opening extract from

The Day of the Tiffids

written by

John Wyndham

published by

Penguin Books Ltd

1

The End Begins

When a day that you happen to know is Wednesday starts off by sounding like Sunday, there is something seriously wrong somewhere.

I felt that from the moment I woke. And yet, when I started functioning a little more sharply, I misgave. After all, the odds were that it was I who was wrong, and not everyone else – though I did not see how that could be. I went on waiting, tinged with doubt. But presently I had my first bit of objective evidence – a distant clock struck what sounded to me just like eight. I listened hard and suspiciously. Soon another clock began, on a loud, decisive note. In a leisurely fashion it gave an indisputable eight. Then I *knew* things were awry.

The way I came to miss the end of the world – well, the end of the world I had known for close on thirty years – was sheer accident: like a lot of survival, when you come to think of it. In the nature of things a good many somebodies are always in hospital, and the law of averages had picked on me to be one of them a week or so before. It might just as easily have been the week before that – in which case I'd not be writing now: I'd not be here at all. But chance played it not only that I should be in hospital at that particular time, but that my eyes, and indeed my whole head, should be wreathed in bandages – and that's why I have to be grateful to whoever orders these averages. At the time, however, I was only peevish, wondering what in thunder went on, for I had been in the place long enough to know that, next to the matron, the clock is the most sacred thing in a hospital.

Without a clock the place simply couldn't latch. Each second there's someone consulting it on births, deaths, doses, meals, lights, talking, working, sleeping, resting, visiting, dressing, washing – and hitherto it had decreed that someone should begin to wash and tidy me up at exactly

three minutes after 7 a.m. That was one of the best reasons I had for appreciating a private room. In a public ward the messy proceeding would have taken place a whole unnecessary hour earlier. But here, today, clocks of varying reliability were continuing to strike eight in all directions – and still nobody had shown up.

Much as I disliked the sponging process, and useless as it had been to suggest that the help of a guiding hand as far as the bathroom could eliminate it, its failure to occur was highly disconcerting. Besides, it was normally a close forerunner of breakfast, and I was feeling hungry.

Probably I would have been aggrieved about it any morning, but today, this Wednesday 8 May, was an occasion of particular personal importance. I was doubly anxious to get all the fuss and routine over because that was the day they were going to take off my bandages.

I groped around a bit to find the bell-push, and let them have a full five seconds clatter, just to show what I was thinking of them.

While I was waiting for the pretty short-tempered response that such a peal ought to bring, I went on listening.

The day outside, I realized now, was sounding even more wrong than I had thought. The noises it made, or failed to make, were more like Sunday than Sunday itself – and I'd come round again to being absolutely assured that it *was* Wednesday, whatever else had happened to it.

Why the founders of St Merryn's Hospital chose to erect their institution at a main road crossing upon a valuable office-site and thus expose their patients' nerves to constant laceration, is a foible that I never properly understood. But for those fortunate enough to be suffering from complaints unaffected by the wear and tear of continuous traffic, it did have the advantage that one could lie abed and still not be out of touch, so to speak, with the flow of life. Customarily the west-bound buses thundered along trying to beat the lights at the corner; as often as not a pig-squeal of brakes and a salvo of shots from the silencer would tell that they hadn't. Then the released cross-traffic would rev and roar as it started up the incline. And every now and then there would be an interlude: a good grinding bump, followed by a general stoppage – exceedingly tantalizing to one in my condition where the extent of the contretemps had to be judged entirely by the degree of profanity resulting. Certainly, neither by day nor during most of the night, was there any chance of a St Merryn

patient being under the impression that the common round had stopped just because he, personally, was on the shelf for the moment.

But this morning was different. Disturbingly because mysteriously different. No wheels rumbled, no buses roared, no sound of a car of any kind, in fact, was to be heard. No brakes, no horns, not even the clopping of the few rare horses that still occasionally passed. Nor, as there should be at such an hour, the composite tramp of work-bound feet.

The more I listened, the queerer it seemed – and the less I cared for it. In what I reckoned to be ten minutes of careful listening I heard five sets of shuffling, hesitating footsteps, three voices bawling unintelligibly in the distance, and the hysterical sobs of a woman. There was not the cooing of a pigeon, not the chirp of a sparrow. Nothing but the humming of wires in the wind . . .

A nasty, empty feeling began to crawl up inside me. It was the same sensation I used to have sometimes as a child when I got to fancying that horrors were lurking in the shadowy corners of the bedroom; when I daren't put a foot out for fear that something should reach from under the bed and grab my ankle; daren't even reach for the switch lest the movement should cause something to leap at me. I had to fight down the feeling, just as I had had to when I was a kid in the dark. And it was no easier. It's surprising how much you don't grow out of when it comes to the test. The elemental fears were still marching along with me, waiting their chance, and pretty nearly getting it – just because my eyes were bandaged, and the traffic had stopped . . .

When I had pulled myself together a bit, I tried the reasonable approach. Why *does* traffic stop? Well, usually because the road is closed for repairs. Perfectly simple. Any time now they'd be along with pneumatic drills as another touch of aural variety for the long-suffering patients. But the trouble with the reasonable line was that it went further. It pointed out that there was not even the distant hum of traffic, not the whistle of a train, not the hoot of a tugboat. Just nothing – until the clocks began chiming a quarter past eight.

The temptation to take a peep – not more than a peep, of course; just enough to get some idea of what on earth could be happening, was immense. But I restrained it. For one thing, a peep was a far less simple matter than it sounded. It wasn't just a case of lifting a blindfold: there

were a lot of pads and bandages. But, more importantly, I was scared to try. Over a week's complete blindness can do a lot to frighten you out of taking chances with your sight. It was true that they intended to remove the bandages today, but that would be done in a special, dim light, and they would only allow them to stay off if the inspection of my eyes were satisfactory. I did not know whether it would be. It might be that my sight was permanently impaired. Or that I would not be able to see at all. I did not know yet . . .

I swore, and laid hold of the bell-push again. It helped to relieve my feelings a bit.

No one, it seemed, was interested in bells. I began to get as much annoyed as worried. It's humiliating to be dependent, anyway, but it's a still poorer pass to have no one to depend on. My patience was whittling down. Something, I decided, had got to be done about it.

If I were to bawl down the passage and generally raise hell, somebody ought to show up if only to tell me what they thought of me. I turned back the sheet, and got out of bed. I'd never seen the room I was in, and though I had a fairly good idea by ear of the position of the door, it wasn't all that easy to find. There seemed to be several puzzling and unnecessary obstacles, but I got across at the cost of a stubbed toe and minor damage to my shin. I shoved my head out into the passage.

'Hey!' I shouted. 'I want some breakfast. Room forty-eight!'

For a moment nothing happened. Then came voices all shouting together. It sounded like hundreds of them, and not a word coming through clearly. It was as though I'd put on a record of crowd noises – and an ill-disposed crowd at that. I had a nightmarish flash wondering whether I had been transferred to a mental home while I was sleeping, and that this was not St Merryn's Hospital at all. Those voices simply didn't sound normal to me. I closed the door hurriedly on the babel, and groped my way back to bed. At that moment bed seemed to be the one safe, comforting thing in my whole baffling environment. As if to underline that there came a sound which checked me in the act of pulling up the sheets. From the street below rose a scream, wildly distraught and contagiously terrifying. It came three times, and when it had died away it seemed still to tingle in the air.

I shuddered. I could feel the sweat prickle my forehead under the

bandages. I knew now that something fearful and horrible was happening. I could not stand my isolation and helplessness any longer. I had to know what was going on around me. I put my hands up to my bandages; then, with my fingers on the safety-pins, I stopped . . .

Suppose the treatment had not been successful? Suppose that when I took the bandages off I were to find that I still could not see? That would be worse still – a hundred times worse . . .

I lacked the courage to be alone and find out that they had not saved my sight. And even if they had, would it be safe yet to keep my eyes uncovered?

I dropped my hands, and lay back. I was wild at myself and the place, and I did some silly, weak cursing.

Some little while must have passed before I got a proper hold on things again, but after a bit I found myself churning round in my mind once more after a possible explanation. I did not find it. But I did become absolutely convinced that, come all the paradoxes of hell, it was Wednesday. For the previous day had been notable, and I could swear that no more than a single night had passed since then.

You'll find it in the records that on Tuesday, 7 May, the Earth's orbit passed through a cloud of comet debris. You can even believe it, if you like – millions did. Maybe it was so. I can't prove anything either way. I was in no state to see what happened; but I do have my own ideas. All that I actually know of the occasion is that I had to spend the evening in my bed listening to eye-witness accounts of what was constantly claimed to be the most remarkable celestial spectacle on record.

And yet, until the thing actually began nobody had ever heard a word about this supposed comet, or its debris . . .

Why they broadcast it, considering that everyone who could walk, hobble, or be carried was either out of doors or at windows enjoying the greatest free firework display ever, I don't know. But they did, and it helped to impress on me still more heavily what it meant to be sightless. I got round to feeling that if the treatment had not been successful I'd rather end the whole thing than go on that way.

It was reported in the news-bulletins during the day that mysterious bright green flashes had been seen in the Californian skies the previous night. However, such a lot of things did happen in California that no

one could be expected to get greatly worked up over that, but as further reports came in this comet-debris motif made its appearance, and it stuck.

Accounts arrived from all over the Pacific of a night made brilliant by green meteors said to be 'sometimes in such numerous showers that the whole sky appeared to be wheeling about us.' And so it was, when you come to think of it.

As the night line moved westward the brilliance of the display was in no way decreased. Occasional green flashes became visible even before darkness fell. The announcer, giving an account of the phenomenon in the six o'clock news, advised everyone that it was an amazing scene, and one not to be missed. He mentioned also that it seemed to be interfering seriously with short-wave reception at long distances, but that the medium waves on which there would be a running commentary were unaffected, as, at present, was television. He need not have troubled with the advice. By the way everyone in the hospital got excited about it, it seemed to me that there was not the least likelihood of anybody missing it – except myself.

And, as if the radio's comments were not enough, the nurse who brought me my supper had to tell me all about it.

'The sky's simply full of shooting stars,' she said. 'All bright green. They make people's faces look frightfully ghastly. *Every*body's out watching them, and sometimes it's almost as light as day – only all the wrong colour. Every now and then there's a big one so bright that it hurts to look at it. It's a marvellous sight. They say there's never been anything like it before. It is such a pity you can't see it, isn't it?'

'It is,' I agreed, somewhat shortly.

'We've drawn back the curtains in the wards so that they can all see it,' she went on. 'If only you hadn't those bandages you'd have a wonderful view of it from here.'

'Oh,' I said.

'But it must be better still outside, though. They say thousands of people are out in the parks and on the Heath watching it all. And on all the flat roofs you can see people standing and looking up.'

'How long do they expect it to go on?' I asked, patiently.

'I don't know, but they say it's not so bright now as it was in other places. Still, even if you'd had your bandages off today I don't expect

they'd have let you watch it. You'll have to take things gently at first, and some of the flashes are very bright. They – Ooooh!'

'Why "ooooh"?' I inquired.

'That was such a brilliant one then – it made the whole room look green. What a pity you couldn't see it.'

'Isn't it?' I agreed. 'Now do go away, there's a good girl.'

I tried listening to the radio, but it was making the same 'ooohs' and 'aaahs' helped out by gentlemanly tones which blathered about this 'magnificent spectacle' and 'unique phenomenon' until I began to feel that there was a party for all the world going on, with me as the only person not invited.

I didn't have any choice of entertainment, for the hospital radio system gave only one programme, take it or leave it. After a bit I gathered that the show had begun to wane. The announcer advised everyone who had not yet seen it to hurry up and do so, or regret all his life that he had missed it.

The general idea seemed to be to convince me that I was passing up the very thing I was born for. In the end I got sick of it, and switched off. The last thing I heard was that the display was diminishing fast now, and that we'd probably be out of the debris area in a few hours.

There could be no doubt in my mind that all this had taken place the previous evening – for one thing, I should have been a great deal hungrier even than I was had it been longer ago. Very well, what *was* this then? Had the whole hospital, the whole city, made such a night of it that they'd not pulled round yet?

About which point I was interrupted as the chorus of clocks, near and far, started announcing nine.

For the third time I played hell with the bell. As I lay waiting I could hear a sort of murmurousness beyond the door. It seemed composed of whimperings, slitherings, and shufflings, punctuated occasionally by a raised voice in the distance.

But still no one came to my room.

By this time I was slipping back. The nasty, childish fancies were on me again. I found myself waiting for the unseeable door to open, and horrible things to come padding in – in fact, I wasn't perfectly sure that somebody or something wasn't in already, and stealthily prowling round the room . . .

Not that I'm given to that kind of thing, really . . . It was those damned bandages over my eyes, the medley of voices that had shouted back at me down the corridor. But I certainly was getting the willies – and once you get 'em, they grow. Already they were past the stage where you can shoo them off by whistling or singing at yourself.

It came at last to the straight question: was I more scared of endangering my sight by taking off the bandages, or of staying in the dark with the willies growing every minute?

If it had been a day or two earlier I don't know what I'd have done – very likely the same in the end – but this day I could at least tell myself:

'Well, hang it, there can't be a lot of harm if I use common sense. After all, the bandages are due to come off today. I'll risk it.'

There's one thing I put to my credit. I was not far enough gone to tear them off wildly. I had the sense and the self-control to get out of bed and pull the blind down before I started on the safety-pins.

Once I had the coverings off, and had found out that I could see in the dimness, I felt a relief that I'd never known before. Nevertheless, the first thing I did after assuring myself that there were indeed no malicious persons or things lurking under the bed or elsewhere, was to slip a chair-back under the door-handle. I could, and did, begin to get a better grip on myself then. I made myself take a whole hour gradually getting used to full daylight. At the end of it I knew that thanks to swift first-aid, followed by good doctoring, my eyes were as good as ever.

But still no one came.

On the lower shelf of the bedside table I discovered a pair of dark glasses thoughtfully put ready against my need of them. Cautiously I put them on before I went right close to the window. The lower part of it was not made to open, so that the view was restricted. Squinting down and sideways I could see one or two people who appeared to be wandering in an odd, kind of aimless way farther up the street. But what struck me most, and at once, was the sharpness, the clear definition of everything – even the distant housetops view across the opposite roofs. And then I noticed that no chimney, large or small, was smoking . . .

I found my clothes hung tidily in a cupboard. I began to feel more normal once I had them on. There were some cigarettes still in the case. I lit one, and started to get into the state of mind where, though everything

was still undeniably queer, I could no longer understand why I had been quite so near panic.

It is not easy to think oneself back to the outlook of those days. We have to be more self-reliant now. But then there was so much routine, things were so interlinked. Each one of us so steadily did his little part in the right place that it was easy to mistake habit and custom for the natural law – and all the more disturbing, therefore, when the routine was in any way upset.

When getting on for half a lifetime has been spent in one conception of order, reorientation is no five-minute business. Looking back at the shape of things then, the amount we did not know and did not care to know about our daily lives is not only astonishing, but somehow a bit shocking. I knew practically nothing, for instance, of such ordinary things as how my food reached me, where the fresh water came from, how the clothes I wore were woven and made, how the drainage of cities kept them healthy. Our life had become a complexity of specialists all attending to their own jobs with more or less efficiency, and expecting others to do the same. That made it incredible to me, therefore, that complete disorganization could have overtaken the hospital. Somebody somewhere, I was sure, must have it in hand – unfortunately it was a somebody who had forgotten all about Room 48.

Nevertheless, when I did go to the door again and peer into the corridor I was forced to realize that whatever had happened it was affecting a great deal more than the single inhabitant of Room 48.

Just then there was no one in sight, though in the distance I could hear a pervasive murmur of voices. There was a sound of shuffling footsteps, too, and occasionally a louder voice echoing hollowly in the corridors, but nothing like the din I had shut out before. This time I did not shout. I stepped out cautiously – why cautiously? I don't know. There was just something that induced it.

It was difficult in that reverberating building to tell where the sounds were coming from, but one way the passage finished at an obscured french window, with the shadow of a balcony rail upon it, so I went the other. Rounding a corner, I found myself out of the private-room wing and on a broader corridor.

When I first looked along it I thought it empty, then as I moved forward

I saw a figure come out of a shadow. He was a man wearing a black jacket and striped trousers, with a white cotton coat over them. I judged him to be one of the staff doctors – but it was curious that he should be crouching against the wall and feeling his way along.

'Hullo, there,' I said.

He stopped suddenly. The face he turned towards me was grey and frightened.

'Who are you?' he asked, uncertainly.

'My name's Masen,' I told him. 'William Masen. I'm a patient – Room 48. And I've come to find out why –'

'You can see?' he interrupted, swiftly.

'Certainly I can. Just as well as ever,' I assured him. 'It's a wonderful job. Nobody came to unbandage my eyes, so I did it myself. I don't think there's any harm done. I took –'

But he interrupted again.

'Please take me to my office. I must telephone at once.'

I was slow to catch on, but everything ever since I woke that morning had been bewildering.

'Where's that?' I asked.

'Fifth floor, west wing. The name's on the door – Doctor Soames.'

'All right,' I agreed, in some surprise. 'Where are we now?'

The man rocked his head from side to side, his face tense and exasperated.

'How the hell should I know?' he said, bitterly. 'You've got eyes, damn it. Use them. Can't you see I'm blind?'

There was nothing to show that he was blind. His eyes were wide open, and apparently looking straight at me.

'Wait here a minute,' I said. I looked round. I found a large '5' painted on the wall opposite the lift gate. I went back and told him.

'Good. Take my arm,' he directed. 'You turn right as you come out of the lift. Then take the first passage on the left, and it's the third door.'

I followed instructions. We met no one at all on the way. Inside the room I led him up to the desk, and handed him the telephone. He listened for some moments. Then he groped about until he found the rest, and rattled the bar impatiently. Slowly his expression changed. The irritability and the harassed lines faded away. He looked simply tired –

very tired. He put the receiver down on the desk. For some seconds he stood silently, looking as though he was staring at the wall opposite. Then he turned.

'It's useless – dead. You *are* still here?' he added.

'Yes,' I told him.

His fingers felt along the edge of the desk.

'Which way am I facing? Where's the damned window?' he demanded, with a return of irritability.

'It's right behind you,' I said.

He turned, and stepped towards it, both hands extended. He felt the sill and the sides carefully, and stepped back a pace. Before I had realized what he was doing he had launched himself full at it, and crashed through . . .

I didn't look to see. After all, it was the fifth floor.

When I moved, it was to sit down heavily in the chair. I took a cigarette from a box on the desk, and lit it shakily. I sat here for some minutes while I steadied up, and let the sick feeling subside. After a while it did. I left the room, and went back to the place where I had first found him. I still wasn't feeling too good when I got there.

At the far end of the wide corridor were the doors of a ward. The panels were frosted save for ovals of clear glass at face level. I reckoned there ought to be someone on duty there that I could report to about the doctor.

I opened the door. It was pretty dark in there. The curtains had evidently been drawn after the previous night's display was over – and they were still drawn.

'Sister?' I inquired.

'She ain't 'ere,' a man's voice said. 'What's more,' it went on, 'she ain't been 'ere for ruddy hours, neither. Can't you pull them ruddy curtains, mate, and let's 'ave some flippin' light? Don't know what's come over the bloody place this morning.'

'Okay,' I agreed.

Even if the whole place were disorganized, it didn't seem to be any good reason why the unfortunate patients should have to lie in the dark.

I pulled back the curtains on the nearest window, and let in a shaft of

bright sunlight. It was a surgical ward with about twenty patients, all bedridden. Leg injuries mostly, several amputations, by the look of it.

'Stop fooling about with 'em, mate, and pull 'em back,' said the same voice.

I turned and looked at the man who spoke. He was a dark, burly fellow with a weather-beaten skin. He was sitting up in bed, facing directly at me – and at the light. His eyes seemed to be gazing into my own, so did his neighbour's, and the next man's . . .

For a few moments I stared back at them. It took that long to register. Then:

'I – they – they seem to be stuck,' I said. 'I'll find someone to see to them.'

And with that I fled the ward.

I was shaky again, and I could have done with a stiff drink. The thing was beginning to sink in. But I found it difficult to believe that *all* the men in that ward could be blind, just like the doctor, and yet . . .

The lift wasn't working, so I started down the stairs. On the next floor I pulled myself together, and plucked up the courage to look into another ward. The beds there were all disarranged. At first I thought the place was empty, but it wasn't – not quite. Two men in nightclothes lay on the floor. One was soaked in blood from an unhealed incision, the other looked as if some kind of congestion had seized him. They were both quite dead. The rest had gone.

Back on the stairs once more, I realized that most of the background voices I had been hearing all the time were coming up from below, and that they were louder and closer now. I hesitated a moment, but there seemed to be nothing for it but to go on making my way down.

On the next turn I nearly tripped over a man who lay across my way in the shadow. At the bottom of the flight lay somebody who actually had tripped over him – and cracked his head on the stone steps as he landed.

At last I reached the final turn where I could stand and look down into the main hall. Seemingly everyone in the place who was able to move must have made instinctively for that spot either with the idea of finding help or of getting outside. Perhaps some of them had got out.

One of the main entrance doors was wide open, but most of them couldn't find it. There was a tight-packed mob of men and women, nearly all of them in their hospital nightclothes, milling slowly and helplessly around. The motion pressed those on the outskirts cruelly against marble corners or ornamental projections. Some of them were crushed breathlessly against the walls. Now and then one would trip. If the press of bodies allowed him to fall, there was little chance that it would let him come up again.

The place looked – well, you'll have seen some of Doré's pictures of sinners in hell. But Doré couldn't include the sounds: the sobbing, the murmurous moaning, and occasionally a forlorn cry.

A minute or two of it was all I could stand. I fled back up the stairs.

There was the feeling that I ought to do something about it. Lead them out into the street, perhaps, and at least put an end to that dreadful slow milling. But a glance had been enough to show that I could not hope to make my way to the door to guide them there. Besides, if I were to, if I did get them outside – what then?

I sat down on a step for a while to get over it, with my head in my hands and that awful conglomerate sound in my ears all the time. Then I searched for, and found, another staircase. It was a narrow service flight which led me out by a back way into the yard.

Maybe I'm not telling this part too well. The whole thing was so unexpected and shocking that for a time I deliberately tried not to remember the details. Just then I was feeling much as though it were a nightmare from which I was desperately but vainly seeking the relief of waking myself. As I stepped out into the yard I still half-refused to believe what I had seen.

But one thing I was perfectly certain about. Reality or nightmare, I needed a drink as I had seldom needed one before.

There was nobody in sight in the little side street outside the yard gates, but almost opposite stood a pub. I can recall its name now – 'The Alamein Arms'. There was a board bearing a reputed likeness of Viscount Montgomery hanging from an iron bracket, and below, one of the doors stood open.

I made straight for it.

Stepping into the public bar gave me for the moment a comforting

sense of normality. It was prosaically and familiarly like dozens of others.

But although there was no one in that part, there was certainly something going on in the saloon bar, round the corner. I heard heavy breathing. A cork left its bottle with a pop. A pause. Then a voice remarked:

'Gin, blast it! T'hell with gin!'

There followed a shattering crash. The voice gave a sozzled chuckle.

'Thash the mirror. Wash good of mirrors, anyway?'

Another cork popped.

''S' damned gin again,' complained the voice, offended. 'T'*hell* with gin.'

This time the bottle hit something soft, thudded to the floor, and lay there gurgling away its contents.

'Hey!' I called. 'I want a drink.'

There was a silence. Then:

'Who're you?' the voice inquired, cautiously.

'I'm from the hospital,' I said. 'I want a drink.'

'Don' 'member y'r voice. Can you see?'

'Yes,' I told him.

'Well then, for God's sake get over the bar, Doc, and find me a bottle of whisky.'

'I'm doctor enough for that,' I said.

I climbed across, and went round the corner. A large-bellied, red-faced man with a greying walrus moustache stood there clad only in trousers and a collarless shirt. He was fairly drunk. He seemed undecided whether to open the bottle he held in his hand, or to use it as a weapon.

''F you're not a doctor, what are you?' he demanded, suspiciously.

'I was a patient – but I need a drink as much as any doctor,' I said. 'That's gin again you've got there,' I added.

'Oh, is it! B— gin,' he said, and slung it away. It went through the window with a lively crash.

'Give me that corkscrew,' I told him.

I took down a bottle of whisky from the shelf, opened it, and handed it to him with a glass. For myself I chose a stiff brandy with very little soda, and then another. After that my hand wasn't shaking so much.

I looked at my companion. He was taking his whisky neat, out of the bottle.

'You'll get drunk,' I said.

He paused and turned his head towards me. I could have sworn that his eyes really saw me.

'Get drunk! Damn it, I *am* drunk,' he said, scornfully.

He was so perfectly right that I didn't comment. He brooded a moment before he announced:

'Gotta get drunker. Gotta get mush drunker.' He leaned closer. 'D'you know what? – I'm blind. Thash what I am – blind's a bat. *Every*body's blind's a bat. 'Cept you. Why aren't you blind's a bat?'

'I don't know,' I told him.

''S that bloody comet, b— it! Thash what done it. Green shootin' shtarsh – an' now everyone's blind's a bat. D'ju shee green shootin' shtarsh?'

'No,' I admitted.

'There you are. Proves it. You didn't see 'em: you aren't blind. Everyone else saw 'em' – he waved an expressive arm – 'all's blind's bats. B— comets, I say.'

I poured myself a third brandy, wondering whether there might not be something in what he was saying.

'*Every*one blind?' I repeated.

'Thash it. All of 'em. Prob'ly everyone in th' world – 'cept you,' he added, as an afterthought.

'How do you know?' I asked.

''S'easy. Listen!' he said.

We stood side by side leaning on the bar of the dingy pub, and listened. There was nothing to be heard – nothing but the rustle of a dirty newspaper blown down the empty street. Such a quietness held everything as cannot have been known in those parts for a thousand years and more.

'See what I mean? 'S'obvious,' said the man.

'Yes,' I said slowly. 'Yes – I see what you mean.'

I decided that I must get along. I did not know where to. But I must find out more about what was happening.

'Are you the landlord?' I asked him.

'Wha' 'f I am?' he demanded, defensively.

'Only that I've got to pay someone for three double brandies.'

'Ah – forget it.'

'But, look here –'

'Forget it, I tell you. D'ju know why? 'Cause what's the good 'f money to a dead man? An' thash what I am – 's good as. Jus' a few more drinks.'

He looked a pretty robust specimen for his age, and I said so.

'Wha's good of living blind's a bat?' he demanded, aggressively. 'Thash what my wife said. An' she was right – only she's more guts than I have. When she found as the kids was blind too, what did she do? Took 'em into our bed with her, and turned on the gas. Thash what she done. An' I hadn't the guts to stick with 'em. She's got pluck, my wife, more'n I have. But I will have soon. I'm goin' back up there soon – when I'm drunk enough.'

What was there to say? What I did say served no purpose save to spoil his temper. In the end he groped his way to the stairs and disappeared up them, bottle in hand. I didn't try to stop him, or follow him. I watched him go. Then I knocked back the last of my brandy, and went out into the silent street.