

# KEITH ROBERTS

## *The Signaller*

One of the most powerful talents to enter the field in the last thirty years, Keith Roberts secured an important place in genre history in 1968 with the publication of his classic novel *Pavane*, one of the best books of the 1960s, and certainly one of the best Alternate History novels ever written (rivaled only by books such as L. Sprague de Camp's *Lest Darkness Fall*, Ward Moore's *Bring the Jubilee*, and Philip K. Dick's *The Man in the High Castle*). Trained as an illustrator—he did work extensively as an illustrator and cover artist in the British SF world of the 1960s—Roberts made his first sale to *Science Fantasy* in 1964. Later, he would take over the editorship of *Science Fantasy*, by then called *SF Impulse*, as well as providing many of the magazine's striking covers. But his career as an editor was short-lived, and most of his subsequent impact on the field would be as a writer, including the production of some of the very best short stories of the last three decades. Roberts's other books include the novels *The Chalk Giants*, *The Furies*, *The Inner Wheel*, *Molly Zero*, *Gráinne*, *Kiteworld*, and *The Boat of Fate*, one of the finest historical novels of the 1970s. His short work can be found in the collections *Machines and Men*, *The Grain Kings*, *The Passing of the Dragons*, *Ladies from Hell*, *The Lordly Ones*, and *Winterwood and Other Hauntings*. His most recent book is a new collection, *Kaeti On Tour*.

In "The Signaller"—one of the stories that was later melded into *Pavane*—he takes us sideways in time to an alternate England where Queen Elizabeth was cut down by an assassin's bullet, and England itself fell to the Spanish Armada—a twentieth-century England where the deep shadow of the Church Militant stretches across a still-medieval land of forests and castles and little huddled towns; an England where travelers in the bleak winter forests or on the desolate, windswept expanses of the heath must fear wolves and brigands and routiers; and, since the Old Things don't change even in an Alternate World, an England where it is yet

possible to encounter specters of a darker and more  
ele-mental kind ...

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On either side of the knoll the land stretched in long, speckled sweeps, paling in the frost smoke until the outlines of distant hills blended with the curdled milk of the sky. Across the waste a bitter wind moaned, steady and chill, driving before it quick flurries of snow. The snow squalls flickered and vanished like ghosts, the only moving things in a vista of emptiness.

What trees there were grew in clusters, little coppices that leaned with the wind, their twigs meshed together as if for protection, their outlines sculpted into the smooth, blunt shapes of ploughshares. One such copse crowned the summit of the knoll; under the first of its branches, and sheltered by them from the wind, a boy lay facedown in the snow. He was motionless but not wholly unconscious; from time to time his body quivered with spasms of shock. He was maybe sixteen or seventeen, blond-haired, and dressed from head to feet in a uniform of dark green leather. The uniform was slit in many places; from the shoulders down the back to the waist, across the hips and thighs. Through the rents could be seen the cream-brown of his skin and the brilliant slow twinkling of blood. The leather was soaked with it, and the long hair matted. Beside the boy lay the case of a pair of binoculars, the Zeiss lenses without which no man or apprentice of the Guild of Signallers ever moved, and a dagger. The blade of the weapon was red-stained; its pommel rested a few inches beyond his outflung right hand. The hand itself was injured, slashed across the backs of the fingers and deeply through the base of the thumb. Round it blood had diffused in a thin pink halo into the snow.

A heavier gust rattled the branches overhead, raised from somewhere a long creak of protest. The boy shivered again and began, with infinite slowness, to move. The outstretched hand crept forward, an inch at a time, to take his weight beneath his chest. The fingers traced an arc in the snow, its ridges red-tipped. He made a noise halfway between a grunt and a moan, levered himself onto his elbows, waited gathering strength. Threshed, half turned over, leaned on the undamaged left hand. He hung his head, eyes closed; his heavy breathing sounded through the copse. Another heave, a convulsive effort, and he was sitting upright, propped against the trunk of a tree. Snow stung his face, bringing back a little more awareness.

He opened his eyes. They were terrified and wild, glazed with pain. He looked up into the tree, swallowed, tried to lick his mouth, turned his head to stare at the empty snow round him. His left hand clutched his stomach; his right

was crossed over it, wrist pressing, injured palm held clear of contact. He shut his eyes again briefly; then he made his hand go down, grip, lift the wet leather away from his thigh. He fell back, started to sob harshly at what he had seen. His hand, dropping slack, brushed tree bark. A snag probed the open wound below the thumb; the disgust-ing surge of pain brought him round again.

From where he lay the knife was out of reach. He leaned forward ponderously, wanting not to move, just stay quiet and be dead, quickly. His fingers touched the blade; he worked his way back to the tree, made him-self sit up again. He rested, gasping; then he slipped his left hand under his knee, drew upward till the half-paralysed leg was crooked. Concen-trating, steering the knife with both hands, he placed the tip of its blade against his trews, forced down slowly to the ankle cutting the garment apart. Then round behind his thigh till the piece of leather came clear.

He was very weak now; it seemed he could feel the strength ebbing out of him, faintness flickered in front of his eyes like the movements of a black wing. He pulled the leather toward him, got its edge between his teeth, gripped, and began to cut the material into strips. It was slow, clumsy work; he gashed himself twice, not feeling the extra pain. He fin-ished at last and began to knot the strips round his leg, trying to tighten them enough to close the long wounds in the thigh. The wind howled steadily; there was no other sound but the quick panting of his breath. His face, beaded with sweat, was nearly as white as the sky.

He did all he could for himself, finally. His back was a bright torment, and behind him the bark of the tree was streaked with red, but he couldn't reach the lacerations there. He made his fingers tie the last of the knots, shuddered at the blood still weeping through the strappings. He dropped the knife and tried to get up.

After minutes of heaving and grunting his legs still refused to take his weight. He reached up painfully, fingers exploring the rough bole of the tree. Two feet above his head they touched the low, snapped-off stump of a branch. The hand was soapy with blood; it slipped, skidded off, groped back. He pulled, feeling the tingling as the gashes in the palm closed and opened. His arms and shoulders were strong, ribboned with muscle from hours spent at the semaphores: he hung tensed for a mo-ment, head thrust back against the trunk, body arced and quivering; then his heel found a purchase in the snow, pushed him upright.

He stood swaying, not noticing the wind, seeing the blackness surge round him and ebb back. His head was pounding now, in time with the pulsing of his blood. He felt fresh warmth trickling on stomach and thighs, and the rise of a

deadly sickness. He turned away, head bent, and started to walk, moving with the slow ponderousness of a diver. Six paces off he stopped, still swaying, edged round clumsily. The binocular case lay on the snow where it had fallen. He went back awkwardly, each step requiring now a separate effort of his brain, a bunching of the will to force the body to obey. He knew foggily that he daren't stoop for the case; if he tried he would fall headlong, and likely never move again. He worked his foot into the loop of the shoulder strap. It was the best he could do; the leather tightened as he moved, riding up round his instep. The case bumped along behind him as he headed down the hill away from the trees.

He could no longer lift his eyes. He saw a circle of snow, six feet or so across, black-fringed at its edges from his impaired vision. The snow moved as he walked, jerking toward him, falling away behind. Across it ran a line of faint impressions, footprints he himself had made. The boy followed them blindly. Some spark buried at the back of his brain kept him moving; the rest of his consciousness was gone now, numbed with shock. He moved draggily, the leather case jerking and slithering behind his heel. With his left hand he held himself, low down over the groin; his right waved slowly, keeping his precarious balance. He left behind him a thin trail of blood spots; each drop splashed pimperl-bright against the snow, faded and spread to a wider pink stain before freezing itself into the crystals. The blood marks and the footprints reached back in a ragged line to the copse. In front of him the wind skirled across the land; the snow whipped at his face, clung thinly to his jerkin.

Slowly, with endless pain, the moving speck separated itself from the trees. They loomed behind it, seeming through some trick of the fading light to increase in height as they receded. As the wind chilled the boy the pain ebbed fractionally; he raised his head, saw before him the tower of a semaphore station topping its low cabin. The station stood on a slight eminence of rising ground; his body felt the drag of the slope, reacted with a gale of breathing. He trudged slower. He was crying again now with little whimperings, meaningless animal noises, and a sheen of saliva showed on his chin. When he reached the cabin the copse was still visible behind him, grey against the sky. He leaned against the plank door gulping, seeing faintly the texture of the wood. His hand fumbled for the lanyard of the catch, pulled; the door opened, plunging him forward onto his knees.

After the snow light outside, the interior of the hut was dark. The boy worked his way on all fours across the board floor. There was a cupboard; he searched it blindly, sweeping glasses and cups aside, dimly hearing them shatter. He found what he needed, drew the cork from the bottle with his teeth, slumped against the wall and attempted to drink. The spirit ran down his chin, spilled across chest and belly. Enough went down his throat to wake him momentarily.

He coughed and tried to vomit. He pulled himself to his feet, found a knife to replace the one he'd dropped.

A wooden chest by the wall held blankets and bed linen; he pulled a sheet free and haggled it into strips, longer and broader this time, to wrap round his thigh. He couldn't bring himself to touch the leather tourniquets. The white cloth marked through instantly with blood; the patches elongated, joined and began to glisten. The rest of the sheet he made into a pad to hold against his groin.

The nausea came again; he retched, lost his balance and sprawled on the floor. Above his eye level, his bunk loomed like a haven. If he could just reach it, lie quiet till the sickness went away.... He crossed the cabin somehow, lay across the edge of the bunk, rolled into it. A wave of black-ness lifted to meet him, deep as a sea.

He lay a long time; then the fragment of remaining will reasserted it-self. Reluctantly, he forced open gummy eyelids. It was nearly dark now; the far window of the hut showed in the gloom, a vague rectangle of greyness. In front of it the handles of the semaphore seemed to swim, glint-ing where the light caught the polished smoothness of wood. He stared, realizing his foolishness; then he tried to roll off the bunk. The blankets, glued to his back, prevented him. He tried again, shivering now with the cold. The stove was unlit; the cabin door stood ajar, white crystals fan-ning in across the planking of the floor. Outside, the howling of the wind was relentless. The boy struggled; the efforts woke pain again and the sickness, the thudding and roaring. Images of the semaphore handles dou-bled, sextupled, rolled apart to make a glistening silver sheaf. He panted, tears running into his mouth; then his eyes slid closed. He fell into a noisy void shot with colours, sparks, and gleams and washes of light. He lay-watching the lights, teeth bared, feeling the throb in his back where fresh blood pumped into the bed. After a while, the roaring went away.

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The child lay couched in long grass, feeling the heat of the sun strike through his jerkin to burn his shoulders. In front of him, at the conical crest of the hill, the magic thing flapped slowly, its wings proud and lazy as those of a bird. Very high it was, on its pole on top of its hill; the faint wooden clattering it made fell remote from the blueness of the summer sky. The movements of the arms had half hypnotized him; he lay nod-ding and blinking, chin propped on his hands, absorbed in his watching. Up and down, up and down, *clap*... then down again and round, up and back, pausing, gesticulating, never staying wholly still. The semaphore seemed alive, an animate thing perched there talking strange words

no-body could understand. Yet words they were, replete with meanings and mysteries like the words in his *Modern English Primer*. The child's brain spun. Words made stories; what stories was the tower telling, all alone there on its hill? Tales of kings and shipwrecks, fights and pursuits, Fairies, buried gold. ... It was talking, he knew that without a doubt; whisper-ing and clacking, giving messages and taking them from the others in the lines, the great lines that stretched across England everywhere you could think, every direction you could see.

He watched the control rods sliding like bright muscles in their oiled guides. From Avebury, where he lived, many other towers were visible; they marched southwards across the Great Plain, climbed the westward heights of the Marlborough Downs. Though those were bigger, huge things staffed by teams of men whose signals might be visible on a clear day for ten miles or more. When they moved it was majestically and slowly, with a thundering from their jointed arms; these others, the little local towers, were friendlier somehow, chatting and pecking away from dawn to sunset.

There were many games the child played by himself in the long hours of summer; stolen hours usually, for there was always work to be found for him. School lessons, home study, chores about the house or down at his brothers' small-holding on the other side of the village; he must sneak off evenings or in the early dawn, if he wanted to be alone to dream. The stones beckoned him sometimes, the great gambolling diamond-shapes of them circling the little town. The boy would scud along the ditches of what had been an ancient temple, climb the terraced scarps to where the stones danced against the morning sun; or walk the long processional av-enué that stretched eastward across the fields, imagine himself a priest or a god come to do old sacrifice to rain and sun. No one knew who first placed the stones. Some said the Fairies, in the days of their strength; oth-ers the old gods, they whose names it was a sin to whisper. Others said the Devil.

Mother Church winked at the destruction of Satanic relics, and that the villagers knew full well. Father Donovan disapproved, but he could do very little; the people went to it with a will. Their ploughs gnawed the bases of the markers, they broke the megaliths with water and fire and used the bits for patching dry stone walls; they'd been doing it for cen-turies now, and the rings were depleted and showing gaps. But there were many stones; the circles remained, and barrows crowning the windy tops of hills, *hows* where the old dead lay patient with their broken bones. The child would climb the mounds, and dream of kings in fur and jewels; but always, when he tired, he was drawn back to the semaphores and their mysterious life. He lay quiet, chin sunk on his hands, eyes sleepy, while above him Silbury 973 chipped and clattered on its hill.

The hand, falling on his shoulder, startled him from dreams. He tensed, whipped round and wanted to bolt; but there was nowhere to run. He was caught; he stared up gulping, a chubby little boy, long hair falling across his forehead.

The man was tall, enormously tall it seemed to the child. His face was brown, tanned by sun and wind, and at the corners of his eyes were net-works of wrinkles. The eyes were deep-set and very blue, startling against the colour of the skin; to the boy they seemed to be of exactly the hue one sees at the very top of the sky. His father's eyes had long since bolted into hiding behind pebble-thick glasses; these eyes were different. They had about them an appearance of power, as if they were used to looking very long distances and seeing clearly things that other men might miss. Their owner was dressed all in green, with the faded shoulder lacings and lanyard of a Serjeant of Signals. At his hip he carried the Zeiss glasses that were the badge of any Signaller; the flap of the case was only half secured and beneath it the boy could see the big eyepieces, the worn brassy sheen of the barrels.

The Guildsman was smiling; his voice when he spoke was drawling and slow. It was the voice of a man who knows about Time, that Time is forever and scurry and bustle can wait. Someone who might know about the old stones in the way the child's father did not.

"Well," he said, "I do believe we've caught a little spy. Who be you, lad?"

The boy licked his mouth and squeaked, looking hunted. "R-Rafe Bigland, sir..."

"And what be 'ee doin'?"

Rafe wetted his lips again, looked at the tower, pouted miserably, stared at the grass beside him, looked back to the Signaller and quickly away. "I...I..."

He stopped, unable to explain. On top of the hill the tower creaked and flapped. The Serjeant squatted down, waiting patiently, still with the lit-tle half-smile, eyes twinkling at the boy. The satchel he'd been carrying he'd set on the grass. Rafe knew he'd been to the village to pick up the afternoon meal; one of the old ladies of Avebury was contracted to supply food to the Signallers on duty. There was little he didn't know about the working of the Silbury station.

The seconds became a minute, and an answer had to be made. Rafe drew

himself up a trifle desperately; he heard his own voice speaking as if it was the voice of a stranger, and wondered with a part of his mind at the words that found themselves on his tongue without it seemed the con-scious intervention of thought. "If you please, sir," he said pipingly, "I was watching the t-tower..."

"Why?"

Again the difficulty. How explain? The mysteries of the Guild were not to be revealed to any casual stranger. The codes of the Signallers and other deeper secrets were handed down, jealously, through the families privi-leged to wear the Green. The Serjeant's accusation of spying had had some truth to it; it had sounded ominous.

The Guildsman helped him. "Canst thou read the signals, Rafe?"

Rafe shook his head, violently. No commoner could read the towers. No commoner ever would. He felt a trembling start in the pit of his stom-ach, but again his voice used itself without his will. "No, sir," it said in a firm treble. "But I would fain learn..."

The Serjeant's eyebrows rose. He sat back on his heels, hands lying easy across his knees, and started to laugh. When he had finished he shook his head. "So you would learn...Aye, and a dozen kings, and many a high-placed gentlemen, would lie easier abed for the reading of the towers." His face changed itself abruptly into a scowl. "Boy," he said, "you mock us..."

Rafe could only shake his head again, silently. The Serjeant stared over him into space, still sitting on his heels. Rafe wanted to explain how he had never, in his most secret dreams, ever imagined himself a Signaller; how his tongue had moved of its own, blurting out the impossible and absurd. But he couldn't speak anymore; before the Green, he was dumb. The pause lengthened while he watched inattentively the lurching progress of a rain beetle through the stems of grass. Then, "Who's thy father, boy?"

Rafe gulped. There would be a beating, he was sure of that now; and he would be forbidden ever to go near the towers or watch them again. He felt the stinging behind his eyes that meant tears were very close, ready to well and trickle. "Thomas Bigland of Avebury, sir," he said. "A clerk to Sir William M-Marshall."

The Serjeant nodded. "And thou wouldst learn the towers? Thou wouldst be a Signaller?"



“Aye, sir...” The tongue was Modern English of course, the language of artisans and tradesmen, not the guttural clacking of the landless churls; Rafe slipped easily into the old-fashioned usage of it the Signallers employed sometimes among themselves.

The Serjeant said abruptly, “Canst thou read in books, Rafe?”

“Aye, sir...” Then falteringly, “If the words be not too long...”

The Guildsman laughed again, and clapped the boy on the back. “Well, Master Rafe Bigland, thou who would be a Signaller, and can read books if the words be but short, my book learning is slim enough as God He knows; but it may be I can help thee, if thou hast given me no lies. Come.” And he rose and began to walk away toward the tower. Rafe hesitated, blinked, then roused himself and trotted along behind, head whirling with wonders.

They climbed the path that ran slantingly round the hill. As they moved, the Serjeant talked. Silbury 973 was part of the C class chain that ran from near Londinium, from the great relay station at Pontes, along the line of the road to Aquae Sulis. Its complement...but Rafe knew the complement well enough. Five men including the Serjeant; their cottages stood apart from the main village, on a little rise of ground that gave them seclusion. Signallers’ homes were always situated like that, it helped preserve the Guild mysteries. Guildsmen paid no tithes to local demesnes, obeyed none but their own hierarchy; and though in theory they were answerable under common law, in practice they were immune. They governed themselves according to their own high code; and it was a brave man, or a fool, who squared with the richest Guild in England. There had been deadly accuracy in what the Serjeant said; when kings waited on their messages as eagerly as commoners they had little need to fear. The Popes might cavil, jealous of their independence, but Rome herself leaned too heavily on the continent-wide networks of the semaphore towers to do more than adjure and complain. Insofar as such a thing was possible in a hemisphere dominated by the Church Militant, the Guildsmen were free.

Although Rafe had seen the inside of a signal station often enough in dreams he had never physically set foot in one. He stopped short at the wooden step, feeling awe rise in him like a tangible barrier. He caught his breath. He had never been this close to a semaphore tower before; the rush and thudding of the arms, the clatter of dozens of tiny joints, sounded in his ears like music. From here only the tip of the signal was in sight, looming over the roof of the hut. The

varnished wooden spars shone orange like the masts of a boat; the semaphore arms rose and dipped, black against the sky. He could see the bolts and loops near their tips where in bad weather or at night when some message of vital importance had to be passed, cressets could be attached to them. He'd seen such fires once, miles out over the Plain, the night the old King died.

The Serjeant opened the door and urged him through it. He stood rooted just beyond the sill. The place had a clean smell that was some-how also masculine, a compound of polishes and oils and the fumes of tobacco; and inside too it had something of the appearance of a ship. The cabin was airy and low, roomier than it had looked from the front of the hill. There was a stove, empty now and gleaming with blacking, its brass-work brightly polished. Inside its mouth a sheet of red crepe paper had been stretched tightly; the doors were parted a little to show the smart-ness. The plank walls were painted a light grey; on the breast that enclosed the chimney of the stove rosters were pinned neatly. In one corner of the room was a group of diplomas, framed and richly coloured; below them an old daguerreotype, badly faded, showing a group of men standing in front of a very tall signal tower. In one corner of the cabin was a bunk, blankets folded into a neat cube at its foot; above it a hand-coloured pinup of a smiling girl wearing a cap of Guild green and very little else. Rafe's eyes passed over it with the faintly embarrassed indifference of childhood.

In the centre of the room, white-painted and square, was the base of the signal mast; round it a little podium of smooth, scrubbed wood, on which stood two Guildsmen. In their hands were the long levers that worked the semaphore arms overhead; the control rods reached up from them, encased where they passed through the ceiling in white canvas grommets. Skylights, opened to either side, let in the warm July air. The third duty Signaller stood at the eastern window of the cabin, glasses to his eyes, speaking quietly and continuously.

"Five...eleven...thirteen... nine..." The operators repeated the combinations, working the big handles, leaning the weight of their bodies against the pull of the signal arms overhead, letting each downward rush of the semaphores help them into position for their next cypher. There was an air of concentration but not of strain; it all seemed very easy and practised. In front of the men, supported by struts from the roof, a telltale repeated the positions of the arms, but the Signallers rarely glanced at it. Years of training had given a fluidness to their movements that made them seem almost like the steps and posturings of a ballet. The bodies swung, checked, moved through their arabesques; the creaking of wood and the faint rumbling of the signals filled the place, as steady and lulling as the drone of bees.

No one paid any attention to Rafe or the Serjeant. The Guildsman began

talking again quietly, explaining what was happening. The long message that had been going through now for nearly an hour was a list of current grain and fatstock prices from Londinium. The Guild system was invaluable for regulating the complex economy of the country; farm-ers and merchants, taking the Londinium prices as a yardstick, knew exactly what to pay when buying and selling for themselves. Rafe forgot to be disappointed; his mind heard the words, recording them and storing them away, while his eyes watched the changing patterns made by the Guildsmen, so much a part of the squeaking, clacking machine they con-trolled.

The actual transmitted information, what the Serjeant called the payspeech, occupied only a part of the signalling; a message was often al-most swamped by the codings necessary to secure its distribution. The current figures for instance had to reach certain centres, Aquae Sulis among them, by nightfall. How they arrived, their routing on the way, was very much the concern of the branch Signallers through whose stations the cyphers passed. It took years of experience coupled with a certain de-gree of intuition to route signals in such a way as to avoid lines already congested with information; and of course while a line was in use in one direction, as in the present case with a complex message being moved from east to west, it was very difficult to employ it in reverse. It was in fact pos-sible to pass two messages in different directions at the same time, and it was often done on the A Class towers. When that happened every third cypher of a northbound might be part of another signal moving south; the stations transmitted in bursts, swapping the messages forward and back. But coaxial signalling was detested even by the Guildsmen. The line had to be cleared first, and a suitable code agreed on; two lookouts were employed, chanting their directions alternately to the Signallers, and even in the best-run station total confusion could result from the smallest slip, necessitating reclearing of the route and a fresh start.

With his hands, the Serjeant described the washout signal a fouled-up tower would use; the three horizontal extensions of the semaphores from the sides of their mast. If that happened, he said, chuckling grimly, a head would roll somewhere; for a Class A would be under the command of a Major of Signals at least, a man of twenty or more years experience. He would be expected not to make mistakes, and to see in turn that none were made by his subordinates. Rafe's head began to whirl again; he looked with fresh respect at the worn green leather of the Serjeant's uni-form. He was beginning to see now, dimly, just what sort of thing it was to be a Signaller.

The message ended at last, with a great clapping of the semaphore arms. The lookout remained at his post but the operators got down, showing an interest

in Rafe for the first time. Away from the semaphore levers they seemed far more normal and unafrightening. Rafe knew them well; Robin Wheeler, who often spoke to him on his way to and from the station, and Bob Camus, who's split a good many heads in his time at the feastday cudgel playing in the village. They showed him the code books, all the scores of cyphers printed in red on numbered black squares. He stayed to share their meal; his mother would be concerned and his father annoyed, but home was almost forgotten. Toward evening another message came from the west; they told him it was police business, and sent it winging and clapping on its way. It was dusk when Rafe finally left the station, head in the clouds, two unbelievable pennies jinking in his pocket. It was only later, in bed and trying to sleep, he realized a long-submerged dream had come true. He did sleep finally, only to dream again of signal towers at night, the cressets on their arms roaring against the blueness of the sky. He never spent the coins.

Once it had become a real possibility, his ambition to be a Signaller grew steadily; he spent all the time he could at the Silbury Station, perched high on its weird prehistoric hill. His absences met with his father's keenest disapproval. Mr. Bigland's wage as an estate clerk barely brought in enough to support his brood of seven boys; the family had of necessity to grow most of its own food, and for that every pair of hands that could be mustered was valuable. But nobody guessed the reason for Rafe's frequent disappearances; and for his part he didn't say a word.

He learned, in illicit hours, the thirty-odd basic positions of the signal arms, and something of the commonest sequences of grouping; after that he could lie out near Silbury Hill and mouth off most of the numbers to himself, though without the codes that informed them he was still dumb. Once Serjeant Gray let him take the observer's place for a glorious half hour while a message was coming in over the Marlborough Downs. Rafe stood stiffly, hands sweating on the big barrels of the Zeiss glasses, and read off the cyphers as high and clear as he could for the Signallers at his back. The Serjeant checked his reporting unobtrusively from the other end of the hut, but he made no mistakes.

By the time he was ten Rafe had received as much formal education as a child of his class could expect. The great question of a career was raised. The family sat in conclave; father, mother, and the three eldest sons. Rafe was unimpressed; he knew, and had known for weeks, the fate they had selected for him. He was to be apprenticed to one of the four tailors of the village, little bent old men who sat like cross-legged hermits behind bulwarks of cloth bales and stitched their lives away by the light of penny dips. He hardly expected to be consulted on the matter; however he was sent for, formally, and asked what he wished to do. That was the time for the bombshell. "I know exactly what I want to

be," said Rafe firmly. "A Signaller."

There was a moment of shocked silence; then the laughing started and swelled. The Guilds were closely guarded; Rafe's father would pay dearly even for his entry into the tailoring trade. As for the Signallers...no Bigland had ever been a Signaller, no Bigland ever would. Why, that...it would raise the family status! The whole village would have to look up to them, with a son wearing the Green. Preposterous...

Rafe sat quietly until they were finished, lips compressed, cheekbones glowing. He'd known it would be like this, he knew just what he had to do. His composure discomfited the family; they quietened down enough to ask him, with mock seriousness, how he intended to set about achieving his ambition. It was time for the second bomb. "By approaching the Guild with regard to a Common Entrance Examination," he said, mouthing words that had been learned by rote. "Serjeant Gray, of the Silbury Station, will speak for me."

Into the fresh silence came his father's embarrassed coughing. Mr. Bigland looked like an old sheep, sitting blinking through his glasses, nibbling at his thin moustache. "Well," he said. "Well, I don't know... *Well...*" But Rafe had already seen the glint in his eyes at the dizzying prospect of prestige. That a son of his should wear the Green...

Before their minds could change Rafe wrote a formal letter which he delivered in person to the Silbury Station: it asked Serjeant Gray, very correctly, if he would be kind enough to call on Mr. Bigland with a view of discussing his son's entry to the College of Signals in Londinium.

The Serjeant was as good as his word. He was a widower, and child-less; maybe Rafe made up in part for the son he'd never had, maybe he saw the reflection of his own youthful enthusiasm in the boy. He came the next evening, strolling quietly down the village street to rap at the Biglands' door; Rafe, watching from his shared bedroom over the porch, grinned at the gaping and craning of the neighbours. The family was all a-flutter; the household budget had been scraped for wine and candles, silverware and fresh linen were laid out in the parlour, everybody was anxious to make the best possible impression. Mr. Bigland of course was only too agreeable; when the Serjeant left, an hour later, he had his signed permission in his belt. Rafe himself saw the signal originated asking Londinium for the necessary entrance papers for the College's annual examination.

The Guild gave just twelve places per year, and they were keenly contested.

In the few weeks at his disposal Rafe was crammed mercilessly; the Serjeant coached him in all aspects of Signalling he might reasonably be expected to know while the village dominie, impressed in spite of him-self, brushed up Rafe's bookwork, even trying to instill into his aching head the rudiments of Norman French. Rafe won admittance; he had never considered the possibility of failure, mainly because such a thought was unbearable. He sat the examination in Sorviodunum, the nearest re-gional centre to his home; a week later a message came through offering him his place, listing the clothes and books he would need and instruct-ing him to be ready to present himself at the College of Signals in just under a month's time. When he left for Londinium, well muffled in a new cloak, riding a horse provided by the Guild and with two russet-coated Guild servants in attendance, he was followed by the envy of a whole vil-lage. The arms of the Silbury tower were quiet; but as he passed they flipped quickly to Attention, followed at once by the cyphers for Origi-nation and Immediate Locality. Rafe turned in the saddle, tears stinging his eyes, and watched the letters quickly spelled out in plaintalk. "Good luck..."

After Avebury, Londinium seemed dingy, noisy, and old. The College was housed in an ancient, ramshackle building just inside the City walls; though Londinium had long since overspilled its former limits, sprawl-ing south across the river and north nearly as far as Tyburn Tree. The Guild children were the usual crowd of brawling, snotty-nosed brats that comprised the apprentices of any trade. Hereditary sons of the Green, they looked down on the Common Entrants from the heights of an unbear-able and imaginary eminence; Rafe had a bad time till a series of dormi-tory fights, all more or less bloody; proved to his fellows once and for all that young Bigland at least was better left alone. He settled down as an accepted member of the community.

The Guild, particularly of recent years, had been tending to place more and more value on theoretical knowledge, and the two-year course was intensive. The apprentices had to become adept in Norman French, for their further training would take them inevitably into the houses of the rich. A working knowledge of the other tongues of the land, the Cornish, Gaelic, and Middle English, was also a requisite; no Guildsman ever knew where he would finally be posted. Guild history was taught too, and the elements of mechanics and coding, though most of the practical work in those directions would be done in the field, at the training stations scat-tered along the south and west coasts of England and through the Welsh Marches. The students were even required to have a nodding acquaint-ance with thaumaturgy; though Rafe for one was unable to see how the attraction of scraps of paper to a polished stick of amber could ever have an application to Signalling.

He worked well nonetheless, and passed out with a mark high enough to satisfy even his professors. He was posted directly to his training station, the A Class complex atop Saint Adhelm's Head in Dorset. To his intense pleasure he was accompanied by the one real friend he had made at College; Josh Cope, a wild, black-haired boy, a Common Entrant and the son of a Durham mining family.

They arrived at Saint Adhelm's in the time-honored way, thumbing a lift from a road train drawn by a labouring Fowler compound. Rafe never forgot his first sight of the station. It was far bigger than he'd imagined, sprawling across the top of the great blunt promontory. For convenience, stations were rated in accordance with the heaviest towers they carried; but Saint Adhelm's was a clearing centre for B, C, and D lines as well, and round the huge paired structures of the A-Class towers ranged a circle of smaller semaphores, all twirling and clacking in the sun. Beside them, establishing rigs displayed the codes the towers spoke in a series of bright-coloured circles and rectangles; Rafe, staring, saw one of them rotate, displaying to the west a yellow Bend Sinister as the semaphore above it switched in midmessage from plaintalk to the complex Code Twenty-Three. He glanced sidelong at Josh, got from the other lad a jaunty thumbs-up; they swung their satchels onto their shoulders and headed up toward the main gate to report themselves for duty.

For the first few weeks both boys were glad enough of each other's company. They found the atmosphere of a major field station very different from that of the College; by comparison the latter, noisy and brawling as it had been, came to seem positively monastic. A training in the Guild of Signallers was like a continuous game of ladders and snakes; and Rafe and Josh had slid back once more to the bottom of the stack. Their life was a near-endless round of canteen fatigues, of polishing and burnishing, scrubbing and holystoning. There were the cabins to clean, gravel pads to weed, what seemed like miles of brass rail to scour till it gleamed. Saint Adhelm's was a show station, always prone to inspection. Once it suffered a visit from the Grand Master of Signallers himself, and his Lord Lieutenant; the spitting and polishing before that went on for weeks. And there was the maintenance of the towers themselves; the canvas grommets on the great control rods to renew and pipe-clay, the semaphore arms to be painted, their bearings cleaned and packed with grease, spars to be sent down and re-rigged, always in darkness when the day's signalling was done and generally in the foulest of weathers. The semi-military nature of the Guild made necessary sidearms practice and shooting with the longbow and crossbow, obsolescent weapons now but still occasionally employed in the European wars.

The station itself surpassed Rafe's wildest dreams. Its standing complement, including the dozen or so apprentices always in training, was well

over a hundred, of whom some sixty or eighty were always on duty or on call. The big semaphores, the Class A's, were each worked by teams of a dozen men, six to each great lever, with a Signal Master to control coordination and pass on the cyphers from the observers. With the station running at near capacity the scene was impressive; the lines of men at the controls, as synchronised as troupes of dancers; the shouts of the Signal Masters, scuffle of feet on the white planking, rumble and creak of the control rods, the high thunder of the signals a hundred feet above the roofs. Though that, according to the embittered Officer in Charge, was not Signalling but "unscientific bloody timber-hauling." Major Stone had spent most of his working life on the little Glass C's of the Pennine Chain before an unlooked-for promotion had given him his present position of trust.

The A messages short-hopped from Saint Adhelm's to Swyre Head and from thence to Gad Cliff, built on the high land overlooking Warbarrow Bay. From there along the coast to Golden Cap, the station poised six hundred sheer feet above the fishing village of Lymes, to fling themselves in giant strides into the west, to Somerset and Devon and far-off Cornwall, or northwards again over the heights of the Great Plain en route for Wales. Up there Rafe knew they passed in sight of the old stone rings of Avebury. He often thought with affection of his parents and Serjeant Gray; but he was long past homesickness. His days were too full for that.

Twelve months after their arrival at Saint Adhelm's, and three years after their induction into the Guild, the apprentices were first allowed to lay hands on the semaphore bars. Josh in fact had found it impossible to wait and had salvaged his ego some months before by spelling out a frisky message on one of the little local towers in what he hoped was the dead of night. For that fall from grace he had made intimate and painful contact with the buckle on the end of a green leather belt, wielded by none other than Major Stone himself. Two burly Corporals of Signals held the miners' lad down while he threshed and howled; the end result had convinced even Josh that on certain points of discipline the Guild stood adamant.

To learn to signal was like yet another beginning. Rafe found rapidly that a semaphore lever was no passive thing to be pulled and hauled at pleasure; with the wind under the great black sails of the arms an operator stood a good chance of being bowled completely off the rostrum by the back-whip of even a thirty-foot unit, while to the teams on the A-Class towers lack of coordination could prove, and had proved in the past, fatal. There was a trick to the thing, only learned after bruising hours of practice; to lean the weight of the body against the levers rather than just using the muscles of back and arms, employ the jounce and swing of the semaphores to position them automatically for their next cypher. Trying to fight them instead of working with *the* recoil would reduce a strong man to a



sweat-soaked rag within minutes; but a trained Signaller could work half the day and feel very little strain. Rafe approached the task assiduously; six months and one broken collarbone later he felt able to pride himself on mastery of his craft. It was then he first encountered the murderous intricacies of coaxial signalling...

After two years on the station the apprentices were finally deemed ready to graduate as full Signallers. Then came the hardest test of all. The site of it, the arena, was a bare hillock of ground some half mile from Saint Adhelm's Head. Built onto it, and facing each other about forty yards apart, were two Class D towers with their cabins. Josh was to be Rafe's partner in the test. They were taken to the place in the early morning, and given their problem; to transmit to each other in plaintext the entire of the Book of Nehemiah in alternate verses, with appropriate Attention, Acknowledgement, and End-of-Message cyphers at the head and tail of each. Several ten-minute breaks were allowed, though they had been warned privately it would be better not to take them; once they left the rostrums they might be unable to force their tired bodies back to the bars.

Round the little hill would be placed observers who would check the work minute by minute for inaccuracies and sloppiness. When the messages were finished to their satisfaction the apprentices might leave, and call themselves Signallers; but not before. Nothing would prevent them deserting their task if they desired before it was done. Nobody would speak a word of blame, and there would be no punishment; but they would leave the Guild the same day, and never return. Some boys, a few, did leave. Others collapsed; for them, there would be another chance.

Rafe neither collapsed nor left, though there were times when he longed to do both. When he started, the sun had barely risen; when he left it was sinking toward the western rim of the horizon. The first two hours, the first three, were nothing; then the pain began. In the shoulders, in the back, in the buttocks and calves. His world narrowed; he saw neither the sun nor the distant sea. There was only the semaphore, the handles of it, the text in front of his eyes, the window. Across the space separating the huts he could see Josh staring as he engaged in his endless, useless task. Rafe came by degrees to hate the towers, the Guild, himself, all he had done, the memory of Silbury and old Serjeant Gray; and to hate Josh most of all, with his stupid white blob of a face, the signals clacking above him like some absurd extension of himself. With fatigue came a trance-like state in which logic was suspended, the reasons for actions lost. There was nothing to do in life, had never been anything to do but stand on the rostrum, work the levers, feel the jounce of the signals, check with the body, feel the jounce...His vision doubled and trebled till the lines of copy in front of him shimmered unreadably; and still the test ground on.

At any time in the afternoon Rafe would have killed his friend had he been able to reach him. But he couldn't get to him; his feet were rooted to the podium, his hands glued to the levers of the semaphore. The signals grumbled and creaked; his breath sounded in his ears harshly, like an engine. His sight blackened; the text and the opposing semaphore swam in a void. He felt disembodied; he could sense his limbs only as a dim and confused burning. And somehow, agonizingly, the transmission came to an end. He clattered off the last verse of the book, signed End of Message, leaned on the handles while the part of him that could still think realized dully that he could stop. And then, in black rage, he did the thing only one other apprentice had done in the history of the station; flipped the handles to Attention again, spelled out with terrible exactness and letter by letter the message *"God Save the Queen."* Signed End of Message, got no acknowledgement, swung the levers up and locked them into position for Emergency-Contact Broken. In a signalling chain the alarm would be flashed back to the originating station, further information rerouted and a squad sent to investigate the breakdown.

Rafe stared blankly at the levers. He saw now the puzzling bright streaks on them were his own blood. He forced his raw hands to unclamp themselves, elbowed his way through the door, shoved past the men who had come for him and collapsed twenty yards away on the grass. He was taken back to Saint Adhelm's in a cart and put to bed. He slept the clock round; when he woke it was with the knowledge that Josh and he now had the right to put aside the cowled russet jerkins of apprentices for the full green of the Guild of Signallers. They drank beer that night, awkwardly, gripping the tankards in both bandaged paws; and for the second and last time, the station cart had to be called into service to get them home.

The next part of training was a sheer pleasure. Rafe made his farewells to Josh and went home on a two month leave; at the end of his furlough he was posted to the household of the Fitzgibbons, one of the old families of the Southwest, to serve twelve months as Signaller-Page. The job was mainly ceremonial, though in times of national crisis it could obviously carry its share of responsibility. Most well-bred families, if they could afford to do so, bought rights from the Guild and erected their own tiny stations somewhere in the grounds of their estate; the little Class-E towers were even smaller than the Class D's on which Rafe had graduated.

In places where no signal line ran within easy sighting distance, one or more stations might be erected across the surrounding country and staffed by Journeyman-Signallers without access to coding; but the Fitzgibbons' great

aitch-shaped house lay almost below Swyre Head, in a sloping coombe open to the sea. Rafe, looking down on the roofs of the place the morning he arrived, started to grin. He could see his semaphore perched up among the chimney stacks; above it a bare mile away was the A re-peater, the short-hop tower for his old station of Saint Adhelm's just over the hill. He touched heels to his horse, pushing it into a canter. He would be signalling direct to the A Class, there was no other outroute; he couldn't help chuckling at the thought of its Major's face when asked to hurl to Saint Adhelm's or Golden Cap requests for butter, six dozen eggs, or the services of a cobbler. He paid his formal respects to the station and rode down into the valley to take up his new duties.

They proved if anything easier than he had anticipated. Fitzgibbon himself moved in high circles at Court and was rarely home, the running of the house being left to his wife and two teenage daughters. As Rafe had expected, most of the messages he was required to pass were of an in-tensely domestic nature. And he enjoyed the privileges of any young Guildsman in his position; he could always be sure of a warm place in the kitchen at nights, the first cut off the roast, the prettiest serving wenches to mend his clothes and trim his hair. There was sea bathing within a stone's throw, and feast day trips to Durnovaria and Bourne Mouth. Once a little fair established itself in the grounds, an annual oc-currence apparently; and Rafe spent a delicious half hour signalling the A Class for oil for its steam engines, and meat for a dancing bear.

The year passed quickly; in late autumn the boy, promoted now to Signaller-Corporal, was reposted, and another took his place. Rafe rode west, into the hills that crowd the southern corner of Dorset, to take up what would be his first real command.

The station was part of a D-Class chain that wound west over the high ground into Somerset. In winter, with the short days and bad seeing conditions, the towers would be unused; Rafe knew that well enough. He would be totally isolated; winters in the hills could be severe, with snow making travel next to impossible and frosts for weeks on end. He would have little to fear from the *routiers*, the footpads who legend claimed haunted the West in the cold months; the station lay far from any road and there was nothing in the cabins, save perhaps the Zeiss glasses car-ried by the Signaller, to tempt a desperate man. He would be in more dan-ger from wolves and Fairies, though the former were virtually extinct in the south and he was young enough to laugh at the latter. He took over from the bored Corporal just finishing his term, signalled his arrival back through the chain, and settled down to take stock of things.

By all reports this first winter on a one-man station was a worse trial than

the endurance test. For a trial it was, certainly. At some time through the dark months ahead, some hour of the day, a message would come along the dead line, from the west or from the east; and Rafe would have to be there to take it and pass it on. A minute late with his acknowledgement and a formal reprimand would be issued from Londinium; that might peg his promotion for years, maybe for good. The standards of the Guild were high, and they were never relaxed; if it was easy for a Major in charge of an A-Class station to fall from grace, how much easier for an unknown and untried Corporal! The duty period of each day was short, a bare six hours, five through the darkest months of December and January; but during that time, except for one short break, Rafe would have to be continually on the alert.

One of his first acts on being left alone was to climb to the diminutive operating gantry. The construction of the station was unusual. To compensate for its lack of elevation a catwalk had been built across under the roof; the operating rostrum was located centrally on it, while at each end double-glazed windows commanded views to west and east. Between them, past the handles of the semaphore, a track had been worn half an inch deep in the wooden boards. In the next few months Rafe would wear it deeper, moving from one window to the other checking the arms of the next towers in line. The matchsticks of the semaphores were barely visible; he judged them to be a good two miles distant. He would need all his eyesight, plus the keenness of the Zeiss lenses, to make them out at all on a dull day; but they would have to be watched minute by minute through every duty period because sooner or later one of them would move. He grinned and touched the handles of his own machine. When that happened, his acknowledgement would be clattering before the tower had stopped calling for Attention.

He examined the stations critically through his glasses. In the spring, riding out to take up a new tour, he might meet one of their operators; but not before. In the hours of daylight they as well as he would be tied to their gantries, and on foot in the dark it might be dangerous to try to reach them. Anyway it would not be expected of him; that was an un-written law. In case of need, desperate need, he could call help through the semaphores; but for no other reason. This was the true life of the Guildsman; the bustle of Londinium, the warmth and comfort of the Fitzgibbons' home, had been episodes only. Here was the end result of it all; the silence, the desolation, the ancient, endless communion of the hills. He had come full circle.

His life settled into a pattern of sleeping and waking and watching. As the days grew shorter the weather worsened; freezing mists swirled round the station, and the first snow fell. For hours on end the towers to east and west were

lost in the haze; if a message was to come now, the Signallers would have to light their cressets. Rafe prepared the bundles of faggots anxiously, wiring them into their iron cages, setting them beside the door with the paraffin that would soak them, make them blaze. He became obsessed by the idea that the message had in fact come, and he had missed it in the gloom. In time the fear ebbed. The Guild was hard, but it was fair; no Signaller, in winter of all times, was expected to be a superman. If a Captain rode suddenly to the station demanding why he had not answered this or that he would see the torches and the oil laid and ready and know at least that Rafe had done his best. Nobody came; and when the weather cleared the towers were still stationary.

Each night after the light had gone Rafe tested his signals, swinging the arms to free them from their wind-driven coating of ice; it was good to feel the pull and flap of the thin wings up in the dark. The messages he sent into blackness were fanciful in the extreme; notes to his parents and old Serjeant Gray, lurid suggestions to a little girl in the household of the Fitzgibbons to whom he had taken more than a passing fancy. Twice a week he used the lunchtime break to climb the tower, check the spin-dles in their packings of grease. On one such inspection he was appalled to see a hairline crack in one of the control rods, the first sign that the metal had become fatigued. He replaced the entire section that night, breaking out fresh parts from store, hauling them up and fitting them by the improvised light of a hand lamp. It was an awkward, dangerous job with his fingers freezing and the wind plucking at his back, trying to tug him from his perch onto the roof below. He could have pulled the station out of line in daytime, signalled Repairs and given himself the benefit of light, but pride forbade him. He finished the job two hours before dawn, tested the tower, made his entry in the log and went to sleep, trusting in his Signaller's sense to wake him at first light. It didn't let him down.

The long hours of darkness began to pall. Mending and laundering only filled a small proportion of his off-duty time; he read through his stock of books, reread them, put them aside and began devising tasks for himself, checking and rechecking his inventories of food and fuel. In the blackness, with the long crying of the wind over the roof, the stories of Fairies and were-things on the heath didn't seem quite so fanciful. Difficult now even to imagine summer, the slow clicking of the towers against skies bright blue and burning with light. There were two pistols in the hut; Rafe saw to it their mechanisms were in order, loaded and primed them both. Twice alter that he woke to crashings on the roof, as if some dark thing was scrabbling to get in; but each time it was only the wind in the skylights. He padded them with strips of canvas; then the frost came back, icing them shut, and he wasn't disturbed again.

He moved a portable stove up onto the observation gallery and discovered the remarkable number of operations that could be carried out with one eye on the windows. The brewing of coffee and tea were easy enough; in time he could even manage the production of hot snacks. His lunch hours he preferred to use for things other than cooking. Above all else he was afraid of inaction making him fat; there was no sign of it hap-pening but he still preferred to take no chances. When snow conditions permitted he would make quick expeditions from the shack into the sur-rounding country. On one of these the hillock with its smoothly shaped crown of trees attracted his eye. He walked toward it jauntily, breath steaming in the air, the glasses as ever bumping his hip. In the copse, his Fate was waiting.

The catamount clung to the bole of a fir, watching the advance of the boy with eyes that were slits of hate in the vicious mask of its face. No one could have read its thoughts. Perhaps it imagined itself about to be attacked; perhaps it was true what they said about such creatures, that the cold of winter sent them mad. There were few of them now in the west; mostly they had retreated to the hills of Wales, the rocky peaks of the far north. The survival of this one was in itself a freak, an anachro-nism.

The tree in which it crouched leaned over the path Rafe must take. He ploughed forward, head bent a little, intent only on picking his way. As he approached the catamount drew back its lips in a huge and silent snarl, showing the wide pink vee of its mouth, the long needle-sharp teeth. The eyes blazed; the ears flattened, making the skull a round, furry ball. Rafe never saw the wildcat, its stripes blending perfectly with the harshness of branches and snow. As he stepped beneath the tree it launched itself onto him, landed across his shoulders like a spitting shawl; his neck and back were flayed before the pain had travelled to his brain.

The shock and the impact sent him staggering. He reeled, yelling; the reaction dislodged the cat but it spun in a flash, tearing upward at his stom-ach. He felt the hot spurting of blood, and the world became a red haze of horror. The air was full of the creature's screaming. He reached his knife but teeth met in his hand and he dropped it. He grovelled blindly, found the weapon again, slashed out, felt the blade strike home. The cat screeched, writhing on the snow. He forced himself to push his stream-ing knee into the creature's back, pinning the animal while the knife flailed down, biting into its mad life; until the thing with a final convul-sion burst free, fled limping and splashing blood, died maybe somewhere off in the trees. Then there was the time of blackness, the hideous crawl back to the signal station; and now he lay dying too, unable to reach the semaphore, knowing that finally he had failed. He wheezed hopelessly, settled

back farther into the crowding dark.

\* \* \* \*

In the blackness were sounds. Homely sounds. A regular *scrape-dink, scrape-clink*; the morning noise of a rake being drawn across the bars of a grate. Rafe tossed muttering, relaxed in the spreading warmth. There was light now, orange and flickering; he kept his eyes closed, seeing the glow of it against the insides of the lids. Soon his mother would call. It would be time to get up and go to school, or out into the fields.

A tinkling, pleasantly musical, made him turn his head. His body still ached, right down the length of it, but somehow the pain was not quite so intense. He blinked. He'd expected to see his old room in the cottage at Avebury; the curtains stirring in the breeze perhaps, sunshine coming through open windows. It took him a moment to readjust to the signal hut; then memory came back with a rush. He stared; he saw the gantry under the semaphore handles, the rods reaching out through the roof; the whiteness of their grommets, pipe-clayed by himself the day before. The tarpaulin squares had been hooked across the windows, shutting out the night. The door was barred, both lamps were burning; the stove was alight, its doors open and spreading warmth. Above it, pots and pans shimmered; and bending over them was a girl.

She turned when he moved his head and he looked into deep eyes, black-fringed, with a quick nervousness about them that was somehow like an animal. Her long hair was restrained from falling round her face by a band or ribbon drawn behind the little pointed ears; she wore a rustling dress of an odd light blue, and she was brown. Brown as a nut, though God knew there had been no sun for weeks to tan her like that. Rafe recoiled when she looked at him, and something deep in him twisted and needed to scream. He knew she shouldn't be here in this wilderness, amber-skinned and with her strange summery dress; that she was one of the Old Ones, the half-believed, the Haunters of the Heath, the possessors of men's souls if Mother Church spoke truth. His lips tried to form the word "Fairy" and could not. Blood-smearred, they barely moved.

His vision was failing again. She walked toward him lightly, swaying, seeming to his dazed mind to shimmer like a flame; some unnatural flame that a breath might extinguish. But there was nothing ethereal about her touch. Her hands were firm and hard; they wiped his mouth, stroked his hot face. Coolness remained after she had gone away and he realized she had laid a damp cloth across his forehead. He tried to cry out to her again; she turned to smile at him, or he thought she smiled, and he realized she was singing. There were no words; the

sound made itself in her throat, goldenly, like the song a spinning wheel might hum in the ears of a sleepy child, the words always nearly there ready to well up through the surface of the colour and never coming. He wanted badly to talk now, tell her about the cat and his fear of it and its paws full of glass, but it seemed she knew already the things that were in his mind. When she came back it was with a steaming pan of water that she set on a chair beside the bunk. She stopped the humming, or the singing, then and spoke to him; but the words made no sense, they banged and splat-tered like water falling over rocks. He was afraid again, for that was the talk of the Old Ones; but the defect must have been in his ears because the syllables changed of themselves into the Modern English of the Guild. They were sweet and rushing, filled with a meaning drat was not a mean-ing, hinting at deeper things beneath themselves that his tired mind couldn't grasp. They talked about the Fate that had waited for him in the wood, fallen on him so suddenly from the tree. *"The Norns spin the Fate of a man or of a cat,"* sang the voice. *"Sitting beneath Yggdrasil, great World Ash, they work; one Sister to make the yarn, the next to measure, the third to cut it at its end..."* and all the time the hands were busy, touching and soothing.

Rafe knew the girl was mad, or possessed. She spoke of Old things, the things banished by Mother Church, pushed out forever into the dark and cold. With a great effort he lifted his hand, held it before her to make the sign of the Cross; but she gripped the wrist, giggling, and forced it down, started to work delicately on the ragged palm, cleaning the blood from round the base of the fingers. She unfastened the belt across his stom-ach, eased the trews apart; cutting the leather, soaking it, pulling it away in little twitches from the deep tears in groin and thighs. *"Ah..."*, he said, *"ah..."* She stopped at that, frowning, brought something from the stove, lifted his head gently to let him drink. The liquid soothed, seeming to run from his throat down into body and limbs like a trickling anaesthesia. He relapsed into a warmth shot through with little coloured stabs of pain, heard her crooning again as she dressed his legs. Slid deeper, into sleep.

Day came slowly, faded slower into night that turned to day again, and darkness. He seemed to be apart from Time, lying dozing and waking, feeling the comfort of bandages on his body and fresh linen tucked round him, seeing the handles of the semaphores gleam a hundred miles away, wanting to go to them, not able to move. Sometimes he thought when the girl came to him he pulled her close, pressed his face into the mother-warmth of her thighs while she stroked his hair, and talked, and sang. All the time it seemed, through the sleeping and the waking, the voice went on. Sometimes he knew he heard it with his ears, sometimes in fever dreams the words rang in his mind. They made a mighty saga; such a story as had never been told, never imagined in all the lives of men.



It was the tale of Earth; Earth and a land, the place her folk called Angle-Land. Only once there had been no Angle-Land because there had been no planets, no sun. Nothing had existed but Time; Time, and a void. Only Time was the void, and the void was Time itself. Through it moved colours, twinklings, sudden shafts of light. There were hummings, shout-ings, perhaps, musical tones like the notes of organs that thrummed in his body until it shook with them and became a melting part. Sometimes in the dream he wanted to cry out; but still he couldn't speak, and the beautiful blasphemy ground on. He saw the brown mists lift back wav-ing and whispering, and through them the shine of water; a harsh sea, cold and limitless, ocean of a new world. But the dream itself was fluid; the images shone and altered, melding each smoothly into each, yielding place majestically, fading into dark. The hills came, rolling, tentative, squirming, pushing up dripping flanks that shuddered, sank back, returned to silt. The silt, the sea bed, enriched itself with a million-year snowstorm of little dying creatures. The piping of the tiny snails as they fell was a part of the chorus and the song, a thin, sweet harmonic.

And already there were Gods; the Old Gods, powerful and vast, look-ing down, watching, stirring with their fingers at the silt, waving the swirling brownness back across the sea. It was all done in a dim light, the cold glow of dawn. The hills shuddered, drew back, thrust up again like golden, humped animals, shaking the water from their sides. The sun stood over them, warming, adding steam to the fogs, making multiple and shimmering reflections dance from the sea. The Gods laughed; and over and again, uncertainly, unsurely, springing from the silt, sinking back to silt again, the hills writhed, shaping the shapeless land. The voice sang, whirring like a wheel; there was no "forward," no "back"; only a sense of continuity, of massive development, of the huge Everness of Time. The hills fell and rose; leaves brushed away the sun, their reflections waved in water, the trees themselves sank, rolled and heaved, were thrust down to rise once more dripping, grow afresh. The rocks formed, broke, re-formed, became solid, melted again until from the formlessness somehow the land was made; Angle-Land, nameless still, with its long pastures, its fields, and silent hills of grass. Rafe saw the endless herds of animals that crossed it, wheeling under the wheeling sun; and the first shadowy Men. Rage possessed them; they hacked and hewed, rearing their stone circles in the wind and emptiness, finding again the bodies of the Gods in the chalky flanks of downs. Until all ended, the Gods grew tired; and the ice came flailing and crying from the north, the sun sank dying in its blood and there was coldness and blackness and nothingness and winter.

Into the void, He came; only He was not the Christos, the God of Mother Church. He was Balder, Balder the Lovely, Balder the Young. He strode across the land, face burning as the sun, and the Old Ones grov-elled and adored. The wind

touched the stone circles, burning them with frost; in the darkness men cried for spring. So he came to the Tree Yggdrasil— *What Tree*, Rafe's mind cried despairingly, and the voice checked and laughed and said without anger, "*Yggdrasil, great World Ash, whose branches pierce the layers of heaven, whose roots wind through all Hells...*" Balder came to the Tree, on which he must die for the sins of Gods and Men; and to the Tree they nailed him, hung him by the palms. And there they came to adore while His blood ran and trickled and gouted bright, while he hung above the Hells of the Trolls and of the Giants of Frost and Fire and Mountain, below the Seven Heavens where Tiw and Thunor and old Wo-Tan trembled in Valhalla at the mightiness of what was done.

And from His blood sprang warmth again and grass and sunlight, the meadow flowers and the calling, mating birds. And the Church came at last, stamping and jingling, out of the east, lifting the brass wedding cakes of her altars while men fought and roiled and made the ground black with their blood, while they raised their cities and their signal towers and their glaring castles. The Old Ones moved back, the Fairies, the Haunters of the Heath, the People of the Stones, taking with them their lovely bleed-ing Lord; and the priests called despairingly to Him, calling Him the Christos, saying he died on a tree, at the Place Golgotha, the Place of the Skull. Rome's navies sailed the world; and England woke up, steam jetted in every tiny hamlet, and clattering and noise; while Balder's blood, still raining down, made afresh each spring. And so after days in the telling, after weeks, the huge legend paused, and turned in on itself, and ended.

\* \* \* \*

The stove was out, the hut smelled fresh and cool. Rafe lay quiet, knowing he had been very ill. The cabin was a place of browns and clean bright blues. Deep brown of woodwork, orange brown of the control handles, creamy brown of planking. The blue came from the sky, shafting in through windows and door, reflecting from the long-dead semaphore in pale spindles of light. And the girl herself was brown and blue; brown of skin, frosted blue of ribbon and dress. She leaned over him smiling, all nervousness gone. "*Better*" sang the voice. "*You're better now. You're well.*"

He sat up. He was very weak. She eased the blankets aside, letting the air tingle like cool water on his skin. He swung his legs down over the edge of the bunk and she helped him stand. He sagged, laughed, stood again swaying, feeling the texture of the hut floor under his feet, looking down at his body, seeing the pink crisscrossing of scars on stomach and thighs, the jaunty penis thrusting from its nest of hair. She found him a tunic, helped him into it laughing at him, twitching

and pulling. She fetched him a cloak, fastened it round his neck, knelt to push sandals on his feet. He leaned against the bunk panting a little, feeling stronger. His eye caught the semaphore; she shook her head and teased him, urging him toward the door. *"Come"* said the voice. *"Just for a little while"*

She knelt again outside, touched the snow while the wind blustered wetly from the west. Round about, the warming hills were brilliant and still. *"Balder is dead"* she sang. *"Balder is dead..."* And instantly it seemed Rafe could hear the million chuckling voices of the thaw, see the very flow-ers pushing coloured points against the translucency of snow. He looked up at the signals on the tower. They seemed strange to him now, like the winter a thing of the past. Surely they too would melt and run, and leave no trace. They were part of the old life and the old way; for the first time he could turn his back on them without distress. The girl moved from him, low shoes showing her ankles against the snow; and Rafe followed, hesitant at first then more surely, gaining strength with every step. Behind him, the signal hut stood forlorn.

\* \* \* \*

The two horsemen moved steadily, letting their mounts pick their way. The younger rode a few paces ahead, muffled in his cloak, eyes beneath the brim of his hat watching the horizon. His companion sat his horse quietly, with an easy slouch; he was grizzled and brown-faced, skin tanned by the wind. In front of him, over the pommel of the saddle, was hooked the case of a pair of Zeiss binoculars. On the other side was the holster of a musket; the barrel lay along the neck of the horse, the butt thrust into the air just below the rider's hand.

Away on the left a little knoll of land lifted its crown of trees into the sky. Ahead, in the swooping bowl of the valley, was the black speck of a signal hut, its tower showing thinly above it. The officer reined in quietly, took the glasses from their case and studied the place. Nothing moved, and no smoke came from the chimney. Through the lenses the shuttered windows stared back at him; he saw the black vee of the Semaphore arms folded down like the wings of a dead bird. The Corporal waited impatiently, his horse fretting and blowing steam, but the Captain of Signals was not to be hurried. He lowered the glasses finally, and clicked to his mount. The animal moved forward again at a walk, picking its hooves up and setting them down with care.

The snow here was thicker; the valley had trapped it, and the day's thaw had left the drifts filmed with a brittle skin of ice. The horses floundered as they climbed the slope to the hut. At its door the Captain dismounted, leaving the reins hanging slack. He walked forward, eyes on the lintel and the boards.

The mark. It was everywhere, over the door, on its frame, stamped along the walls. The circle, with the crab pattern inside it; rebus or pictograph, the only thing the People of the Heath knew, the only message it seemed they had for men. The Captain had seen it before, many times; it had no power left to surprise him. The Corporal had not. The older man heard the sharp intake of breath, the click as a pistol was cocked; saw the quick, instinctive movement of the hand, the gesture that wards off the Evil Eye. He smiled faintly, almost absentmindedly, and pushed at the door. He knew what he would find, and that there was no danger.

The inside of the hut was cool and dark. The Guildsman looked round slowly, hands at his sides, feet apart on the boards. Outside a horse champed, jangling its bit, and snorted into the cold. He saw the glasses on their hook, the swept floor, the polished stove, the fire laid neat and ready on the bars; everywhere, the Fairy mark danced across the wood.

He walked forward and looked down at the thing on the bunk. The blood it had shed had blackened with the frost; the wounds on its stomach showed like leaf shaped mouths, the eyes were sunken now and dull; one hand was still extended to the signal levers eight feet above.

Behind him the Corporal spoke harshly, using anger as a bulwark against fear. "The...People that were here. They done this..."

The Captain shook his head. "No," he said slowly. "'Twas a wildcat."

The Corporal said thickly, "They were here though..." The anger surged again as he remembered the unmarked snow. "There weren't no tracks, sir. *How could they come?...*"

"How comes the wind?" asked the Captain, half to himself. He looked down again at the corpse in the bunk. He knew a little of the history of this boy, and of his record. The Guild had lost a good man.

How did they come? The People of the Heath...His mind twitched away from using the names the commoners had for them. What did they look like, when they came? What did they talk of, in locked cabins to dying men? Why did they leave their mark...

It seemed the answers shaped themselves in his brain. It was as if they crystallized from the cold, faintly sweet air of the place, blew in with the souging of the wind. *All this would pass, came the thoughts, and vanish like a dream. No*

*more hands would bleed on the signal bars, no more children freeze in their lonely watchings. The Signals would leap continents and seas, winged as thought. All this would pass, for better or for ill...*

He shook his head, bearlike, as if to free it from the clinging spell of the place. He knew, with a flash of inner sight, that he would know no more. The People of the Heath, the Old Ones; they moved back, with their magic and their lore. Always back, into the yet remaining dark. Until one day they themselves would vanish away. They who were, and yet were not...

He took the pad from his belt, scribbled, tore off the top sheet. "Corporal," he said quietly. "If you please...Route through Golden Gap."

He walked to the door, stood looking out across the hills at the match-stick of the eastern tower just visible against the sky. In his mind's eye a map unrolled; he saw the message flashing down the chain, each station picking it up, routing it, clattering it on its way. Down to Golden Gap, where the great signals stood gaunt against the cold crawl of the sea; north up the A line to Aquae Sulis, back again along the Great West Road. Within the hour it would reach its destination at Silbury Hill; and a grave-faced man in green would walk down the village street of Avebury, knock at a door...

The Corporal climbed to the gantry, clipped the message in the rack, eased the handles forward lightly testing against the casing ice. He flexed his shoulders, pulled sharply. The dead tower woke up, arms clacking in the quiet. *Attention, Attention...* Then the signal for Origination, the cypher for the eastern line. The movements dislodged a little cloud of ice crystals; they fell quietly, sparkling against the greyness of the sky.

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