

Opening extract from

The Machine Gunners

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1

When Chas awakened, the air-raid shelter was silent. Grey winter light was creeping round the door-curtain. It could have been any time. His mother was gone, and the little brown attaché case with the insurance policies and bottle of brandy for emergencies. He could hear the milk-cart coming round the square. The all-clear must have gone.

He climbed out of the shelter scratching his head, and looked round carefully. Everything was just the same: same whistling milkman, same cart-horse. But there was too much milk on the cart and that was bad. Every extra bottle meant some family bombed-out during the night.

He trailed round to the kitchen door. His mother had the paraffin-heater on and bread frying. It smelt safe. There were two more panes of glass out of the window, and his father had blocked the gaps with cardboard from a Nestle's Milk box. The lettering on the cardboard was the right way up. Father was fussy about things like that.

Father was sitting by the heater with his pint mug of tea. He looked weary, but still neat in his warden's uniform, with his beret tucked under his shoulder-strap.

'You remember that lass in the greengrocer's?'

'The ginger-haired one?' said his mother, still bending over the stove.

'Aye. A direct hit. They found half of her in the front garden and the other half right across the house.'

'She didn't believe in going down the shelter. She was always frightened of being buried alive.' From the way his mother hunched her shoulders, Chas could tell she was trying not to cry.

Chas's father turned to him.

'Your rabbits are all right. Chinny had some glass in her straw, but I shifted it. But there's six panes out of the greenhouse. If it goes on this way, there'll be no chrysanthemums for Christmas.'

'It won't be the same without chrysants,' said his mother. Her lips were tight together, but shaking slightly. 'Here's your breakfast.'

Chas cheered up. Two whole slices of fried bread and a roll of pale pink sausage-meat. It tasted queer, not at all like sausage before the war. But he was starting to like the queerness. He ate silently, listening to his parents. If he shut up, they soon forgot he was there. You heard much more interesting things if you didn't butt in.

'I thought we were a gonner last night, I really did. That dive bomber . . . I thought it was going to land on top of the shelter . . . Mrs Spalding had one of her turns.'

'It wasn't a dive bomber,' announced Father with authority. 'It had two engines. He came down on the rooftops 'cos one of the RAF lads was after him. Right on his tail. You could see his guns firing. And he got him. Crashed on the old laundry at Chirton.

Full bomb load. I felt the heat on me face a mile away.' Mother's face froze.

'Nobody killed, love. That laundry's been empty for years. Just as well – there's not much left of it.'

Chas finished his last carefully-cut dice of fried bread and looked hopefully at his father.

'Can I go and see it?'

'Aye, you can go and look. But you won't find nowt but bricks. Everything just went.'

Mother looked doubtful. 'D'you think he should?'

'Let him go, lass. There's nowt left.'

'No unexploded bombs?'

'No, a quiet night really. Lots of our fighters up. That's why you didn't hear any guns.'

'Can I borrow your old shopping-basket?' said Chas.

'I suppose so. But don't lose it, and don't bring any of your old rubbish back in the house. Take it straight down the greenhouse.'

'What time's school?' said his father.

'Half-past ten. The raid went on after midnight.'

War had its compensations.

Chas had the second-best collection of war souvenirs in Garmouth. It was all a matter of knowing where to look. Silly kids looked on the pavements or in the gutters; as if anything *there* wasn't picked up straight away. The best places to look were where no one else would dream, like in the dry soil under privet hedges. You often found machine-gun bullets there, turned into little metal mushrooms as they hit the ground. Fools thought nothing could fall through a hedge.

As he walked, Chas's eyes were everywhere. At the

corner of Marston Road, the pavement was burnt into a white patch a yard across. Incendiary bomb! The tailfin would be somewhere near – they normally bounced off hard when the bomb hit.

He retrieved the fin from a front garden and wiped it on his coat; a good one, not bent, the dark green paint not even chipped. But he had ten of those already.

Boddser Brown had fifteen. Boddser had the best collection of souvenirs in Garmouth. Everyone said so. There had been some doubt until Boddser found the nose-cone of a 3.7 inch anti-aircraft shell, and that settled it.

Chas sighed, and put the fin in his basket. A hundred tailfins couldn't equal a nose-cone.

He knew the old laundry would be no good even before he got there. He began finding bits of the plane, but they were only lumps of aluminium, black on the sides and shiny at the edges, crumpled like soggy paper. They were useless as souvenirs – other kids just laughed and said you'd cut up your mother's tin kettle. Unless it was a piece that had a number on it, or a German word, or even . . . Chas sighed at the tightness in his chest . . . a real swastika. But *these* were just black and silver.

The scene of the crash was a complete catastrophe. It was the partial catastrophes that Chas found interesting – picture frames still hanging on exposed walls five storeys up; chimneys balanced on the verge of toppling – whereas the old laundry had been flattened as completely as if the council's demolition gang had done it. Just piles of brick and the bomber's two engines.

One engine was in the front garden of a council house that had its windows out and its ceiling down. The family were scurrying around like ants from a broken nest, making heaps of belongings they had salvaged, and then breaking up the heaps to make new heaps. Chas watched them as if they were ants, without sympathy, because they were a slummy kind of family; a great fat woman in carpet slippers and a horde of boys of assorted sizes; hair like lavatory brushes, coarse maroon jerseys that wouldn't fasten at the neck and boots with steel heelplates.

Chas went on staring over the garden wall. The woman paused in her doorway, a slopping handleless chamber-pot in her hand.

'Bugger off staring. Ghoul! Haven't you anything better to do?'

'Can I see the engine?' said Chas hopelessly.

'No. It's ours.'

'No it isn't – it belongs to the Air Ministry. By law.' Chas sounded confident, but his heart wasn't in it.

'No it don't. It's ours 'cos it knocked our house down. Bugger off or I'll set our Cuthbert on you.'

Cuthbert, the largest lavatory brush, picked up a stone, a sudden look of interest dawning on his face. The other lavatory brushes closed round him in an offensive phalanx. Chas drew himself up for a parting shot.

'West Chirton rubbish,' he said, in a tone he had often heard his mother use.

'Balkwell snob. Go back where you came from. S'our engine. The newspaper's coming to take photos of us today.' She drew herself up, adjusting a lump of

front door that stood propped against the wall. On it was chalked the legend BUSNES AS USUAL.

The first stone flew from the fist of a lavatory brush. The phalanx began to move forward. Chas took to his heels.

The other engine was guarded by the local policeman, Fatty Hardy. He was wearing a white tin hat with P on it and looking important, but he was still the Fatty Hardy who had chased Chas off many a building-site before the War. Stupid.

This engine was much better than the one in the front garden. It still had its propeller. Though the blades were bent into horseshoes, the middle was unharmed, a lovely shiny egg-shape painted red. Chas nearly choked with greed. If he only had that . . . that was better than any 3.7 inch nose-cone! The whole propeller was loose – it waggled when the wind blew. Chas's mouth actually filled with saliva, as if he could smell a pie cooking.

How could he get rid of Fatty Hardy? An unexploded bomb? Swiftly he bashed his eyes with his fists, throwing handfuls of dust into them until they began to stream with tears. Then he ran towards Fatty Hardy bawling incoherently. As he reached the policeman he put his hand up; school died hard.

'Please, sir, Mum says come quick. There's a deep hole in our garden and there's a ticking coming from it.'

Fatty looked distinctly worried. Airplane engines was airplane engines and needed protecting from thieving kids. But unexploded bombs was unexploded bombs.

'*Hurry*, sir! There's little kids all round it, looking down the hole.'

Fatty grabbed his shoulders and shook him roughly.

'Where, where? Take me, take me!'

'Please, sir, no, sir. Mum says I mustn't go back there, in case it goes off. I've got to go to me gran's, sir. But the bomb's at 19, Marston Road.'

Fatty went off at a wobbling run, his gasmask case flogging his broad bottom. Before he was out of sight, Chas was at the engine. Its realness was overwhelming. There were German words on the cowling. *Öel* was the only one he could recognize. Everything was bigger close to. The twisted prop-blades curled into the air like palm-leaves. The red spinner, which he had thought as carryable as a rugby-ball, now seemed as big as a brewery-barrel. He tugged at it; it came off so far and then stuck. He heaved again at the shiny red newness. It still resisted.

'Nazi pigs!' he screamed, as his hand slipped and the blood came. He picked up a lump of brickwork, four bricks still cemented together, and, raising it above his head, flung it at the spinner. The beautiful red thing crushed in, but it still wouldn't budge. He hit it again. Another great white flaking dent appeared. It was a mess now, hardly worth having. But still it refused to come off.

There was a sudden roar of rage from behind. Fatty Hardy had returned, sweaty face working. Chas ran.

He wasn't greatly worried. Hardy was puffing already; he wouldn't last fifty yards. The only worry was the piles of rubble underfoot. If he fell, Hardy

would have him. Placing his feet carefully, he ran towards the Wood.

The Wood was in the grounds of West Chirton Hall. At one time, his father said, the people at the Hall had owned everything. But then the factories came, and the council estate, and the owners of the Hall just curled up and died for shame. Now the house itself was just a hole in the ground lined with brick, and a black cinder floor. There was a big water-tank full of rusty water, and nothing else.

The Wood was bleak and ugly too. Grown-ups dumped rubbish round the outside, and kids climbed and broke the trees. But nobody went into the middle. Some said it was haunted, but Chas had never found anything there but a feeling of cold misery, which wasn't exciting like headless horsemen. Still, it was an oddly discouraging sort of place.

Each year the briars grew thicker; even Chas knew only one way through them. He took it now, wriggling under arches of briars as thick as your finger, interlaced like barbed wire. He was safe. Fatty Hardy couldn't even try to follow. He picked himself up quickly because the grass was soaking. The sky seemed even greyer through the bare branches, and he felt fed-up. Still, since he was here he might as well search for souvenirs. Chirton Hall was another place no one ever looked. He'd found his best bit of shrapnel there – a foot long, smooth and milled on the sides, but with jagged edges like bad teeth.

He sniffed. There was a foreign smell in the Wood . . . like petrol and fireworks. Funny, it wasn't Guy Fawkes yet. Some kids must have been messing

about. As he pressed on, the smell grew stronger. There must be an awful lot of petrol.

Something was blocking out the light through the branches. A new building; a secret army base; a new anti-aircraft gun? He couldn't quite see, except that it was black.

And then he saw, quiet clearly at the top, a swastika, black outlined in white. He didn't know whether to run towards it or away. So he stayed stock-still, listening. Not a sound, except the buzzing of flies. The angry way they buzzed off dog-dirt when you waved your hand over it. It was late in the year for flies!

He moved forward again. It was so tall, like a house, and now it was dividing into four arms, at right-angles to each other . . .

He burst into the clearing. It was the tail of an aeroplane: the German bomber that had crashed on the laundry. At least, most of it had crashed on the laundry. The tail, breaking off in the air, had spun to earth like a sycamore seed. He'd read of that happening in books. He could also tell from books that this had been a Heinkel He 111.

Suddenly he felt very proud. He'd report the find, and be on the nine o'clock news. He could hear the newsreader's voice.

The mystery bomber shot down over Garmouth on the night of the 1st of November has been identified as a new and secret variation of the Heinkel He 111. It was found by a nearly-unknown schoolboy, Charles McGill of Garmouth High School . . . sorry, I'll read that again, Form 3A at Garmouth High

School. There is no doubt that but for the sharp eyes of this young man, several enemy secret weapons vital to the Blitzkreig would have remained undiscovered . . .

Chas sighed. If he reported it, they'd just come and take it away for scrap. Like when he'd taken that shiny new incendiary-bomb rack to the Warden's Post . . . they'd not even said thank you.

And he wouldn't get in the news. It was a perfectly normal Heinkel 111, registration letters HX-L, with typical dorsal turret mounting one machine-gun . . .

Chas gulped. The machine-gun was still there, hanging from the turret, shiny and black.

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Chas reached up and tugged at the gun-barrel. One leg of its swivel had snapped with the impact. He wrenched at the other, but the aluminium of the aircraft body just bent without breaking. Besides, a belt of shining cartridges went from the gun back into the aircraft. It supported the gun like a sling against Chas's downward pulls. Perhaps if he loosened the cartridge-belt . . .

He grabbed the round barrel, put his plimsolls against the curving sides of the plane and went up like a monkey. He peered over the edge of the cockpit.

The gunner was sitting there, watching him. One hand, in a soft fur mitt, was stretched up as if to retrieve the gun; the other lay in his overalled lap. He wore the black leather flying-helmet of the Luftwaffe, and goggles. His right eye, pale grey, watched through the goggle-glass tolerantly and a little sadly. He looked a nice man, young.

The glass of the other goggle was gone. Its rim was thick with sticky red, and inside was a seething mass of flies, which rose and buzzed angrily at Chas's arrival, then sank back into the goggle again.

For a terrible moment, Chas thought the Nazi was alive, that the mitted hand would reach out and grab him. Then even worse, he knew he was dead. It was like that moment in a fight when you think you're

winning, and then suddenly you're lying on the ground with your mouth full of salty blood and you know you're going to lose, so you start shaking all over. Only this was ten times worse.

He wanted to let go of the fuselage, drop off and run home. But something in his mind wouldn't let him; something found the dead man fascinating. Something made him reach out and touch the gloved hand. Inside the sheepskin, the fingers were hard as iron. The arm and whole body was stiff. The gunner moved, but only as a statue or a toy soldier would move, all in one piece. The flies rose and buzzed. Inside the goggle was a deep red hole full of what looked like . . . Chas dropped and was violently sick against a little door marked *Nicht Anfassen.*

He thought his mother would be angry at him for having wasted a good breakfast when food was hard to get. Then he heard the nine o'clock hooter. Everyone set their watches by the factory hooters. They went at seven and eight and twelve and five. But this one, a little silly warbly one, went at nine. Chas knew it well, because it told him if he was late for school.

School! School was half-past ten, and he had to get home and change into uniform. He must hurry. He scurried off through the brambles without a backward look.

But nightmares aren't so easily shaken off. On his way home he wiped the splashes of sick off his jerkin, but his mother noticed how pale he was.

'Look like you seen a ghost! What you been up to?'

'Nothing, Mum. Had to run all the way 'cos I was late and I've got a stitch.'

'Where's my basket?' Chas's jaw fell open. The basket was lying by the little door marked *Nicht Anfassen.*

'I forgot it. It's all right, I've hidden it in a safe place. I'll get it tonight after school.'

For an awful moment he thought she was going to drag him back for the basket there and then. She did things like that when she got into a temper. But she also had a dread of him being late for school, so she just said, 'See you do. You can't get a basket for love nor money these days. Your Dad bought that for me at Newcastle Market when we were courting. Now get off to school before you get the stick.'

He sighed; she would never understand that you didn't *get* the stick for being late these days.

But even at school the nightmare persisted. Right through double Maths and into English, usually his favourite subject, that goggled face kept on coming back. His hands turned shiny with sweat. It ran down his forehead. He never even heard the question Mr Liddell, the English master, asked him. Usually he was first with his hand up.

'What's the matter with you this morning, McGill? You ill?'

God, no. Being ill meant being sent home, answering questions, being sent to fetch that basket.

'Sorry, sir. Couldn't sleep in the shelter. Woman next door had kittens because she thought that bomber was diving on her personally.' The class roared.

The English master regarded Chas sharply for a moment, then decided to join in the laugh. Then he stifled a yawn and ran his hands through his greying hair. Mr Liddell doubled nights as Captain Liddell of the Garmouth Home Guard and found the experience wearing. Besides, McGill was a good pupil usually. But he had too vivid an imagination. A boy to like, but not a boy to trust.

Chas went back to his vision of the machine-gunner. For there was something else in the vision: the machine-gun, black, new, glistening. Even in his terror, *because* of his terror, he wanted that gun. He wanted to beat Boddser Brown. But how?

First, cut it free. His father's hacksaw should see to that. All his father's tools were wonderful, powerful, could cope with anything. But then he would need some way of moving the gun. From the way it had swung on its mount he knew it would be heavy.

Cemetery Jones's bogie. That could do it. He had a vision of the bogie: a heavy two-inch plank with big pram-wheels at each end, and a soap-box for a body.

And Cemetery Jones was just the one who would go with him into Chirton Wood at dusk. Cemetery Jones was called after his father, who was also called Cemetery Jones. He was the keeper of Garmouth graveyard, and marched ahead of funerals in black gaiters and a top hat wrapped in black muslin, looking like the Devil leading sinners at a brisk pace to the Gates of Hell.

Off-duty he was very cheerful, with straw-coloured hair, pale blue eyes, some very grisly jokes and a laugh like a horse. He had gleaming wide-spaced teeth

like marble tombstones, which he was said to clean six times every day.

Cemetery Junior had the same laugh, hair, eyes and teeth, though he didn't clean his at all, so they were very yellow. He said a dentist had once told him they were so widely-spaced they would never rot, and he was testing the theory out.

Chas caught Cem in school dinner. School dinner was a kind of self-discipline: the potatoes and the thin translucent custard tasted so queer that they required an effort of will to eat. But Chas had an uncle who was Chief Engineer on an oil-tanker in the Persian Gulf. Every so often, Uncle William was invited to a feast by the local sheikh, who would suddenly hand him a whole sheep's eye with grease-dripping fingers. If Uncle William could swallow it in one gulp without gagging, the oil would continue to flow. If not . . . on such small things hung the fate of the Free World. Chas was training himself to be like Uncle William. He was even training himself to like the smell of burning rubber. 'It's an acquired taste,' he'd say to his friends airily.

Cemetery's approach to school dinner was different. He treated his plate as an artist treats his palette, whirling gravy, dried potato, dried peas and dried egg into cosmic whirls and brushwork, occasionally flipping a choice piece of impasto into his mouth. By the time all had collapsed into a grey soggy amorphous mass from which no further reaction could be derived, it was three-quarters eaten. This procedure he called the 'Potato Irrigation Scheme'.

'I've found something,' announced Chas mysteri-

ously, over the ginger stodge. 'It's *Big*. I need your bogie to shift it.'

'Can't. Got my Guy on the bogie.'

'What you want a Guy for? No bonfires allowed this year. No fireworks in the shops. Nothing. You're potty.'

'I use the money I collect to buy sweets.'

'Look, it's just one night. This is Big – Bigger than anything you've ever seen.'

'Go on, you always say that.'

'Come and see for yourself, then.'

'When?'

'Tonight.'

'Got to do me homework before the raid starts. We've only got one candle in our shelter and Mum says it ruins your eyes.'

'Look, I'll give you an incendiary bomb fin, a real smasher, not a dent . . .'

'I'll come for the fin, then. But I don't believe the other.'

Chas's eyes suddenly glinted. He'd had one of his Famous Ideas.

'And bring your bogie with the Guy still on it.'

They were going down to West Chirton. Chas was on the bogie and Cem was pulling it, snorting and grunting like a horse. He always insisted on pulling the bogie, so he never got a ride. When asked why, he always said he was 'getting his muscles up', but everyone knew he was really scared of letting go the towing-rope in case someone ran off with the bogie. People didn't grumble; they enjoyed the ride.

Suddenly there was the wild ringing of a bicycle ball behind.

'Oh hell,' said Chas and Cemetery together.

'Where are you kids going?' asked a bossy female voice. 'And why have you got two Guys on your bogie this year, Cemetery?'

'Oh, ha, ha,' said Chas in disgust. 'Faff off, Audrey Parton, we're busy.'

'*Busy*?' The scorn was finely done. 'Little things please little minds.'

'While bigger fools look on,' retorted Chas.

'In disgust.'

'At themselves.' It was an old boring routine, but Cem laughed like a horse. Audrey Parton rode past, and slewed round her bike to block the road.

'Tell me where you're going or I won't let you past.' There was something in the threat. She was bigger than either Cem or Chas: what Mrs McGill called a fine strapping lass. She had bulging hockey-muscles and grey ankle-socks, and red hair in pigtails and freckles. She fought boys and, alas, sometimes won.

On the other hand there were some good things about her, which made her the only girl Cem and Chas ever talked to. Her chest was quite flat, and she didn't giggle and whisper to other girls as you went past. She never told on you to her mother, and she was as good climbing trees and drainpipes as any boy. For a long time she'd led her own girls' gang, but now they'd all deserted her for sheer lisle stockings, ringlets, and mother's powder-puff. She'd become a misfit. She said she'd always wanted to be a boy. She was the only girl who always had sticking-plasters on her knees.

Mrs McGill treated Audrey with respect, because her family were posh and owned a car. But Mr McGill said her father was skulking in a Reserved Occupation, making his fortune while better men went to fight for their country. When Mr McGill spoke in that sort of voice, nobody argued.

'Where are you going?' asked Audrey. 'Can I come?' Chas muttered under his breath a phrase he'd heard sailors use.

'Going to me auntie's at West Chirton,' said Cem.

'You haven't got an auntie at West Chirton.'

'Have, so!'

'Haven't, so!'

This went on for some time. Chas eyed her bulging muscles speculatively. That machine-gun was heavy. She might come in useful. Besides, the dead German would scare the little cow silly. She wouldn't interfere with men's business again.

'All right, you can come with us.'

'Lead on, MacDuff,' said Audrey, patting him on the head as the bogie rolled past. Chas felt his hair suddenly prickle, as if it was full of nits.

They hid Audrey's bike on the edge of the Wood and pushed in. They had to lay the Guy down to get the bogie through the briars. Chas thought that in the dusk he looked like a dead man.

He had to keep shushing Cem and Audrey. They both had fits of the giggles as they felt the tension.

'It's all just one of your stupid jokes,' said Cem, 'but it'll cost you that bomb-fin.'

'I'm not going to do any *dirty* things with you two in this wood, so you needn't think I am,' said Audrey,

caught between fear and desire. 'I don't mind kissing, but no more.'

'Eeurk!' said Cem. 'Who'd want to with *you*.'

Chas's chest was getting tighter and tighter. He was glad he wasn't alone. At least he'd get Mum's basket back.

When Cem saw the bomber, he laughed as if it was a joke.

'Shut up,' said Chas. 'There's a dead German inside. You can look if you want, but Audrey can't.'

Cem climbed up, dropped down again, and whistled. 'That's one for me dad.'

'No it's not. They don't bury them here.'

'Yes they do. Dad had a coffin full of . . . bits, from this bomber at lunchtime. Well screwed down it was, I can tell you.'

'Go on, they send them all . . .'

'Yeah?'

'To the War Office, to count them,' said Chas stoutly through chattering teeth.

'Is there really . . .?' said Audrey, all eyes and woman for once.

Chas was not displeased with the effect he was having on her, but he said severely, 'Girls aren't allowed to look. They can't stand it.'

'Poor man,' said Audrey. 'He's a long way from home.'

'*Look*,' said Chas, 'we came for *this*.' He waggled the gun.

'Cor, you're not . . . How can we get it off?'

'Got me dad's saw.' He pulled it out from under his jerkin. 'Hold the gun steady.'

He began to saw. It was hard work. He kept

catching his knuckles on the rivets of the fuselage, and soon blisters came. When he handed over to Cem he'd cut a quarter of the way through the aluminium strut.

'Can't see where I've got to saw,' said Cem.

'I've got a torch.' The fuselage lit up, and the trees around. Chas couldn't resist a peep upwards, to see if the dead German was looking down, watching them.

When he took over the saw from Cem, they were halfway through.

'There's a funny smell,' said Audrey. 'What's that funny smell?'

'That's *him*,' said Cem, nodding towards the shadowy fuselage with a professional air. 'It gets worse as it goes along.'

'I want to go home,' said Audrey, beginning to sniff.

'Go then. There's probably other dead 'uns in the Wood, waiting to get you.' Audrey gave a little scream.

'Keep that torch straight. I knew a girl wouldn't be any *good*.'

'Oh, shut up.' But the torch-beam straightened and held steady.

'Put that LIGHT out!' The yell came from the edge of the Wood. Audrey screamed and dropped the torch. There was the sound of breaking glass and it went out.

'Oh God,' said Cem. 'That's Fatty Hardy. Shush.' But Chas went on sawing like a mad thing. He was nearly through that aluminium strut and he wasn't going to be cheated now.

He felt the strut give, and the gun fell agonizingly

on his foot. He grabbed it up, and immediately it shook and leapt in his arms. A golden-red light filled the clearing, and a noise like Guy Fawkes gone mad. He let go of the gun, and the noise stopped. But he could see, where the aircraft tail bulked large against the sky, a great ragged hole had been torn in it.

A police whistle shrilled on the edge of the Wood.

'God, that's done it,' said Cem. 'Shall we run?'

But Chas sat hunched in a dream of power, remembering the vibration against his foot, the red sparks shooting up, and, beyond them, flights of dark bullets winging through the dark enemy sky.

'What we going to do?' whispered Cem frantically.

Abruptly, Chas returned to the present. Even shaking from head to foot, he was still the one who thought up the plan.

'What's your Guy's legs made of?'

'Sticks.'

'Get one out.'

'Whaffor?'

'We're putting the gun up it.'

The gun went, though it split the Guy's trousers. The old wellington boot just covered the end, though one of the Guy's legs was now inches longer than the other. Still, Guys were like that. Chas used all the string and wire in his pockets to make it secure, and stuffed the straw back into all the gaps.

'Right, out we go.' He didn't forget his mum's shopping basket.

They crawled through the briars towards Audrey's bike.

'Oh, lor!' groaned Cem.

Fatty Hardy was standing some yards off, staring

straight at where they lay. He was accompanied by a warden, a woman in a headscarf, two small boys and a dog. It was the small boys who worried Chas, but it was the dog which barked and ran straight at them. Tears of rage filled Chas's eyes. To be so near to owning the gun and then . . .

The dog stopped two yards off and stood yapping hysterically. Chas threw a stick at it and missed. The dog retreated a yard and continued its din.

'Hey, that dog's found something!' shouted Fatty Hardy, advancing.