

## Chapter One

It was humid inside the small laboratory in spite of the window which was open contrary to all regulations. Outside the sun shone and, but for the absence of foliage on the trees surrounding the squat grey stone buildings which comprised the Midlands Biological Research Centre, one would have been forgiven for assuming that summer had already begun. Small birds twittered incessantly as they busied themselves searching for twigs and dry grass with which to complete the building of their nests. Rooks circled and cawed noisily above a line of tall elms. Another cycle of life had begun.

The tall, fair-haired man in the long white coat moved away from the window and, ignoring the 'no smoking' sign above the long table which supported several oblong glass cases, he lit a cigarette, inhaled deeply, and slowly blew twin streams of smoke out through his nostrils. His handsome, tanned features wore a worried expression, his lips were a tight, bloodless line, his pale blue eyes focused on the end container. He drew even more fiercely on his cigarette, seemingly unaware of the attractive blonde girl who watched his every move intently.

The rats, mice and guinea pigs in the other cages were unnaturally still, almost as though they sensed that something untoward was happening in that very room, something totally in contrast to the laws of Nature, something which they could not understand but feared all the more because it was beyond their comprehension.

Even the reinforced glass could not muffle the shrill, almost insane shrieking of the bats within the cage. Usually they were motionless and silent by day, only becoming active when the laboratory was in darkness and the bacteriologists had left. Not so today. For the last three days they had been abnormally active, with the exception of those that lay dead on the floor of their prison. Even in death they had an unnatural look about them, the corpses stiff and twisted beyond the limits of rigor mortis, the tiny faces masks of pain and rage, proof that the creatures had died in extreme agony.

The living flung themselves blindly at the walls, some dropping stunned with the impact, lying inert for several moments and then recovering surprisingly quickly, piping their rage and hurling themselves back at the glass again. Some eight or nine lay dead below the maddened twenty or so that continued their crazed aerobatics in the cramped enclosure.

One small, reddish-brown silky body attempted to secure a hold on the smooth sides of the case with its minute claws, slipped, and fell to the floor. It rolled onto its back, kicking frantically at first, then slowly the twitching limbs stiffened as though rigor mortis were preceding death. Yet the two watching humans knew by the way the bat's eyes dilated that it still lived. They realised also that it was in indescribable pain - and there was nothing whatsoever that they could do about it.

It was a quarter of an hour before the bat's eyes dulled and it died. The last victim, an hour ago, had suffered for forty-five minutes before it was granted a merciful release from its suffering.

'Hell,' the tall man muttered to himself, 'I've never seen anything like it before!'

The girl moved closer to him, and asked in a low, husky whisper, 'What is it, Brian? What's happening to them?'

He seemed to notice her presence for the first time, and his expression softened momentarily. 'I don't know,' he murmured, averting his eyes from her gaze.

'But. . . ' her fingers closed over his as she spoke, and he made no attempt to remove them. 'The tests. The tests we did yesterday. They're bound to show something . . . the reason for this paralysis in the bats, the mad rages, the pain . . .'

Professor Brian Newman looked silently out of the window. Out there, across the soft, springy heather which was just beginning its new growth, were something in the region of twenty-five thousand acres of woodland and heath - Cannock Chase, a well-known beauty spot to which crowds of tourists thronged at weekends and on bank-holidays. A natural environment, except for this place, the Midlands Biological Research Centre, an ugly scar on the landscape.

Newman remembered the beginning of it all, the protests, the petitions by the locals. It hadn't got them anywhere. They hadn't achieved anything, simply because they had been conned by the authorities. Local councils had been persuaded that the centre was for the good of the people. Well, the Professor thought, smiling wryly to himself, it was certainly supposed to be for the good of all mankind. Except for... for this\ His gaze was drawn irresistibly back to the glass cage, the dead and dying bats, the small bodies of the doomed thudding continuously against the sides as they swooped and fluttered insanely, often colliding with each other. Soon these creatures would all be dead. It might take until the day after tomorrow. There was no way of helping them or alleviating their suffering. All he could do was to watch them die and hope that it would end there. Then cremate the corpses and say nothing, not even to Haynes. Haynes wouldn't understand. He was an administration man, and the less he knew, the better. Likewise the other scientists. There must be no more meddling. Once these bats were dead, that had to be the end of it.

'The tests,' Susan Wylie squeezed his hand and whispered huskily. 'What did they show, Brian?'

Newman turned to her, and sighed loudly. They showed that the inexplicable has happened. Something which we cannot explain, only accept. The virus is a mutated one caused by experimenting. I've tried to determine the difference between bacterial and viral meningitis. In humans it's difficult to tell in the early stage, which is the very time when either the virus or the bacteria might be destroyed. Take meningococcus, for example. There are ten types of viruses. The symptoms are all the same: severe headache, high fever, vomiting, stiffness of back and neck muscles, but not . . . this. I've never known the disease lead to madness or such awful agony. And I have created a new horror. A mutated virus! God knows how it happened, it was a million-to-one accident. Those tests we did . . . my - God, how far it could spread, and to which species: rats, mice, other rodents , . . even humans! It doesn't bear thinking about!'

'But Brian,' Susan slipped an arm about him. 'There's no harm done. Whatever you've created is confined in that single glass cage. The whole disease is trapped in there. It can't get out. Admittedly there's nothing we can do to ease these creatures' suffering, but once they're all dead, that's that. As you say, cremate the bodies and nobody will be any the wiser.'

'I guess you're right,' he tossed the butt of his cigarette out of the window. 'A couple of days and I reckon it will all be over. But it's frightening to think what freak mutations can be brought about by experiments like this one. All over the world scientists are conducting such. experiments daily. Students, too. It could happen anywhere, anytime, and something far more terrible than nuclear war could be unleashed upon the world I don't know how this came about. I'd feel one helluva lot easier if I did. Nevertheless, we must end it here and now. This laboratory must be kept locked. Nobody must come in here, not even Haynes. At the end of the week, when there's no trace of this mess left, I shall report that my experiments were a failure. Negative results.'

'I suppose that's the best thing,' her pert features puckered into a smile. 'Let's forget all about it tonight and enjoy ourselves.'

He stiffened slightly, and looked away.

'What's the matter?' there was concern in her voice.

'I... I'm afraid we'll have to postpone tonight, Susan. I'm sorry, but that's the way it is.'

'Why?' her smile vanished, replaced by an expression of disappointment and indignation. 'Why, Brian? A whole week now and you've done nothing but work round the clock. Okay, that was fair enough in the interests of science, but now . . . well, there's nothing more you can do.'

'You don't understand.'

'I understand you better than any woman,' she retorted. 'Better than Emma ever did.'

'There's no need to bring my wife into this.'

'Your ex-wife, Brian. You're divorced. Free. Or had you forgotten it?'

'No,' he drew deeply on the remains of his second cigarette. 'I hadn't forgotten it. But I still have work to do in spite of this... this disaster.'

'But you're going to write it off. Forget it.'

'As far as the world is concerned,' he spoke sharply, irritably. 'But I'm not forgetting it. Not ever. I've got to go into it deeper, for my own satisfaction if for no other reason.'

'But what about tonight?'

'I'm sorry. There's no way.'

She released his hand and turned away so that he could not see the tears welling up in her eyes. For the past two months they had been living together, something of which Haynes disapproved. Damn Haynes. Bacteriologists were entitled to lead their own private lives just as much as anybody else. She told herself that it was in the interests of science. Two people dedicated to

a common cause, bound by love. Love? Did Brian Newman really love her? Lately she had been sleeping in his bungalow in Cannock whilst he had remained here in the laboratory. That was no kind of-life. Exceptional circumstances, certainly, but it didn't make her feel any better.

'I'm sorry, Sue,' stood behind her, his hands travelling up her body until they came to rest on her breasts beneath her nylon overall.

'How much longer before we're together again, Brian?'

'As soon as this business is over. A day or two at the most, the way these bats are dying.'

'I'll stop here with you. It's my rightful place by your side, sharing success and failure.'

'No,' he caught his breath audibly. 'I must see this through alone. Get your sleep. You need it'

'So do you.'

'I'll catch up on it afterwards. I'll take a few days off, and we'll spend 'em in bed together.'

This time they both laughed.

'All right,' she sighed. 'So long as you're telling me the truth.'

'Don't be silly,' he snapped.

'You have a reputation, Professor Newman.' She turned and wagged a finger at him in mock severity. 'And it is not solely concerned with viruses and bacteria, nor bats. Birds, other than the feathered variety, have retarded a promising career for you, and you know it. That's why you're working out here in this hell's half acre. Without all your affairs you'd probably be in the States now. Or Russia.'

'And I wouldn't have you.' he stooped and kissed her, his lips and probing tongue smothering further accusations.

Finally they disengaged. 'Now go back and get some rest.' he said. 'I'll maybe snatch an hour or two on the couch. But I've got to see this thing through to the end.'

'All right.' she agreed and began unbuttoning her overall. 'See you in the morning, Brian. Enjoy the company of your bats.'

He watched her walk from the laboratory, his discerning gaze appreciating her posture, the straight back, the natural swing of her hips, the long, blonde hair. He locked the door behind her, and turned his attention back to the cage of death.

The bats were going crazy, fluttering, squeaking, buffeting one another, tumbling, battering themselves against the sides of the glass as though determined to smash it. Another one was dying, but this time it was almost instantaneous. One second it had been hurling itself frantically at the toughened glass, the next it was lying quivering on the floor amidst the corpses of its fellows, limbs shuddering, stiffening. Its eyes seemed to meet his and they glittered accusingly, with sheer malevolence. Blaming Man, as though in its last seconds it understood.

Brian Newman shuddered and turned away. The symptoms followed an identical pattern, yet in every case the incubation period varied. Possibly some were more resistant to the mutated virus than others. It was the way with most diseases. He walked to the window and looked out. A red Mini was disappearing down the rough track which led to the road beyond the belt of tall trees. He could tell by the way Susan drove that she was angry. She didn't trust him, and he couldn't blame her.

He took off his white coat and hung it on a peg by the door. Hell, life was getting too complicated all round. A grey telephone stood on the desk in the far corner, and he knew that he could settle everything so easily. One quick call could remove Fiona from his life before they became further involved. Then he could go back to Susan, forget Fiona, the bats, the killer virus, everything.

He walked slowly across the room, and his hand rested on the telephone. Then he changed his mind. Logic and a physical urge battled inside him. The latter won, and he flicked up the night-switch on the small panel. He couldn't chance Susan ringing him here tonight and discovering that he had left the lab.

He stepped out into the corridor, locking the door behind him and pocketing the key. Muted voices reached him from inside other rooms as he made his way slowly towards the exit. Susan had been right in what she said, he decided. He was nothing more than a cog in a mighty wheel. His experiments were minor when compared with some that were being conducted here at the Research Centre. Yet, suddenly, his was the most vital of all. Something had gone wrong, not necessarily through his fault. The whole project had to be eliminated and then he could return to being an ordinary run-of-the-mill boffin. Somehow, he had to forget.

'Brian!'

He halted and turned around slowly, recognising Haynes's voice. The latter stood in the doorway of his office, tall and imposing, thick-rimmed spectacles giving him an owlish appearance, a personification of authority. Newman looked at him steadily without speaking.

'I haven't had a progress report from you,' there was a hint of reprimand in Haynes's words.

'No,' Newman replied. 'For two reasons. First, I've been working day and night. Second, there's nothing to report. Only failure.'

'Failure!'

'Distinguishing between bacterial and viral meningitis is impossible in the early stages of incubation.'

'Difficult, but not impossible. In similar experiments bats have proved to be more useful than rats. They assisted in the perfection of the latest measles vaccine. There's no reason why this experiment should not succeed.'

'Well, it hasn't, and furthermore it won't,' Professor Newman snapped.

'I'd like a second opinion. You should have consulted Professor Rickers instead of locking yourself away in your lab for days on end with that girl.'

Brian Newman's fists clenched, and he had to hold himself in check with a conscious effort. The implication was not lost on him.

'Miss Wylie has been my assistant for two years now. She is perfectly capable of assisting in any experiment which I undertake. I don't want Rickers, and I don't need him.'

'Well, I want him to have a look at those bats you've injected. I'll ask him to call in tomorrow afternoon. He's got a couple of American students working with him, and I want them to see as much of everything as possible during their stay here.'

'I won't have students messing about in my lab,' Newman spoke softly, scarcely louder than a whisper, but his anger was only too evident.

'Now look here, Brian,' Haynes adjusted his spectacles in the way he always did when he wished to enforce his authority. 'I'm running this Centre, and although I give you a pretty free hand most of the time, I'm not going to issue negative reports without second opinions. Professor Rickers will check on the bats tomorrow, and it's no good, you getting all steamed up about it.'

Brian Newman turned abruptly, and without another word pushed his way through the glass swing doors and out into the early evening sunlight. Anger at Haynes seethed inside him, but more than that he experienced a sensation of fear. Death in its most terrible form was contained in a single glass cage in his laboratory. Disease, a type of plague, perhaps, was trapped in there. Rickers would insist on opening it up whilst some of the infected creatures were still alive, and there was no way that could be allowed to happen, for the sake of life upon Earth.

The Shoal Hill Tavern was crowded. Brian Newman worked his way from the bar, slopping beer and whisky as he negotiated the human obstacle course, his eyes fixed on the petite, dark-haired girl who was seated at the table in the corner, patiently awaiting his return. Fiona Bradbury glanced up and smiled, tiny slim ringers reaching out for the glass which he pushed across the Formica surface towards her.

'Perhaps we should have gone somewhere else tonight.' she said. 'I've never known it this crowded on a Thursday before.'

'Maybe we'll go somewhere else later,' Newman replied, and took a long drink from his glass.

'What's the matter, Brian?' she asked a few minutes later. 'There's something on your mind. Is it that girl you're shackled up with?'

'No,'- his answer was unconvincing, even to himself. 'Not really. No problems there. Just one or two things in the lab which I've got to get sorted out. I can't talk about them, so please don't ask me.'

'All right,' she relaxed a little. 'But it's that girl I'm worried about. Damn it all, you're not even married to her! No divorce problems. You can kick her out tomorrow.'

'So that you can move in?'

'If you want me to. I don't see any reason why not. Anyway, we can't go on sneaking off like this as though we've got to hide from the world. We're both free, so let's cut out the cloak and dagger stuff.'

Newman nodded. Hell, why did women always get so possessive? Why couldn't they be satisfied with a good time every now and then in return for a screw on the

back seat of some guy's car? It didn't cost them anything.

He tried to weigh Susan and Fiona against each other in his own mind. There wasn't much to choose between them. They were both sexy, both attractive. It didn't really matter which he picked either way, except that Susan understood him. She knew how things were in the laboratory, the measure of success or failure, the satisfactions, the disappointments. That was something Fiona would never comprehend. One thing was certain, though. He couldn't run the two of them much longer; it had to be one or the other. Right now the choice was his, but shortly it might be made for him if Susan found out.

'Let's take a ride,' he finished his beer and looked at her.

'If you say so, but all this back-seat stuff is getting a bit boring, Brian. Christ, when there's a comfortable bed back at your place, why the hell do we have to play at contortionists in the car on a chilly night?'

'You know damned well why.'

'Yes, I guess I do,' she stood up and adjusted her dress. 'But not for much longer. You either want me or you don't.'

He followed her out of the lounge bar, again making comparisons, remembering Susan's wiggle as she had walked from the laboratory a few hours earlier. Physically there was little to choose between them. It would be a hard decision when he finally had to make it.

The car-park was full as they walked along an avenue of badly positioned vehicles. Cars had never interested Brian Newman. They were simply a mechanical means of getting from one place to another in the shortest possible time. Yet tonight, for some inexplicable reason, he found himself compelled to run his eye over them. Every third one seemed to be a Mini. It was the red ones which claimed his attention. He found himself glancing at their registration numbers, his mouth dry even after three pints of beer, tension building up inside him. Suddenly he stiffened, his stomach muscles contracting. He felt sick. The letters and numbers on the front plate of the red Mini two rows away seemed to leap at him like sensational headlines in a newspaper. He read them, knew them by heart, and they hammered inside his brain in the manner of an electronic warning system.

He saw, too, the long flowing hair of the girl who sat behind the wheel of the stationary car. Her face was in shadow, but he knew the expression on it without seeing it, a mixture of hurt and hate, a woman scorned. 'Come on,' Fiona tugged impatiently at his sleeve. He shrugged her off abruptly, and snapped in a voice which he hardly recognised as his own. 'I'll take you home. I guess I don't feel too good tonight, after all.'

Probably the decision which Professor Brian Newman had been dreading had even now been made for him, and he had already lost the backing of Susan Wylie in the traumatic day which faced him on the morrow.

## Chapter Two

It was just after eleven o'clock when Newman returned to the Biological Research Centre. The night-porter glanced up as the tall professor walked in, then looked away, disinterested. It was quite customary for the various scientists to come and go at all times of the day and night.

Newman unlocked the door of his own laboratory, let himself in and turned the key behind him. He did not wish to be interrupted by anyone for any reason.

There were about a dozen bats still left alive, the oxygen machine attached to the cage ensuring that there was no way in which either virus or bacteria could escape into the atmosphere. The creatures were still zooming frantically about their enclosure, and in the silence of the room their shrill piping and buffeting seemed even louder. Newman moved closer, watching them. Whereas earlier he had been repulsed, he now experienced a morbid fascination almost to the point of being hypnotised. He had created something, death in a form that had not hitherto existed. It was all his doing.

He, stood staring at the bats for well over an hour, his mind having lost all sense of time. He understood the attraction of an aquarium in a conventional home, constant movement, always something happening, however trivial. This was different, exciting. Death could occur at any second.

After a time he became aware that the death-rate amongst the bats seemed to have slowed. They continued to batter themselves ceaselessly against the glass, but those which fell stunned revived after a time and resumed their futile occupation. At first Newman thought that the creatures were making attempts to attack him, but eventually it dawned upon him that this was not so, for they flew at the opposite side with equal compulsion. It was madness, he decided. Their brains were of a low order, yet the mutated virus appeared to have robbed them of everything except basic instincts. They resented imprisonment and were determined to seek freedom in the only way they knew, blind flight. Yet, even in the midst of their panic, they were colliding with one another time and time again.

'God!' Newman spoke aloud as the answer suddenly dawned on him. 'The virus has destroyed their radars. They're flying blind!'

Some time later he opened the window and lit a cigarette. The night was mild and humid, freak weather for early April. It was almost like summer. His thoughts turned to Susan. There was no way in which he could lie his way out of this one. She wouldn't accept excuses, and Professor Newman wasn't the type to plead. One way or another it was over, and too late he realised that he didn't want Fiona after all. There had never been anything more than physical attraction between them. She had been good, very good, but after each session his one thought had been to take her home. With Susan he was content to cuddle her until they both fell asleep. That was the difference.

He wondered if Susan was back at his bungalow right now. In all probability she was packing her bags and loading them into the Mini. The chances of her turning up at the Centre of the following day were remote.

He glanced in the direction of the telephone, but discarded the idea at once. It wouldn't work. A phone call would not stop Susan from leaving.

Newman felt physically and mentally drained. His thoughts returned to the bats, and the knowledge that he could not risk any interference from Professor



Rickers and his students the next day. He had hoped that the creatures would die quickly, but now it looked unlikely. In that case, there was only one solution. He would have to destroy them. They could easily be gassed. The only problem was that the lethal gas was stored in a separate part of the building, under lock and key, and could only be obtained with Haynes's permission, which certainly would not be forthcoming.

He tried to think of alternative means. Perhaps if he filled the glass case with water and drowned the occupants ...

Newman lay down on the sparse couch and stretched himself out. His entire body was crying out for sleep, yet he knew that there was no chance of slumber. His brain was too confused, going over recent events, trying to work out solutions, thinking of Susan, of Fiona, of Haynes and Rickers, and the students. Somehow he did not like the idea of switching off the light and being alone in the darkness with those squeaking, thudding bats. His thinking was becoming illogical, he told himself. They could not possibly get out, but until every one of them was dead there would be no peace in that laboratory.

He lay there just looking up at the plain white ceiling. For the first time in his life he felt totally helpless. Events would control his own actions from now on.

Sometime after the first grey light of dawn had crept in through the uncurtained windows he dropped into a fitful doze. It seemed only seconds since his eyelids had closed before he heard a key being turned in the lock. He sat up with a start. It could only be one of a small group of people who had access to laboratory keys. Haynes, Rickers... Susan!

'Good morning, Professor Newman,' she walked in, closing the door behind her.

Brian Newman was too startled to reply. He simply stared at her in amazement. She was immaculate in every aspect, and there was no evidence of her having spent a troubled night. She barely glanced in his direction, taking off her coat, and then immediately set about her routine duties, sterilising implements, checking charts, and all the time ignoring him totally.

Newman sat up and swung his legs to the floor. His suit was crumpled, his hair awry, and there was a growth of stubble on his chin. He rubbed his bleary eyes, and sighed loudly.

'I could use some coffee,' he spoke softly, a tremor in his voice.

'We have coffee at ten,' Susan Wylie replied formally. 'However, there is coffee, sugar and dried milk in the cupboard if you wish to make yourself a drink.'

He stood up, swaying slightly. His head ached abominably. He looked quickly in the direction of the bat cage. There were still a dozen or so of the creatures flying crazily to and fro, bumping, falling, fluttering up again. No more had died during the night, and that didn't add up. Either the virus was dead, they were immune to it, or else the incubation period in these last few was longer.

'About last night. . . ' he began, clearing his throat.

'I slept well, thank you,' she replied icily without glancing up. 'Now, if you will excuse me, Professor, there are certain items which I must go and collect from the stores....'

'Now listen to me!' he snapped, his level of anger rising fast. Women had

cursed him hundreds of times over the years, pleaded with him, cried, but none had ever treated him with indifference.

She ignored him and turned in the direction of the door.

'I said listen to me!' his hand shot out, grasping her by the shoulder and turning her round to face him. 'There are one or two things we've got to get ironed out.'

'I have no idea what you're talking about, professor.' Only her eyes gave away her innermost feelings, bitterness that an outward show of indifference could not cloak.

'You know damned well what I'm talking about!' he rasped. 'About last night at the Shoal Hill Tavern.'

'Oh, so you went drinking, did you?'

'And that wasn't all,' his voice was raised. 'I was with a bird. And I was going to screw her only you stopped me! You put me off my stroke!'

'Me?'

'Yes, you. Out on a snooping trip. Well, I don't blame you, but I can't stand liars.'

'Neither can I, Professor. And just lately you've been telling quite a few yourself.' Her self-control began to snap, and she added savagely, 'You think you're God's gift to women, don't you, Brian Newman? Well, let me tell you this. All you're trying to do is prove something to yourself, though God knows what. Maybe 'conquer and move on' is your motto. Well, I'm not standing for it. You thought you could drive me off, didn't you? That I'd pack and run? Well, I'm not leaving the Centre. 'I'm not giving up a good job because of you. I'll move out of your bungalow so you can have her in the bed all to yourself, but I'm staying right here in this very lab as far as work goes. I'm not going to give you the satisfaction of seeing me go to Haynes and ask for a transfer to Rickers's lab. The pair of you would love that, in your own warped ways, but I'm staying put, bats and all. But lay one finger on me again, try to get familiar with me, and I'll be lodging an official complaint that will really put paid to your career. You've got me with you all the time in an official capacity, and nothing more, whether you like it or not!'

'You bitch!' His left hand went back, and before he could stop himself he had struck her across the face with a resounding slap.

She staggered back, tears filling her eyes, gasping with pain. He stood aghast, mouth opening to voice an apology.

Suddenly everything seemed to explode inside her, and she was hurling herself at him, beating at his body with clenched fists, tearing, scratching, biting, kicking. He staggered back, Susan Wylie clinging on to him, screaming insults at him,

'Damn you he yelled. 'I'll teach you a lesson you won't forget. I'll.. .' His words trailed off as his back met with something solid but movable. The table. He felt the nearside legs being lifted clear of the floor, objects sliding, crashing, splintering, fragments of glass tinkling. In desperation he pushed her away from him, and even as he turned he saw guinea-pigs and other rodents scampering about, frightened, bewildered by their unexpected freedom,

'Oh, God!' he gasped.

Something flew past his face, a rush of air from tiny wings fanning him. Another. And another.

'The bats!' he cried, his face turning a deathly white. 'The bats have escaped!'

Susan Wylie backed away. It was true. The cage of death was lying in splinters, the bats which had died from the mutated virus spilled beneath it. Yet it was the living ones which brought a cry of terror to her lips. They were flying crazily about the room, cannoning into walls, getting up again, jinking, swerving. One hit a row of test-tubes and sent them showering to the floor.

'Under the table!' Brian Newman grabbed her around the waist, dragging her down beneath the long table with him. 'Keep still! They're not after us. It's just that their radars are damaged and they've no sense of direction.'

The high-pitched squeaking was much louder now that the tiny creatures were free of their cage. Newman and Susan heard them striking against the windows. Sooner or later they must find the open one. More breaking glass.

'The window's gone. The big one!' Brian Newman gasped. 'The pane must have been cracked or faulty. They'd never break it otherwise.'

The incoming fresh air seemed to attract the bats. Whereas their disturbed radars had previously forced them to fly aimlessly, panic-stricken, now they scented freedom. In a matter of seconds they had gone, speeding across the Chase like jet-propelled butterflies, lost to the view of the two people who stared after them through the shattered window of the laboratory.

'Well, they're gone,' Brian Newman slipped an arm around Susan, and this time she made no attempt to squirm from his grasp. 'I'm sorry,' she said weakly. 'It wasn't your fault. I shouldn't have hit you.' 'What are we going to do now?'

Newman looked around the lab, noting the slivers of broken glass on the floor, the smashed cages, mice and guinea-pigs scuttling fearfully to and fro.

'Well, I guess we'll have to tell Haynes the whole truth now,' he said, 'and we can only pray that the virus died in those victims, and that the bats which escaped are neither infected nor carriers. Otherwise . . .' He shook his head slowly, and his expression was grave. If the virus had been carried from the Biological Research Centre, then the possible consequences did not bear thinking about. Voices in the corridor outside interrupted them. Someone was banging on the door.

'What's happening in there? Are you all right, New-man?' It was Haynes's voice.

Brian Newman strode to the door and unlocked it. Haynes, Professor Rickers - a tall, balding man with rimless spectacles - and the night-porter, who had been just on the point of going off duty, crowded into the small laboratory.

'What the hell,' Haynes's face took on a deep flush as he surveyed the wreckage,

'There's been an accident,' Newman said. 'I slipped and overturned the table.'

'You'd better get these rodents caught quickly,' Haynes snapped, noting two or three white mice running around the perimeter of the room.

Professor Newman closed the door and leaned up against it, looking at the others. 'I think we've got a lot of talking to do,' he said softly.

'Talking?' Haynes glanced at him with a puzzled expression on his face.

'I think Johnson was just going off duty,' Newman nodded to the porter. 'We don't need to delay him.'

Johnson grunted, and Newman opened the door to let him out. He could not take any risk of wild stories finding their way into civvy street.

'Now,' Haynes adjusted his spectacles and glared at the bacteriologist, 'perhaps you'd tell me just what the hell is going on.'

In a few words Newman explained about the mutated virus and the fact that about a dozen bats, possibly carrying the disease, were loose upon Cannock Chase.

'Impossible,' Rickers snapped.

'I wish it was impossible,' Newman retorted. 'But the first thing we've got to do is to carry out tests on the dead bats and try to determine the extent of this virus.'

'Well, let's get cracking,' Haynes glanced at Rickers, 'I suggest that Professor Rickers carries out the post-mortems here and now.'

'Fair enough,' Newman replied, 'but I suggest we all wear rubber gloves and protective clothing. From what I've seen these last few days we're dealing with a virulent disease which could be capable of striking us all down.'

Somewhat reluctantly Professor Rickers donned a white coat and gauze mask,, the others following suit. Brian Newman stood back. He was content to be a spectator from now on, as he was confident that whatever there was to be found inside the dead bats, Rickers would find it.

For the next hour the three of them watched Rickers working painstakingly, dissecting bat after bat, examining entrails with the aid of a microscope, making notes on a scrap of paper, scraping furry remains into a plastic bag, and then starting on another tiny corpse. They could not see his expression behind the mask, and not once did he indicate his findings.

Finally, with every bat dissected and the remnants enclosed in the waste bag, Rickers removed his mask and gloves and turned to the others. His expression alighted briefly on Newman, disbelief and mockery in his eyes.

'These bats died of a brain disease,' Rickers said. 'Meningitis, which is what they were injected with anyway, so that's hardly surprising. The virus is dead, so we can hardly be expected to pronounce a mutation. To ascertain that we should have to examine a living creature, but as they have all apparently escaped there is no opportunity to do that. Doubtless they will die from meningitis in the wild, their bodies will never be found, and that will be that. I would doubt very much whether mankind or even wildlife is at risk.'

Haynes was gloatingly triumphant as he turned to Newman. 'You are making mountains out of molehills, Professor Newman,' he said, drawing himself up to his full height. 'And it would seem that a whole week of work has been

needlessly wasted.'

'I tell you, the disease is deadly!' Newman spoke hotly.

'I suggest you compile your negative report,' Haynes turned to the door, ignoring his protest. 'Let me have it by tomorrow, please.'

Two minutes later only Susan and Brian Newman remained in the laboratory.

'And that's that.' Newman sighed, 'Officially, anyway.'

'What are we going to do?'

'We can't do anything except wait. Whatever happens now will happen in the outside world, instead of in the laboratory where we stood a chance of controlling it.' His hand found hers and squeezed it lightly. 'By the way, I'm sorry about last night.'

'So am I. What are you going to do, though? I mean, about that girl?'

'I dropped her off home, and as far as I'm concerned that's that'

'So we're back to square one. Just you and me.'

'Perhaps we can manage to make a go of it this time.' he said, avoiding her gaze.

'Maybe.' She picked up a broom and began sweeping up broken glass. 'Like everything else, we'll just have to await developments.'

### Chapter Three

The Wooden Stables, as the sprawling, untidy outbuildings were known, had fallen gradually into a state of disrepair since the war. Once they had been the property of the Marquis of Anglesey, and thoroughbred stock had been stabled there. Then, with the breaking up of the estate, which had once stretched from Cannock Wood down to Lichfield, they had undergone a series of ownerships, and the quality of horseflesh housed there had deteriorated along with the structure.

Walter Williams cursed to himself as he swung the old Austin pick-up truck off the Cannock Road and felt the wheels spinning in the mud of the rough track. It had not rained for almost a fortnight now, but the bridle-path was still like a quagmire. He revved up, and as he felt the vehicle shoot forward he made a mental note to bring a load of slag up next time and attempt to fill in one or two of the pot-holes, something which he had been meaning to do ever since he had bought the place three years ago.

Dusk was gathering, and the shadows from the conifer wood on his left prompted

him to switch on his headlights. The twin beams lit up the dereliction ahead of him, a vista of crumbling brickwork and rotting timbers, with gaping holes in the slate roof of the nearest building. Something large ambled out of the shadows and trotted towards him as he brought the vehicle to a halt.

'Hello Penny, old gal,' he called out to the piebald mare as he climbed out and went round to the tailboard. There were four bales of hay in the back of the truck. With luck he wouldn't have to come up here again for two or three days. He would be glad when his daughter, Shirley, was old enough to look after her own horses. It had been the same all along, the rabbit, the guinea-pig, the dog, even the goldfish. Walter had had to tend to the lot.

The mare nuzzled him as he let the tail-board down.

There's a good girl,' he coaxed, fondling her. 'But where's Stango?'

Stango was Penny's mate, a black stallion who looked good until one examined him closely, and realised why he was housed in the Wooden Stables.

Walter peered into the darkness. It was strange, indeed, that Stango had not come to meet him. Perhaps the horse had already bedded itself down in the building. It had never happened before, though. Then he heard the drumming hooves in the field.

'Hey, Stango,' he called. 'Good boy. C'm'ere!'

Stango came into view at a fast gallop, moving from left to right, passing in front of the truck but making no attempt to approach it. With a whinny the animal came to a halt about twenty yards away, and stood there flicking his tail restlessly the way he usually did in hot weather when the flies were troublesome. He pawed the ground and snorted.

'What the devil's up with you?' Walter walked steadily towards the horse, hand outstretched. Stango backed away, and in the darkness Walter Williams saw the whiteness of his rolling eyes. The stallion snorted and, breaking into a canter, galloped away to the other end of the field.

'Bloody vandals been up 'ere again,' Walter muttered. 'Throwin' stones at 'im, I suppose. No wonder the bugger's upset. Better 'ave a look an' see if Vs 'urt.'

But Stango had no intention of letting Walter Williams approach him. Ten minutes later a breathless and angry Walter was shaking his fist at the silhouette of the horse which stood on the opposite side of the small field.

'AH right, bloody well stay there if that's how you feel, damn you!' he snarled, and returned to his task of unloading the bales of hay from the pick-up.

'C'mon, old girl,' he called to the watching Penny as he struggled to the nearest building carrying a bale. 'Some nice fresh hay 'ere. Come and get it.'

But Penny would come no further than five yards from the doorway.

'So you're bein' bloody stupid, too, are you?' Walter was fast losing patience. With a final curse he threw the bale into the stable. It thudded onto the stone floor, rolled over, and then, as it came to rest, he heard a movement in the rafters.

He stood still, listening. The noise came again. A soft rustling sound like

moths beating against a lampshade.

Sparrows roosting in the rafters, he told himself, but knew that it was not so. The movements were too light. He experienced a prickly sensation up and down his spine. There was definitely something up there in the roof.

He turned and headed back to the truck. Three more bales of hay had to be carried up here. He paused, opened the driver's door and groped in the untidy glove-compartment until he located the cylindrical metal shape of the torch which he kept there. He flicked the beam on. It was bright with the power of a new battery. He would soon find out what it was up in the rafters that was disturbing the horses.

As he turned back he noticed that Penny had deserted him. Dusk was turning to deep darkness, but he could just make out the shapes of the two horses by the fence on the far side of the field. They were definitely restless.

He could hear the rustling noise again even before he entered the old building. It wasn't exactly louder, but it was more pronounced, as though whatever had been responsible for that initially had been joined by others.

'Let's 'ave a look at yer, then.' His hand trembled as he directed the beam upwards. There was a sudden rush of air, and Walter recoiled. The light from his torch picked out dozens of pairs of tiny wings, jinking, swerving, and the air was suddenly filled with shrill squeaks.

Something struck him in the face. The force of the impact was no greater than a well-aimed table-tennis ball, but he recoiled in alarm.

'Bats!' he grunted in revulsion.

Another hit him on the hand, and he dropped the torch.

'Ugh!'

He groped on the ground and located the fallen torch. He tried the switch, but nothing happened. A brief examination revealed that the glass was broken. Possibly the bulb was damaged.

Walter Williams cowered in the darkness for a few seconds, and then straightened up with a hollow laugh.

'Bleedin' flyin' mice,' he grunted. 'Armless but 'orrible. Well, they've all gone so p'raps the 'orses'll come back now.' He gave a whistle, and heard Penny and Stango moving in the darkness, but they did not come near him.

'Please yer bleedin' selves then,' he muttered, and began fetching the remaining bales of hay from the pick-up. He did not enter the stable. Instead he flung each bale in through the doorway, and within a few minutes he was reversing his vehicle back down the muddy, rutted track.

It took him less than five minutes to drive back to his small house on the outskirts of Chase Terrace.

'What on earth's the matter with you, Walter?' Gladys Williams inquired, looking up from the oven as her husband stamped into the kitchen.

'Nothin', ' he answered, and began struggling to remove his Wellington boots.

'Well, you look as white as a ghost, just like you'd seen one.'

'Bats,' he puffed as a Wellington finally yielded to his efforts and came free of his foot.

'Who's bats?'

'I don't know who they bloomin' well belong to.'

'It's you who's bats,' his plump, red-faced wife was only half concentrating as she pulled a casserole from the oven.

'Bats,' Walter repeated irritably, endeavouring to pull off the second boot. 'With wings. Flyin' mice.' 'Where?' 'Wooden Stables.'

'Oh, that's all right then. It's when they get in the 'ouse I'll start worryin.'

At that moment a slim, fair-haired, freckled-face girl of about ten came in from the hall. She had changed into jodhpurs on her return from school, something which she always did lately. It was small consolation for being deprived of a daily horse ride, but in a few weeks, when the daylight extended into the evenings, she would be able to walk up to the Wooden Stables and enjoy all the riding she wanted.

'Penny and Stango all right, Dad?' she asked. Her greatest regret was that her father insisted on feeding them on his way back from the building site at Hednesford. She had tried more than once, unsuccessfully, to persuade him to come home first and pick her up. Not only would she be able to see her horses during the week then, but it would stop him from complaining that he was forced to look after them, Walter Williams would not have been happy, though, if he couldn't have a moan about something.

'All right,' he grunted. 'More or less, anyway.'

'What d'you mean, 'more or less'?' Shirley Williams demanded, alarm on her face.

'Nothin' to worry about' Her father was already wishing that he had said 'they're OK.' At least he would have been able to enjoy his evening meal in peace.

'What is it?' Shirley's voice was strained, and her eyes seemed to bore into him just like the time three years ago when old Biggy, the family's dog, had died and Walter had lied and told his daughter that the animal had gone over to stay with Uncle Bill for a while. Walter knew that he would never be able to lie to her again.

'Just bats,' he grumbled. 'Nothin' to get excited about.'

'And what have bats got to do with Penny and Stango?' she faced him, hands on hips, determined to pursue the matter to the end.

'I dunno. I guess the 'orses don't like sleepin' in a stable with bats in the rafters.'

'You mean,' Shirley demanded, stepping towards him with an angry ?lint in her eyes, 'you mean that Penny and Stango are out in the field and you left them there?'

'They won't come to no 'arm.' Walter looked to his wife for support, but she



was too busy serving up the stew to concern herself with such mundane topics as bats and horses. 'Couldn't do nothin' about it,' he mumbled. 'They wouldn't come in, so I chucked the 'ay inside for 'em. More than likely they're in there now, guzzu'n' themselves ...'

'Oh, Dad!' Shirley was close to tears. 'If they're frightened of the bats, they won't go in.'

'It's a warm night. Almost like-summer. They won't 'urt.'

'I don't like them outside all night,' Shirley was beginning to shout. 'Those yobbos from the Oakdene Estate, the Pearson boys on their motor-bikes, might go up there and throw stones at them or chase them.'

'The Pearsons won't go up there. They'll be stuck down at the 'Cottage Spring', where they are most nights.'

'But anything could happen to them, Dad!' The young girl was on the verge of hysteria.

The bats've gone,' Walter said. 'They flew out when I shone the torch on 'em. Penny and Stango'll go back.'

'But we don't know. We can't be sure.'

'Come and get yer dinners,' Gladys Williams called out, having decided it was time that she intervened. 'And don't fret yerself, Shirley. Yer dad'll run yer up afterwards just to make sure.'

Walter Williams glared at his wife, opened his mouth to protest, but closed it again, and nodded. 'All right,' he muttered. Anything for peace and quiet. It would only take a quarter of an hour, and he offered up a silent prayer as he took his place at the table that Penny and Stango had come to their senses and gone back into the stable. He didn't fancy trying to round them up in the darkness. The memory of the bats returned to him, and he shivered involuntarily. Harmless, but horrible.

The horses were not in sight when Walter Williams drove back up the rutted track which led to the Wooden Stables and sat with the engine running, his headlights piercing the darkness and illuminating a section of the field and the buildings.

'Where are they?' Anxiously, Shirley was peering through the windscreen.

'Probably in the stable.' Walter told her. He did not relish going inside the buildings again. Perhaps if he could satisfy his daughter that they were not out in the field then she would be agreeable to going back home again. But in his heart he knew that he would not escape so lightly.

'They could be anywhere,' Shirley said, opening the passenger door. 'Maybe round the back of the stable. Let's go and see. We'd better check the stable first.'

'All right,' Walter sighed, groped for his torch in the glove-box, before he remembered that it was broken. The torch is smashed.'

'Leave the headlights on, then. They'll help.'

Walter was decidedly uneasy as he led the way towards the half-ruined buildings, the piercing beams of light from the vehicle behind them

illuminating the dereliction and creating eerie shadows. Bats at dusk were bad enough, but in the pitch blackness of night they filled him with dread. He'd never thought much about them before. Horrible little things. Usually they fled at the approach of man, but this lot had appeared to attack him. That one had really dashed itself against him viciously.

He halted in the entrance to the stable, listening. Not a sound came from within, no movement or horses, munching of hay.

'Penny . . . Stango.' Shirley's call echoed inside the building. There was no answering whinny, no welcoming stirring. Just silence.

'We'd better check the field at the back.' Shirley's voice was tinged with anxiety.

'We don't have a torch.'

'We won't need one. If they're there we'll be able to spot them.'

'Let's try whistling them first.'

They pursed their lips, emitting a series of high-pitched, unmusical whistles. Walter's mouth was dry. It wasn't easy. After a time they paused to listen.

'I can hear something,' Shirley spoke in a low tone, unsure but optimistic.

Walter heard it, too. It definitely was not any sound made by the horses, though. It was more like the wind soughing through the trees, a gentle breeze at first, increasing to gale force. Then realisation dawned on him.

'Come on,' he hissed. 'Back to the truck. It's those...'

A stinging blow caught him on the forehead. His daughter was screaming hysterically, flailing her arms.

'Dad ... Dad, there's something caught in my hair!'

Bats were jinking, swerving, frying all around them. Something was caught up in Shirley's long fair hair, a small furry creature that flapped its wings frantically. She was beating at it, trying unsuccessfully to knock it off.

'Stand still!' Walter spoke sharply, clutching her to him and grabbing the fluttering bat. The very feel of its silky fur was repulsive to him, and every instinct yelled at him to snatch his hand away.

Its claws were entwined in the girl's hair and he could not dislodge it. There was only one alternative. He closed his fingers over it, felt the pulsing body in his palm, and then squeezed. He turned away to vomit, hoping Shirley would not notice. The creature had pulped in his fingers, squelching out a sticky warmth. He wiped his hand on his trousers, heaved again, and then spoke with a determined effort at calmness.

'It's all right, love. It's dead.'

'It's still in my hair. Ugh! There's something running down my neck!'

He threw up an arm to defend them from the swooping bats. One brushed the back of his neck, and he began to drag the sobbing girl back towards the truck.

'We'd best get away from here.'

'But... but what about Penny and Stango?'

'They're probably in the field at the back. They won't hurt.'

The bats had disappeared as suddenly as they had come. Probably all gone back to the stable, Walter thought to himself as he helped Shirley into the vehicle. She was white-faced, crying, shuddering at the feel of the loathesome squashed creature entwined in her matted hair.

'I'm ... I'm going to be sick,' her stomach heaved and she vomited undigested stew in the cab. Walter made no attempt to open the door for her to lean out. Instead he crashed the gears into reverse and began backing down the muddy bridle-path. Before they reached the main Cannock Road he, too, was vomiting again.

Herbie Whitcombe had driven slowly all the way from the Shoal Hill Tavern to Heath Hayes, He was fully aware that the level of alcohol in his blood was way above the legal limit. Usually he rationed himself to a couple of whiskies and then drove back to Chasetown. It was a nightly ritual that took him away from his nagging wife for an hour or two.

Herbie was in his mid-fifties. He was grossly overweight, and this fact, plus the unsightly goitre which he had developed in recent years, had combined to prevent him from finding himself another woman. So he had sought solace in drink.

By the time he reached the island at Heath Hayes his earlier caution had evaporated in a cloud of alcohol fumes. His foot pressed down harder on the accelerator pedal and the speedometer needle rose rapidly, to fifty . . . sixty . . . sixty-five . . . The hump in the road opposite the Wooden Stables almost caused him to bang his head on the roof of the 1100. But it did not dampen the sudden exuberance which was building up inside him. He wondered just how fast this car would go. He had never really tested it to its limit.

The needle was hovering on seventy when he caught sight of the two horses in the road ahead of him. A piebald and a black. They weren't just cantering. They were galloping towards him, wildly, panic-stricken tails streaming behind them.

The shock sobered him somewhat, but it was too late. A screeching of tortured rubber, filled his ears as he slammed on the brakes, and a terrified neighing.

Herbie hit the piebald head-on. The animal sprawled across the bonnet, forelegs splayed, screaming its agony as it was pushed along, both back legs breaking under the impact.

Only the crushing weight of the injured animal prevented the car from overturning. Broken glass from headlights and windscreen trailed in the wake of the slewing 1100. Then the ripped and jagged fender tore into the flanks of the stallion. Vehicle and horses spun crazily. The driver's door flew open, and Herbie Whitcombe was hurled out into the road. He lay there for a second, winded. The horses were neighing frenziedly as they attempted to free themselves, tearing their flesh as they did so. Herbie tried to struggle upright. As far as he could ascertain he was unhurt except for a few bruises and a cut on his hand. He knew he had to be away from this place before the police came with their breathalysers.

He staggered to his feet, clutching at the open door for support. The stallion reared up, eyes rolling, pawing the air in its agony. It straightened,

tottered, and then fell forward, both front hooves smashing down with devastating force on the skull of Herbie Whitcombe.

It was ten minutes before the police reached the accident. They waited impatiently, watching the suffering of the horses until the vet whom they had summoned arrived on the scene and humanely destroyed both Penny and Stango.

#### Chapter Four

Doctor Jenkinson always slept downstairs on the divan during his spasmodic weeks of night-duty. Lately he had been leaving the emergency duties to his younger partners, but, nevertheless, there were still times when he had to take his turn. And by going upstairs to bed he invariably disturbed his wife on those occasions when it was necessary for him to turn out.

The telephone rang shortly after 3 a.m. and without even switching on the light he reached out and lifted the receiver from its cradle.

'Emergency doctor speaking.'

'Doctor,' it was a woman's voice, breathless, a note of panic. 'It's me daughter. She's dying.'

'Just let me have your name and address, and explain the symptoms, please.' He always tried to appear calm, especially at night. Illnesses were magnified totally out of proportion by the average person after dark. Often the patient could be helped by a little common-sense advice, followed by a call the following morning.

Gladys Williams blurted out her name and address. 'Me 'usband's with 'er now,' she gulped. 'Terrible pain 'er's in. Frothin' at the mouth and... and sorta... paralysed?'

'Keep her warm,' Patrick Jenkinson instructed, suddenly alert as he switched on the light with his free hand, and groped for his tie. 'I'll be with you in a few minutes.'

Less than ten minutes later, bag in hand, the tall doctor with grey hair stood by Shirley's bedside. There was a puzzled expression on his face, and he winced at the sight of the child. He spoke to her, but she did not appear to hear him. 'Her normally pretty face was a mask of pain, her eyes rolling, spittle frothing on her lips, and as he felt her damp forehead her teeth gnashed together. Her posture was unnatural, almost as though she was attempting to stretch every muscle in her body yet was unable to move any of them.

Jenkinson took a thermometer from his breast-pocket, shook it, and placed it under the child's armpit beneath her sweat-soaked nightdress.

'What is it, doctor?' Walter Williams spoke gruffly, anxiously.

'It could be any one of a number of things,' the doctor replied, not meeting the other's gaze. 'How long has she been like this?'

'Er wasn't too good yesterday,' Gladys Williams answered him. 'But that was only to be expected.'

'Why?'

'Er 'orses were killed. Both of 'em. A car ran into 'em night before last on the Cannock Road. Upset 'er some-thin' awful.'

'Oh, yes,' Doctor Jenkinson stiffened. 'I remember the incident.' He did not add that he had been called to the scene of the accident to pronounce Herbie Whitcombe dead. This was no time to discuss such matters in detail.

'Er was just feelin' off-colour to start with. Complained of an 'eadache and was sick a couple o' times. Didn't want to eat. Then 'er complained 'er couldn't see properly. 'Ad trouble 'earin', too. We got 'er to bed, and then 'er started 'avin' these fits, goin' all stiff, shoutin' out... and when Walter 'ere tried to comfort 'er, 'er bit is 'and!'

'I see.' Jenkinson removed the thermometer from beneath Shirley's arm, and stepped nearer to the light to read it. Somehow he managed to keep his expression impassive, yet his hand shook visibly as he returned the instrument to its case.

'I'm going to call an ambulance,' he said as calmly as possible, moving towards the door and the telephone in the hall.

'It... it,' Walter Williams stammered white-faced and shaking, 'it ain't... rabies, is it?'

'No.' Patrick Jenkinson forced a smile and shook his head. 'I can assure you it's not rabies.' Though what the hell it is, he mused as he dialled, God only knows. The initial symptoms are akin to those found in meningitis... but this paralysis had him beaten.

Jenkinson travelled in the ambulance with Mr and Mrs Williams. Shirley lay still and stiff, eyes closed, and periodically the doctor checked her breathing. The faint movement of her chest was the only sign that she was alive. Within twenty minutes she was hi the intensive care unit of Walsall General Hospital. Her parents remained anxiously in the waiting-room, and it seemed an eternity before they saw Dr Jenkinson coming down the long room towards them. The doctor's expression was grim and sorrowful, and the flame of hope which had remained alive in their hearts flickered and died. Some terrible, inexplicable illness had snatched their beloved daughter from their lives with the unexpectedness of a bolt of lightning.

It was exactly a week after the funeral that Walter Williams began to feel unwell. For a time he told nobody, assuming that it was just tiredness caused by a combination of grief and sleepless nights. Life had to go on although the summons he had received from the police for allowing the horses to wander on to the road did not make him feel any better.

'What's up?' Gladys regarded him through red-rimmed eyes. 'What yer 'oldin' yer 'ead for, Walter?'

'I think I'm going to be sick.' Walter replied, and only just made it to the

bathroom in time. It was the thought of the autopsy, the dissecting and stitching of a pretty, innocent little girl. The final analysis, the moment of truth.

Walter was still heaving when he came back into the room. He was sweating, too, and shivering at the same time- The light seemed to have dimmed. Gladys was in shadow and he could not discern her features. 'You ought to go to bed,' she said. He looked at her, knew that she was speaking to him', but he could not hear her words.

'Yer what?' he forced the words out, but whether there was any sound he did not know. 'Walter? You're ill!'

His comprehension faded. He sensed himself at a disadvantage. His back and neck muscles were agony. This woman - he didn't know who she was - was advancing on him, hands outstretched. She was an enemy. He had to defend himself, and the best way to do that was to attack. He stumbled towards her, using every ounce of physical and mental effort to force his limbs to respond. Gladys Williams was heavily built, but for her size she was surprisingly weak. He lurched against her, and she fell back against the table. His stiffening fingers found her flabby neck and closed around it, locking in a paralytic vice as they did so.

Her mouth was opening, but whether any sound came from it he could not tell. Her tongue was out, blue and swollen, her eyes bulged and rolled. Walter Williams could see no longer, yet it did not frighten him. He felt the woman struggling in his grasp for a time, but eventually she grew still. Then he became aware that he was losing balance, sliding, falling, taking her with him. They hit the floor and rolled over. She was on top of him, a crushing weight that restricted his breathing, the only bodily function of which he was now capable,

He lay there in a black void, his breathing becoming more shallow every minute, and eventually the trickle of spittle from his lips slowed and stopped altogether.

'Look at this.' Professor Brian Newman thrust some newspaper clippings across the desk towards Haynes. 'You can't ignore these. This is the consequence of bur experiments with the bats.'

'Nonsense,' Professor Rickers spoke up moving from the window. 'You're seeing things as you want to see 'em, Newman. You're a sensationalist - or maybe you're just trying to justify your own balls-ups and prove us wrong in the bargain.'

'Read them,' Newman snapped.

'I've read 'em,' Haynes pushed the cuttings back. 'Apart from the girl's death, and her father's, too, which are diagnosed as a type of meningitis -'

'Meningitis, buggery!' Newman's anger was rising.

'Maybe the horses and that guy in the car died from it, too,' Rickers laughed.

'There's a tie-up. My theory is that this... this disease has an indirect bearing on all four deaths, maybe the horses', too. We can't be sure.'

'You're just wasting your time, Newman, and ours.' Haynes said. He had not called the professor by his first name since the day when the bats had escaped from the laboratory. It wasn't that he was worried about them, he simply could

not tolerate fools. And, in his estimation, Newman was an incompetent fool. Women and science did not mix.

'Let me tell you what happened as I see it!' Newman thumped the desk with his fist.

'Go on, then,' Haynes released with a sigh, adjusting his spectacles. He glanced at Rickers, who had returned to the window and was staring out across Cannock Chase.

'I reckon,' Professor Newman began glancing at Haynes and then across at Rickers, 'that the reason for those horses being loose on the road was that they had been upset by the bats. Unfortunately, out of the whole saga there is no one left alive to tell us what really happened. The girl and her father have both died as a result of some strange form of meningitis which is identical to that from which the bats were dying in my laboratory. Unfortunately the virus dies with the victim, and the only way in which its true form can be determined is to examine it in the body of a sufferer before death occurs. So far we haven't been afforded that opportunity. In the final stages, the disease brings on paralysis and madness. Williams attacked and strangled his wife before the paralysis claimed him. As for the bats, they just go crazy, flying blindly. They scared the horses out of the stables and the field on to the road. The driver of that car was just unfortunate -'

'He'd been drinking,' Haynes interrupted.

'Maybe so, but that doesn't alter the fact that the horses were stampeding crazily down the road. And we must also face up to the fact that bats carrying this virus are loose in the countryside. I had hoped that those which escaped might die quickly without harming anybody or anything, but we must face the thought that some of them are carriers. They won't die from the disease themselves, but they'll pass it on to other bats, and I dread to think how far it will spread.'

Rickers laughed harshly.

'You're crazy, Newman,' he said. 'I've said it before, and I'll say it again - the whole thing is preposterous. You made a balls-up of your experiments, a few bats died, and if your theories became known outside this Research Centre half the population would be panicking.'

'All right.' Brian Newman stood up, shaking his-head.

'Have it your own way. But don't say I haven't warned you. Any time now those bats will start to mate. About forty per cent of those which are carriers could pass the virus on to their young, creating a new generation of carriers which won't die. A bat can live from four to twelve years, and during that time they'll be spreading this plague, breeding again. Seven weeks from now the whole thing could be totally out of control, and we won't be able to do a thing to stop it. The bubonic plague outbreaks of the Middle Ages will seem like head-colds by comparison.'

'And supposing you're correct in your assumptions?' Haynes smiled in the manner of a tolerant uncle who has just listened to the fantasies of an infant nephew. 'How do you propose halting the spread of this ... this mutated meningitis virus?'

'That I can't say right now.' Newman was tight-lipped. 'Maybe I can find an antidote which neutralises the poisons produced in the body by the germs, perhaps by taking a blood sample from a bat which has recovered from the

disease and then injecting it into an infected one, though I must admit I don't foresee any survivors in this instance. We can try to determine the reasons for immunity in the case of the carriers. In any case I'll either have to try to recapture some of the escaped bats, or inject the virus into some more and start again from scratch.'

'If you're going to do that,' Haynes snapped, 'then you do it in your own time. You were allocated one month for this meningitis experiment. You have already submitted a negative report and admitted failure. I can't allow you to waste any more time on it. There are far more important research matters to be attended to.'

'OK,' Newman retorted pausing in the doorway. 'I'll do it in my own time. I take it you'll have no objections to my using the laboratory in the evenings and at weekends? Miss Wylie will assist me.'

'Carry on.' Haynes picked up a folder and beckoned to Rickers. 'You can use the place, but don't go wasting our time.'

As Brian Newman closed the door and walked down the corridor towards his own laboratory he could hear Haynes and Rickers laughing.

'Well?' Susan Wylie looked up as he entered the small lab. 'What are their reactions?'

'Ridicule, naturally,' Newman told her. He walked across to the open window and gazed out on the sunlit Cannock Chase. 'What else could one expect from a guy like Rickers? And in the meantime, out there, there's a death-force gathering which will sweep across this country like a swarm of locusts.'

'What are we going to do?' she asked, laying a hand on his arm.

'Work like hell to try and find an anti-toxin,' he said. 'I'd appreciate your help, but it won't be in the government's time, nor will there be any remuneration for evening work and weekends, and at the end of it all we may have absolutely nothing to show for our efforts.'

'Of course I'll help you, Brian.' she smiled. 'You know that.'

'Even after the way I treated you?'

'A leopard doesn't change his spots. I knew what you were like before I moved in to live with you. You'll probably do it again.'

'Thanks,' he murmured, and his lips went down to meet hers.

'Where do we start?' she breathed when they finally broke off that lingering kiss.

'Well, before I begin injecting a fresh lot of bats and creating another strain of lethal paralysis,' he replied, 'I think a look around those stables where the Williams family kept their horses wouldn't go amiss. No doubt that was where the escaped bats took up residence to begin with, though possibly they've moved on elsewhere by now. I have no doubt in my own mind that both Williams and his daughter caught the paralysis from them, and if the devils are still hiding out there then it could be the most dangerous place on earth at this very moment. In that case I think it would be better if I went alone.'

'No!' Her eyes blazed with determination. 'I'm in this together, Brian, and I'm going with you. Just try and stop me! We created this horror together, and



I'm prepared to share the risks involved in trying to stop it.'

'All right,' he conceded, nodding. 'But as a precaution we'd better wear some kind of protective clothing. Rubber gloves and mesh face-masks may not be totally effective, but at least they'll help. We don't need to wait for dark. We'll go up this evening, about an hour before dusk.'

Brian Newman left his car at the bottom of the muddy track, and together they walked in the direction of the Wooden Stables. Susan Wylie wore jeans to protect her bare legs, and their faces were both covered by netting masks of the variety used by duck-shooters, while latex rubber gloves shielded their hands.

The sun was dipping slowly in the cloudless western sky behind them, as though reluctant to relinquish its heat to the cool of darkness.

'It hasn't rained for a month now.' Susan said. 'I heard on the radio that a drought has been officially declared.'

'Nothing's acting naturally these days.' The professor sighed. 'It's as if Nature herself has had enough of everything and wants to wipe us all out and start again.'

'Don't say that.' Susan shivered, then added, 'What a damp, derelict place this is!'

'Clouds of midges hovered beneath the trees, and as they rounded a bend which brought them into view of the stables, they surprised a couple of feeding rats which darted into the sanctuary of the gloomy, derelict buildings.

'Ugh!' Susan grimaced. 'Just the sort of place for the bats to hide out. They'd be well at home with all the rats and mice. By the way, d'you think rodents are capable of carrying the virus?'

'I don't know,' Newman replied. He paused before the entrance, almost reluctant to go in. 'But I guess we'll find out before very long. Now, follow me, and let's take a look inside.'

The Wooden Stables were dark and forbidding, the sunlight filtering in through gaping holes in the roof and penetrating the shadows, and they stood just inside the doorway for a few moments whilst then- eyesight adjusted to the gloom.

The first thing they noticed was the smell, a pungent, decaying odour.

'God, what a stink!' Susan wrinkled her nose beneath her mask.

'Something's decomposing.' Newman walked towards an opening in the brick partition which separated the building into two halves. The floor was a mass of saturated straw and rubble, broken slates, fallen bricks, and heaps of horse dung. His foot kicked against something, a tiny body that rolled over, half decomposed, barely recognisable. It might have been a dead mouse but for the membrane of skin attached to it, a frail wing that had somehow outlasted the carcass.

'Look,' he said, pointing to the ground. 'That's one of 'em. And there's another, lodged on that shelf. Let's take a more thorough look.'

He produced a torch from his pocket, and by its light they uncovered another twenty small corpses, some more rotted than others. The professor directed the

light up into the rafters but there was no sign of life, only unbroken cobwebs stretching between the beams.

'Well, they're not here now,' he muttered. 'And from the way these corpses have rotted I reckon they've been gone for some time. Of course, the weather's been abnormally warm for the time of year, but I'd say the bats haven't used this place for a fortnight.'

'Maybe... maybe they've all died and... that's the end of it,' Susan suggested, trying to sound convincing.

'I wish I could agree with you.' Newman switched off his torch and they went back outside. 'But I'm afraid we can only wait and see. There's twenty-five thousand acres of Cannock Chase, and they could be just anywhere on it. Maybe even further afield. We know for a fact that this virus can be passed on to human beings, even if Haynes and Rickers pooh-pooh the idea. So all we can do is work like hell in an attempt to find an antidote, and await any further outbreaks. I'm afraid, though, that before very long Rickers is going to have to eat his words.'

They walked back to the car in silence. In the dusk which was now gathering a bat flitted overhead, squeaked once, and then was lost to sight amidst the tall pines.

## Chapter Five

The Close was a quiet backwater of the small city of Lichfield, where little change had taken place during the last century. The prominent feature was the cathedral, towering above the solid red brick and black-and-white timbered buildings which housed the Dean and Chapter and others connected with this holy place.

In the furthest corner, partially screened by a ten foot grey stone wall, stood the Bishop's Palace. However, it no longer housed that worthy man, for during the last couple of decades it had been taken over by St Chad's Cathedral School, a purpose for which it was ideally suited. Along with everything else in the Close it maintained an unhurried existence, preparing its pupils for life at a public school. As with most establishments of this nature, tradition prevailed. And one such tradition was that the boys attended a morning service in the cathedral on every Saint's day.

The headmaster, a young prebendary who was combining a career in teaching with a call to the service of God, watched with pride from the steps of the cathedral's north door as his pupils were marched in single file, shepherded by a couple of prefects. The choristers too in their red and white cassocks, seated in the stalls adjoining the altar, were from the school also. And this morning, to complete the St Chad's monopoly, the Reverend Francis Jackson himself would be giving the short address. He smiled to himself at the prospect, watching the last of the boys file into the stately edifice. The

Bishop personally would be observing everything, seated somewhere at the rear of the long aisle, incognito in the shadows, so this morning everything had to run to perfection. Even the celebration of the birthday of a minor saint had to be a splendid occasion.

The first anthem was already beginning when the Reverend Jackson took his place. He knelt briefly, adopting an attitude of piety, eyes closed, lips moving soundlessly, then rose and opened his prayer book. He knew the words by heart, and this enabled him to focus his attention on the congregation. It seemed to consist mostly of his own pupils, with just one or two members of the public seated in the rear pews'. He tried to identify the Bishop, but it was impossible at such a distance. He had to be there, though.

The anthem was followed by prayers, the first lesson, and then, as the hymn entered its last verse, the Reverend Francis Jackson embarked upon his dignified walk from his seat to the lectern. The pulpit was only used on Sundays.

The strains of the organ died away and the Reverend Jackson faced the congregation with a benign smile on his angular face.

'O Lord,' he spoke louder than usual to ensure that the Bishop would hear him clearly, and affected an Oxford accent, 'may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be now and always acceptable in Thy sight.'

He paused for a second, his eyes narrowing. Someone, somewhere, was fidgeting. He couldn't see who it was, but he could hear it, a kind of rustling, sweet-papers perhaps, a stealthy sliver of chewing gum...

Even as the headmaster peered down the aisle, the soft swishing sound increased, like inarticulate whisperings. He looked upwards, and his jaw dropped in horrified astonishment. The lofty roof towered above, him, the stonework beautifully carved into figures and designs by craftsmen over the centuries, the sunlight revealing every detail in a variety of colours through the stained-glass windows. Yet this magnificence went unnoticed as the headmaster saw the tiny flying creatures fluttering crazily, diving, twisting, crashing into carvings, falling, regaining their powers of flight, soaring, diving.

'Bats? Francis Jackson grunted.

The whole congregation stared at him in amazement. From where they sat they could not see the bats, and such were the acoustics of the cathedral that they were unable to hear them either. Choirboys and prefects glanced at each other. Their headmaster had snapped under the strain at last. Somebody ought to go to his aid. His arms were extended as though trying to ward off some invisible attacker, his lips mouthing exhortations of fear as though a devil had possessed his soul.

Bryce-Janson, the head boy, was on his feet, determined to rescue his headmaster before this thing went any further. He stepped forward, trying to determine a course of action, when the full force of the bat invasion came into view, spiralling down from the roof in a flight of uncontrolled fury, erratic and without any obvious use of their radar. There must have been at least two or three dozen of the creatures.

The congregation were staring in amazement. Bryce-Janson stood immobile, as though hypnotised. The Reverend Jackson was flailing his arms wildly, shouting hysterically. He had always had a fear of bats, and to him this was a nightmare. It couldn't be happening. It was all in the mind, and in front of

the Bishop, too! Something sharp struck him on the forehead and he suddenly knew that it was real enough. It was then that he started to scream.

Bats zoomed up and down the aisle. Some of the boys crouched behind the pews in an attempt to dodge them; others ran blindly for the exit. An elderly woman, a regular at most services, fell to the floor in a faint.

Jackson was surrounded by several choristers who were attempting to drag him to the safety of the vestry, but he seemed to have lost all control of himself, lashing out blindly with his fists. One surplice-clad boy fell to the floor, clutching at a broken nose from which blood poured freely.

'Calm yourself, sir!' Bryce-Janson caught the headmaster from behind, pinioning his arms.

'Let go of me, stupid boy!'

The strength of the man was superior to that of the boy, and Bryce-Janson was sent spinning, tripping and sprawling headlong on the altar steps. A bat flew at him, dropped to the floor with the impact, and then took off again.

'Calm yourselves, everyone!' A tall, white-haired man was attempting to restore order in the aisle. Under normal circumstances the Bishop's voice would have commanded instant obedience, but now he was pushed rudely aside. The door was open and boys were fighting one another to get out.

Francis Jackson lay on the stone floor, panting, his face deathly white. Something alighted on his outstretched fingers, and with a shriek of terror he snatched his hand away. The bat swooped upwards, glanced off a stone pillar and then embarked upon a zig-zag course towards the roof.

All but a dozen or so boys were outside in the open air by this time. The Bishop had gone to the assistance of his prebendary, kneeling beside the semi-conscious Jackson and muttering soothingly in his ear. Then, as suddenly as it had begun, the aerial attack ceased. One or two of the bats were to be seen high up in the roof, clinging to the stonework, but the majority had vanished as though answering some strange call to return whence they had come. The clamour of voices died away, and a few of those boys who had fled began tiptoeing back into the cathedral, shameful expressions on their faces, each one of them hoping that their own individual show of cowardice had gone unnoticed in the mass melee.

'We had better help the headmaster back to the school,' the Bishop said to Bryce-Janson. 'I think he is only suffering from shock, but we'd better let Matron have a look at him.'

The red-headed boy with the broken nose was clutching a saturated crimson handkerchief to his injury. Nobody seemed particularly interested in him, and he began to cry.

Within ten minutes the cathedral was empty except for the Bishop and the Head Verger. The latter, a short, plump man, fidgeted uncomfortably under the steely gaze of the other.

The Bishop glanced upwards, but there was not a bat to be seen, 'Bryant where did all these bats come from?'

'I've no idea, Bishop,' the verger muttered. 'We've not had a bat in the cathedral for years, not since one dropped down on to the altar during the carol service a few Christmases ago. Mind you, there's usually one or two

flying around outside at night.'

'But this was absolute madness! So many of them, and in the daytime, too.'

'It could be that the contractors working on the main spire disturbed a nest of them, Bishop.'

'Yes, yes, that's a point,' The holy man seemed relieved at the prospect of a logical explanation. 'Of course. Well, perhaps you would have a word with the contractors. If there are bats in any quantity in the spire, then I think we ought to contact a firm of pest controllers. We can't have this happening again. Those poor boys were frightened out of their wits, not to mention the headmaster. See to it, will you, Bryant?'

'I will, Bishop.' The Head Verger turned away, and once out of sight of the Bishop he paused to mop his damp forehead with his handkerchief. He was thankful that he had been in the toilet when it had all happened. If there was anything he hated and feared more than rats and mice, it was bats.

The Reverend Jackson began to feel ill early in the evening of the third day following the chaos which the bats had caused in the cathedral. He was aware that he was running a temperature, and every movement seemed an effort, almost as though he was a spectator from afar witnessing his own actions. He put it down to shock. The whole episode had been very unnerving for him, although he had tried not to show it outwardly. It would be bad for his morale, and that of the school, for the pupils to become aware that their headmaster was afraid of a few harmless bats. He shook his head and tried to ignore the aching and feverishness. An early night might shake it off. He was grateful that he was a bachelor and did not have to go to great lengths to deceive a doting wife. All he had to do was to remain in the background until he felt well again.

His dreams began to trouble him the moment he laid his head on the pillow; nightmarish figments of the subconscious that bordered on realism. Bats. Hundreds, thousands of them. All sizes. Some so small that they were scarcely larger than fleas, alighting on his body, crawling, biting, impossible to dislodge. He writhed and groaned in his sweat-soaked bed, striking at himself, slapping his face and thighs. Eventually they left him, but his respite was brief. Next came the giant ones, as big as Alsatian dogs, hanging on the walls by their claws, perching on the end of the bed and just staring. They watched him like vultures waiting for death, gloating over the easy pickings that would be theirs.

'I'm not going to die, damn you!' he yelled, and switched on the light.

The bats had gone. They had all been in his mind, imagination. Yet he was certain he hadn't been asleep. They had been so real. He decided he would not put out the light again. The darkness was terrifying.

He lay there trying to think of sane things, mundane matters such as assemblies, school reports, examinations. The Common Entrance exams were only a short time away. Confirmation classes were due to begin the following week, too. But always his thoughts returned to the bats. The Bishop had assured him that the contractors restoring the main spire would endeavour to remove any of the repulsive creatures they came across. The pest extermination people would be called in if necessary. There was nothing to worry about.

Twice during the night he had to stagger across the landing to the toilet, retching into the bowl. The lavatory light didn't work. The bulb must have blown, but he had neither the inclination nor the energy to go and search for a replacement. Nevertheless, he had to prop the door open whilst he was being

sick, otherwise so his fevered mind told him, the cubicle was full of bats. Minute ones crawled all over the cistern. Big ones perched on the pipes, and hung on the walls. But they didn't like the light. Even that which filtered in from the landing dispelled them. That was the answer. Keep the light on.

Sometime towards dawn he fell into a restless slumber, tossing and turning, trying to complete that brief address which had been cut short so abruptly the other morning. Bats swooped at him, struck him, landed on his shoulders, clung to his cassock. But he was not going to be deterred this time. He forced the words out, shouting to make himself heard above the incessant squeaking. 'The forces of darkness are present at all times ... even during daylight... we must make a stand against them ...'

His voice trailed off. The pews were empty. There was no congregation. His own boys had deserted him in his very hour of need. The Bishop, too. He would go and find them, remonstrate with them, if only he could find the way out. There were no doors. He ran blindly down the aisle. Where was Bryant? It was the Head Verger's job to lock and unlock the doors. But he couldn't blame the fellow if there were no doors. Just unending stonework, leering gargoyles with bats clinging to them . . .

The jangling of the telephone in his study below saved him from the ultimate terror as the winged creatures began to close in on him. He struggled out of bed. His limbs seemed reluctant to respond and it needed a conscious physical effort to move one foot in front of the other. There was a red haze before his eyes and he was dizzy. The stairs presented a problem, but he solved it by clinging to the banister with both hands. He had once caned a boy for sliding down the rail in the Palace. He regretted that action. It had been unjust. The boy, he couldn't remember his name, had been right. It was by far the best method of descending a staircase.

The phone was still ringing as he entered the study, flopped down gratefully in his mahogany swivel chair and lifted the receiver.

'Headmaster.' His speech was slurred. The formation of that single word had been an effort. Somebody might think he'd been drinking.

'Matron here, headmaster.' The voice at the other end gave no indication that she had noted anything strange about him. 'I've had six boys brought into the sanatorium during the night. I'm going to ask the doctor to make an early call, but I think... well, I'd like you to have a look at them first.'

A sudden sense of foreboding seemed to assist the Reverend Francis Jackson with his speech, and the words came more easily.

'What's... what's the matter with them?'

'They're . . . well, I thought it was the beginning of a summer flu epidemic, but three of them appear to be paralysed, and ... oh, I'd be glad if you'd come across, headmaster!'

'I'll be with you as soon as I can.' Jackson sensed a constriction of his vocal cords, a tightening in his throat. He replaced the receiver, but in so doing misjudged the cradle and the instrument fell on to the desk with a clatter, slid over the edge and hung suspended by the coil. There was a pain in his back, travelling upwards to the base of his neck. That part of his anatomy had ached throughout the night, but now, suddenly, it was bordering on agony. He could not move his head. He tried to lift himself up out of the chair but it was impossible. The muscles would not respond to the urgent calls from his brain.

The Reverend Francis Jackson was very frightened indeed. What on earth had happened to him? The curtains were still drawn, and he had not bothered to switch on the light as he stumbled through the doorway. Now he sat in the gloom. The dawn was coming fast, its grey light filtering into the study through the chinks in the curtains, but everything was obscured by a red film, a haze that hovered in front of his eyes.

He tried to flop back in the chair, but even relaxation was denied him. His eyelids were heavy, but they would not close. It was as though they had been fixed in position by some kind of quick-drying glue. They were smarting, burning. Agony.

He could sense spittle in his mouth, welling out of the saliva glands, slipping back down his throat and threatening to choke him. Some of it trickled out between his lips and down his chin, falling in sticky strings down the front of his pyjama jacket and on to his lap.

The room was becoming darker. Not black, but filled with a claret mistiness. He could still see, but his vision was restricted to that area immediately in front of him. And the bats were back. The tiny ones first, crawling all over the walls like thunder-bugs at harvest time, millions of them. They were on his face and neck, inside his pyjamas causing him to itch from head to foot, a sensation that was driving him insane. He wanted to scratch himself but couldn't.

Then came the big ones, appearing silently from nowhere on slow, flapping wings that folded as they landed. They jostled for position on the desk, a mass of horrible faces, unblinking eyes. Gloating. He couldn't shut them out. He tried to pray, but the cohesion of thought was slipping from him. He was the living dead. A zombie. His body was dead, and only a tiny spark of life remained somewhere in his brain, just enough to kindle the terror.

Now he wanted to die, just so that he could shut out these ghoulish creatures. After that they could do what they liked with his body. Feed on it. Drink his blood. He didn't care. His mind burned with a craving for death that wouldn't come.

It took the Reverend Jackson almost an hour to die. And when his release finally came there was no outward sign of change. He sat rigid, eyes wide and staring sightlessly. Not a single muscle had relaxed; even his bowels remained taut against all the laws of Nature.

The Sanatorium consisted of a separate block at the rear of the Palace which housed the school. There were two wards for segregating different ailments, and small, self-contained flat in which Miss Boston, the plump, kindly matron, lived.

Miss Boston had returned to her quarters to make herself a cup of tea and prepare for an early call from one of the local doctors. She was concerned about the six boys who had been admitted at intervals since midnight, but there was nothing she could do until the doctor arrived. She wondered how much longer the headmaster was going to be. It was an hour since she had telephoned him. He had sounded strange, she recalled. His speech had been slurred. Perhaps he was a secret drinker? She smiled at the thought. He was constantly preaching teetotalism. He even refused to have a glass of sherry at the Old Boys' Reunion. She sighed, shook her head in bewilderment, yawned, and poured herself a cup of tea.

The small ward stank of vomit and diarrhoea. The curtains were still closed,

and the six boys aged from nine to fourteen, lay in various postures on the beds, their pyjamas undone, their bodies glistening with sweat.

Montgomery, the youngest, was crying softly to himself. 'He didn't like boarding schools anyway, and they were a thousand times worse when one was ill. This last half-hour his body had been stiffening from the base of the spine upwards, a creeping numbness that alleviated his earlier agony. He stared up at the ceiling, mentally tracing the cracks in the plaster, going all round them and back again, just for something to do. He hoped that the doctor might send him home. That would have made the suffering worthwhile.

Ursin-Davies sweated profusely. He always sweated anyway, on account of his size. Rolls of fat were visible to the others through his open pyjama jacket. He hated this school, but most of all he loathed sport. What use were football and cricket to a fellow with brains? Yet they did not seem to appreciate his academic qualities. The fact that he came top of 5B in almost every subject did not appear to compensate for his failure at everything physical. Master, prefects and fellow pupils ridiculed him, went out of their way to make his life a misery. He hated every one of them, and particularly Bryce-Janson.

Ursin-Davies turned his head and looked across at the head boy. BJ was groaning in agony, grinding his teeth.

Good! If his own pain was anything to go by, Ursin-Davies decided, then BJ was going through hell. It was almost worth putting up with to watch the swine suffer.

Ursin-Davies draped an arm over the side of the bed. His fingers brushed against something metallic, and with some difficulty he managed to grasp it and slowly draw it upwards. It was a knife, an ordinary item of cutlery, the blade matted with congealed gravy. It smelled bad, and he wrinkled his nose. Some earlier patient had obviously dropped it, and it had never been recovered. He grinned to himself. That just went to prove that old 'Bossy' wasn't as thorough as she made out. She kidded 'em all, the idle old bitch. Even Jackson, Christ, how he hated Jackson. But not as much as he despised Bryce-Janson. The head-boy was a legal bully. He could take it out of you, and justify his actions. He could think up all sorts of sadistic punishments and get away with them. His word always counted with the Head against anybody else's.

This sudden new surge of hatred was easing the fat boy's pain. He remembered his recent clash with BJ. Dirty shoes and a crumpled tie at the Saint's Day service the other day had earned him a session of detention. Not just ordinary detention like others got, though. Oh, no. BJ knew that that would be no real punishment for him. He'd taken him down to the gym and put him through the lot; the vaulting horse, the horizontal bar, the climbing ropes, ending up with twenty minutes' physical jerks whilst the head boy sat on his arse and smirked.

Ursin-Davies had thought that he might have suffered a heart-attack after that lot. He had coughed and wheezed all night, and then he'd been selected to represent his house on a cross-country run the next day. They knew he couldn't bloody well run. It was all BJ's doing. He had engineered it. The bastard had been waiting at the finishing-point when Ursin had staggered in, a full twenty minutes after everybody else.

'I'll make an athlete of you if it kills you.' the head boy had announced in a loud voice, and all the spectators had broken into peals of laughter. You were expected to laugh like hell at any of BJ's sick jokes. 'Better a dead athlete than a fat scholar.'



'If it kills you'. Ursin-Davies winced at the memory of that jibe, and felt the cold steel of the knife in his sweaty palm.

'I say, Bryce-Janson,' a thirteen-year-old boy called out, shaking a younger colleague in the next bed, 'I think ... I can't make Burlington hear. He's gone all stiff like . . . like he's got polio or something.'

Bryce-Janson sat up hurriedly. He grunted, but somehow managed to slide off the bed and pad across to the boy who had attracted his attention.

'Let me see.' He pulled the other aside. 'Hey, Burlington. Listen to me.' He shook the inert form roughly. 'This is Bryce-Janson. Answer me! D'you hear me? If you're fooling, I'll report you to the Head.'

Ursin-Davies eased himself up on one elbow with difficulty. The nine-year-old was wailing, and those clustered around the silent boy's bed were beginning to panic. Bryce-Janson was trying to cover up his own fear by using his authority.

The bitterness which had been building up inside Ursin-Davies came to the boil. He gripped the handle of the knife. The back of his most hated, enemy was towards him, and he wondered why he hadn't thought of this before. It was all too easy, and no more than the bastard deserved.

A cauldron of hatred seethed inside Ursin-Davies. He forced his knife-arm back and upwards. The muscles were stiff and unyielding at first, but sheer determination defeated the semi-paralytic tendons. It just needed one supreme effort.

He brought the knife down with every ounce of his thirteen stone behind it. It took the head boy between the shoulders, the blade buckling but sinking in up to the hilt with the weight of the blow, twisting and tearing as blood gushed out of the jagged wound.

Bryce-Janson screamed, a strangled, unnatural sound that died away in a hiss of spittle. He sank to his knees, clutching at the sheets and pulling them to the floor with him. Boys stared in horror, disbelief on their faces. Ursin wrenched the knife free and held it up, blood dripping on to the floor. He tried to laugh, but no sound came. Just a baring of the teeth, lips drawn back, spittle frothing, bubbling, bursting. Then came brief realisation, momentary sanity amidst the madness, as his mouth opened with shock.

He gripped the knife again, exerting unwilling muscles, struggling to turn the bloody blade so that it pointed inwards, forcing it up towards his own jowls. Staccato movements, an inch at a time, beads of sweat rolling down his face with the strain.

'No ... no ... Fatty, no!' nine-year-old Montgomery screamed, the only one to realise the full implication of Ursin-Davies's actions.

This time the blade's entry was achieved more easily. It slid into the soft fat without the hindrance of bone, once again going hi up to the hilt, severing the jugular vein, until blood spouted like an oil-geyser, jetting on to beds and boys alike.

The door opened, and Matron entered, a short, middle-aged doctor at her heels.

'These are the boys, doctor,' she was saying, 4it really is most puzzling... and... '

She broke off, saw the tottering boy, the knife embedded in his throat, the fountain of blood, and fell forward unconscious.

## Chapter Six

The sun beat down relentlessly on the squat buildings which comprised the Biological Research Centre on Can-nock Chase, so that as early as ten o'clock in the morning the heat in Haynes's office was stifling. The air-conditioning laboured under the strain, and the four people in the room knew that by midday it would be virtually ineffective. They all recalled the freak summer of 1976, but this one threatened to break all records. Farmers were forecasting disastrous potato crops again. Fire-brigades were at full stretch in an attempt to combat heath and forestry fires. Yet, suddenly, all these had become of minor importance.

Copies of every daily newspaper for the past week lay spread out on the desk. The headlines bore a similarity as the Fleet Street prophets of doom revelled in the latest sensations. 'BATS FROM HELL SPREAD KILLER DISEASE', 'SCHOOL QUARANTINE AS PLAGUE AND MADNESS STRIKE', 'DEATH VIRUS ESCAPES FROM RESEARCH CENTRE', and so on. The accounts varied. Some followed the truth religiously, others exaggerated. The man in the street would believe that which he chose to believe. In all, fear would predominate.

Haynes regarded Brian Newman, Professor Rickers and Susan Wylie steadily. He fidgeted with his spectacles, and chewed his lower lip.

'It seems you were right, Brian.' He averted his eyes as he spoke. He wasn't accustomed to making apologies, nor to admitting that he was wrong. 'I owe you an apology.'

'Thanks.' Newman said. He could have made it tougher for his chief, but he had no wish to do so. The situation now was far too serious for either of them to indulge in petty jealousies.

Rickers shuffled his feet and mumbled. 'I still can't believe it. It's just not scientifically possible.'

'Well, it's happened, and that's that.' Haynes spoke sharply. 'And right now we've got to do something about putting it right. How have your tests gone, Brian? Is an antidote possible?'

'Not at the moment.' Newman shook his head gravely. 'I injected a fresh lot of bats, but they died in just the same way. I tried taking germs from those which appeared to be immune and injecting the virus into the sufferers. They died. It had no effect.'

'Hell!' Haynes lit a cigarette and blew a cloud of smoke into the air. 'The Press are really gunning for us now. So are our own boys in London. We're the

villains of the piece.'

'I am,' Professor Newman corrected him. 'It was my fault that the bats escaped, I was careless enough to knock the cage over.' He noticed Susan blush and start to say something, but his frown silenced her. 'It's got to come out, anyway, and I'm prepared to take full responsibility.' 'Let's get a few facts together first,' Haynes said, 'working from the information we already have. By now a large percentage - it's impossible to quote figures - of bats are carrying the virus. Those which they come into contact with either catch it, and die within a very short time, or else they become carriers themselves. Hence the disease will spread at an alarming rate. It is reasonable to assume, in the light of recent information, that the bats were responsible for the death of the Williams' family and that they caused the horses to bolt on to the road. Therefore the Wooden Stables were their first home after their escape. Then they vanished. Was it because they were disturbed? Let us assume so. Then for some time they disappeared altogether, presumably to some quiet place. The main bunch, anyway. They chose the upper regions of Lichfield Cathedral's main spire. They were disturbed again, this time by a firm of contractors working on the spire. They came into contact with schoolboys and a headmaster. The headmaster and six boys died horribly from this meningitis type disease within three days. But nobody else. Consequently we can assume, at this point, that humans do not carry the disease. They only catch it directly from the bats. Therefore, the bats are the real menace. If you keep out of their way you're safe, unless of course you meet up with someone in the 'mad' stage of the disease. Williams killed his wife, and that schoolboy murdered the head boy. But can the virus be carried by animals or birds, rats, mice, starlings, all the scavengers, for instance?'

That we don't know yet,' Professor Newman answered. The greatest danger could be from rats and mice, but at the moment there are no reports to substantiate this.'

'But the question everybody is asking,' Haynes said slowly, pausing to draw on his cigarette, 'Is just where have the bats gone now? Nobody has set eyes on them since the episode in the cathedral.'

'We can only guess,' Brian Newman said. The time between the Wooden Stables affair and the one in the cathedral we can presume is the period they took to adjust to their new way of life, hiding away from humans. Then they were disturbed by those contractors. They have now retired somewhere to breed. The period of gestation is seven weeks. That takes us up to July. The young are not capable of leading an independent life for two months after birth. By September, we could be in the midst of the most terrible spread of the disease imaginable. It could be nationwide instead of just confined to the Midlands. Our only hope is to find the main colony and destroy them. Now!'

'A task equivalent to looking for the proverbial needle in the haystack,' Rickers said. 'Where the hell do we start?'

'There is no longer any point in attempting to conceal the facts from the public,' Newman continued. The more they are kept informed, the better. We must enlist their help. Anybody who sees bats must report it at once, and we must have teams of pest-control experts standing by to move into action. Whilst the bats remain in rural areas there is still hope, but once they converge on the towns and cities - well, it doesn't bear thinking about!'

Haynes said, 'Oh, God!'

'We play ball with the Press, then?' Rickers pulled a wry face.

'We must,' Haynes replied. 'Give them the full facts, don't leave them to draw their own conclusions. There's already been too much exaggeration and surmising. I'm attending a Press conference this afternoon, and I shall attempt to educate them on bats and mutated viruses. Now, Brian, what's the chance of coming up with an antidote? Is it hopeless?'

'We'll keep trying,' Professor Newman told him. There isn't much else I can do at this stage. However, to be perfectly honest, I don't hold out much hope.'

Ken Tyler had been gamekeeper in charge of the land around the ancient site of Castle Ring, on the edge of Cannock Chase, for five years. His duties varied between rearing pheasants for his employers, who rented the shooting rights over the surrounding two thousand acres, controlling the vermin, assisting in the culling of the deer herds, and spending his weekends patrolling in his Land-68

Rover to ensure that none of the picnickers who converged on the Chase at fine weekends either lit fires or deposited litter.

A small, wiry man, he wore the traditional suit of plus-fours in all weathers, including freak heat-waves. It was his uniform, his symbol 'of authority. People knew to whom they were talking when he stopped them. In his own estimation he commanded the same respect as that of a police officer. His word was law on the Chase. If Ken Tyler instructed anyone to quit the land, they were expected to obey without question.

For the past fortnight he had rarely enjoyed more than four hours' sleep in any one night. Fires were breaking out all over the Chase. At this very moment two brigades, aided by troops and voluntary helpers, were attempting to contain thirty acres of blazing conifer thickets. There was no chance of putting the fire out. They had to be content to widen the fire-breaks and hopefully prevent it from spreading to an adjacent five hundred acres of larch trees.

Ken Tyler knew all about the deadly bats. His attitude was one of 'I-told-you-so'. Hadn't he forecast something like this happening from the very first day when the building of the Biological Research Centre had commenced next to the German Cemetery? Yet he still had his routine duties to attend to. He had listened to the repeat broadcast of the previous evening's plea to the public. 'Find the bats,' they said, 'before they give birth hi July.'

Tyler laughed. Some chance. Today he was going to leave the fire-fighters to their own devices. Beyond the golf-course there were five acres of rhododendron bushes. The previous winter they had provided roosting for some tens of thousands of migratory starlings. As a result the shrubs had become white with the birds' droppings, and beneath them there was a good six inches of foul-smelling excreta. Now a fire up there would have been beneficial, cleared the area. But no, the silly buggers who came here at weekends preferred to drop their cigarette ends and broken bottles in valuable growing timber.

Nevertheless, there was a job to be done on those rhododendrons. Some of the starlings had remained behind when their colleagues had departed for their native country in March, just as though they were keeping the place habitable for the big flocks to return to next winter. They had to be moved, now. Game and starlings could not exist in the same area. No self-respecting pheasant would put up with a constant foul stench and incessant deafening twittering throughout the nights.

Well, if the public weren't prepared to burn the rhododendrons, then Ken Tyler would see to it himself. And the public could take the blame!

The half-gallon of paraffin in the back of the Land-Rover was covered by an old blanket. In all probability a crumpled newspaper would have been quite sufficient to start a blaze, but Tyler was not taking any chances. The flames had to spread quickly, and become established before any of the brigades already in the area were able to put out the fire.

On the floor beside the covered can lay his shotgun, a 12-bore, worn and rusted in places, but nevertheless with a look of efficiency about it. The gamekeeper never went anywhere without it. It was as much a part of his character as the baggy plus-fours.

He drove past the Park Gate Inn, turned right at the junction, then took the first left down a bumpy, uneven track which followed a winding course amidst the pine forest. There was a smell of woodsmoke in the air. It had been around for almost a week now, drifting across the Chase from the numerous fires, hanging in the still, windless, hot atmosphere.

At last the track emerged on to an open stretch of heather, its natural beauty marred by a number of well-trodden footpaths and an abundance of litter. Tyler grimaced as he brought the Land-Rover to a standstill. People were selfish, inconsiderate. They never kept to recognised footpaths but had to trample down natural growth, leaving it looking as though a herd of stampeding elephants had crossed it. Then, to add insult to injury, they left their litter lying all over the place.

It was early: 7.15 a.m. Too early for ordinary folk to be about, and all the firemen had their hands full anyway. There were rumours that today the authorities were sending troops from Whittington Barracks to help out. Well, if that was the case, then they were certainly fighting a losing battle, Tyler decided. Soon the whole countryside would be reduced to a charred waste.

He stopped the Land-Rover within thirty yards of the high wall of rhododendrons, and reversed so it was facing in the direction from which it had come, ready for a quick getaway before the flames took hold.

God, it was hot! He pushed his cap on to the back of his head and wiped his brow. Even at night the place never got a chance to cool down. There was no respite from the scorching heat. By day it blazed down from the sun, by night it came up out of the cracked, parched earth. There was no escape.

He climbed down and looked around him. Not a soul in sight. In the distance he could see a column of black smoke mushrooming in the sky. That would be the Pye Green fire. A line of firemen were fighting like hell in an attempt to prevent it from destroying the STD station. Bloody good job if it burnt it down, Tyler thought. It spoiled the Chase, like a skyscraper. Trouble with people today, he told himself, was they couldn't exist without every up-to-date gadget and convenience.

He checked once more to make sure that there was nobody about, and then he lifted the can of paraffin out of the back. Just two gallons, but it would be more than enough.

The shrubs should have been flowering by this time of year, a mass of sweet smelling red and pink. Instead they had a look of dereliction about them. Somehow the greenery had survived in spite of the clinging starling droppings. There had been no rain to wash the excreta away.

Tyler wrinkled his nose. The sour aroma was stronger than the smell of woodsmoke. He coughed. Maybe if the bushes blazed for a week it might get rid of the stench and scorch up the layer of droppings. It was the only way.

Usually there were starlings in evidence, one or two flying about, maybe nesting, or just too lazy to go out to feed on the surrounding fields. They chirped noisily. This morning, however, there was not a bird to be seen. Not a cheep. Silence. Sheer desolation.

Ken Tyler noticed this as he walked towards the rhododendrons, carrying his can of paraffin. Where had all the birds gone? Still, whenever they'd gone, when they came back to roost that evening they'd be in for a nasty shock. They'd singe their wings if they came too close. The starling problem was as good as solved.

As he approached the bushes the stench was almost overpowering, a combination of excreta and rotting flesh. Many starlings died from natural causes out of the thousands clustering in the bushes, and none of the scavengers of the countryside were prepared to clear up the corpses.

'Soon settle that,' Ken Tyler said as he unscrewed the cap on his jerry-can and began splashing the contents over the nearest rhododendrons. 'Cremate the bastards!'

He stood back, struck a match, and flung it at the paraffin-soaked bushes. It fell to the ground, lay burning for a couple of seconds, and then with a roar a small sheet of flame shot up, spreading even before it reached the topmost branches.

Tyler felt the scorching heat on his back as he ran for the Land-Rover. Those excreta-covered bushes were tinder-dry. The blaze was spreading far quicker than he had thought it would.

As he opened the door of the vehicle he noticed a movement out of the corner of his eye, and turned back towards the fire. Tongues of flame crackled on dead branches, leaping into the air hungrily as black smoke billowed up in a huge pillar, burnt leaves floating in the air and carrying the sparks. But that was not all.

Whirling upwards, at first indistinguishable from the sparks and smuts but then recognisable by their very numbers and speed, were hundreds of pairs of tiny wings, crazily veering in all directions. In a panic, soaring and diving, their one aim was to escape the heat of the furnace.

Tyler's first thought was that these living creatures were starlings now being forced to relinquish their stronghold. Yet as he climbed into the driving seat, slammed the door and gunned the Land-Rover's engine, the truth suddenly dawned on him.

'Christ alive!' he muttered, glancing back. 'Bats!' The radio broadcast came back to him. 'Report any sightings of bats immediately.'

The Land-Rover bumped and jerked at 40 m.p.h. down the uneven track, its driver heedless of potholes or overhanging branches. His first thought was to return to his cottage and telephone the information to the Research Centre up on Pye Green.

Then he realised that he could not do so without incriminating himself. On no account must he admit to being up here on Castle Ring at the time when the fire broke out. No way. To hell with the bats. That was where they had come

from, according to a sensationalist newspaper, and for all Ken Tyler cared that was where they could return. He drove back into the yard adjoining his small cottage close to Castle Ring. The bedroom curtains were drawn. His wife still slept. She would not be aware that he had even been outside the yard. Nobody else had seen him, and he had passed no vehicles.

As he went inside the telephone was ringing. It was the Fire Officer, advising him that part of the Castle Ring Estate was on fire. They could only spare a skeleton force.

There was no chance of saving the large expanse of rhododendrons.

Throughout the county of Staffordshire firemen and volunteers fought blazes. Brownhills Common was ablaze, and the A5 traffic had been halted. A verge smouldered at Hilton, near Lichfield, and a couple of soldiers from Whittington Barracks watched over it, stamping out the flames which broke out periodically. A more serious fire was threatening to destroy Sutton Park, where the combined fire-fighting forces of Staffordshire and Warwickshire were losing their battle.

All of these men saw the bats passing over, flitting through the drifting smoke, but it was well into the day before the reports reached the Biological Research Centre on Cannock Chase.

## Chapter Seven

Professor Brian Newman's bungalow was situated on the outskirts of Cannock. Small and compact, there was nothing to distinguish it from the other houses in the small cul-de-sac. Yet its photograph had already appeared in at least one daily newspaper, the caption beneath it stating that 'this is the residence of Professor Newman, who developed the killer virus and allowed it to escape into the world'.

Newman glanced through the local evening paper which he had picked up on his way back from the Centre less than an hour ago. His name was featured again in the bold front-page headlines. He grimaced, and tossed it to one side.

'Well, they've really singled me out for the blame now,' he said, with bitterness in his voice. 'They have to have a scapegoat, though.'

'Then they're damned fools,' Susan Wylie replied hotly. 'They seem to overlook the fact the you're the one person who stands any chance of wiping out these bats.'

'I wish I could share your optimism.' Newman smiled wanly. 'Weeks of tests in an attempt to find an antidote for the virus, and still nothing to show for my efforts.'

'It'll come.' Susan assured him. She moved across to where he was sitting, and

slipped an arm around his neck. 'It's got to. There has to be an antitoxin somewhere.'

'It's the latest reports that worry me,' Newman said, squeezing her hand gently. 'Large numbers of bats have been reported heading south-west, sighted at Brownhills, Lichfield and Sutton Park. Now what the hell's going on? A migration of some sort? And what caused 'em to move? There are no reports beyond Sutton Park, but my guess is that they won't settle there. The whole bloody area is ablaze. If they continue on their present course then our worst fears are confirmed.' The cities?'

'Yes.' He nodded. 'Birmingham, at a guess. Then the panic will really start. There've been no deaths lately simply because the bats have been hiding out in remote places away from populated areas. Imagine what could happen. Thousands of derelict slum dwellings for them to hide and breed in. A dense population. The hospitals would never be able to cope. There would be widespread chaos, maybe even a breakdown of law and order. A spread of anarchy.'

'You're a pessimist,' She kissed him on the forehead. 'Well, I'm an optimist. Maybe the whole thing's over, and the virus is dead. The bats might never be heard of again.'

Her attempts to raise his spirits were interrupted by a crashing and splintering of glass. A heavy object thudded on to the carpet and bounced against the fireplace. It was a jagged half-brick. The curtains blew inwards as the warm breeze of a hot summer's night wafted through the smashed pane.

'What the hell!!' Professor Newman was on his feet immediately. A hail of stones crashed into the small living-room, smashing the remaining panes of glass in the window, their force retarded by the obstructing flapping curtains.

'Come on out, Newman!' came a shout from outside. 'Show yourself, you bastard!' Someone was hammering and kicking on the front door. 'What's going on?' Susan breathed. Newman pushed her behind him and moved to the window, parting one of the curtains slightly so that he could see outside. The scene which met his eyes caused him to catch his breath.

There were some twenty youths gathered on the pavement outside. Others were clustered at the front door, pounding with their fists. 'Show yourself, Newman!'

'Come on out or we'll burn the bloody place down!' 'Who are they?' Susan was trembling. 'Yobs. I'll bet the oldest one amongst 'em isn't more than twenty. They're just looking for trouble, and dangerous. If the football season had started maybe they wouldn't be here.' 'What are we going to do?'

Newman peered out again. The houses around were in darkness. Only a single streetlamp lit up the bizarre scene. The residents were obviously not going to tangle with the youths. He wondered if anybody was phoning the police.

'Dial 999,' he said pushing Susan gently away. 'I'll try and keep 'em talking in the meantime.'

'If you're not out in ten seconds,' a tall, well-built youth in a black leather jacket and jeans yelled, 'we're smashin' the door down and comin' in!'

'What d'you want?' Brian Newman shouted, and dodged back as another stone came whizzing into the room.



'We want you. You started this fuckin' disease, and if we've all gotta die then you're goin' to be the first!'

'Calm yourselves.' Newman tried to speak evenly. 'The matter is under control. There is no need for panic.'

His reply was greeted with guffaws, and more of the youths began crowding into the tiny front garden. One of them had an axe, and he heard the woodwork of the front

door begin to splinter. Susan was talking on the phone. Time was running out. Why didn't some of the locals do something? Or were they in sympathy with these louts who sought revenge on the man who was responsible for the terrible mutated virus?

A denim-clad arm was thrust in through the flapping curtains. The fingers gripped a rolled newspaper, the flames licking at the nylon material, igniting it instantly.

Newman struck downwards viciously with a heavy glass ashtray, catching the youth on the forearm. There was a howl of pain, and the improvised torch fell to the carpet. The professor stamped on it immediately. More stones and bricks showered into the room.

There was a splintering crack from out in the hall, and he knew that the front door had yielded. >Susan screamed and came running back into the room, slamming the frail door behind her. There was no way of locking it - not that it would have been any use. Newman pulled her to him, determined to shield her from the mob. Flames were now leaping from the curtains on to the pine wall coverings, and choking black smoke filled the room.

'Did you ... get through?' Newman gave way to a fit of coughing.

'Yes.' She wiped her smarting eyes. 'Gave them ... the address...'

Then let's just pray they get here in time.'

Youths crowded into the room, young faces twisted into expressions of hate and fear. Several of them had knives. The big fellow, the one who had done most of the threatening and shouting, pushed his way to the front and grabbed Newman by the front of his pullover.

'Get your hands off me!' Newman hissed.

'Shut your trap!' The other struck the professor across the face with the back of his free hand, and Newman tasted blood in his mouth as he staggered back.

Three of them had hold of Susan, and were dragging her screaming out into the hall.

'Let go of her!' Newman's voice was lost in the shouting, and he felt himself being pulled along with the crowd. The room was ablaze. It was only a matter of minutes before the entire bungalow became an inferno.

Fists were pummelling him the whole time. His eyes were smarting from the smoke, and only the coolness of the night air on his face told him that they were outside. He was flung to the pavement. Boots thudded into his body, and he groaned aloud. It felt as though a rib was broken, but his main concern was for Susan. He looked up, trying to see her through a forest of legs. Then he heard her scream, 'Let go of me!'

He tried to rise, but was kicked down again, rolling over, covering his head with his hands in an attempt to protect his skull,

'Dirty bastard! Murderer!' 'Vivisectionist pig!'

There were a dozen different reasons for their hate, all merged into one action of lawless mob rule. Susan Wylie struggled desperately, but she was totally helpless in the grip of four leering, lusting, angry youths. They wanted her naked, but they weren't going to bother undoing buttons and zip-fasteners. Garments were ripped into shreds and torn from her body. Her bra-strap snapped, and hands pawed at her soft white breasts. As her skirt came away she felt her thighs being forced apart. Fingers prised and stabbed between them, bringing cries of pain to her lips.

Brian Newman lay in a huddled heap on the pavement. Breathing was an effort. There was a searing pain in his lungs. He could feel the heat from the fire, and then liquid was jetting on to him. A spot landed on his swollen lips, warm and acid and foul. 'Piss on the bastard!'

His attackers were standing over him, a dozen or more streams of urine soaking his clothing. But his only thoughts were for Susan Wylie.

Then, just as consciousness seemed to be slipping from him, he heard the bee-bor-bee-bor-bee-bor of approaching sirens, becoming louder by the second, and tyres screeching as vehicles took the bend into the cul-de-sac.

'Cops!' somebody yelled.

'So what? There's enough of us.'

Two panda cars pulled into the kerb twenty yards from the mob. Four uniformed officers got out and regarded the scene steadily. One reached back into his vehicle and begun to talk into his radio. It was an explosive situation that required the utmost caution.

Professor Newman and Susan Wylie were afforded a brief respite as their attackers turned to weigh up the new opposition. Lights were going on in the surrounding houses now as the residents' courage returned with the arrival of the law.

More sirens. This time it was a fire-engine, headlights dazzling the youths as it drove towards them, slowing, blocking the road.

Suddenly, as one, the crowd broke into a wild retreat, pushing policemen to one side, scrambling over the roofs of the panda cars, running past the fire-engine, then scattering into the wild disarray.

Nobody followed them. Even a second approaching police patrol-car did not slow until it drew up behind the fire-engine. The firemen were already unrolling lengths of hose and connecting it to the hydrant.

The officers helped Professor Newman and Susan Wylie to their feet, covering the girl with the remnants of her torn clothing. She shivered in spite of the heat from the burning bungalow.

'What happened, sir?' a sergeant asked.

Must a frightened mob.' Professor Newman winced at the sharp pain in his lungs. They were looking for trouble. Decided to take it out on us on account

of this virus.'

'Oh, you're the professor who let the bats out!' Newman detected contempt in the other's tone. 'Well, I suppose we'd better get you to hospital for a check-up. Doesn't look like there'll be much left of your bungalow.'

Newman grimaced. The police were only assisting because it was their duty. Had they realised from whom the summons for help had come they might not have arrived so quickly. Officially, they deplored this outbreak of lawlessness. Individually, they secretly sympathised with the mob. The virus carried by the bats did not discriminate. Whichever side of the law one was on, it struck with impartiality. And the cause of its existence was this young professor. Without him it would probably never have happened. And nobody believed him capable of containing or destroying it. His efforts were nothing more than an attempt to pacify the public, to appease his own conscience. It was only a matter of time before widespread death swept across Britain, and maybe even further afield.

## Chapter Eight

The Bank's Treasury was possibly one of the latest publicised functions of banking in the whole of the city of Birmingham. Without its existence the banking system would not have operated smoothly. A local headquarters for the supplying of additional cash, and the collection of surplus money by means of bullion vans, serving all the branches in the area, had replaced the previous method of dealing with these requirements by High Value Packets, both labour and time saving.

The bullion-vans passed almost unnoticed in the city traffic. Their weekly collections and deliveries at branches were noted with mild interest by passers-by. Those with more subversive motives attempted to discover their timetables, routes, and the amount of money which the vans carried. Yet an air of mystique prevailed. Security companies' vans were attacked frequently. The Bank's went unscathed, such was their organisation and security, including a number of guards who remained on board at all times whilst they were in transit, even to the extent of eating their meals inside during all weathers, in stifling heat or freezing cold.

Yet the Treasury itself was a veritable fortress, a basement stronghold beneath a huge office block where security measures were such that none could pass beyond the first checkpoint without proper authorisation. The underground structure was old, partially converted to meet modern requirements for the storing of vast quantities of money into a maze of tunnels which housed the many strong rooms and working areas where money was counted and sorted into denominations. Large amounts of cash, the daily takings of multiple companies, was also brought in here for counting and checking, thereby dispensing with lengthy delays at branch counters. This section, adjacent to the main strong room with grilled walls and locked doors, was known as the Credit House.

Some twenty clerks were employed in the Credit House alone, spending five days of the week shut away from the daylight, working laboriously and monotonously. They, too, were subjected to several checks before entering or leaving their place of employment, everything geared towards an invincible money store.

The heat wave penetrated the depths of the Treasury right down to the Credit House, the clerks sweltering in the heat that was conveyed underground by the brickwork in the same way that storage heaters retain their temperature.

Joe Lutton had worked in the Credit House ever since its formation a decade ago. Everything was a routine which did not deviate, and, provided one obeyed the rules and systems laid down, there was a substantial pension to be picked up on retirement. One did not even have to count the notes by hand these days. One simply inserted a bundle into a machine, pressed a button, checked the digits recorded on the dial, and removed the notes from a clip at the back of the instrument. Machine-minding, in effect. Joe Lutton, a small, dapper, freckled-faced clerk in his early forties did not even have to think about the work these days. His mind wandered to other matters as he laboured with the efficiency of a human robot.

Today he thought about bats. Everybody was thinking about bats. They were in the headlines of the midday edition of the Mail again. 'BATS HEADING FOR THE CITY? IS DEATH ON THE MOVE?'

It was a frightening thought. Joe was glad that he worked down here in this nice safe place. The overall compensations outweighed the boredom. Bats frightened him. He remembered his wedding-night and the bat that had somehow found its way into the bridal chamber. His wife had nearly had hysterics and their marriage had not been consummated for a further twenty-four hours. In his day, few people had sex before marriage, particularly within the respectability of banking circles. He had waited a day longer than most.

But the bats couldn't get down here into the Credit House. The Treasury was impregnable.

The afternoon wore on, hot and stuffy. Lutton finished checking a tray of £40,000-worth of five-pound notes, and went and fetched another one from the chief clerk's desk.

Mondays were always exceptionally busy. That meant a late finish, but Joe Lutton didn't mind. The overtime money would be useful.

He had counted the first bundle of fivers and re-banded them, when Don Lucas, a young apprentice -clerk, gave a shout from the other end of the room where he was working at a long trestle table.

'Hey! What's this?'

Heads turned. Something crouched on the floor, small and furry, tiny eyes glancing about it.

'It's a mouse,' somebody said.

'Don't be stupid.' Lucas backed away. 'Mice don't have wings. It's a bat!!'

'A bat!'

There was a momentary shocked silence. Clerks turned and stared. They couldn't believe it. But the proof was squatting there, and even as they looked it took off, flew up to the ceiling, and alighted upside down on a supporting steel

girder.

'Oh, God!' Lutton paled.

The Chief clerk, a man only a year or two younger than Lutton, picked up the internal telephone and dialled a single number.

'Sorry to bother you, Mr Baxterdale.' His voice was humble, apologetic, trying to hide his fear. 'No, no trouble really. Only . . . only there's ... there's a bat in the Credit House!'

Lutton sweated. He hated the chief clerk for his cringing personality. Sorry to bother you, Mr Baxterdale, he mimed his superior mutely to himself, there's only a bat in the Credit House and we could all be bloody well dead by this time tomorrow. Of course, we don't want to interrupt the work, and if you like we'll keep it in here ...

Baum, the Credit House chief clerk replaced the receiver, cleared his throat, and looked round at the others.

'Er,.. Mr Baxterdale says he'll ring the Area Inspector. Nothing to worry about. Just carry on. Don't anybody take any notice of it.'

Lutton sweated profusely. This new system of locking the grilles from the outside, the keys being held in the Treasury office by two authorised holders, had disturbed him right from its implementation. Suppose there was a fire and the intersecting corridors were cut off by a wall of flames? Those in the Credit House would die. But this was a thousand times worse. Death hung perched on that beam. It only had to touch one of them, so the papers said, and that would be that.

Lucas picked up something from the table, moving slowly. It was an old wooden cylindrical ruler that dated back to the early days of banking, as heavy and as lethal as the truncheons carried by the bullion van crews. A Treasury antique that was still in use.

All eyes were on him. Everybody knew exactly what he was going to do, and nobody made a move to stop him.

The childish streak in him had often prompted reprimand from Baxterdale. The young clerk was always flicking rubber-bands at his colleagues, and then immediately assuming an air of innocence. His aim was uncanny. They hoped it would be so now.

Lucas was poised to strike, arm back, ruler clenched firmly. Those watching held their breath. Then he struck, and it seemed impossible that he could miss.

Wood clanged on steel, the whole length of the girder reverberating. The bat had moved at the last second with the speed of a house-fly accustomed to dodging swats. It shot upwards, hit the ceiling, dropped to the floor, and then took off at an angle of forty-five degrees.

Clerks accustomed to the tranquillity of life in the Credit House panicked. Money spilled on the floor as they sought cover behind desks, but their safety was as perilous as that of the car driver who is suddenly attacked by an irate wasp in his vehicle. The bat zoomed crazily to and fro.

The chief clerk shouted in alarm, striking futile blows as the creature flew at him, seemed to become caught in the threads of his shirt and then freed

itself. Lutton saw it heading in his direction. It passed him with a yard to spare, somersaulted, turned in mid-flight, and on its return journey glanced off the back of his neck. He fell to his knees.

It headed directly toward the steel grilles. There was a brief sigh of relief from the clerical staff. The bars were four inches apart. Plenty of room for it to pass through. It caught one of its wings as it did so, and tumbled to the concrete floor on the other side, stunned.

'Jesus!' someone breathed.

They heard footsteps and voices echoing down the corridor. Baxterdale was coming with the key holders to release them from this vault of death.

'It's there, sir!' Don Lucas called out shrilly, pointing to the inert bat as Baxterdale reached the grille door.

'What?' Baxterdale stopped abruptly, the two men at his heels bumping into him. 'Where?'

There!'

As Baxterdale, a plump, bald-headed man, finally saw the bat, it stirred, shuffled forward, and took off again -back through the bars and into the Credit House.

Screams and confusion came from within the enclosed area. There was no logic in the creature's behaviour. It flew madly back and forth, this time seeming impervious to the obstacles which it struck, hitting the bars again but not passing between them.

'Let us out! For Christ's sake let us out!' someone yelled.

But Baxterdale and his companions were retreating back up the corridor, glancing over their shoulders as they ran.

'Bloody well unlock the doors!'

Baxterdale reached his office, and his flabby hand was trembling as he picked up the receiver and dialled the Area Inspector's number. The line was engaged. He dropped the telephone back on to its cradle.

'Hadn't.. .hadn't we ought to go back down there?' one of the keyholders asked.

'No.' the Treasury Chief shook his head. 'You know the instructions issued to the public regarding these bats as well as I do. The stairway door is closed. The bat can't get beyond the lower-basement level. As soon as we can get hold of the Area Inspector he'll report it to the police.'

'Can't . . . can't we ring the police?' the second key-holder gulped.

The Bank's rules,' Baxterdale reminded him, glowering. The police are never to be involved without consulting the Area Inspector first. You know that.'

Baxterdale tried the number again. It was still engaged. Somewhere, far away and muffled, they could hear the screams of the trapped clerks.

It was the rush hour. People were hurrying, bustling, jostling each other, standing on packed buses while traffic waited at a standstill for longer

periods than it moved. The newspaper-vendors had all sold out in the city centre by five o'clock and were packing up their stands and kiosks. The evening edition of the Mail was a total sell out, just as the midday one had been. There was no fresh news of the bats, but the previous accounts, re-written with a diversity of opinions, were still commanding front page space.

The sirens of ambulances and police-cars', and their flashing blue lights, were a commonplace sight. Seldom did the worker on his way home spare either a second glance. However, this evening there seemed to be an atmosphere of extra urgency about the two white cars and the ambulance which forced their way through the lanes of jammed traffic, a motor-cycle patrol doing its best to clear the way ahead for them.

'Must be another bomb-scare,' a passenger on an outer-circle bus commented for the benefit of his fellow travellers. 'That'll make three this week.'

Within minutes crowds were gathering on the pavement by the ramp entrance which led down into the bowels of the Treasury. The grille was already raised in anticipation, two uniformed messengers and Baxterdale waiting by it in a state of acute agitation.

The ambulance was backed up, and stood in readiness with its engine running. Three constables emerged from the cars, carrying with them some kind of white plastic protective clothing.

'Looks like bleedin' riot-gear,' a youth remarked to his companion on the opposite side of the road. 'What the 'ell's goin' on down there?'

The grille gate was lowered behind the policemen.

'Your Area Inspector phoned us,' a young inspector snapped as they followed Baxterdale down a white corridor, which eventually led to the office. 'Just one bat, you say.'

'Yes.' Baxterdale straightened his tie and puffed out his chest, 'Down in our lower checking area.'

'Basement evacuated?'

'No. Everybody's still down there with it.'

'What!' the inspector's expression was one of incredulity, 'You mean there are people down there with it?'

'The instructions, are to try and lock any bats in an enclosed area ...'

'Yeah, but not people with 'em! Come on, there's no time to waste.'

They hurried on down until they came to the corridor adjacent to the Credit House. The imprisoned clerks were no longer shouting and rushing about in a state of terror. Instead they were sitting white-faced at their desks, silent, trembling.

The two key-holders unlocked the grille, and the policemen, pulling on gauze masks, elbow-length gloves and plastic coats, stepped inside.

'Now, where's this bat?' Baxterdale attempted to retrieve some of his authority.

'It's gone, sir,' the chief clerk stammered.

'Gone?'

'Yes.'

'Where? Where on earth could it have gone to?'

'I don't know, sir. One minute it was flying about like a mad thing. The next there was no sign of it. It must've ... it must've got out up the ventilation shaft.'

The policemen looked at one another. The inspector shook his head and turned to the group of huddled clerks.

'How many of you actually came into contact with the bat?'

Seven hands were raised nervously in a fearful admission.

'I see.' The policeman nodded and tried to make light of it. 'Well, I think we'd better take you down to the General for a check-up. Just a formality. We brought an ambulance with us just in case.'

The seven clerks looked at one another, abject fear and hopelessness in their expressions. They'd read the papers, the details of the virus.

Once an infected bat touched you, that was it. Finis. There was no antidote. Nothing on God's Earth could save you.

Once the ambulances and police cars had pulled away from the Treasury life reverted to normal in the streets. Workers caught their trains and buses, and the incident was forgotten.

The city enjoyed a brief lull between the departure of those returning to their homes and the arrival of those coming in to enjoy the night-life, the cinemas and theatres and night-clubs. For a couple of hours the traffic was light and the buses half empty.

There were only a few people about when Baxterdale left the Treasury, a sinking feeling in his stomach and a worried frown on his florid face. The Area Inspector's voice still rang in his ears. 'You bloody fool!' he had raged, 'If you can't make a decision in an emergency like that you don't deserve to be in charge of the place. If anybody dies I'm holding you personally responsible, and I'll see to it that you finish your banking career counting notes in the Credit House!'

It was only as he walked up Corporation Street that Baxterdale found the courage to admit to himself the real reason why he had locked the clerks in the Credit House with the bat. Had he attempted to release them, that crazed creature might have flown at him. The captain of the ship had battened down the hatches and deserted the sinking vessel with the crew locked in the hold.

He walked slowly, thoughtfully. Of course, they might not die. There was every chance that the bat had not been carrying the virus, that its erratic flight had been caused by panic. It was his only consolation.

His car was parked in Shadwell Street, a lengthy daily walk to and from the Treasury, but that was compensated by easy access to the Expressway. From there it was about forty minutes by car to his home at Shenstone.



Something caused him to glance upwards as he crossed Colmore Row and made his way across the front of the derelict Snow Hill station. At dusk hundreds of starlings could be seen in and around the buildings, chattering noisily as they went up to roost. Scavengers, but the city accepted them in the same way that it put up with the feral pigeons which fouled the buildings and cost the ratepayers a fortune annually in cleaning bills.

But today something was wrong. The starlings did not come back to roost until dusk, and that was almost three hours away. He looked again; The eaves were crowded, some of the occupants flying, settling, flying again. And there was something decidedly odd about the way they flew. Starlings maintained a straight course, in short, jerky flights. These were soaring and diving faster than the eye could follow, crashing crazily into the stonework. Swifts? Swallows? Baxterdale did not know much about ornithology, and he was not particularly interested. He almost turned away, and then, suddenly, he understood. Bats/

The papers had said they might head for urban areas. He quickened his step, hurrying down the underpass. The radio had said, 'report all sightings of bats'. To hell with that! Bats had caused him enough trouble for one day. Let somebody else do the shouting,

Baxterdale was breathless by the time he reached his car. His fat fingers fumbled with the door key, and it dropped from his grasp and bounced under the car.

'Sod it!' he swore, and dropped to his hands and knees.

It was then that he saw the rat. It was crouching motionless under the car, and it was a big brown creature, its red eyes regarding him balefully. Baxterdale drew back his hand. The key was nearer to the rat than it was to himself, and the rodent made no move to flee. It was not frightened of him.

Of course, it wasn't surprising to see a rat in the car park. He'd come across them before. The canal was only a matter of fifty yards away. That's where it had come from.

'Shoo!' he muttered. 'Scram!'

The rat did not move. Baxterdale pursed his lips and a little shiver of revulsion ran up his spine. He had to have that key. And the sooner he was away from Birmingham the better. Tomorrow he would go sick. He'd made up his mind. He'd never done it before, but there was a limit to that which any man could stand.

He began to stretch out his hand nervously. The key lay about a foot away from the rat. Easy does, it, then a quick snatch ... He moved quickly, grabbing for the fallen object, but even as his hand closed over it the rodent leaped forward.

Baxterdale yelled as sharp teeth dug into his palm, claws raking his knuckles. The creature was clinging to him, biting, scratching. He struck at it with his other hand, once, twice. Its grip slackened, and with a sob of relief he saw it fall, hit the ground, roll over, and dart towards a dense bed of nettles and weeds which bordered some adjacent waste ground.

Baxterdale retrieved his key, unlocked the door and then examined the wound on his hand. The bite was a deep one, bleeding freely. It was painful, too, There might be poison in it. He'd read somewhere once that people bitten by snakes sucked the venom out and often saved their lives by so doing.

His eyes shut, his thick lips closed over the bite, he sucked, sensed an unpleasant taste on his palate, and vomited on to the ground. For some moments he stood there retching, and then, with deliberate effort he climbed into his car, bound 'The wound with his handkerchief and drove off.

Baxterdale was feeling ill by the time he reached Spaghetti Junction and filtered on to the A38. His vision was impaired for some strange reason, as though he was driving through a red fog, with visibility down to only twenty yards or so and gradually reducing. His back ached, the pain increasing and travelling upwards until it reached his neck. He could not turn his head at all, and even the effort required to manipulate the controls was considerable. Logic told him to pull off the road and attempt to attract attention. Instinct urged him to try and make it home, a wounded fox crawling back to its lair to die.

He passed through Sutton Coldfield, and had it not been quiet, with virtually no traffic about, his frequent swerves would doubtlessly have involved him in a head-on-collision.

Then, at last, every nerve seemed to freeze in his body. His brain was confused. He did not know where he was, or where he was heading.- An island loomed up ahead of him. His foot was jammed securely on the accelerator, and there was no way in which he could free it even had he realised the danger. Rigid hands clutched the wheel. Eyes stared sightlessly ahead.

The car, a Viva, hit the roundabout and overturned, sliding on its roof with a screech of tortured metal, and finished upside down on the forecourt of the Midland Bank branch at Four Oaks.

The wheels spun. People gathered, staring, curious, horrified. Baxterdale watched them from his inverted position, unharmed by the accident, but slowly dying from the paralytic plague. He stayed there for almost an hour, and only when a fire-engine could be spared from the scene of burning devastation in Sutton Park was the Treasury Chief cut free and rushed to hospital.

## Chapter Nine

Haynes's expression was grave. His bloodshot eyes were proof that he had not slept for days. Once again a meeting was being held in his small office, but this time, apart from Rickers, Newman and Susan Wylie, there were two leading bacteriologists from London, and a well-built, grey-haired Ministry of Defence official.

Sir John Stirchley was tall and thin, wore rimless glasses that seemed to have the effect of making his eyes larger than they really were, and this, combined with bushy eyebrows and a military-type moustache gave him an appearance of severity. His work was acknowledged by biologists throughout the world.

Professor Talbot, on the other hand, was clean-shaven, said little, and was virtually unknown outside his London laboratory. Yet Sir John Stirchley had the greatest admiration for him, and had singled him out from a host of top bacteriologists as the man most suited to help in the crisis which was now building up to a peak.

All eyes were on Newman, the bandages around his waist and beneath his clothing giving him a more mature stature, but every time he moved the stiff jerky motions reminded one of a screen cartoon character. He had certainly been fortunate not to have received more severe injuries at the hands of the mob.

'Gentlemen,' Haynes began, sounding tired and lifeless, 'we are now faced with a situation which, up until a few days ago, we had considered not impossible but certainly improbable. The bats have moved into Birmingham, and, as far as we know, they have not infiltrated beyond the city centre. It was thought at first that a single bat had somehow penetrated the Bank Treasury. It was later discovered that several more of the creatures were hiding out in a rather antiquated ventilation shaft. Seven bank clerks who came into contact with the bat died at intervals during the course of the following week. This was only to be expected, but the most alarming features of all were to spread from there.'

He paused, fumbled a cigarette out of a packet on the desk, and lit it with fingers that shook.

'First, this man Baxterdale,' he continued. 'As far as anybody knew he had had no contact with the bat. He was later discovered, on the same day, trapped in his car which had overturned. There was no doubt that he had somehow contracted this mutated meningitis virus, but even if he had done so then he should have survived another two or three days. He died within hours! There was a wound on his hand, a small but nasty bite which was later found to have been inflicted by a rat. Baxterdale had contracted the disease via a rodent. Now, perhaps Professor Newman would be kind enough to give us a summary of his recent experiments with rats.'

'I injected twenty rats with the same virus which is causing wide-spread death amongst the bats,' Brian Newman said. 'Only one rat died. Trie' others appeared to be immune. I thought that possibly they had become carriers in the same way that many bats are. Further tests proved that they were not. The virus had died without apparently harming them in any way. One rat in twenty, gentlemen.

Five per cent. But a thousand times more deadly than a bat.'

'And what about mice?' Sir John Stirchley asked.

'Totally erratic,' Newman replied. 'Some followed the same course as the bats. About fifty per-cent fatalities. Definitely not as receptive as bats, but more so than rats. But, overall, there is no pattern. There is only one common denominator, and that is that the disease is deadly and it can be carried by almost any living being, including humans! Seven Treasury clerks died as a result of coming into contact with an infected bat. Within a week three hospital staff and one doctor caught the disease. Yet none of those who attended to earlier victims caught it. Why?' He shrugged his shoulders. 'Maybe we shall never find the answer to that one. It could be that some people are immune for some reason. One thing seems fairly certain, though. The virus is only passed on while the sufferer lives. Once the victim dies, so does the virus. Whilst we are faced with a situation akin to outbreaks of bubonic plague in the Middle Ages, we have the small consolation of knowing that

corpses can be handled with impunity.'

'And your experiments to find an antidote?' Sir John Stirchley asked.

'Negative. At the moment I have nothing to report. I am still hopeful, though.'

Haynes took off his glasses and sighed. 'So much for the biological side of this business.' He turned to the Ministry of Defence official. 'Now, Mr Littler, we have brought you up to date on our side of things, so perhaps you would be kind enough to fill us in on the details of what is happening in the Midlands? One is always dubious of relying solely upon newspaper, radio and television reports.'

'Quite so,' the other spoke in a flat, expressionless voice. 'Well, as you know a large number of bats have infiltrated the centre of Birmingham. The first reported sighting was in the old Snow Hill Station. The pest authorities were called in; the building was sealed off and pumped full of cymag gas. Later it was discovered that forty-two bats had been killed. All males.'

'All males!' Newman gasped. Then-

'Precisely. The point I am just about to make,' Littler continued, 'is that it is reasonable to assume that the females are breeding elsewhere. In the city, or in rural areas? It is impossible to say. According to reliable information which I have, the female bats should have given birth to their young already, and so, by the middle of September when these young bats are able to fend for themselves, their numbers could have increased by twenty-five percent. As one infected bat alone is capable of killing an innumerable number of people before it dies, then we have some idea of what we are up against.'

'But apart from Snow Hill Station.' Haynes broke in, 'there must be dozens of other such places harbouring bats.'

'Of course,' Littler replied. 'They have been sighted in scores of derelict slum areas, but it seems that once they are disturbed they leave and seek refuge elsewhere. We had one report of a large flock seen entering a derelict house in Moseley. We followed the same procedure as with Snow Hill Station, but afterwards, when it was safe to enter, we found not one single dead bat. They had obviously flown before our arrival.'

'It's like the mythical burial ground of the elephants in Africa,' Rickers groaned. 'Somewhere that's never found. We have to find the bats' breeding places if we're to check their spread, and that's only half way towards solving the problem.'

'And what about the public?' Sir John Stirchley lowered his voice. 'The scenes on television and the accounts in the newspapers are pretty awful. Is it really as bad as all that?'

'Worse,' Littler said with a grimace. 'So far twenty-three people have died as a direct result of this virus. Doctors are working night and day, and surgeries and hospitals are besieged by terrified people who claim to have been in contact with bats. The Prime Minister is speaking to the country tonight. The Midlands is to be declared a disease-zone, a circle incorporating Stoke-on-Trent, Leicester, Kidderminster and Wellington. All roads will be closed to and from the Midlands in an attempt to keep everybody and everything in.'

'Impossible!' Sir John snapped. 'We have neither the police nor the armed

forces with which to implement this. Just closing the roads and railways won't be sufficient. People will travel on foot.'

'We shall not be relying solely upon the police or armed forces as we know them,' Littler spoke uncertainly, as though he should not be disclosing the information. 'There can be ... shall we say, the formation of an additional force.'

'Like vigilantes?'

'Oh, no, the vigilantes are already making their presence felt. This will be a body of men. Armed. Well, I'll say no more, but it is the only way.'

'A police state,' Stirchley muttered.

'Only temporarily. While the bats continue to spread the disease,'

'All the armies in the world couldn't contain a colony of bats.'

'It isn't just the bats, sir. It's the people. If they begin fleeing the infected area then they are capable of carrying the virus to other parts, the same as the bats do. Likewise, we can't have a breakdown of law and order in the Midlands. Imagine the looting which would take place if everyone left.'

'What are the feelings of the citizens of Birmingham at present?'

'Panic hasn't broken out yet,' the Ministry man replied, 'but it could at any moment. Once people start dying in the streets and there aren't enough hospitals to cope with the sick, then all hell will be let loose. That's why the BVF is being formed.'

'British Volunteer Force.'

The seven people looked at each other in silence. There was no more to be said. No amount of talking could come up with a solution. Not unless Professor Newman discovered an antidote or someone found the main breeding quarters of the bats.

'I'm afraid the whole of the blame seems to have fallen on your head, Professor Newman,' Sir John Stirchley said, smiling wanly. 'Of course we know that it's just one of those things, but it's no good trying to explain that to the public. I am, however, going to try and get it through to Fleet Street that you are the one person capable of saving them from the bats. I'm sorry about the way you and Miss Wylie were treated by those louts, and about your bungalow, too. I take it you have fixed up accommodation elsewhere?'

'Yes, I've another bungalow.' Newman said 'At Chase-town Close to Chasewater.'

'Perhaps we should arrange for a police guard,' Stirchley mused.

'I don't think that will be necessary, sir,' Newman smiled at Susan. 'I am sure that that episode was purely a freak outbreak of hooliganism.'

'Well, if you need anything let me know,' Sir John nodded to Haynes, and the meeting broke up.

Susan followed Brian back into the laboratory.

'It's terrible,' she said, shuddering, and leaned against him. 'D'you ... d'you think there's any chance of finding an antidote now?'

'No,' he told her, 'to be perfectly honest, I don't. I've tried everything, and barring a miracle we'll just have to face up to the fact that there's no antitoxin.'

Then... what'll happen?' she asked.

'If it continues to spread.' he replied as he slipped an arm around her, 'I guess it'll mean the end of civilisation as we know it in this country. Or even the whole world!'

'We are in the midst of one of the gravest situations since the war,' were the Prime Minister's opening words as he began his televised speech on all channels, 'and as a result it has fallen upon my government to bring in emergency measures. A State of Emergency was formally declared at six o'clock this evening, and the British Volunteer Force, which has been formed only this week, has now gone into full operation. A disease-zone has been drawn up, incorporating most of the Midlands, and there will be no movement of persons either into or out of that designated area. It is our duty to contain the virus within those boundaries, and while every effort will be made to assist the people inside, under no circumstances must the virus spread beyond it. We are hoping that our scientists will discover an antidote within a very short time. In the meantime life elsewhere must continue as near as normally as possible, whilst within the zone it is in the interests of everyone to stay at home, stay indoors, and have as little contact with others as possible. Arrangements for food and other necessities will be made by your local authorities. Be sensible. Stay at home.'

Within an hour of the Prime Minister's speech traffic-jams were building up on all roads leading from the Midlands. Nobody had foreseen such drastic emergency measures in spite of the new terror which flitted from building to building in the gathering dusk each night. There were reports of deaths. Some still did not believe it. And those who did refused to believe that it could ever happen to themselves. Somebody was dying on average every half hour in a city the size of Birmingham. One accepted those statistics. The cause did not matter.

Now, suddenly, the presence of the bats was affecting everybody's life. Death was one thing. Military rule was another.

Gerald Pitkin had worked at the Treasury for five years. As an ex-Forces man it helped to supplement his pension after the age of forty-five. Thickset with short-cropped iron-grey hair, he had no other ambition than to see his time out there. At first he had had some difficulty adjusting to the new way of life, the systems, the lack of military discipline, but overall there were few problems. Until that fateful day when the bats had chosen to occupy the ventilation shaft in the Credit House. Fortunately for Gerald he had been standing in for one of the clerks on the bullion-vans who had stopped at home with a migraine. So by the time Gerald's van had arrived back at base order had been restored, and the Credit House clerks who had been in direct contact with the bats had been taken to hospital.

He accepted their deaths philosophically. Baxterdale's he delighted in secretly. But in the days which followed, Gerald Pitkin devoted much thought to the situation. It was rumoured early in the morning that the Prime Minister would be making a statement to the country that night, and Gerald had a good idea what the content of that speech would be. With his army training he forecast events. It had to be that way. They had to try and contain the outbreak of whatever it was, he decided. That meant calling up reservists (not from the infected zone, naturally) plus volunteers, men who feared for their

own safety if the plague spread. Rabble. An armed mob with little or no training, just a few brief instructions. Keep the bloody Midlanders in, and if any of 'em try to make a break for it, shoot 'em down. They'd die, anyway. A bullet was quick, painless. The virus was slow agony by comparison. So what was there to lose?

It was raid-morning by the time Gerald had worked all this out. A sudden sense of frustration followed by panic gripped him. Had he left it too late? He and his wife Bertha, and Harry, their eighteen-year-old son, should have made tracks yesterday. His brother Tom's place at Shrewsbury was the safest place for them. They'd be all right there.

He wondered if there was still time. He looked at his watch, trying to estimate what time he would finish that evening. Surely not later than five, unless some stupid pratt couldn't balance his books, and then they'd all have to hang about waiting. Stupid bloody rules. Nobody left until everybody had balanced. And even if everything went according to plan he might still be too late. Surely others had anticipated a cordoning-off of the Midlands? Anybody with any sense could see what was going to happen.

Gerald Pitkin had to leave early somehow. And one didn't get out of the Treasury before time without a good excuse. Like going sick. He worked out a plan of action, but it was after lunch before he finally put his escape-plan into motion.

'I've got the shits,' he informed Barlow, the new chief clerk.

'Well, go and have a crap, then.' Barlow was young, wore a permanent smirk on his face and made no secret of his dislike of ex-Forces men. If you didn't start in the Bank straight from school then you didn't deserve to be there.

'I've had two.' Gerald controlled his temper and tried to look as though he might be feeling ill. 'And I've been sick, too. I think I might have caught something. A bug, maybe.'

'You had a couple of days off last week.' Barlow continued working, pencilling figures in a large cash-book as he spoke.

'I had the shits then,' Gerald forced a belch and hoped that it sounded genuine. I don't think I ever shook it off.' 'I'll phone upstairs for the key holders,' Barlow muttered, picking up the phone and dialling with his pencil. 'You'd better have a word with the Chief. See what he says.'

Gerald Pitkin could hardly believe his good fortune as he hurried along the crowded street, up the ramp to the station, and just managed to board the 3.15 train before it pulled out. He'd never have got away with a yarn like that in Baxterdale's time. Baxterdale wouldn't have listened to anybody who claimed to have the shits. He was one big shit himself. But he was dead and gone, so what the hell?

Bertha Pitkin looked up in amazement as Gerald walked into the hall. She was thickly built, with greying hair disguised by an auburn rinse. The type who did everything to a routine. That had been bred into her by living for most of her life in army married quarters. And anything which disrupted her self-regimented life upset her. Like her husband arriving home two hours before he was officially due.

'What on earth's the matter with you?' she snapped. 'Are you ill or something?'

Told 'em I was.' Gerald was sweating, partly because of the heat and partly because he had run the remaining hundred yards as he succumbed to a sense of urgency.

'Whatever for?'

'Because we're leaving.' He jerked a thumb towards the stairs. Harry would still be sleeping. He was on nights at the car factory this week. 'Wake Harry and get a few things packed. Just essentials.'

Are you mad?' she demanded, surveying him, hands on hips, eyebrows raised, lips compressed.

'No,' he said. 'But if we don't get out now, we never shall. They're going to do something shortly. Cordon off Birmingham, maybe even the whole of the Midlands.'

She stared at him in astonishment, but for once she did not ridicule him.

They couldn't.' she breathed softly. 'They wouldn't dare.'

'They could and they would.' He stood poised on the bottom stair. 'I'll go up and wake Harry. We need to be on the road in half-an-hour before everybody else realises what's happening.'

Forty minutes later the Pitkins, Gerald at the wheel of their new Fiat, Bertha beside him and a bleary-eyed Harry in the back amidst piles of loose luggage, headed out of Birmingham. Gerald had tried to telephone Tom before leaving, but after three unsuccessful attempts, each time thwarted by a recorded flat female voice which stated that 'all lines to Shrewsbury are engaged', he gave up and they set off.

The traffic was lighter than it would have been under normal circumstances. Gerald Pitkin prided himself that he was the only person in the whole of Birmingham who had forecast the government's intentions.

They were through West Bromwich and Wolverhampton by six o'clock, and out on to the A464. Gerald glanced down at the petrol-gauge. Less than half full. He wished that he had filled up before leaving, but it didn't matter. There was more than enough fuel in the tank and it was less than fifty miles to Shrewsbury.

Shifnal was crowded. People seemed to be carrying on much the same as usual, going about their everyday shopping, chattering on the streets.

'Probably haven't even heard about the bats out here, Gerald said. 'I guess we're clear by now. We can relax.'

'I think you're making a damned fool of yourself, and us as well,' Bertha snorted. 'And when you get back to Birmingham you'll find that you've had the sack from the Treasury.'

'I've still got my army pension,' he grunted. Things did seem to be very normal out here.

Harry slept soundly on the back seat.

Then, with startling suddenness, their returning sense of security was shattered. There was a police road-block at the entrance to the M54, the Wellington by-pass which would have taken them to within a few miles of their



destination.

Wooden barriers blocked the road. A red and white police patrol-car was parked on the side, one uniformed officer seated behind the wheel, another standing by it, waving for them to continue back up the dual-carriageway and on to the A5. That in itself was bad enough. It was the third member of the obstruction team who caused Gerald Pitkin's heart to miss a beat. Tiny beads of sweat formed on his forehead. A soldier, stoic-faced, wearing camouflage denims. An automatic rifle was cradled beneath his arm and he watched the Fiat intently as though half-expecting some kind of resistance from its occupants.

Bertha started to wind the window down, but Gerald stopped her. His foot had eased up on the accelerator but now it pressed down hard again and the car picked up speed.

'We'll get back on the A5 and go through Wellington,' he said.

Bertha was white-faced, shaken. Harry stirred and sat up in the back. Neither of them said anything. There was nothing to say.

As they dropped down into Wellington, through Ketley, they were aware of an increased flow of traffic coming towards them. Cars, vans, all piled high with luggage, hastily strapped roof-racks, occupants with resigned expressions on their faces. Bumper to bumper, they crawled, came to a standstill, moved again.

Yet Gerald Pitkin had to see for himself. He tried to convince himself that it was nothing more than a flow of holiday-makers returning from the Welsh coast. Their expressions? Well, nobody enjoyed coming back off holiday, did they?

There was one other car behind them. He watched it in the mirror. A Reliant three-wheeler, grossly overloaded.

The heat was oppressive. The sky had clouded over, but Gerald knew it would not rain. Four months of drought now. The overcast sky increased the humidity, and Gerald Pitkin tried to tell himself that that was why he was sweating. The back of his shirt and trousers were stuck to the upholstery.

The oncoming traffic was at a standstill by the Cock Hotel. One car had broken down, overheated, and those following were having to overtake it. Impatience was growing. Horns blared. Drivers were leaning out of their windows in an attempt to determine the cause of the delay. And still the road ahead of the Pitkins was free of obstruction.

The second roadblock was some way out of Wellington. It consisted of another patrol car, two policemen, a soldier and, of course, an automatic rifle.

'Damn it!' Gerald Pitkin drove slowly up to the barriers. Apart from the following three-wheeler there was no other traffic here. It was as though the initial panic was over. The public had accepted the situation, resigned themselves to it. They had been told to go back to their homes and die like good citizens. And they were obeying.

Gerald pulled up alongside the barriers, wheels half-turned in anticipation of the U-turn he would be forced to make.

'Sorry, sir.' A policeman stepped forward. 'I'm afraid you'll have to turn around and go back.'

'We're on our way to Shrewsbury. To my brother's place.'

'I'm sorry, sir. The A5 and all roads to Shrewsbury are closed.'

'There's been an accident?'

'I don't know what's happened, sir. But the roads are all closed. Now, please move on.'

The soldier had moved forward as though in support of the constable, the rifle no longer carried casually, the muzzle swinging in an arc until it pointed at the Fiat. 'All right.' Pitkin nodded. 'We'll go back.' The three-wheeler was already following them as though the driver had never expected to be allowed through. Like everybody else, he had to satisfy himself that he had made the attempt.

'Well, so much for that,' Bertha groaned. 'Now for the long haul back to Birmingham. You ought to have phoned the AA first.'

'We're not going back,' Gerald stated firmly. 'What!'

'I said, we're not going back. Can't you see what's going to happen? By tomorrow there's going to be rioting in the city. Folks won't take this lying down.' 'What on earth can we do, then?' 'We'll take a right turn back here.' Gerald braked as they caught up with the tail of the traffic queue. 'I think it's signposted Little Wenlock. You can get up on to the Wrekin that way.' 'How will that help us?'

'We'll ditch the car and go on foot. They can't patrol the whole countryside, they won't have enough men. We'll get through. We'll wait for dark, though, and with luck we'll be in Shrewsbury by morning.' 'You're mad,' Bertha Pitkin said, but she did not argue. Harry Pitkin said nothing. He never had been a conversationalist. A loner from boyhood, he accepted life as it was. If his father said they were going on an all-night hike then he would trudge along with them.

Somewhere over the Wrekin there was a rumble of thunder, followed a few seconds later by a flash of lightning. But there was no rain.

## Chapter Ten

St Philip's Churchyard was crowded shortly after daybreak. The overnight cloud formation had vanished, and once again the new day was threatened with scorching heat. There was to be no let-up.

People sat on the grass, dishevelled, weary after a sleepless night. They came from all walks of life, the social barriers having been destroyed by the Prime Minister's speech a few hours previously. In the background a couple of uniformed and helmeted policemen watched intently. Their presence was only a formality. If anything happened they would be powerless to prevent it. Their

radios were futile, for there were not sufficient numbers of police at Digbeth station to answer the call. Every available man was out on the road-blocks.

The crowds were demoralised. Even the early frustration had gone. Despair was widespread. The church was full. Those who were unable to get inside knelt and prayed on the steps. A team of clergymen were administering Holy Communion. Several other religious bodies congregated into separate groups. Others were proclaiming the end of the world, insisting that there was salvation for those who followed in their path. Only they would be saved.

There were political meetings, too, the voices of the speakers carrying in the still atmosphere above the lower tones of those who prayed.

Marcus Vandon rejoiced in the crisis. On six successive occasions he had lost his deposit -in local by-elections; Now at last he would be able to sway the masses. They would listen to him now. He had something positive to offer. Action. The current government was a negative one, deserting its people in their hour of need, leaving the dying to bury their dead.

There was something commanding about Marcus Vandon in spite of his small stature. His voice demanded attention. He had a command of the English language far superior to most politicians. Small of build, it was his eyes, wide and staring, and the lean determined features which made him stand out from other men. Some had compared him with Hitler, and there was a marked similarity. People faced with the curtailment of their freedom as well as possible death are always prepared to listen to alternatives. And Marcus Vandon had a solution to offer. Standing on the small stool which he had brought along to give him an extra few inches in height, he addressed those nearest to him.

'We are being deserted in our darkest hour by those whose duty it is to protect us.' he began. 'We have been singled out for sacrifice. Our police and armed forces are determined that we shall not escape. Why? I ask you, why?'

He paused for a second, glancing around, noting with satisfaction that his audience was swelling.

'Because of the disease,' somebody replied halfheartedly.

'Yes, but why is the disease here in our midst, destroying us! They tell us that an unfortunate accident has come about, and that these bats escaped from the Biological Research Centre on Cannock Chase. I put it to you that they were deliberately released!'

An uneasy murmur greeted his words.

'Think about it.' Vandon continued, 'We have an overpopulation problem. Immigration goes unchecked. Inflation is soaring. An application for an IMF loan has been turned down. Unemployment is approaching the two-and-a-half million mark. What is the answer? I ask you, what is the answer when a ruthless government is determined to stay in power and continue to pursue their policies which have already failed?'

He paused again. Angry mutterings reached his ears, and with difficulty he suppressed a smile.

'I'll tell you. Reduce the population. And that is exactly what this government is doing. It has sentenced all of you to death. Each and every one of you. They have chosen an area which is both highly populated and can be cordoned off efficiently. Within weeks each and every one of you will be dead.'

Myself included.'

'What are we going to do about it, then?' a man at the front of the crowd which surrounded Marcus Vandon asked. 'You tell us this, but what's the answer?'

'It is partly your own faults.' Vandon lowered his voice, a perfect mild reprimand, a father offering to forgive and help his erring son, 'You refused to heed me in the past. Only a small minority gave me their votes, I could have been your mouthpiece, asking these questions in Westminster, and it is doubtful whether this government would ever have dared to attempt such an atrocious act of treason and mass murder had they had one amongst them protesting and remonstrating with them. But it is still not too late, my friends! Are we going to huddle in our homes and await death, as they order us to?'

'We bloody ain't!'

'What else can we do?'

'I'll tell you!' Marcus Vandon stabbed his forefinger in all directions, singling out individuals, making them leaders of men in their own estimation. The choice is yours., and yours... and yours, sir. We have the numbers, in spite of these hired killers, this so-called British Volunteer Force. They can no more contain us than they can stop the tide from flowing. We must show our strength, and drive these self-appointed upholders of a law which does not exist from our streets! We must break out of this human safari-park in which they have enclosed us! Courage is needed, friends. A few will die, but we will all die if we stay. I beseech you, act now! And remember afterwards that it was Marcus Vandon who saved you from certain death.'

The two policemen were trying to push their way through the crowd towards Marcus Vandon. Suddenly a dozen pairs of hands. pulled them down, and they were swamped by a human tide of seething fury. Their helmets rolled away, and their hands, clasped over their bared heads, were no protection from the raining kicks and blows as they became the first victims of the rising rebellion.

The clergymen outside the building were still attempting to give Holy Communion to those who knelt patiently in rows on the concrete flagstones, but their muttered blessings were lost amidst the roars of the crowd.

Glass tinkled in nearby Colmore Row where shop windows were already being smashed. A group of teenagers was on the rampage. They had not heard Marcus Vandon's oration, but they sensed the new atmosphere. Just like the old football days.

An old man with dark glasses, wearing a shabby raincoat in spite of the warmth, shuffled his way along the pavement with the aid of a white walking-stick. He heard the pounding of running feet and cowered in the darkness of his own blindness. Then the mob hit him, knocking him to the ground, booted feet treading over him as the rampaging youths surged towards Victoria Square.

He lay still, a scarlet pool forming beneath his head, oozing out from the wound in his skull where it had struck the kerbstone. Those following in the wake of the first bunch of rioters were slightly more compassionate. Their ranks parted, and they walked around the corpse. Some of them even gave the old man a passing glance, wondering idly how he had died. But it was only the start. There would be many deaths. It was something that each and every one of

them had to learn to accept. For only through death would life eventually be found again.

Then the early morning stillness was shattered by the first volley of gunfire, crackling harshly in the city centre.

It was a busy day for Marcus Vandon. Later that morning he spoke to a milling throng from the steps of the Town Hall. For once in his life there were few hecklers. His words were greeted with cheers against a background of rifle fire from the bottom end of New Street.

'It is the only way,' he yelled, attempting to make himself heard as his speech reached its climax. 'We must fight on. Every one of us. For the sake of our families, our homes. Fight!'

Evening saw him in Villa Park, the terraces and stands packed beyond the legal capacity for football matches. Vandon's new band of followers had connected his microphone to the public address system, and as dusk began to cool the fierce heat of the day he exhorted those around him to even greater acts of anarchy.

The conquest of this stadium had not gone without bloodshed. Fifteen or twenty dead bodies lay on the pavements along by the Holte End turnstiles, a thin blue line which had been breached by sheer weight of numbers. Some of the casualties had been civilians, the forerunners of the 70,000-strong mob. As Marcus Vandon had pointed out earlier that day, victory would not be gained without some losses.

Vandon's face was contorted into an expression of maniacal triumph. For him a lifelong dream was coming true. He had seized on an unprecedented opportunity. The anarchy in the Midlands would spread faster than the virus which the bats carried. The government would fall within a week. It was already toppling.

'The hospitals are overcrowded,' he yelled. 'See for yourselves! The dead and the dying lie in the streets of this, your city. There is only one way to end this disease, and to defeat this militia which those clinging to power by their fingertips have called in at the eleventh hour. Fire, the greatest cleanser of all...'

A murmur of shocked horror, the note quickly changing to one of reluctant approval.

'I say that Birmingham must be razed to the ground. Destroyed in the form we know it, and the bats with it. And then we must rebuild. A bigger and better city will rise like a phoenix from the ashes of the old!'

Even 'as Marcus Vandon's words were echoing around Villa Park, screams were coming from the crowded stands and terraces. People were pushing, a crush-barrier collapsed, and bodies tumbled out on to-the pitch. A wave of instant panic was sweeping through the crowd.

'What. . . ' Marcus Vandon's eyes bulged, and at that moment he saw and understood. Like swarms of angry giant moths, bats were flitting from beneath the eaves of the stands, pouring out in their dozens, swooping, then hurling themselves venomously at the terrified people who stampeded wildly below them in an effort to escape.

Many of the bats were smaller than the others, uncertain of their newly acquired powers of flight, fluttering short distances then alighting again on the cross-sections of steel girders.

The death-swarms had given birth to their offspring. The time of fearful waiting was over. The new strain of the mutated virus was born!

The soaring, twisting bats were silhouetted against the pale blue of the night sky. It was impossible for the terrified watchers below to estimate the numbers as the creatures spiralled upwards as high as the floodlighting pylons, and then dived like irate hornets at the seething mass of humanity which milled on the pitch.

Marcus Vandon, a messiah to the crowds only seconds before, was forgotten instantly. Terrified men and women fought and clawed each other as they tried to force individual ways in the direction of the exits. Many stumbled, fell, and were trampled to death within seconds. A man was screaming, holding a small child above his head in a desperate act of fatherly protection, but the human tide took them both, and they disappeared from sight.

The raised platform from which Marcus Vandon had been speaking tottered precariously. He clutched at the railings, his-voice drowned in the screaming of the injured as he attempted futilely to reason with those around him. He felt himself falling, and thudded softly on to a carpet of squashed bodies, a hillock of corpses, broken limbs dangling loosely, features resembling crushed blood-oranges. But even six feet above ground level Marcus Vandon was not safe. Others were clambering blindly over every obstacle, heavy boots crushing and kicking in a mad frenzy to escape. He was conscious of the cracking of his skull, a brief second of agony, and then, for him, it was all over.

Those who had climbed the pylons watched from a dizzy height as man trampled man below them. They were in the safest place ... except for the bats! A fifteen-year-old boy threw up both hands in an effort to ward off a particularly aggressive bat which flew at him for the third time. He felt himself falling, grabbed wildly, missed his hold, and plummeted head first from his perch. A few feet below him he struck two of his colleagues who were endeavouring to climb down, taking them with him on his death fall.

The bats were relentless in their crazed flight, dive-bombing the crowds, reluctant to desert the stadium. The young hung on the stands, watched the antics of their parents, tried to imitate them, and then, when their wings became tired, flew back to rest.

By midnight Villa Park was quiet except for an occasional groan from someone amongst the piles of strewn corpses, a luckless person who still clung hopelessly to life. Bodies lay on the terraces and in the stands, and it would have been impossible even to estimate the death-toll.

No ambulances had come. None had been mobile at all that day..

In the guarded Council Chambers plans were being drawn up for the removal of corpses from public places by means of refuse carts.

Gerald Pitkin had watched the sky darkening over the Wrekin for the past half-hour. His head ached, and his eyes seemed to smart in their sockets. Beside him, his wife sat in the passenger-seat of the Fiat as though dozing, but he knew that although her eyes were closed she was not asleep. Harry stared out of the window at the rear, expressionless, unspeaking.

'It's nearly dark.' Gerald tapped Bertha on the shoulder. 'I think we'd better be moving.'

'D'you think it's worth it?' Her eyelids flickered open as she spoke, and he

saw that she had been crying silently to herself. 'I mean, we won't make it, will we?'

'Of course we shall,' he replied, trying to sound confident. 'It's only about ten miles from here, across country.'

'But those guards...'

'We'll keep our eyes peeled,' he assured her, and eased his door open. 'Bet you we don't see a single one.'

All three of them got out. The Fiat was parked in an open gateway, its front wheels resting on the stubble of early harvested barley.

'The sky's very red over there.' Bertha Pitkin pointed beyond the Wrekin.

'Probably the reflection of the setting sun,' Gerald replied. He knew perfectly well that it wasn't. It was too late, anyway. He knew in his heart what was causing the glow. Somewhere, far away, something was burning. Something big. Buildings. A town, maybe a city. Wolver-hampton or Birmingham.

'We'll head west,' he spoke in low tones. 'Keep well clear of villages and roads until we get to Atcham. Shouldn't think they'll bother with guards out that far. We'll be well behind the lines then.'

Gerald led the way, crawling under barbed-wire fences, holding up the wicked strands for Bertha to crawl beneath. Clothing was torn, hands and legs were scratched, but nobody complained.

There was silence everywhere. They knew that the road was no more than a quarter of a mile away, yet no sound of traffic came to their ears. No lights showed in houses or cottages. A dog barked somewhere as they passed a darkened farmhouse, but nobody came to investigate. It was as though the whole world had died and they were the sole survivors of some terrible disaster. Gerald Pitkin shuddered at the thought. It was a very real possibility.

The land ahead of them rose slightly. They could see trees and bushes outlined against the sky.

'How much further d'you think it is?' Bertha whispered hoarsely, holding on to her husband's arm for support.

'We must've covered about rive or six miles.' he replied. 'We're not doing too badly. If we can keep this pace up we'll be at Tom's before daylight'

Then, in one brief, horrifying second, their hopes were shattered. They were halfway up the slope when a voice called from the shadows, 'Hold it right there. Keep perfectly still or you'll be shot!'

Gerald Pitkin caught his breath. Bertha whimpered softly. Harry remained silent. Footsteps came towards them, boots crunching on dry bracken and grass, and two men appeared. One was hanging back, covering the other. Both had guns.

'And where the hell d'you bastards think you're bleedin' well goin'?' the nearest man demanded. He approached 'hem, and arrogantly spat at their feet.

They could see he was dressed in some kind of improvised uniform. A camouflage combat-jacket bore white initials clumsily stitched on to the lapels. BVF. Added to this was a PVC jungle-style hat, denims and heavy working boots. The weapon he carried was a sporting gun, probably a twelve or sixteen gauge,

Gerald decided. A cartridge-belt was slung, Mexican-style across his chest.

'We're on our way to Shrewsbury.' Gerald tried to keep the tremor out of his voice. 'To see my brother.'

'Well nobody goes any further than this. So piss off back where you came, all three of you.'

'Our car broke down outside Wellington,' Gerald said. 'We had to leave it and walk.'

'Well you can bloody well walk back to it.'

'Please. My wife is exhausted... '

'Look, mate, I'm bloody exhausted too, turning back bastards like you who leave the roads and try to sneak out of the disease-zone across country.'

'Who are you?' Gerald asked, but he already knew, anyway.

'BVF. And if you don't piss off right now, you'll be shot.' There was the click of a safety-catch being pushed forward. 'All three of you. And you won't be the first tonight!'

Slowly Gerald Pitkin turned away, and the three of them trudged back down the hill. None of them spoke. When they reached the bottom they sank down on to the soft grass, huddling together in a way that they had not done for many years.

'What... what are we going to do now?' Bertha sobbed at last.

'I don't know,' Gerald replied. 'I just don't know.' And in the east the sky had become a deeper red, the fiery glow spreading across the whole width of the horizon beyond the Wrekin.

## Chapter Eleven

The city of Birmingham burned for two whole days and nights, dense columns of black smoke rising into the sky, spreading and obscuring the scorching rays of the sun. Fire-brigades fought and lost a series of battles, being forced to concede several major buildings to the flames, and spraying adjacent ones in a futile effort to check the spreading blaze. And all the time they were hampered by missile-throwing crowds which even the combined Armed Forces and BVF squads were unable to drive back at times.

Rubber bullets were replaced by lead ones during the first day of street fighting. No longer were warning shots fired over the heads of the fear-crazed mobs. Tanks and armoured trucks formed barricades in an attempt to segregate New Street and Corporation Street whilst the battles with the flames



continued.

The streets were littered with the dead. The wounded cried incessantly for aid, but none heeded them except perhaps close relatives, many of whom paid the extreme penalty from either venturing into the line of fire, or being buried beneath falling, burning rubble. Nowhere were the casualties collected. The outbreak of violence had prevented the scheme for corpse clearance by means of refuse-carts being implemented. It was hoped, unofficially, that the majority of the victims would be cremated in the holocaust.

Anarchy and fire were terrible indeed. But when compared with the terror which the bats were creating they were as mild irritations in a crumbling society. The burning city appeared to have enraged them beyond all comprehension. By day few were seen, but as dusk and smoke merged into darkness, they flitted over blazing streets as though winging their way through the flames of hell itself. They were impartial in their choice of victims. Members of the armed and fire-fighting forces or rioters, it made no difference to these tiny, insane creatures.

Many bats were seen lying dead in the gutters, along with rats and mice which had crawled from their holes in the final stages of suffering. But it was from the carriers of the mutated virus that the danger lay. Whilst they existed, death was a constant hazard.

The third day dawned. The flames had died down. Embers smouldered, and the still atmosphere was filled with the stench of burned flesh. Thousands had perished. The war in the city had been reduced to guerrilla status. Armoured trucks patrolled the streets, unhesitatingly opening fire on any hostile gathering, increasing the death-toll hourly.

In the suburbs citizens cringed behind locked doors, answering to none. Fireplaces were either blocked up or else fires were kept burning as long as wood and coal supplies lasted. It was one way of keeping the bats at bay.

The disease was reaching its peak as those who had been unfortunate enough to come into contact with bats, after the exodus of the breeding flocks and their young from Villa Park, succumbed to the virus. Hospitals slowly ground to a standstill and became little more than extensions of the city's mortuaries. With no antidote available all that doctors could do was to attempt to ease the suffering of the dying. And this was no more than a token effort of goodwill on the part of the medical officers. Even morphine had little effect once the paralysis and madness stage was reached.

By the third evening, a stillness hung over the city. Only the occasional shot was to be heard. The rioters were skulking in the shadows, licking their wounds, watching and waiting.

The smoke haze thinned somewhat as dusk deepened. But there was something different, something strange in the air. It was difficult to determine what it was.

It was the Chief Fire Officer who finally diagnosed it, and there was a mixture of surprise and relief in his voice as he stared up at the smoky sky.

'It's the bats.' he said. 'There's not a single one to be seen!'

Reports from other parts of the city confirmed this. The bats had disappeared completely.

The Biological Research Centre on Cannock Chase was under heavy guard, mostly

by the BVF, The vigilantes were the worst threat. In the beginning they had contented themselves with organising bat-hunts throughout the countryside, even attempting to shoot the creatures in flight as they flitted to and fro in the half-light of dusk. This had proved to be little more than a waste of shotgun ammunition, one party having expended a hundred rounds one evening with only one kill to show for it. And that had been a fluke, the marksman himself had admitted, for the one which met its end in a charge Of number 8 shot was not the bat at which he had fired, but another which was flying close behind it!

The initial aims of the vigilantes were abandoned. Now they became the rural counterparts of the Birmingham rioters. Clashes with BVF patrols were frequent, and members of both factions had been killed in shoot-outs.

'Civil war is growing all around us,' Sir John Stirchley said as he addressed the small group gathered in Haynes's office. 'And it seems that Nature is doing her level best to aggravate the situation in every possible way. This heat wave continues, although it is now mid-September. The fact that the sun's rays are not quite as powerful as they were a month ago does nothing to lessen the fire danger which is stretching even the BVF to its limits. Birmingham is in smouldering ruins, and now this. There is not a bat left in the city, according to reports. They used it to breed, destroyed it, and now, for some unknown reason, they have deserted it. We haven't yet discovered where they've gone, which makes it all the more worrying. What d'you think, Newman?'

'The obvious reason which springs to mind is that the flames and smoke have driven them to seek refuge elsewhere, but I can't really accept that theory. If that was so, why didn't they scarper when the fires first broke out? They didn't seem unduly bothered by the blazing buildings. I think there's a much simpler solution.'

'And what's that?' Sir John leaned forward.

'Food,' Newman replied. 'Millions of big fat insects which have multiplied beyond all comprehension in this freak heatwave. Remember 1976, the blackfly, greenfly, ladybirds? Well, it's happened again, although on a much larger scale. And the bats won't mid them in any numbers in the cities. There's just the odd allotment here and there. No, I believe they're already back in the countryside, and any minute now we can expect to receive reports of their new location!'

Jim Dunkley had lived and farmed outside Tamworth all his life. The land in question had belonged to his father, and his father before him. Gradually, though, it was shuddering beneath the march of progress. There were plans for the building of a link-road through part of it. Compulsory purchase, naturally. A sand and gravel company were offering an extortionate price for the two lower fields. He was tempted, but it meant the end of his heritage. Nothing would be the same any more.

Jim Dunkley preferred to wear his old working clothes seven days a week. His one and only suit was kept strictly for funerals and weddings, and since he no longer had any next of kin, apart from his wife, he didn't envisage ever having to dress up again.

Untidy, rugged, at forty-five he was one of the last of a dying breed, a true son of the soil to whom farming was a way of life rather than a means of making money. Few of the nearby villagers had ever seen him without his battered old pork-pie hat. Many did not know the colour of his hair. Perhaps he was bald, and was embarrassed by it, some said. Years ago his wife, Rachel, had protested when he had begun wearing that hat indoors, even to the extent

of sitting down to meals with it on his head. In the end she had given up and accepted it.

Dunkley did not like changes. A true-blooded conservative, he also objected to people trespassing on his land. And, in his opinion, poaching was a crime that should have been punishable by imprisonment.

The bats did not worry him unduly. He only half-believed the story, anyway. Propaganda. The reason didn't interest him. He was even unmoved by the rioting and burning of Birmingham. That was fifteen miles away. His whole world consisted of ninety acres of arable and woodland. Outside of that nothing mattered. Nevertheless, he had to have money to carry on, and after two poor harvests in succession the only logical way seemed to be to sell off those bottom fields to the quarrying company. That was what his accountant had advised.

Dunkley was in a bad humour as he left the house that afternoon and set off across the fields, a rusty twelve-bore hammer-gun beneath his arm. Between the months of September and January he always went out shooting on Saturday afternoons. It was a ritual. Not that he shot much, nowadays. The spreading conurbation which surrounded his small rural island had been responsible for driving most of the wildlife away. There might be a covey of partridges up on the top field. There might also be some of those BVF bastards trespassing in the woods. If so, then his patience was running out. They carried arms. Shotguns. They were poachers, in effect. He'd heard a couple of barrels being discharged a few night ago when the moon was full. Only his wife's pleading had prevented him from going to investigate. The swines must have spotted a roosting pheasant.

The 'Hanging Wood' still looked the same as it had when he had been a boy, a horseshoe-shaped covert with giant oak trees and tall Corsican pines which never seemed to lose their lush greenery even in the dead of winter. The place was so named because Oliver Cromwell had taken a hundred Royalist prisoners there, and hanged them from the topmost branches of those tremendous oaks, leaving their bodies suspended there as a warning to their followers until the hempen ropes were routed by the elements and one by one the corpses fell to the ground to become interred beneath a carpet of dying vegetation. Of course, there had always been rumours that the place was haunted, passers-by claiming to have heard the creaking of bodies as they swung to and fro on a windy night.

The other spinney Jim Dunkley did not care for. Its name, the 'Devil's Dressing Room' was derived from another legend whereby the devil was supposed to have stayed there for a short while upon his arrival on earth whilst he changed into human form. The centre of this copse consisted of a deep quarry with sheer sides, caused by the removal of the stone which had been used in the building of nearby Tamworth church sometime during the Middle Ages. The sides of this deep and gloomy hole were covered with moss and lichen, small natural caves having formed over the years. Rarely did the sun penetrate there, and even after four months of continual drought it was still damp and forbidding.

It had not been Jim Dunkley's intention to go to the 'Devil's Dressing Room' that afternoon. Even wildlife seemed to avoid it. Yet he had ample time to spare, and at least it would give him some respite from the heat.

The stile over the barbed-wire fence which was the boundary of the spinney was as rotten as it had been the first time his father had brought him there when he was seven. Yet it had survived, and fulfilled everything-that was required of it.

There was total silence within the small wood. Not even the clatter of a disturbed woodpigeon could be heard as he forced his way through the foliage. It was uncanny.

Then came the flies, as suddenly as though they had been forewarned of his coming and had lain in ambush, allowing him to enter before descending upon him. They were not the midges which sting all exposed areas of the human flesh on balmy summer evenings, but swarms of the common black variety, buzzing, settling. He broke off a stem of bracken and used it as a swat, but it only seemed to encourage them more. He cursed, propped his gun up against a tree trunk, and proceeded to fill a short, stubby pipe with dark, long-stranded tobacco. It took him four or five matches to light it, and only when he was puffing out clouds of strong brown smoke did the flies retreat.

Jim Dunkley picked up his gun and pushed further into the wood. He had never known so many flies here before. Surely they would have preferred the warmth and dryness of the Hanging Wood.

The bracken was chest high, lush green with hardly a tint of brown on its fronds, defying the drought even as it now attempted to impede his own progress, entwining around his body as he forced his way through.

There was an area of silver-birch trees leading up to the old quarry, half an acre of flattened undergrowth with mounds of excavated soil rising up' above the trampled bracken. Beneath the surface was a badger-set which had been there in his youth, the solitary position affording these nocturnal creatures all the peace and quietness they needed. Yet his experienced eye noted that the footprints in- the soil, and the scoring of the bark on the surrounding trees where they had sharpened their claws, were not fresh. The badgers had moved on elsewhere, a week or more ago at a rough guess, Jim Dunkley decided.

It was strange indeed. Civilisation had not encroached this far. Not yet, anyway. Perhaps it was the presence of the BVF guards. Those two shots the other night... He moved forward, an angry expression on his face. Well, they weren't coming on to his land with guns any more. Nor those damned vigilantes. It was just an excuse to poach the surrounding countryside. If they tried it again he'd see how they felt about being on the receiving end of a double charge of buckshot.

Dunkley was ten yards from the edge of the old quarry when he became aware of the smell, nauseous, putrifying, penetrating even his own barrier of strong tobacco smoke. He coughed. It was like decomposing flesh. In his time he had dug out a number of fox-earths and he was familiar with the stench, the half-consumed carcasses, rotting and rank. But this was much more powerful. A dozen foxes would not be capable of making a smell as bad as that. And it was definitely coming from the pit.

He moved forward, treading warily, knowing that the edge was crumbling and that in some places it would not bear the weight of a fully grown man. He dropped to his hands and knees, crawled the last five yards and peered down into the depths.

He had to wait whilst his eyesight adjusted to the gloom below. Scrub bushes grew on the bottom. One or two birch seedlings had even managed a precarious hold on the sides, rooted in the soft moss. And the smell was sickening. Something was dead down there.

Then he saw them, tiny bodies practically forming a carpet over the entire bottom, lying in a variety of positions. Unnatural. Stiff. Many were propped

up by the corpses of their companions, and all were in various stages of decomposition, as though they had been dying at intervals over the past couple of weeks. 'Bats!' he grunted. 'Bloody hundreds of 'em!' He was astounded, but not frightened. He did not believe the reports anyway. The trouble with people today was that they did not understand the ways of the countryside. They were all too involved in modern living. A surplus of bats had coincided with some outbreak of disease. They had to have a scapegoat, so they blamed the bats. Harmless little creatures, really. He recalled the time when there were supposedly armies of rats on the march. It had come about as a result of flooding in the west country, and the rodents had been forced to move on in search of new quarters. The rat population hadn't increased, it was just that people saw more of them. It was the same with these bats. All the demolition and rebuilding in the towns and cities had compelled them to move out into the country, so folks began panicking. There was a logical explanation for everything if one just took the trouble to think about it.

Jim Dunkley was just about to move away when something attracted his attention on the opposite face of the quarry. A small cave had been formed in the slate by constant washing of the rain on the surface. Part of it had come away and formed an alcove, roughly three feet square and going back into the quarry about a couple of feet. And as he looked, the whole interior seemed to move. He stared, and only when a tiny furry creature hopped out on to the overhanging ledge did he realise what the interior of that cave contained.

'More bloody bats,' he muttered. 'Hundreds of 'em all crowded in together!'

He continued to watch. There was little movement. The bats were resting, sleeping by day, and when dusk fell they would flit out in search of food.

Possibly the farmer would have crept away undetected had it not been for the crumbling edge of the deep pit. As he moved he dislodged a piece of slate. It slid forward, struck some more, gathered some stones on its way, and as a result a miniature avalanche showered down on to the mass of minute, rotting corpses below.

The reaction from within the cave was instantaneous. The whole interior seemed to come to life, the bats pouring outwards as one, then spraying in all directions in the manner of irate wasps which have had their nest dug out.

Jim Dunkley was not frightened.. He was simply astounded at the sight of so many bats. He knelt there looking up at them, and as he did so something struck him sharply in the face. He grunted, and began to struggle to his feet.

Bats were everywhere. Above the trees, below them, clinging to the sides of the quarry, and still more were emerging from holes and smaller caves. They flitted around him, as insistent as the flies which had troubled him earlier. They brushed against him, struck his clothing. He threw up a hand to protect his face, wielding the shotgun in an attempt to ward them off.

Then the ground beneath his feet gave way, crumbling. He stepped back, but there was nothing beneath his feet. He was falling, floating, somersaulting...

Jim Dunkley plummeted headlong to the bottom of the quarry, impaling his head on a sharp unturned rock. His skull split open, showering grey matter and crimson fluid over the dead bats which lay all around. His body twitched once or twice, but he was already dead. The shotgun fell, landing softly, barrels resting against his chest, hammers at full cock.

The bats continued to fly haphazardly for five or ten minutes, seemingly oblivious to the man who lay dead in their very own graveyard, and then,

tiring of their unaccustomed daytime activities, they returned to their sleeping places.

Silence returned to the Devil's Dressing Room. There was not a bat in sight, the only evidence of their existence being the smell of death which rose up out of the quarry, and the buzzing of the flies as they fed, uninterrupted.

## Chapter Twelve

By late September, terror had returned to the rural areas in full force. No longer were the bats concentrated in any particular place. With the coming of dusk people barricaded themselves in their homes, listening fearfully as tiny bodies thudded against window panes or fluttered down chimneys, squeaking inside blocked fireplaces as though with anger at being thwarted of their prey. In spite of many official statements that the bats were not deliberately intent upon attacking humans, and that their seemingly aggressive attitude was brought about by damaged radar, the public were still convinced that they were the main targets of the flying death swarms. And outside the protective cordon the rest of Britain waited fearfully. It was only a matter of time before the bats extended their territory.

'As there seems to be no chance of finding an antidote,' Haynes said, 'then there is only one alternative.' He and Rickers were in Newman's laboratory where tests were still being carried out on a number of bats, mice and rats.

'And what's that?' Professor Newman looked up.

'We must poison the bats. If necessary, to the point of extinction.'

Newman laughed. 'It's fine in theory. But there's no chance. With rats and mice you can put poison down for 'em; feed 'em specially prepared food, but bats live on insect life.'

'Of which there is an abundance this year.'

'Granted, but...'

'Then we must spray the insects and thus poison the bats.'

Newman looked thoughtful. 'And who thought this one up?' he asked.

'I did,' Rickers admitted.

Newman glanced at Susan Wylie. She knew what he was thinking. Insecticides were dangerous to wildlife in general. They upset the balance of Nature. In the past, poisonous sprays had been responsible for a decline in the numbers of birds of prey, buzzards, kestrels, sparrow-hawks, the golden eagle. Partridges, too, at one stage had almost been wiped out. It was too risky. And yet, with hundreds dying daily from the mutated virus...

'I guess it's worth a try,' Newman said.

'It's already under way,' Haynes told him somewhat smugly. 'Every crop-spraying helicopter unit in the country has been commandeered. The Ministry of Agriculture are advising us on which insecticides to use so that almost every insect will be affected. No matter which varieties the bats feed on, they'll absorb the poison.'

'Sure.' Newman shook his head slowly. 'And insect life will be almost totally wiped out in the Midlands, not to mention species of bird life and rodents.'

'But it's the price we have to pay,' Haynes snapped. 'The rate this virus is spreading now, it's either that or us. And human life must be preserved at all costs.'

'Yes,' Brian Newman said. 'You're right. And I began this whole thing. I've destroyed countless lives, both human and animal. And now the insects have got to pay the penalty, too.'

It was nine o'clock when Brian Newman left the Biological Research Centre and drove the five miles to his new home at Chasetown. Susan had left about two hours before him, and in spite of the present worries he was determined to try and relax for a few hours.

There was a checkpoint at Sankey's Comer. Two BVF soldiers had taken over from the policemen who had been on duty earlier in the day. They recognised the professor's car and waved him through.

The High Street was deserted. Many of the houses and flats did not even show lights, their windows boarded up as though a wartime blackout was in force. Newman saw some bats flying low across the top end of Pavoirs Road. Nowhere was safe after dark now.

He drew into the small gravelled drive and switched off his headlights, glancing about him as he opened the car door. He would have to make a quick dash to the house. It was dangerous to linger.

'Professor Newman!' A voice called from the darkness as he got out of the car.

He turned. A man was standing just inside his front garden, the shadow from the tall privet hedge obscuring his features. He was a big man, his overcoat collar turned up, trilby hat pulled well down.

'Can I help you?' Newman was puzzled. 'Perhaps you'd like to step inside. It isn't safe outside after dark, and ... '

'What I've got to say won't take a moment, Professor.' There was a note of menace in the man's voice as he stepped into the circle of yellow light cast by the nearby street-lamp. Something shiny, metallic, glinted in his hand. A revolver.

'What's this?' Newman stiffened.

'A gun,' the other laughed harshly. 'Army issue .45. 1916. My late father kept it as a relic, with some ammunition. I'm glad he did. Otherwise, Professor, my task of killing you might be more difficult... but I'd do it just the same. You bastard!'

'You're mad!' Newman breathed,

'If I am,' the other said. 'It's because of you. Thanks to your meddling with viruses I've lost a wife and a daughter . . . and it took 'em a long time to die. I watched 'em.' His voice rose to a crescendo, 'Couldn't even get 'em to a hospital. Nobody wanted to know. Yes, Professor, I sat there and watched 'em both die. They were paralysed before they started to go mad. They frothed at the mouth and cursed me with their eyes. Yes, Professor, they went out cursing me . . . but they should've been cursing you, because you murdered 'em... just as I'm going to murder you now!'

Brian Newman stiffened. The man was five yards from him, and he could see the finger curled around the trigger of the revolver. It was too far to try and rush him, and there was no chance of diving for cover. Death was only seconds away.

Then he heard the front door opening behind him, and Susan's voice. 'Are you all right, Brian? Oh my God, what's happening?'

'Go back inside and close the door!' he called out over his shoulder. 'I won't be a minute.'

'You're damned right you won't.' the man snarled. 'Your time's up, Professor Newman.'

'Let's talk this over.'

'The time for talking is done.' The gunman shuffled a step or two nearer. 'After you, it's me, Professor. I've got nothing left to live for.'

Newman closed his eyes. If only Susan had obeyed him and gone back inside. But he knew .she wouldn't. In all probability this maniac would kill her, too. And there wasn't a thing he could do about it.

He closed his eyes. Go on, get it over with. I don't blame you, whoever you are. There's millions more feel like you do about me. That's the fault of the Press.

A deafening shot crashed out. Newman swayed on his feet, but strangely he felt no pain. He remembered reading somewhere that you never heard the shot that got you. Maybe . . . Oh God, maybe he'd shot Susan first!

Newman opened his eyes. Susan was by his side, her arms around him. She was crying. The man lay face down in the drive, the revolver a foot or so away from his outstretched fingers, blood soaking into the gravel.

Still Newman was trying to work it all out. His brain was confused. It wouldn't function properly. This guy was a nutter. Not his fault, though. He'd chickened out at the last minute. Couldn't go through with murder. Committed suicide instead.

'All right, Professor?'

For the first time Newman was aware that someone was standing just inside the open gates. A tall man dressed in a jungle hat, combat jacket, bandolier across his chest. 'Don't worry, Professor. I had him covered the whole time. Had to be careful I didn't hit either of you, though.'

Newman nodded to the BVF soldier, noting the thin trickle of smoke coming from the barrel of the Luger in his hand.



Thanks.' he murmured. 'Thanks a million. I was lucky you happened to be around. I should've asked for a guard before. I told 'em I didn't need one.'

'You've had one all along,' the soldier told him, 'only you didn't know it. Night and day. We can't take chances with you, Professor. Whatever the public might think, you're the one man who stands any chance of coming up with an antidote.'

'I just hope I can justify your confidence.' Newman pulled Susan Wylie close to him, and together they went inside and closed the door.

The weather was changing. Still the sun beat down, but now its heat was tempered by the coming of autumn. Each morning a thick mist followed the dawn, grey vapour which dispersed reluctantly towards mid-morning, and each evening brought a refreshing coolness to the parched land.

Fleets of helicopters stood at the ready throughout the Midlands, all fitted with crop-spraying attachments, the pilots waiting impatiently for the thick mist to evaporate. From the north Staffordshire moors as far south as Worcester, from the Wash to the Wrekin, the operation stretched, the largest assault on insect life in British history.

'Crazy,' Tamperley of West Midlands Fertilizers muttered to his companion as they watched the rays of the sun beginning to disperse the fog. 'It won't work. I could've told 'em that.'

'Don't see no reason why not.' Whittaker climbed up into the helicopter, and tapped the huge tank containing insecticide. 'This stuff was withdrawn five years ago because it was proved to be detrimental to wildlife. Don't see why it shouldn't kill bats.'

'I'll believe it when I see it.' Tamperley lit a cigarette. 'Reckon we'll be on the move in about twenty minutes.'

It was 11.30 a.m. before they took off, the countryside around them now becoming bathed in bright sunshine. Some of the trees below were already showing signs of brown in their foliage. Drought or not, autumn would dominate the rural scene from now onwards.

Whittaker recognised Chasetown sprawling below them and the dark green and purple of Cannock Chase over to their left. Something golden glinted in the sunlight, the ball on the main spire of Lichfield Cathedral. They dropped lower.

Traffic was sparse. An isolated community, even on a small island, had nowhere to go. Smoke hung in the air in places. Heath and forest fires still burned, but they had been abandoned long ago. Town fires were given priority.

Tamperley turned to his colleague. 'That's the place,' he said, pointing in the direction of a tall television transmitter, rising like a lighthouse out of a dark green ocean. 'The fields between those two woods.'

Whittaker nodded and began connecting up various attachments. They could see other helicopters already at work, skimming fields and woods, turning, going back, three or four covering a large expanse of arable ground. Organisation. He had to hand it to the authorities, in spite of what Tamperley said. They were doing everything possible. If it resulted in failure then they'd done their best. Nobody could blame them, only that professor who had allowed the bats to escape. It was all his fault.

'OK,' Tamperley called. They were flying at a height of twenty feet, skimming hedgerows, rising to negotiate a couple of spinneys. 'Let 'er go.'

'Never sprayed woods before,' Whittaker muttered to himself. A lifelong member of the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, he realised the dangers to birdlife from toxic sprays. Yet the bats had to be destroyed; otherwise it meant the end of everything.

Back and forth they went, methodically, barely missing a square yard on a 20-acre field, Tamperley knew his job.

They finished the field and turned their attention to the spinneys, gaining additional height because of some of the taller trees. Wood-pigeons were flying aimlessly. They had been deprived of their morning feed on some lush clover by the helicopters and now there was no peace even in their day-roosts.

'Hey, what's that?' Tamperley yelled above the roar of the engine.

Whittaker looked down in the direction the pilot pointed and saw a small wood with dense undergrowth.

'What...' he began, and then he saw it, a black cloud spiralling upwards, a flock of living creatures, formation-less, spreading out as they gained height. His first thought was that they were starlings. Their mode of flight was different, though; faster and more erratic. Their aerobatics would have been the envy of any pilot.

'It's them!' he yelled. 'The bats!'

'Some of 'em,' Tamperley shouted back. 'That spinney must be one of their roosting places. Well, we might as well give 'em the works. I'm going down on 'em. Let 'em have it!'

Whittaker increased the flow of insecticide as they dipped. The spray was thick and yellow, reminding him of urine. It hit the bats, the sheer force of the liquid sending several of them spinning to the ground. The remainder wheeled and jinked, above and below the helicopter, some dashing themselves against the sides of the machine and falling earthwards, lifeless.

The helicopter was stationary, hovering, the full force of the nozzles directed immediately beneath it. Bats were everywhere, hurling themselves at the glass of the cockpit as though they sensed whence this liquid death came.

There was a brief moment during which the two men thought that victory was theirs, a total slaughter. In fact, Tamperley was already preparing to move on when the cockpit was darkened by shadows, tiny flickering shapes that merged into near-total darkness, obscuring the sunlight.

'Hell's bells!' Whittaker croaked. 'Just look at 'em!'

Bats clung to every available inch of toughened glass, somehow securing a hold on the smooth surface, upside down, hundreds of malevolent faces staring at the two men with an insane hatred beyond comprehension.

'Jesus! ' Tamperley jerked on the lever. 'Let's get back to base!'

The helicopter responded, moved forward, and then shuddered to a standstill as though a brake had been applied. One final roar from the engine, and then it died away, stuttering into silence. The two men could hear the shrill piping of their attackers.

'They've clogged the vanes!' Tamperley screamed.

Whittaker watched in horror as the pilot tried desperately to restart the engine, but they were already embarking upon a direct downward course, hurtling towards the spinney below, the cockpit a coffin, borne by the bats down to a quarry grave.

With a screech of tearing metal and splintering wood the undercarriage was ripped away by the topmost branches of a tall Corsican pine, the trunk spearing into the cockpit. The machine hung precariously for a couple of seconds, its fall checked. Then the tree snapped lower down, and the helicopter plunged on the last stage of its journey of death, jagged rocks rushing up to meet it, bats whirring above as though in triumph at their victory, then scattering in every direction as they witnessed the final destruction.

Another helicopter which had seen the bizarre scene from half-a-mile away hastened towards the spinney, the grim-faced pilot noting the clouds of bats which dispersed in all directions.

'Looked like Tamperley,' he yelled to the man at his side.

'If it was, then he's bought it for sure. Go easy, Joe. I never seen nothin' like it! We don't want to get caught up in a cloud o' bleedin' bats.'

But Joe was already veering away. There wasn't a bat in sight. Just a column of black smoke rising up out of the quarry in the wood as flames began to lick greedily at the lower branches, leaping from one to another with the speed of a frightened squirrel.

Nothing could be done to help the two men in the blazing wreckage. They were already in the final stages of cremation.

## Chapter Thirteen

'Well,' Haynes said, 'The spraying operation is complete. All we can do now is wait. If we don't poison 'em, maybe they'll starve without insect life to feed on.'

'God knows what the long-term result will be,' Newman groaned.

'We've a good idea what it'll be if we don't check the spread of this virus.'

'There's no pattern to the bats' behaviour now,' Professor Newman went on, 'There are reports from both rural and urban areas. We've flushed 'em out of cover, and they're widespread throughout the Midlands.'

'The human death-toll is ejtimated at something in the region of ten

thousand,' Haynes told him. He turned away and looked out of the window. The mist was thinning across the Chase as the early morning sunshine finally broke through. 'We'll probably never know the exact figures, as a lot of the corpses were burned in the fires. People won't stand for it much longer. Even the ordinary, normally complacent citizen is no longer prepared to shut himself away in his house. Food supplies are running out. Those brought in from outside are not being distributed as they should be. It's a case of the strong dominating the weak. At least this spraying idea of Rickers's has given us a breathing space. Everybody's just waiting now, but if it doesn't work . . . well, I'd rather not think about it. That'll be the end,'

The drone of helicopters was absent from the rural scene. Seldom were vehicles heard at all now. Aircraft passed over on their flights north and south, but only government-authorized planes were allowed to land at either Elmdon or the East Midlands Airport.

And gradually the sounds of insects in the woods and fields were dying away. The grasshopper's chirruping became slow, like a chain-saw with the power switched off. Wasps crawled lazily, not even having the energy to sting when molested. Midges died by their millions in hedgerows and fields. And already bird life was beginning to suffer. The swifts and swallows should have been congregating on telegraph-wires in readiness for their long flight south, but many were found lying beneath these communal perches as though electrified by the currents. Everybody knew the true cause of death.

Only the bats seemed unharmed by the extermination of almost every form of insect life. The creatures for whom the poison had been intended showed no signs of ill effects. In fact, they became more active, and were seen in greater numbers than before.

'They're restless, disturbed,' Rickers said uneasily as he stood at the laboratory window, with Haynes and Newman. Dusk was closing in over the Chase, and already dozens of bats were to be seen, flying apparently aimlessly, frequently dashing themselves against the windows of the Biological Research Centre, almost as though they recognised this place as the headquarters of the war which was being waged against them.

'And the insecticides are apparently having no effect on them,' Newman murmured. 'We've killed off nearly everything else within a radius of sixty miles, but the bats appear to be unharmed. How the hell are they surviving?'

'They're eating poisoned insect life,' Haynes said, shaking his head in bewilderment, 'and they're thriving on it. They don't even have to look for it. The woods and fields are carpeted with it. And there's more than enough to keep them going until the winter.'

'Maybe that'll be the finish of them,' Rickers suggested. 'They'll hibernate, and then in spring there'll be no food for them and they'll starve.'

'Like hell!' Newman said. 'They'll just spread to the rest of the country. And we can't poison the whole of the British Isles from John o' Groats to Land's End. Anyway, this hibernation isn't what everybody thinks it is. Bats don't sleep solidly throughout the winter. A spell of mild weather and they're as active as they are in summer.'

'But we don't know that we've failed yet,' Rickers insisted. 'Maybe the poison is taking longer to work on the bats. The virus could be slowing it up.'

'Or even acting as an inoculation. The virus could well be rendering it harmless. There's so much we bloody well don't know about the whole thing. All

we can do is wait, but right now things don't look very hopeful.'

By 24th September it was clear to the whole world that the insecticide experiment was a failure and also that the overall situation had worsened. The numbers of bats flying at night had visibly increased. The young were now totally independent and flew with the adults like swarms of locusts over the whole countryside. Every night held its own terrors. Even the most secure barricades were proved to be inadequate, almost as though the creatures were now deliberately seeking out human victims. Fleet Street constantly reminded the public that Professor Brian Newman was the sole cause of the disaster and that every death must weigh heavily on his conscience.

The man responsible for the spread of this mutated virus,' one London daily newspaper leader article ran, 'has so far failed to come up with an antidote, and it is now reasonable to assume that none exists. An experiment to poison the bats has resulted in the destruction-of virtually the whole of the insect life in the Midlands. What is Professor Newman doing about it? The man responsible for the spread of myxomatosis, the scourge which once cleared Britain of rabbits, entered a monastery in an attempt to cleanse his conscience of the suffering which he had caused to millions of coneys. Surely that is all that is left for Professor Newman, a monk's habit, and a lifetime spent praying for forgiveness. Repent, Professor Newman.'

Brian Newman's hand trembled as he put the paper down on the table.

'Stop blaming yourself,' Susan Wylie said as she entered the room and placed a cup of coffee at his elbow. 'The Press always have to put somebody in the stocks. How the hell can they compare you with this myxomatosis guy? His intention was to cause deliberate suffering. Yours was an accident, a biological freak.'

Newman sat up suddenly, his fists clenched.

'My God!' he muttered. 'Why didn't I think of it before?'

'Think of what?'

'Where's last week's Scientific American.' He began to rummage through a pile of newspapers and magazines beside where he was sitting.

'What is it?'

'Here it is.' He pulled out the magazine he sought and began to flip quickly through the pages. 'Now, let me see, I know I read it somewhere in here... ah, yes, this is it.'

Susan Wylie peered over his shoulder. The article in question was written by one of the leading biologists in the United States and was titled 'Myxomatosis for Rats and Mice.'

'Recent experiments have proved,' it read, 'that a type of myxomatosis, a mutation of the virus which destroys rabbits, is lethal to rats and mice. Once this can be distributed widely it could save the United States billions of dollars annually-in vermin destruction, damage to growing crops, and also help to check the spread of many diseases... '

'Is it possible?' Newman breathed.

'You mean... ?'

'Yes, you've got it!' the Professor's eyes shone. 'If it kills rats and mice, there's no reason why it shouldn't kill bats. It could be the answer to our prayers. I'll ring Rickers right away. Maybe we could get some of the stuff flown in.'

Rickers was not enthusiastic. Neither was he pleased about being disturbed whilst trying to catch up on some lost sleep.

'Doesn't sound very promising to me,' he grunted.

'Neither did your insecticides idea.' Newman snapped, 'and that certainly didn't work. Now it's my turn.'

'Myxomatosis took months to spread.'

'Obviously it did, because rabbits live in warrens, often isolated, without coming into contact with others. The fleas had to carry the virus. This one is contagious. Quicker acting, and bats are much more sociable creatures. And even if it doesn't work on them at least we'll cut down the spread of the disease by destroying rats and mice.'

'I'll sleep on it.' Rickers mumbled and replaced the receiver.

'Well?' Susan Wylie asked.

'He's interested.' Newman told her laughing. 'Pooh-poohed it, of course, because he hadn't thought of it first. Tried to find reasons why it wouldn't work. Then said he'd sleep on it. That means he's fetching Haynes out of bed right now. Probably Professor Talbot and Sir John Storchley, too, and there might even be a trans-Atlantic call to New York before morning.'

'Oh, Brian!' She flung her arms around his, crying softly.

'Now hold on,' he said. 'Let's not count our chickens. There are one helluva lot of obstacles to overcome before we even get round to trying to spread this thing. The government will have to agree to another virus being released, and they aren't exactly sympathetic to everything we've done so far. Like Rickers said, let's sleep on it.'

## Chapter Fourteen

The safari Land-Rover bumped its way across the heather and gorse on Cannock Chase.

'That'll do,' Newman said to the driver. 'We'll release the bats in those firs over there. The rats and mice we'll take down to the Sherbrook Valley.'

The driver, a small man in overalls who spent most of his time nodding assent to any orders he was given, brought the vehicle to a standstill. Newman

climbed down and, taking a small wicker container resembling a pigeon-basket from the rear, he walked with it towards the nearest line of trees. From inside the basket came frenzied squeaks and fluttering. The bats were impatient for their freedom.

Professor Newman opened the lid, and immediately six bats hurtled up into the air, flew round in a circle, and then disappeared amongst the branches of the towering pines. He closed the basket and walked slowly back towards the Land-Rover. Twenty consignments of similarly treated bats were today being released at various strategic points around the Midlands. Most of the injected rodents had been set free in the towns. Just one more lot, he told himself, and that was it.

They had played their last card. He prayed that it was an ace.

Ken Tyler was abroad shortly after daylight, moving silently through the swirling mist, gun beneath his arm. The fog did not worry him. He knew every inch of this land.

There were unlikely to be any bats about until the mist thinned. As with most creatures, mist confused their sense of direction, even the mad ones. Fog meant safety for him, the chance to get some work done.

He followed the course of the Castle Ring moat, his boots squelching in the soft grass, eyes scanning the ground ahead. Then he stopped suddenly. Only an experienced eye would have spotted the rectangular outline of a small, artificially made tunnel, two 3ft lengths of wood with a roof, camouflaged by clods of earth. Inside this he had set a humane vermin trap only days earlier, one of a network around the Ring, the only means by which the ground vermin could be controlled.

He laid his gun on the ground and, kneeling down, peered into the entrance. The daylight at the opposite end was partly obscured. Something was caught in the trap. He gripped the chain and tugged, feeling the trap and whatever it had caught being dragged towards him.

A grunt of satisfaction escaped his lips, turning to one of revulsion almost at once as he caught sight of his catch. A rat. He often trapped rats up here on Castle Ring, but not like this one. Its head was swollen almost to the size of its body. The eyes were puffed up, hidden beneath two huge growths which sprouted out of the sockets themselves, pink and bloated. The mouth was open, rigor mortis having retained the expression of viciousness which the rodent had worn in life.

Tyler used a stick to part the jaws of the trap, kicking the corpse to one side and noting its pink underside, covered with more cancerous growths which had not reached maturity before death had claimed the host.

'Bloody mixy in rats?' He shook his head, and began the task of resetting the trap in the tunnel.

Ken Tyler had seventeen traps set on Castle Ring. On average four or five caught victims daily. Two or three were usually sprung without killing. This morning, twelve had killed. All the creatures were rats, and every one was in the final stages of this terrible disease.

The gamekeeper was puzzled. It was as though the vermin had entered the dark tunnels searching for a place in which to end their lives, their usual alertness for traps having been nullified. He made his way towards the woods. There was a small pool hidden amidst a dense reed-bed. Sometimes there were

mallard on it, and often a brace of these found their way into the Tyler's larder without his employer being aware of it.

Stealthily he crept up on the pond. The mist was thicker here, screening his approach. He stiffened, half-crouching, easing forward the safety-catch on his gun. There was definitely something on the water this morning, unrecognisable shapes in the fog.

He peered intently. There was something unnatural about the whole scene. It was lifeless. Not a splash or a ripple on the surface.

He stepped forward, his boots splashing in the shallows, anticipating an alarmed quacking and frenzied wing beats as ducks took to the air. But nothing happened. There was no sound other than his own movements in the clammy stillness.

Then he felt the bile rise in his throat as he recognised the shapes. Rats. Floating, bellies uppermost, legs rigid. And those same cancerous growths all over them.

'Jesus!' He backed away on to firm land.

Tyler was trembling as he entered the wood. Something unnatural was happening all around him this morning. Not that this hadn't been so for weeks on end now, but this was far worse. More horrible. A new kind of death.

The ground beneath the trees was devoid of undergrowth. Only odd fronds of bracken sprouted at intervals, for seldom did the sunlight penetrate the evergreen foliage of the tar pines. Nothing else grew here.

He trod on a bat before he noticed others lying beneath the trees, his heavy-soled boots squashing it to pulp, splitting open the growth which incorporated most of its body, thick yellowish pus mingling with the blood as it squelched out.

'Ugh!' He scraped his boot on the carpet of pine-needles in an endeavour to wipe off the sticky mess. It smelled, and he backed away from it: a sickly, penetrating odour like a mixture of vomit and excreta. There were bats lying dead all around him, as though a whole roost of them had been stricken in the night. And every one of the tiny creatures was disfigured by those same growths.

Tyler was sweating. Carefully he made his way to the other end of the wood, stepping over and around the bats, taking care not to tread on any more. He paused once, thinking that he saw a grotesque wingless bat, bloated with death, amongst some others. Then he saw it was a field-mouse. He wondered why it had not died in its hole, and decided that perhaps, unlike some of the rats in his tunnel-traps, it had surfaced in quest of air and light.

He started as something flapped silently from a branch above his head and quickly disappeared into the fog. An owl. Another species which would suffer in the long run if it was deprived of these rodents which were its natural prey.

Professor Brian Newman and Susan Wylie returned from the Biological Research Centre just in time for the televised news at ten 'O'clock. A reporter was talking in one of the main Birmingham thoroughfares, with blackened skeletons of buildings all around him, people huddled into small groups, and some traffic filtering by at intervals. Gangs of workmen wearing protective headgear were engaged in clearing-up operations,



'The weeks of terror have finally come to an end;' the reporter was saying, 'and at last people are emerging from their homes, wondering if it really happened or whether it was all one hellish nightmare. But here is the proof of reality.' He indicated the wrecked city around him. 'Burnt out shops and office blocks, many collapsing and burying bodies beneath them. During today alone, sixteen corpses, beyond recognition, have been recovered from the ruins of New Street Station. The fighting is over, and the restrictions which have been in force throughout the Midlands were lifted today. Members of the British Volunteer Force are assisting in site clearance, and many civilians have joined in to help also. But the gladdening news is that the bats from hell, the disease-carrying creatures which have been responsible for the thousands killed and a state of near-anarchy in and around the city of Birmingham, are no more. And for that we have to thank Professor Brian Newman, whose idea it was to import the latest weapon in warfare against rodents from the United States. This is a virus not unlike myxomatosis in rabbits, but much deadlier. Within a week of its initial release tens of thousands of bats, mice and rats have died in the Midlands, and we have just had reports of similar rat deaths as far a field as Manchester and Newcastle-on-Tyne. Whilst the killer disease travelled no further than a radius of fifty miles around Birmingham, this rodent plague appears to be spreading. We can only ask ourselves, what will Britain be like without the vermin against which we have been waging war for centuries? Even Professor Newman cannot forecast the long-term effects. Gerald Watson, News at Ten, Birmingham.'

Brian Newman leaned forward and switched off the television.

'Well,' Susan commented, 'you're no longer the villain of the piece. They're hailing you as a saviour.'

'And within a year the damage will have been restored, and the bats will be only a memory,' Newman muttered, 'but there are those who will never forget, those who lost loved ones. I can do nothing to ease their grief.'

'I'll go and make some supper.' Susan stood up and moved towards the kitchen. 'At least we needn't be afraid to go outside after dark now.'

Brian Newman picked up the evening paper and had hardly opened it up when a piercing scream came from the kitchen.

'Susan!' he yelled, scrambling to his feet, but before he reached the door Susan Wylie came rushing in, her face deathly white.

'Oh, God!' she sobbed.

'Whatever is it?' he demanded pulling her to him.

'Nothing, really.' She made an attempt to pull herself together, 'it was... only a... a mouse. When I opened the cupboard it rolled out on to me. Phew! After all the mice, rats and bats I've held these past weeks whilst you injected them, and then we get one in the kitchen and I nearly have hysterics. It's sort of... different in the lab, isn't it?'

He pulled her to one side, and went into the kitchen. The dead mouse lay on the floor by the sink-unit, its body bloated twice its normal size as though it had been blown up with a pump, the head pink and swollen, eyes buried beneath an unnatural growth, a bulbous matter-filled ball of cancerous, mangy fur.

'It... it's repulsive, isn't it?' Susan caught her breath. 'I... I never

thought this disease was quite as terrible as that. Oh, it's horrible. And we've done that to millions of them!'

He pulled her gently back into the living-room and closed the door. Try not to think about it,' he said, kissing her. 'It's not a pretty sight, I know, and if I'd had any other choice I'd never have brought this vile disease over here. But it was the only way. It was either that or the end of civilisation as we know it.'

'I'm sorry.' She tried to smile. 'It was ... just, well, the way it roiled out of the cupboard on to me as though . . . as though it was trying to make one last attempt to get revenge.'

'I'll go and put it in the dustbin,' he said.

'No,' she insisted. 'I'll do it. I've got to get used to them. No doubt there'll be dozens more of the creatures lying about dead in the coming weeks. And I'm as much to blame for it as you. It was my fault that the bats' cage got knocked over and they escaped.'

During the next few days Professor Newman busied himself carrying out tests on several of the dead creatures which had been brought into the Research Centre.

'Even the Yanks don't really know the extent of this virus,' Haynes said. 'We jumped the gun a bit, even for them. They know what it does to a rodent, but not why. As far as they can tell it's harmless to humans and all other animals, but we've got to be sure.'

'Damn it,' Newman replied with a grin, 'There's enough, been handled so far. If it is harmful then we're really going to be in trouble.'

Towards the middle of the afternoon the professor happened to notice Susan wiping a flushed brow with the palm of her hand.

'Are you all right?' There was consternation on his face.

'It's nothing.' She smiled weakly. 'I feel a bit feverish. A slight headache. Maybe it's the sudden change in the weather.'

'A good downpour doesn't do that to you,' he insisted, and tested her pulse. It was racing. 'I'd say you've got the flu coming on. Now go on back home and get to bed. I'll be back by five.'

'If you insist.' There was gratitude in her voice.

'I do,' he said. 'Are you sure you're OK to drive?'

'I'll be all right.' She walked towards the door, swaying slightly.

He watched her drive away, standing at the window until she was out of sight, and there was a worried expression on his face as he resumed work.

It was 5.20 when Brian Newman eventually arrived back at Chasetown. As he let himself in through the front door he sensed immediately that something was wrong. The bedroom door was open, and from the hall he could see the neatly made bed. It was empty.

'Susan!'

She was not in the living-room. He dashed into the kitchen. One second of

shock, immobility, and then he was on his knees at her side.

'Susan!' he breathed. 'Oh, my God! What's wrong?'

She did not reply. Her eyes were closed, her cheeks flushed with fever, her skin wet with perspiration. He began to undo her clothing with trembling fingers.

Seconds later he was telephoning for a doctor. The two or three minutes during which it took him to contact Doctor Jenkinson were agonising.

'I'll be right round,' the doctor snapped after he had listened to the symptoms. 'Make her as comfortable as you can, but don't try to move her.'

Doctor Jenkinson was less than five minutes arriving. He remembered the Williams family. There had been many since. It was his greatest fear that it would begin all over again.

'It isn't the virus,' Newman told him as he showed him into the kitchen where Susan still lay motionless on the floor, a blanket covering the lower half of her body.

'No, it isn't that, certainly,' Jenkinson said after a brief examination, 'although what it is I haven't a clue, quite frankly. Look at her eyes, the way they're puffing up ...'

Brian Newman stared in horror. It was true. The closed lids appeared to be swelling outwards without opening, as though some horrific growth was propagating at an unbelievable rate inside the sockets.

'Phone for an ambulance,' the doctor ordered. 'I'll stay here with her.'

Within a matter of minutes both Professor Newman and Doctor Jenkinson were in the speeding ambulance with Susan Wylie.

'Has she been in contact with any virus?' Jenkinson tested her pulse again, and tried to hide his anxiety.

'Only this rodent disease,' Newman answered. 'There was a dead mouse in the kitchen the other evening. And, of course, we've been working on them in the laboratory.'

'And thousands of people have been removing them from their homes without ill-effect for the last couple of weeks. It can't be that. But whatever it is it's growing fast!'

Brian Newman was asked to remain in the waiting room once they arrived at Walsall General Hospital. Not even bacteriologists were allowed to attend emergency operations.

The room was empty, four white walls which seemed to close, in on him. Claustrophobia was another form of despair, and he felt hopeless. He knew she was going to die. Nothing could save her. That last ten minutes the symptoms had been identical to those in the creatures with the American killer virus.

He could see Susan now. He tried to shut out the mental picture. At least she wasn't in pain. Just numb. She wouldn't know anything. Consciousness would return for a short time, but it wouldn't make any difference. Her whole brain was a rapidly growing cancer, a forced greenhouse-plant that would outgrow itself, wither and die. The agony was a fallacy. Those creature's did not

suffer. They were simply living, diseased flesh. He had discovered that only that same afternoon.

Yet how had she caught it? It was impossible-. No, he corrected himself, remotely improbable, but a freak occurrence. Everything he touched became a freak. Oh God, if this was the beginning of another outbreak . . . another kind of incurable plague...

He could see her again, moaning as consciousness returned, blind, deaf and dumb. Oh God, please let the end be swift. I want her to die... now!

He whirled round as the door opened. Jenkinson stood there. For the doctor it was Mr and Mrs Williams again. Hope. Realisation. Despair. He just had to confirm the worst fears. He knew the words by heart. A recitation.

'I'm sorry. We did everything possible for her. But there was no hope.'

There would be a post-mortem, but it wouldn't tell them much. A rare cancer. They'd take tests, make notes, refer it to the Cancer Research, providing years of work for somebody. And he, Professor Brian Newman, could tell them. But they wouldn't believe him. Nobody would, not Haynes, Rickers, nor the American who had discovered the virus in the first place. Maybe others would die the same way, and then the authorities would have to admit that there was some connection. Please God it doesn't have to be that way.

But nobody else would die, Newman said harshly to himself. It was the way. Take himself, for example. If he injected the rest of the virus left in the lab into his own bloodstream, nothing would happen. His body would reject it. So would millions of others. One in a hundred million was vulnerable, and it had to be his girl. A kind of retribution for everything he'd ever done.

And he'd never even had time to say goodbye to her.

## Epilogue

The Castle Ring syndicate shot every Saturday between September and January, And on Sunday mornings Ken Tyler, the gamekeeper, always went out with Judy, his aged cocker-spaniel, picking up.

They never found all the birds on a Saturday. There was too much time between the pheasants falling and the end of the drive. No dogs were sent to retrieve during a drive. That meant that a wounded cock pheasant had a good start by the time the dogs picked up his scent. The days were short, and there were too many drives to be fitted in. Guns and beaters alike were impatient. 'If you can't find 'em all, leave 'em. The keeper' can pick 'em up in the morning.'

This morning was no different. He had a brace in the bag in the first half hour. Neither of those birds had been 'runners', but who was to know? Shooting game on Sundays was against the law, but there was nothing to say that one

could not despatch a wounded creature on the Sabbath. It was the only humane thing to do. And in any case, Tyler needed to bag as many as possible if he was to keep back a brace or two for himself when the boss called round later in the day. He wouldn't have to be too greedy this season, he decided. Game was scarce. The fires had ruined a good breeding season, and now weeks of rain were spoiling the shooting days. The bags were well down on the previous year.

Judy ranged to and fro, taking her time, relying on her nose. Her head went down. She picked up something out of the long grass,

'Good girl. Bring it on.'

The spaniel's face was hidden behind a mass of fluffy brown feathers. At first Ken was congratulating himself on another hen pheasant in the bag, but as Judy came closer, he groaned.

'Another bloody owl. Christ A'mighty! Three picked up yesterday, and two kestrels.'

It came on to rain again. He pulled down the brim of his hat and turned up the collar of his coat. 'Bleedin' weather!'

Judy forced her way into some dense briars and the gamekeeper stole forward. It could be that old cock that the Colonel had dropped with his second barrel on the last drive. It had been too dark to look for it properly.

He could see Judy on her way back. Certainly it wasn't the cock bird. Light brown feathers, some catching on the thorns as the dog pushed her way out. It was a big bird. A buzzard. Tyler had not seen one on the Chase for five years. The last had been a stray, blown off course by a freak gale. So was this one. But it had come from a different reason. A futile search for food.

He took the buzzard from the dog, and held it up in his left hand. Under normal circumstances it would have weighed approximately three pounds. He doubted if this bird would have topped the scales at a pound. It had wasted away, reduced to skin and feathers by starvation. The keeper tossed it back over the briars. It seemed to hang suspended in the air, almost floating down on to the thorn bushes, landing with scarcely a sound. Just a few feathers wafted in the wind. It was just one of many, and luckier than most of the birds-of-prey species. It was already dead. Many more had still to die, suffering the pangs of hunger, searching vainly for rats, mice, insects. Finding nothing. Not even a beetle.

Myxomatosis had broken out amongst the rabbits again. Coincidence? There weren't even any young coneys for the hawks. Science had destroyed them, and this was only the beginning.

An hour later Ken Tyler stood amongst the trees which overlooked the Biological Research Centre. A car was parked outside and he recognised Newman's Allegro. The bacteriologist hadn't wasted much time getting back to work again after the girl's funeral, the keeper grimaced.

A fit of anger assailed him. He shook a fist in the direction of the squat ugly buildings.

'You bastard!' he shouted. 'All this is your work. You're destroying wildlife, one species after another. You killed the girl. Everybody knows it. The papers say so, but you and your bloody kind keep on denying it. You won't admit that humans can catch it. Sod you!'

His anger subsided, and the gamekeeper walked slowly away, retracing his steps. Newman hadn't heard him. Nobody had. It wouldn't make any difference, anyway.

They'd created something they couldn't control, and now there was no way of stopping it. Only when all forms of life were wiped out would the cancerous virus finally die. And it took a gamekeeper to realise that.

On the way back he had to wait for Judy again. She was away for fully ten minutes this time, and when she returned to heel she was carrying another owl in her jaws.