

Chapter 1

THE sunlight sparkled and shimmered on the deep blue of the incoming tide, the waves lapping gently at the harbour wall. Fishing-smacks bobbed lazily on the slight swell, and flocks of seagulls screeched noisily as they anticipated the titbits which would be thrown overboard as the latest catch was unloaded. Behind, the range of mountains where the deep green of summer and the purple heather was just coming into full bloom.

Jan Wright rested his elbows on the harbour railings and idly watched the outboard motor-boat, which served as a ferry between Fairbourne and Barmouth, chugging its way across the estuary, leaving a trail of foam in its wake. He was in his early twenties and his broad, handsome face was already tanned to a deep mahogany after less than a week of exposure to these Welsh coast sea-breezes.

'Penny for your thoughts!' the attractive red-haired, freckled-faced girl, dressed in jeans and sweater, nudged him in the ribs with her elbow. She was roughly the same age as himself, and her slim, perfectly proportioned figure had already caused many a male holiday-maker to glance in her direction.

'Nothing much,' he smiled back at her. 'I was only thinking how nice it would be to spend another week here instead of going back to London on Saturday.'

'Well,' she wrinkled her nose, 'I must say I agree with you but I don't think your uncle Cliff would. He would be the first one to blow his top if we didn't turn up at the laboratory on Monday morning!'

'Dear old Uncle Cliff,' Ian laughed.

'Not so much of the "old",' Julie slipped an arm around his waist. 'He may be one of the country's leading botanists but he isn't forty yet. He's very much your mother's younger brother.'

'You're right,' Ian sighed. 'Cliff is almost like a brother to me. And he's hip, too, to quote a modern phrase. He didn't even raise an eyebrow when he discovered that we were going away together for a week. "Have a good dirty week", he said, as I left on Friday night. "I don't expect you'll be good, but try and be careful. I don't want Julie to have to pack up work just yet." You wouldn't find many uncles taking that attitude.'

'Well,' Julie winked, 'we have been careful, haven't we? Or at least, I hope you have!'

They both laughed, and then their attention was diverted by a train crossing the estuary over the viaduct a mile away.

'One more day,' Julie sighed, 'and you still haven't taken me to Shell Island. They say the bathing there is superb.'

'We'll go tomorrow,' Ian promised solemnly and began steering his fiancée in the direction of Davy Jones's Locker, a cave-like café overlooking the harbour.

Saturday dawned with those same cloudless blue skies and blazing sunshine. Ian and Julie were grateful for the coolness of the open 1949 red MG as it glided along the narrow coast roads.

After about twenty minutes Ian slowed down as they approached the small village of Llanbedr, and noticed a sign off to the left which read 'Mochras'.

That's Welsh for Shell Island,' he shouted above the roar of the engine, and then they were turning off down an even narrower road. Soon the tarmac gave way to rough shale, and they could see the tide already lapping at the edges of the causeway.

'What's that?' Julie pointed to some buildings and grass runways which were cordoned off by extensive barbed-wire fencing, almost like some concentration camp from the last war.

'War Department,' Ian said as he slowed down. 'Uncle Cliff told me all about it when he heard we were coming here. It's a pilot-less aircraft base. See those small planes over there? Well, they fly them by remote control. All very hush-hush, though. You'd need a WD pass in triplicate to get even as far as the first check-point! Uncle Cliff said some lads who were camping on Shell Island went on an exploration trip one night and ran into the guards. They nearly got shot, and then had to undergo an extensive interrogation before they were allowed to leave with severe warnings ringing in their ears!'

'It sounds awfully creepy.' Julie shuddered in spite of the warm sunshine. 'I hope we'll be away from here before dark!'

'No need to worry about that place,' Ian saw the water across the road ahead of them, reduced his speed still more, and drove slowly on to Shell Island itself. 'You'll forget that place even exists when you see the real beauty of Shell Island!'

Shell Island was a veritable maze of narrow roads, with ample parking places. Everywhere tents were pitched as campers made the most of the unexpected heat wave. A signpost stated that the South End lay to the left, and the North End to the right.

Ian swung the steering-wheel hard over to the left, noting the sign guiding them to the bathing beaches. Half a mile further on he turned off the road, and parked the car on the top of a steep rise which afforded them a view of sand-dunes and an extensive golden beach beneath.

'Isn't it marvellous!' Julie breathed, the welcome stiffening breeze ruffling her auburn hair. 'All these people camping here - yet we've almost got the beach to ourselves!'

They've probably all had their early morning dip, and are snoozing it off,' Ian stretched. 'Now, let's have that picnic, and then we'll see how warm the water really is!'

Half an hour later, clad in their bathing-costumes, they were racing across the beach towards the incoming tide, laughing and shouting as they splashed ankle-deep through the white foam.

'It's really warm,' Julie laughed. 'Shall we go for a nice long swim?'

'Suits me,' Ian glanced down at the front of his bathing-costume. Julie always made him like that, damn her! He thought of stripping off, showing her what she had seen in the bedroom only last night. Why the hell shouldn't he? There wasn't a soul about. All the same, somebody might have a pair of field-glasses, and the watcher might be prudish as well as being a busybody, and report him. He thought of all the publicity . . . Uncle Cliff . . . he shrugged off the thought and splashed after Julie. God, what a figure she had! Enough to make any man want her badly, really badly...

Julie, the water up to the top half of her bikini, turned back to him.

'Come on,' she yelled. 'What's keeping you? Race you round that headland. Maybe there's a quiet cove there where we can...'

Tan never heard the rest of the sentence, for with a seductive smile she dived backwards and began kicking out with her legs. Yes, he smiled to himself, maybe there is a quiet little cove just around the headland where we can...

He plunged into a crawl, losing sight of his fiancée as his head went under water. He powered on, heading out to sea. About a couple of hundred yards, and then he would veer left, following the coastline, maybe even catching up with her...

'Julie Coles was a strong swimmer, too. She even matched Tan for speed, and after ten minutes or so there were still a good fifty yards between them. Of course, she had got a good start on him. He increased his efforts, clawing the salt water as he strove to narrow the distance.

Ten minutes or so later he paused. Damn these waves. He couldn't see her. Turn, you fool, turn, he swore inwardly. We're far enough out to sea!

Still she persevered with a direct course.

'Stupid bitch,' he gasped aloud- 'You'll be too far out... '

He closed his eyes and mouth as a wave enveloped him. The swell was getting stronger out here. Now he couldn't see her at all. He began to swim desperately. Overtaking her was no longer a game. Their very lives might depend upon it!

Occasionally he caught glimpses of her amidst the rising swell. At last! He breathed a sigh of relief. At least she was turning now, even though she had come too far out to sea.

He decided to strike out diagonally, and head her off. A faint stirring down in his bathing-costume told him that things were getting back to normal. Soon they would be lying on the sun-drenched golden sand of some desolate cove, far from prying eyes where they could strip off, and...

Her shrill scream disrupted his daydreaming. A wave obscured his view of her. Christ! If she got cramp out here ... He trod water looking for her. Suddenly the sea around him was empty. There was no sign of Julie Coles!

'Julie!' he yelled desperately, a note of panic starting to creep into his voice. 'Julie!'

For the first time in his life he felt completely helpless. She was gone. How the hell was he to look for her here?

Strangely, even this far out, the water was comparatively shallow. As he trod water he realised that he could just touch the bottom. He' was above some sort of sandbank. Then he espied a large ripple between the ever-increasing waves heading towards him. He blinked and looked again. There was no doubt about it. It had to be Julie. What a stupid trick! She had screamed to frighten him and now she was trying to sneak upon him underwater!

He rested his feet on the sandy bottom, and laughed, almost hysterically. Well, so long as she was all right...

Suddenly he staggered back, his own piercing scream muffled by the water as his head went under. He fought to free himself from whatever it was that had a hold on his left leg that could only be compared with a pair of garden shears with serrated blades, biting deeper into the bone with every second. He fell full length on to the sea-bed, already gulping down mouthfuls of the murky, sandy water. He began to panic, kicking out with his free leg. There was no escape. That much was quite clear to him. Furthermore, he knew that he was going to die. He knew, too, that whatever it was that was attacking him had also claimed Julie Coles!

There was a red mist before his eyes. No, it wasn't a mist... he could taste it, taste it like that time in his boyhood when he'd fallen on the beach and cut his lip. It was blood! For a second, he almost felt that he was free. That grip had lessened. He made one last, desperate effort to surface, being wrenched back instantly as his right leg was grasped by his unknown attacker.

It was as consciousness began to slip from his fear-crazed mind that he realised what had happened to his left leg. It had been amputated! Then he felt his right leg cracking. Mercifully he lost consciousness.

Cliff Davenport was in his laboratory shortly before seven o'clock on that Monday morning. There were certain tasks that had to be attended to before Ian and Julie arrived at nine. Certain specimens from sea plants had to be removed from the glass tanks and allowed to dry before the next stage of discovering their nutritional benefits could be started. They would be ready for his two assistants to get to grips with as soon as they got back from holiday.

As he worked, the botanist caught a glimpse of his reflection in the water. He smiled. At least he didn't think that he looked any older. Those lines in his lean, aquiline face marked the passing of his dear wife. They could never be erased, like his memory of her. His receding hairline and the odd flecks of grey in his dark hair, were all that denoted his age. His lithe figure was as sprightly as ever, and the pipe drooping out of the corner of his mouth reminded him of the time when he had portrayed Sherlock Holmes in a local amateur dramatic society's presentation of *The Speckled Band*.

His task completed, he retired to his study. There he poured himself a cup of black coffee and relit his pipe. He felt vaguely hungry, but he knew that Julie would automatically prepare him something to eat once she and Ian arrived.

The morning wore on, and still there was no sign of Ian Wright and Julie Coles. Cliff became impatient, yet he was not unduly worried. Probably they had lingered over a 'last night' somewhere together and slept late as a result of it.

By lunch-time, however, he was becoming increasingly worried. No longer were sexual procrastinations uppermost in his mind. Instead his thoughts dwelt on road accidents. Ian had always been inclined to drive far too fast in that old

heap of an MG of his!

It was shortly after three o'clock in the afternoon that the doorbell rang. As Cliff Davenport saw the two blue uniforms through the frosted glass, his stomach muscles tightened. The MG...

'Professor Davenport?' the thin-faced sergeant had an expression on his face that boded distinct ill-tidings.

'Yes, yes.' Cliff's tone could not conceal his anxiety.

'I'm afraid, sir,' the officer said as he stepped over the threshold without being invited to do so, 'we might have some rather grave news for you.'

'Might?'

'Well.. , er .. .' the policeman shuffled his feet awkwardly. The Merioneth Force have reason to believe that a red MG sports car, registration number MNO 897, is the property of Mr Ian Wright, your nephew, who resides at this address. The vehicle in question was found abandoned on Shelf Island. The gentleman in question's clothing was found in it, along with those of a lady. A search has been made, in fact it's still going on. The coast guards are using helicopters. They, er, they haven't found anything yet. It appears that . . . your nephew and his lady friend have been washed out to sea whilst bathing.'

Cliff Davenport sat down on a nearby chair. His face was ashen. His whole body trembled.

'Impossible! ' His dry croak lacked conviction.

'I'm afraid ...' the sergeant began, but stopped as he saw the look in the other's eye.

'Thank you, Sergeant.' Cliff was on his feet as though he had instantly shrugged off the sudden shock, 'Perhaps you will let me know at once if you find anything.'

The two policemen stepped outside into the bright sunlight. Both heaved sighs of relief. It had been easier than they had anticipated. The Professor had taken the news admirably.

Inside the house Cliff Davenport stood with his back to the closed door. He knew in his heart that he would never see either Ian Wright or Julie Coles again.

Chapter Two

CLIFF DAVENPORT remained at his West Hampstead home for three days. He did no

work, and he ate little. He consumed on average an ounce of tobacco a day. Those lines on his face deepened. He was hardened to grief, but it was the very fact of not knowing that troubled him. If Ian and Julie were dead, then for a short while he would succumb to grief. If they were discovered alive, then he would rejoice. Until then he would endure untold mental agony.

Each day he rang the police headquarters at Harlech. The answer was always the same. In the end the Inspector there told him that they would telephone him the moment they had any news. That meant they were not hopeful of finding the couple alive.

By Saturday morning the telephone had still not rung. Cliff roused himself from the armchair which had, by now, been his sleeping place for five nights. He knew that he could not endure another night of waiting, the restless pacing up and down, of the feeling of utter helplessness. He went upstairs to his small, untidy bedroom and dragged a dusty suitcase from beneath the bed. Pulling open drawers at random he began throwing items of clothing into it.

It was scarcely nine o'clock when he backed the Cortina estate car out of the garage. The petrol gauge showed that the tank was full. He could be in Llanbedr by tea-time. The prospect of some kind of action was comforting and his spirits soared as he finally left London behind him.

The hotel in Llanbedr was not an hotel as such. Few holiday makers were aware of its existence and the friendly, widowed Mrs Jones preferred to keep it that way. She had her regular guests who returned, year after year, and that was how she wanted it.

'Goodness me!' she stood aghast as she recognised Cliff Davenport getting out of his car. 'Professor! This is a surprise!'

'Hallo, Mum,' the professor greeted her. Cliff always called Mrs Jones 'Mum', much to her delight.

'I'm sorry to arrive unannounced like this. It's urgent, though. Of course, if you haven't any room I shan't grumble.'

'It'll have to be the attic-room,' Mrs Jones was slightly embarrassed. 'I've got a full house, and if I'd known... '

'The attic will do fine,' Cliff assured her, lifting his suitcase out of the car. 'I don't want to put you to any trouble.'

'I'll put the kettle on,' she declared as she went indoors ahead of him.

'Now, Mum.' Cliff sipped his tea thankfully, and regarded her with a pair of steely-blue eyes, 'Tell me what you know about the missing bathers.'

'Nothing that the papers haven't already reported.' She busied herself with laying the table. 'If folks will go swimming where there's dangerous currents... '

'There aren't any dangerous currents of the South End of Shell Island,' Cliff Davenport snapped, 'and they were both first-class swimmers.'

'How d'you know that?' Mrs Jones paused. 'It isn't that what's brought you here, is it, Professor?'

'It is,' he replied. 'Ian Wright was my nephew, and the girl was his fiancée.'

'Oh!' Mrs Jones sat down suddenly on the nearest chair, 'I didn't know... oh, I'm terribly sorry, Professor.'

'You weren't to know.' The Professor smiled wanly. 'But it's almost a week now since they disappeared, and everybody seems to have abandoned the search, content just to let the tide wash them up in its own time. Well, I'm not satisfied that everything's just as it should be. I intend to poke around a bit. I don't know what it is, but I've got a funny feeling that there's more to this than meets the eye. I also know in my own mind that they're both dead!'

Grimly, he continued drinking his tea.

Sergeant Hughes looked up from his desk as the tall man with the receding hairline walked into the police station.

'Yes, sir,' he grunted automatically, not bothering to rise to his feet. 'What can I do for you?'

'If you could find my nephew, Ian Wright, and his girl friend I should be delighted.' Professor Davenport's tone was terse. 'I have been waiting for a call from you and, as nothing transpired, I thought that I had better come down to Llanbedr.'

'Oh, you're Professor Davenport.' The sergeant rose to his feet and pulled thoughtfully at his moustache. 'Everything that can be done is being done. There was no need for you to ...'

'I prefer to,' Cliff snapped. 'They were both excellent swimmers, and there are no dangerous currents to speak of off the South End where their car was parked.'

'Any bathing is dangerous,' the sergeant stated adamantly. 'They're not the first to be drowned on this part of the coast, you know.'

'And I have a strange feeling that they won't be the last,' Cliff turned on his heel. 'No doubt we shall meet again during the course of my stay here, Sergeant. Good day.'

Cliff was angry as he walked back towards the village. Of course, it could have been an accident. Even the most experienced swimmers met with accidents. Yet, he still had that strange feeling at the back of his mind,...

The following morning, after breakfast, Cliff went on to Shell Island. He went on foot, feeling it hardly worth the trouble of taking the car from Mrs Jones's place to the South End of the island, a journey of possibly two miles. It was a bright, sunny morning, and had it not been for the sense of foreboding which clouded his mind he would have entered into the spirit of a holiday-maker. His binoculars slung over his shoulders and carrying a long stick of ash, a favourite companion on long hikes, he strode along.

Campers barely gave him a passing glance as he crossed the sand-dunes and finally reached the long, wide rolling beach. The tide was well out. Quickly he scanned the water's edge through his binoculars. A flock of oyster-catchers, gulls . . . nothing. Not a movement otherwise. To his left some children were making sandcastles, but he ignored them. It was way out there where the answers to his many questions lay and he knew that he wouldn't solve them from the edge of the dunes.

The sand beneath his feet was firm as he began walking out towards the distant

tideline. Virgin sand, untouched since the last tide had ebbed. Peaceful. And yet...

A few hundred yards further on, the surface began to get softer. His walking boots squelched beneath his weight, yet there was no hint of any quicksands. The oyster-catchers rose in alarm at his approach. The gulls wheeled, screaming their insults at him.

At last the water lapped at his feet. There was a huge ridge of sandbank on his right, resembling a colossal defensive wall built by an ancient people. He glanced behind him at the distant shoreline of Shell Island.

'Surely,' he muttered, 'they would have swum no further than this.'

Suddenly a deafening screaming sound filled the sky, becoming louder all the time. He ducked instinctively, then straightened with a chuckle as the tiny aircraft passed less than fifty feet above him, heading back towards Shell Island.

'Damned unmanned aircraft,' he murmured. Then his eye caught something in the sand about twenty yards away. It was a mark of some kind, maybe three feet long and nearly as wide. It had been made since the tide had gone out, a fresh scuffing of damp sand. The birds? His eyes widened as he saw another, and then he began walking quickly towards them.

'My god!' he gasped, so excited that the words poured out aloud. 'They're all along the tide-line. Claw marks. But what in the name of heaven could have left a print that size? It's, it's like a crab, only dozens of them, and a hundred times as big!'

He dropped to his knees, eager to examine the nearest one. It had the shape and markings of a crab's claw, but. . . the very size of it was beyond comprehension!

Cliff Davenport shook his head in bewilderment. It was fantastic. Impossible! There had to be an explanation! And, for a scientist, a rational one, at that!

Then the water was lapping at his feet again. The tide had turned. He moved back a few paces and watched as the incoming sea slowly began to cover those weird marks in the sand, erasing them forever.

Cliff knew that he had no alternative other than to retreat. He had seen these bizarre, crazy marks with his own eyes and now they were being removed. The evidence was disappearing. If only he'd brought a camera. But nobody would believe him now!

Reluctantly, he retreated before the tide. Two more pilotless aircraft passed over him, dipping down towards the island. Vaguely he wondered if they could have had anything to do with the strange markings in the sand. A new type of undercarriage that made landings feasible on soft ground, marshes and beaches? It was a possibility, even if it was an improbability. There was only one way to find out. He unslung his binoculars and altered his course, heading towards that large barbed-wire compound.

For some reason the visitors to the island seemed to keep well clear of the WD compound. Perhaps they felt that it was not in keeping with the relaxation which they sought, or maybe they had an inbuilt fear of military authority. Cliff Davenport was not one of the latter. At that moment he cared neither for authority nor the scenic beauty. All he knew was that he had to take a closer look at one of those pilotless aircraft, paying particular attention to its

undercarriage. The discovery of some unorthodox landing device would ease his troubled mind somewhat.

When he was within fifty yards of the nearest barbed-wire fence he saw the guard. The man was dressed in RAF uniform, and had his back to the Professor. Cliff noted with a faint tingling of his spine that he carried a rifle. He did not doubt that it was loaded and that the sentry would use it at the first threat to security.

Cliff sank down slowly until he was lying full-length in the long grass. As he parted the tufts in front of him and began focusing his binoculars, he felt more secure. The man could not see him even if he chanced to turn around. Two of the aircraft he sought were standing motionless on a runway to his left. All he had to do was to examine them through the high-powered lenses and then crawl away discreetly. He could not help thinking how easy it would be for foreign spies to adopt this same procedure.

He brought his powerful binoculars to bear on the nearest of the small aircraft. Already it was shimmering in the midday heat, and everything seemed utterly still and peaceful. He began to examine the plane. It was shaped like a jet, and yet was hardly larger than the average glider. Nevertheless it had a sinister appearance, as if it might be playing some secret role in all that had happened recently, like some silent, mechanical bird of prey.

Disappointment welled up inside him as he studied the undercarriage. It was so conventional. Just two wheels, in fact, no different from those on a mini! If it landed in soft ground it certainly wouldn't take off again. He looked at the other plane standing next to it. It was exactly the same.

His spine tingled again. If those crab-like prints out on the sands had not been made by one of these pilotless crafts then there could only be one answer. And that was almost unbelievable!

'Don't move!' The terse command close behind him made him start involuntarily and the binoculars slipped from his grasp. He turned his head slightly. A blue-uniformed man knelt up in the grass less than five yards away from him and in his hand he held something black and shiny which was trained unwaveringly on the Professor's back. There was no mistaking the snub shape of a .38 automatic pistol.

'All right.' The airman's voice was almost a hiss. 'On your feet slowly. Don't make any sudden movement. Just take it easy.'

Cliff Davenport rose to his feet and then he sensed another uniformed man only a foot or so away. He hadn't even heard him move. This guy was an expert where stealth was concerned. That was why he hadn't even suspected the initial stalking. It would be a foolish man indeed who made a sudden bolt for it

'Go on.' Something decidedly menacing prodded Cliff in the small of his back. 'Walk slowly towards that gate over there. Don't try anything!'

Armed men appeared from all directions as he entered the enclosure. They weren't taking any chances. Vaguely Cliff wondered how he had been spotted. It certainly wasn't by the first guard. Probably somebody was scanning the area constantly from a concealed vantage point. In the distance he could see holiday-makers playing ball, pitching tents, cooking food, totally unaware of the drama which was being enacted only a few hundred yards away from them.

Still he walked on, dazed at the suddenness of it all. Every time he slowed up something hard and menacing bored into his back, forcing him to move again.

Now there was a uniformed man on either side of him. Nobody spoke. It was almost as if the arrest of an intruder was an everyday occurrence. Smooth efficiency. Merciless.

They were heading towards a concrete building that stood apart from the main block. It was completely square and flat-roofed rather like the kind of Foreign Legion detention blocks which one sees in the movies. Cliff had visions of men sweating within as the sun climbed higher and the temperature inside rose to intolerable heights.

A man came from behind and unlocked the door. It swung back on well-oiled hinges. For a second everybody paused in the doorway. Cliff noted the interior with some misgiving. Four walls, a ceiling and a floor, all drab, grey concrete. Not even a window. A sudden push sent him sprawling inside. He fell headlong and then, as he picked himself up, darkness closed in on him. The door swung shut and that same lock clicked hack into place. Boyhood dreams of the Foreign Legion suddenly started to become reality.

Chapter Three

CLIFF DAVENPORT sat with his back to the wall in total darkness. His surroundings had a claustrophobic effect on his mind. He couldn't think clearly. Maybe it was all a dream. Secret aircraft bases, giant crabs ... He stretched out a hand and ran his fingers along the concrete. No, the walls weren't padded. That discovery was a relief in some respects. It meant, too, that all this was horribly real!

Time dragged. The face of his watch was not luminous so he had no means of knowing what time of day it was. The useless watch merely emitted a continuous ticking that after a time began to have the same effect upon him as the infamous Chinese water-torture. He wanted to scream, call them all kinds of bastards under the sun. Instead he just remained silent. Waiting; for what, he knew not.

All the time he could hear the regular footsteps of a patrolling sentry. They were taking no chances. He thought of attracting the guard's attention, telling him who he was and why he had approached the base, but he knew it would do no good.

Eventually he lost track of time and just sat staring into the darkness. It was hot and stuffy.

At last there were more footsteps and the key turned in the lock again. The door was flung wide open and Cliff Davenport was momentarily blinded by the sudden sunlight. He threw up his hands to cover his eyes, yet managed to notice the five men who stood in the doorway. They all carried .38 automatics.

'Step this way, please.' A tall man with a clipped moustache seemed to be in

command. His voice was authoritative, and the other four evidently would act on such orders as he might give.

Cliff struggled to his feet, blinking and still unable to focus properly. A uniformed man moved to his side, both helping and pushing him at the same time. The cramped position in which he had been for some immeasurable time had numbed Davenport's leg, and now the pins and needles were agonising. He stumbled, almost fell, and then two of his captors seized him and dragged him across the compound.

Another squat building, only slightly more civilised in appearance, stood less than thirty yards away from where he had been imprisoned. At least it had windows.

One of the guards opened the door. Two more hustled him inside. The interior was neatly but sparsely furnished. Coconut matting lay on the floor, filing cabinets were ranged around the walls and a large mahogany desk dominated the centre. Cliff Davenport gazed at the man who sat behind it. He was well-built, totally bald and his clean-shaven face reminded the botanist of the typical Gestapo chief portrayed in films and books of World War II. Hard, ruthless, fish-like eyes that totally concealed his innermost thoughts. Above all, he wore no uniform. His light-grey, well-worn suit made his appearance all the more sinister.

Somebody shut the door.

'Who are you?' The man behind the desk had a flat, expressionless voice.

'My name is Professor Clifford Davenport.' Cliff drew himself up to his full height, his indignation beginning to return now that he was no longer imprisoned in a darkened cell. 'I live in West Hampstead and I am staying with Mrs Jones of Llanbedr.'

'You were displaying interest in our aircraft,' his interrogator stated, holding up the pair of binoculars which had been confiscated on his capture. 'I want to know why you were so interested in them.'

Cliff paused. Just in time he checked the reply that was on the top of his tongue. Hell, he couldn't start raving on about giant crabs. Just what was he to say? There were two courses open to him. He could either condemn himself as a spy or else commit himself to an asylum. He drew a deep breath. Everybody was watching him intently. Hesitation would be interpreted as guilt.

He expelled a long sigh. 'Well, you know the two bathers who went missing last Sunday?'

'Which two bathers?'

God! Didn't they read the papers or were they just inhuman?

'A young man and his fiancée. Their car was found on the South End of the Island.'

'Was it?'

Of course it bloody well was! He felt his temper rising, but knew that he must keep a tight rein on it. He fought back an angry retort and tried to appear more relaxed.

'Yes,' he said, even essaying a smile, 'it was. The police and the coastguards

have been searching since then but they haven't found the bodies.'

'How does that relate to the fact that you were examining our aircraft through binoculars?' There was neither emotion nor sympathy in his interrogator's voice or expression.

'It doesn't. . . except that. . . that...' Cliff fought for a plausible explanation. 'I had been out on the sands looking for signs of the missing bathers all morning and I wondered if, well, if any of your planes might be utilised in the search.' Somebody behind him was trying hard not to snigger.

'You were observed to be studying the planes in question for quite some considerable time.'

'I was tired.' That was certainly the truth. 'I had been walking for miles all morning. I was glad of the opportunity to rest, and ... as a boy I was fanatically interested in aircraft. There has been a terrible mistake and I can only offer my profuse apologies.'

The man in the grey suit stroked his chin, showing neither belief nor disbelief.

'I shall need proof of your identity,' he remarked at last 'Sergeant Hughes of your local force knows me,' Cliff replied. 'Failing that, I must refer you to Sir Ronald Bradley of Whitehall, who is a personal friend of mine. I take it you have heard of him?'

The Professor felt a sudden surge of hope as surprise registered for a brief second on that deadpan face. A brief flicker and it was gone. Then a decisive move. The receiver of the telephone on the desk was lifted and a long slender forefinger began to dial. A brief pause. The ringing of the phone on the other end of the line could be heard.

Brr ... brr ... brr. On and on it went. Nobody seemed to be in a hurry. Nobody moved.

At last there was a distant crackling and a voice was speaking. The words were inaudible.

'Sir Ronald?' There was now even a note of respect in the grim-faced man's tone, a relaxing of tension. 'Myerscough here, sir. Shell Island. Do you know a Professor Davenport, sir?'

Silence again except for a jumble of distant conversation. Myerscough listened intently. A frown appeared on his face. One of disappointment.

'Yes, yes, Sir Ronald.' He was almost humble now. 'Your description fits him perfectly. No, no, sir, I'll take your word for it. There appears to have been some mistake. Yes, yes, of course, sir. I'm sorry to have troubled you.'

He replaced the receiver and shook his head slowly. Then he smiled. It was merely a movement of facial muscles. There was no humour in his expression.

'There appears to have been some mistake, Professor Davenport,' he said. 'You are free to go. You may take your binoculars also. Please, though, for your own sake do not go examining our aircraft again.'

Cliff Davenport walked back to the hotel in Llanbedr shortly before six o'clock. He felt physically and mentally fatigued. Above all, he had gained nothing. He was even inclined to believe that he had imagined those claw

prints along the tide line. Maybe a band of foraging gulls had disturbed the sand after all...

The small dining room was full when he came down to dinner.

'Ah, Professor,' said Mrs Jones as she suddenly emerged from the kitchen. 'There you are. I was getting worried about you when you didn't come in to lunch.'

'I had a lot of ground to cover.' He shook his head sadly.

'I'm afraid we're a bit pushed for room.' Mrs Jones leaned close so that she would not be heard by the other guests. 'I know you won't mind sharing a table. There's a Mrs Benson over there in the corner. Her husband left her last year. A real rotter he was too. I'm sure you'll like her.'

'I'm sure I will,' Cliff replied. His eyes were already on the dark-haired, petite girl who sipped tomato juice, a wistful expression on her face. She was wearing a cotton blouse above a tartan skirt, and he saw the outline of her small, arm breasts. It wasn't often these days he noticed such things. He put her age at about twenty-five.

'Hallo, Professor,' she greeted him, smiling up at him as he paused nervously at the table. 'I've been hearing all about you from Mrs Jones. Please sit down. My name's Pat.'

Within a matter of minutes the tension had ebbed from him. He felt relaxed. He wanted to talk to someone, and she was the perfect listener, sympathetic and interested. He hadn't meant to tell a soul about his experiences inside that compound. He felt that they were humiliating, but he told her just the same.

'My God!' she exclaimed, her eyes twinkling. 'It's getting like a police state! If they don't want folks looking at their aircraft, why the hell don't they keep them out of sight? I mean, anybody might focus a pair of binoculars on one of those planes.'

'Of course, it could have been a decoy,' he pointed out, although the thought had only just occurred to him. 'Maybe they were expecting someone in particular to show an interest in it, and I just happened along and blundered right into the trap.'

Then he told her about Ian and Julie.

'Oh, how terrible!' She paused, a biscuit spread with cheese halfway to her mouth. 'I've been... bathing off the South End myself only this afternoon.'

A frown creased her brow as she recalled her afternoon spent on those golden sands with the deep blue sea creeping relentlessly back towards the shore.

'There . . . there was something I noticed,' she murmured. 'Something very strange. It might be nothing but...'

'Go on,' he urged.

'Well,' she continued, wrinkling her nose. 'As a kid I've often sat and watched crabs crawling across the beach. I know the sort of tracks they make in wet sand, the imprints of their pincers... well, out there today I saw some marks. They looked like crabs only, well the size of them. If they had been crabs then they'd have to have been the size of, I don't know, sheep!'

'My God!' Cliff Davenport blanched and his knuckles became bloodless as he gripped the edge of the table. 'So I was right after all! I didn't dream it! My God, what sort of creatures are they?'

'You've seen the marks too?' Her jaw dropped in amazement.

'This morning,' he replied. 'And another thing. There's a full moon at present. Now the moon affects the movements of crabs just as it has a pull on the tides. It was as though a herd of them had been crawling along the tide line. But... it can't be. No such creatures could exist!'

'You should know better than I do, Professor.' She smiled. 'But nobody has really explored the bed of the ocean properly. There could be a submarine life around these very islands which mankind has never dreamt of. There must be thousands of caves capable of hiding creatures as big as battleships. After all, they're still not certain about the Loch Ness Monster!'

'You're right,' he muttered. 'Yet it's so incredible. I've been amazed at some of my discoveries regarding plant life. I have to be sure though. A few marks in the sand isn't proof. I'd be ridiculed.'

Suddenly her hand rested on his as though such contact was the most natural thing in the world. He noticed subconsciously the mark where she had once worn a ring on the third finger of her left hand.

'I won't ridicule you ... Cliff.' She smiled, and he felt a stirring within himself that he had almost forgotten existed. 'Suppose we team up, do some investigating. I've nothing else to do. I came here to ... try and forget. Start life all over again. I'll help you to search for Ian and Julie too.'

He felt his eyes misting over.

'Thank you.' He glanced away automatically so that she would not see his emotions. His weaknesses. 'I'd ... be glad of that. Suppose we bathe together tomorrow? No, no, we'd better keep clear of the water. It's too dangerous until we know. We must explore the beach and look for more signs.'

'Fine!' She squeezed his hand and rose to her feet. 'See you at breakfast in the morning, then.'

Both Cliff Davenport and Pat Benson rose late the following morning. Most of the other guests had already breakfasted and departed by the time they sat down and made a start on their respective melons.

Suddenly the headline of a newspaper lying on an adjacent table caught the Professor's eye: 'BATHERS MISSING OFF WELSH COAST'.

He snatched up the paper with trembling hands, almost knowing what he was about to read: 'Following the disappearance of two swimmers off Shell Island last weekend, further people have been reported missing at Borth, Fairbourne and Barmouth late yesterday afternoon. Extensive searches are still going on, but none of the five people have been recovered. Experts believe that dangerous currents have appeared in these waters and have claimed unwary swimmers.'

'My God!' Cliff exclaimed. 'Take a look at this,' he said, passing, the newspaper across to Pat Benson. 'It's already begun! The crabs are attacking!'

Chapter Four

BY ten-thirty Cliff Davenport and Pat Benson were walking out towards the distant shimmering sea. Her hand rested in his. They spoke little. To an outside observer they were just another couple going for a bathe.

Several times they saw the coastguard helicopters. The search for the missing bathers was still going on.

'I can't understand it,' Pat remarked. 'This has always been one of the best coasts to bathe from. A few dangerous currents, but if you know where they are, you're all right. Then suddenly there're all these horrific claw prints appearing, plus people disappearing right, left and centre.'

'It's only just starting,' Cliff observed, and shook his head. 'Something... a freak of nature maybe, but whatever it is, this is only the beginning.'

'How long are you staying here?' It seemed as though there were a note of anxiety in her voice, almost as if his answer would be of great importance to her.

'I don't know.' He watched her carefully as he spoke. 'It depends on what I find out, whether there is anything in my hunch. Well, I suppose, I could be staying for some time. How about you?'

'I'm booked in for a fortnight,' she replied. 'I only came yesterday morning. Like you, though, it depends on what I find out now. I've got no ties. Nothing to go back home for. On top of all that I've got a streak of the nosy-parker in me.'

'So,' he observed, grinning and slipping an arm around her, 'we're both dedicated to the cause then.'

Eventually they reached the sea. The tide had not yet turned, and the last fifty yards or so were a mass of sticky wet mud that was just beginning to dry out in the sun.

'Look!' Pat Benson was the first to spot the marks in the sand, away to the left, giving the smooth surface the appearance of a plot of land somebody had tried to plough up with a mechanical cultivator, before giving it up as a bad job.

Cliff nodded. Her grip tightened on his hand as they changed direction and began to walk towards the object of their search.

'Christ!' Cliff Davenport's lips were bloodless and his face was grim as they stood and looked down at the marks in the sand.

Pat Benson felt an urge to back away, to run as fast as she could back to the mainland before something more horrific than mankind had ever witnessed emerged from the incoming tide. But she stayed. Maybe it was only because she

was with Cliff Davenport, but she stayed all the same.

'Just, just look at the size of them!' she gasped. She felt herself trembling and hoped that the man at her side would not notice.

'It's crabs all right,' the Professor stated, stooping and probing with his fingers in the muddy tracks. 'Look. Here's a fragment of shell. And another. Judging by the way they've churned up this stretch of beach there must've been a hundred or so of 'em. You can see for yourself how right you were. They must be as big as sheep!'

'But... but... ' Pat's voice trembled. 'Why hasn't anybody seen them?'

'For two reasons, I should say.' Cliff paused and slowly filled his pipe, packing the tobacco down tightly in the bowl and then proceeding to light it 'Firstly, as I've already mentioned, they've only just appeared on this part of the coast. Secondly, they move and feed at night, particularly when there's a full moon.'

'But can't we advise the authorities?' Pat spread her hands in despair. 'The army, for instance.'

Cliff Davenport laughed, but there was no mirth in his laughter.

'You can just imagine the sort of reaction we'd get,' he chided, puffing out thick clouds of smoke. 'They're more concerned about the fact that I took a peep at one of their pilotless aircraft through my binoculars than some tomfool tale that I thought there were giant crabs in the area.'

'Thought,' Pat snapped. 'There's no "thought" about it, it's a certainty!'

'We need proof,' he replied, 'positive proof that will convince them. And I'm going to get it.'

'How?'

'I shall come back here tonight,' he said, 'after the moon has risen. I shall be prepared for a long vigil. It may be futile. Probably it will be. The crabs may not show up here again for weeks. Once I've seen them with my own eyes I'll be prepared to try and convince somebody, and maybe get some action of some sort before more lives are needlessly lost'

'We could watch from those dunes over there.' Pat pointed back towards Shell Island. 'We'd be sheltered and we could see without being seen.'

'We?'

'I'm coming with you, make no mistake about that!'

'Now look here,' said Cliff sternly, grasping her by the shoulders, 'this is no job for a woman. These creatures have claimed several Uves already. They're deadly dangerous. The risks... '

'I'm coming.' She looked him straight in the face. 'And don't you try to stop me, Cliff Davenport. We're in this together. You weren't the only one to discover those marks.'

'All right,' he sighed. 'I suppose I can't stop you coming along but you'll have to do as I say. We're just going to look. Nothing more.'

She nodded.

'Fair enough,' she said, 'that's fine by me. Hey, somebody's coming!'

Cliff wheeled round.

About two hundred yards away a man was following the tide-line heading towards them. He had a loping, shambling gait and his body seemed to be twisted from the waist downwards as though he was deformed. He was clad in a torn crimson shirt, the tails flapping in the sea breeze, ragged denim trousers, and his feet were bare. With his long matted hair and unkempt beard he reminded them of Robinson Crusoe.

As he came closer they could see his features plainly. His eyes were large and staring, his nose little more than two nostrils situated above thin lips which were unable to hide the battered stumps of decayed and broken teeth. Every so often he paused to pick up a piece of driftwood.

'A beachcomber.' Cliff commented. 'What a strange fellow!'

The man was wheezing and grunting as he kept up a fast pace, glancing in their direction with glassy staring eyes but not acknowledging their presence. He passed them, striding through the maze of crab tracks but seemingly totally unaware of the fact. They stood and watched him, until about a quarter of a mile further on he turned shorewards.

'We'd better be getting back,' Pat observed; she shivered in spite of the heat of the day.

'Yes, there's not much to be gained by staying here.' Her companion slipped an arm around her slim waist and together they walked slowly back towards the sand dunes.

The soft sand of the dunes was warm to their feet. They were sheltered from the breeze and some of the hollows offered shade. In fact it was an ideal place to sit down and rest. Their original plan had been to return straight away to Mrs Jones's for lunch. Yet somehow there was a temptation to remain in the solitude of the dunes.

They sat down. For a time they said nothing, each busy with their own thoughts. Cliff's arm remained about her and his senses responded to her closeness. It was a long time since a woman had excited him. There was a stirring in his loins, and his heart was beating faster than it usually did. Suddenly he wanted to kiss her, to crush his lips against hers, to feel her body pressed against his own, her breasts on his chest...

He turned his head to look at her, trying to pluck up courage, his mouth dry, his pulse racing. As he moved, her face came up towards his. Was it his imagination or were those full, red lips, a smile hovering upon them, parted in anticipation of his next move?

Impulsively he bent and kissed her. Their lips met and lingered. Her arms came up and encircled his neck, holding him close. Her body was shuddering with emotion and he could feel her fingernails digging deep into his back.

At last they parted. Her face was flushed. Their gaze met and for some moments they just sat and looked at each other.

'Do ... do you ever get lonely?' she sighed, burying her head in his chest

'Yes,' Cliff admitted. 'But I have learnt to overcome it. I just work . . . and work . . . and work. I love my work. It's the only thing that's kept me going. Without it I should have died long ago.'

'But you're still lonely,' she muttered, as she stroked the nape of his neck. 'I know, believe me, I know! Sometimes it has been too awful for words, but I knew that someday I would . . . meet somebody else!'

At her words he felt his spirits soaring, a new life dawning for him, conceived here in the sand-dunes of Shell Island. 'I... I...' Words failed him.

She kissed him again. This time his long, slim fingers stroked her body through her clothing, lingering on those delightful breasts yet fearing to progress further. His loins were fully charged with emotion and he would dearly have loved to have taken her.

But, 'We'd better be getting back to lunch,' he stated firmly, and helped her to her feet, fearful lest his impulses would lead him to actions that might spoil everything that had gone before. Their arms entwined around each other, they set off on the long walk back to Llanbedr. Yet their minds were not easy. Both of them remembered those tracks in the sand, and they could not help wondering what horrors lay beneath the surface of that stretch of scintillating blue sea.

'Enjoyed your morning on the beach, have you?' Mrs Jones smiled as she served up two plates of fresh crab and salad.

Cliff Davenport smiled wryly. Obviously they were not going to be allowed to forget what they had seen that morning! As if that were possible.

'We met a strange fellow out on the sand,' he remarked, partly for politeness sake, and partly because he was curious. 'A beachcomber.'

'Oh!' Mrs Jones shook her head, a look of disapproval on her kindly face. 'That'd be Bartholomew.'

'Bartholomew?' Cliff had no intention of leaving it at that. 'Bartholomew who?'

'Just Bartholomew.' The landlady paused, almost as if she had no wish to discuss the matter any further and was regretting having entered into the conversation in the first place. 'He's been around for three years now. Never bothers nobody. Spends his life on the beaches all along this coast. Lives in caves, I suppose. Does a few odd jobs around the harbour at Barmouth from time to time, so they tell me.'

'He, er, isn't exactly given to conversation,' Cliff went on,

'Oh, um,' - and she blushed as though Bartholomew was a personal embarrassment to her - 'he can't hear. He's deaf and dumb. Simple in the head, too. But he never bothers anybody, so nobody can do anything about him. Not that they want to anyway.'

With that she swept on to the next table and began collecting dirty crockery.

'Bartholomew, eh?' Cliff reiterated when she was out of earshot. 'Everything about this business gets creepier and creepier. I wish you'd stay behind tonight, Pat, and let me go it alone.'

'Well, I won't.' She spoke adamantly as she tackled her food, wrinkling her nose and then pushing the crab to one side and concentrating on the salad. 'Ugh!' She shuddered. 'Crabs give me the shudders. I'll never eat one again!'

'I'm only going on reconnaissance,' Cliff went on. 'Just to have a look. I'm not going to do anything.'

'All the more reason for me to come,' Pat interjected. 'Furthermore, Cliff Davenport, if you don't let me come with you, I'll go alone!'

'All right,' he conceded. 'We'll go together. But we'd better get some rest this afternoon. It could be a very long night -particularly if nothing shows up.'

It was after eleven o'clock when they left Mrs Jones's private hotel. The night was warm and the moon was just beginning to come up over the mountains, casting its silvery glow across the whole countryside.

Cliff Davenport had a sports jacket over his open-necked shirt and was wearing flannels and pumps. Pat Benson wore a polo-necked sweater and jeans. They did not take the car, preferring the lengthy walk to Shell Island through the moonlit countryside.

'What a beautiful night,' Pat remarked as they passed alongside the barbed-wire fence which enclosed War Department property. 'If only we didn't have to worry about giant crabs!'

Cliff pulled her closer and kissed her.

'Maybe we won't have to,' he said with more conviction than he felt. 'Probably it'll turn out to be a white elephant after all and the marks in the sand were made by Bartholomew searching for mussels.'

Pat laughed; but she felt uneasy. Bartholomew certainly hadn't made those prints in the sand. As they crossed the island they could see oil lamps burning in most of the tents, as the campers prepared to turn in for the night. Transistor radios were playing. Somebody started to sing. A dog barked.

They moved on, making a detour to avoid the tents, and eventually arrived at the top of the sand-dunes. Rabbits scuttled away in the long grass.

Then they paused to take pleasure in the sheer beauty of the scene which lay before them. Less than three hundred yards away the silver sea was claiming the wide, empty stretch of sand, each breaker bringing it nearer and nearer to the line of heaped seaweed and washed-up debris that was its boundary except in times of high tides.

There was not a soul in sight. At that moment they felt that they might have been the last two people remaining upon earth.

Gradually the sound of radios and singing died away in the distance. Shell Island slept. Any time now the crabs would walk.

Chapter 5

THEY settled down in a hollow similar to that in which they had made known their feelings towards each other that morning. Indeed, it might even have been the same one.

Cliff glanced at his watch. He could see the dial plainly in the bright moonlight. It was just half-past twelve. He turned to Pat.

'We'll be all right here,' he, said. 'It's nice and sheltered and we've a good view of the whole beach. If anything moves we can't fail to spot it.'

Her reply was two warm lips seeking his and groping hands that were far more daring than they had been earlier on that day. He felt his manhood stiffening under her touch.

God! He hadn't come all this way just to do that. They could have stopped at Llanbedr and been comfortable in bed. All the same he was aroused now, and no man could have withstood such an advance.

They rolled back into the grass, lying side by side, facing each other.

'I haven't done this for a long time,' Pat breathed, feeling at his hardness through his trousers. His hands came from behind her and travelled slowly up the inside of her sweater until they reached the clasp of her bra, unfastening it with an expertise he had almost forgotten, and then feeling the tenderness of her swelling nipples. She moaned softly with delight, then lay back with her eyes closed.

Her fingers were active, though. Cliff felt that thrilling sensation of his zip being pulled down, her fingers groping inside the open vent and then the coolness of the night air on his warm moistness. He gasped with pleasure. Pat Benson certainly knew what she was doing!

Their lips met again, tongues probing and entwining. Both of them were experiencing the awakening of something which had lain dormant in them for so long. Rapidly they were getting out of control. Nothing else mattered . . . not even the giant crabs!

Cliff withdrew his left hand from the warmth of Pat's sweater and felt for the fastener on her jeans. Then he pulled her zip down and she lifted herself up slightly off the ground so that he could unclothe her. The whiteness of her thighs was in itself seductive in the soft moonlight, the darker triangle of soft fluffy hair between them seeming to withhold secrets from him. Secrets of men who had lain there. Men who had been sexually satisfied beyond their wildest dreams. And of one man who had walked away in preference for another woman.

Cliff rolled in between her open legs. She still had a grip on his hardness and now she was guiding it down where she wanted it, bathing it first in her warm river of desire and then sliding it down further until it disappeared inch by inch into her.

After that nothing else mattered. Their bodies bucked and heaved as they murmured sweet nothings in each other's ear before finally convulsing in a violent eruption that left them quivering and still yearning for each other.

Reluctantly they parted and adjusted their clothing. Pat, her hair awry and her cheeks flushed, looked more beautiful to Cliff than ever before.

'I'm more than glad I let you come with me tonight,' he whispered as he zipped himself up again. 'I'm afraid, though, that we must still keep an eye open for those crabs!'

He scrambled to the top of the hollow and gazed out along the shore. The sea was much nearer now. A hundred yards, maybe less. The soft swish of the incoming tide was sweet in his ears. Somewhere a curlew uttered its solitary, unmistakable call, a call so fitting to the loneliness of the vast expanse of open sea which lay in front of them.

Then he saw a movement. It was a long way off, back along the disappearing sands towards the North End. At first he thought that it might have been a shadow cast by the moon as the fluffy white cirrus cloud floated by. He saw it again. It shambled. Stopped. A minute passed. Two. Then it moved again, something on all fours that was following the line of the incoming tide, rearing upright, dropping down again.

'My God!' he hissed.

'What is it?' Pat Benson was at his side, her arms around his waist, her chin on his shoulder. 'What can you see, Cliff?'

'Over there!' He pointed. 'Watch carefully. It'll move again in a second. It's behind that pile of seaweed. There it goes!'

She followed his pointing finger. In the moonlight it was difficult to discern a definite shape. It just shambled along, pausing every few seconds, heading towards them.

'It... it's ...' and relief and surprise were in her strangled gasp, 'a man!'

'You're right!' Cliff stared at the awkwardly moving shape in front of them, 'it's... it's...'

'Bartholomew!' she breathed. 'The beachcomber!'

They watched fascinated as the grotesque form of the man whom they had met earlier in the day grovelled amidst the heaped-up, stinking seaweed. He came closer and closer until they could see his features plainly. Those wide, staring eyes darting eagerly about him as he searched amongst the debris remaining from the last tide. All the time he grunted unintelligibly like some snuffling beast of prey on a fresh scent.

Cliff pulled Pat down low into the long grass. He could not explain his feelings. But he did not want Bartholomew to spot them. Shivers ran freely up and down his spine, Mrs Jones had said that the man was harmless; yet he warranted she had never seen an expression like that on his face! Cliff suddenly felt himself wishing that he had brought along his old service revolver. He had never been afraid of any man in his life but he prayed now that Bartholomew would not spot them.

The beachcomber glanced in their direction, but gave no sign that he was aware of their presence. He drew level with them and passed on. Sometimes he travelled on all fours, but for the most part he resorted to that now familiar shamble, dragging one leg behind him.

'Look! ' Pat's whispered cry brought Cliff's head round again. She was

pointing back in the direction from which Bartholomew had come. Her next exclamation gurgled in her throat. Her hand covered her mouth, her eyes wide with sheer terror.

Then Cliff Davenport saw them. They were emerging from the edge of the tide like a host of behemoths rising up from the mighty deep. The giant crabs had arrived!

They were no more than fifty yards away, their pincers waving in the air as though they were beckoning colleagues still hidden by the sea to follow them. Cliff began to count. He reached forty, but more were still appearing. Their shells were a deep, sandy colour, glinting in the moonlight

Then the watchers saw the faces of the creatures. With a cry Pat Benson clasped her hands to her face. She had never thought of them as such. To her crabs had always been scuttling shells with legs. But the expressions on these faces were almost human. Evil! Deep-set eyes glowed, missing nothing.

They remained stationary as if awaiting some command, not even a pincer moving now.

'Big as sheep!' Cliff Davenport laughed hysterically. 'They're as big as bloody cows!'

'Oh, my god!' Pat clung to him. 'They're real. They actually exist!'

'Quiet!' he commanded, holding her close to him. 'Not a sound!'

They watched. More and more crabs slunk out of the sea. They grouped together, each one remaining motionless as soon as it was on dry land.

'What's going on?' Cliff whispered. 'It's bizarre; it's as though they're waiting for something!'

The crabs remained motionless.

'There!' Cliff had spotted another movement amongst the waves. 'Something's .. Oh, my god! Just look at that one!'

'I don't, I can't believe it!' Pat Benson was close to hysteria. 'It's just not possible! It's a nightmare! Oh, Cliff, please tell me, please, it isn't all real!'

'It's real enough,' he said grimly. 'I wish to God it wasn't, though! Just look at the size of that fellow!'

King Crab! Nobody could have doubted the latest arrival's right to rule. Half as big again as the rest of those nightmarish creatures, this one was the very personification of evil. It waddled slowly to the front of the others, its pincers waving menacingly as though defying any one of them to challenge its authority. Some of them moved back, huddling together.

'They're, even they're frightened of it!' Cliff exclaimed. 'It's got the whole lot of them just where it wants them!'

The horrific leader's eyes, the size of saucers, glinted in the bright moonlight. By some means it was communicating with the others, giving orders. Then it shuffled forwards, turning round two or three times, scuffling the sand with its claws. It faced them again, one pincer circling, waving. They began to move forward, forming into columns and groups.

'Something's up,' Cliff muttered. 'It's as though it's scented something!'

The Professor's mind was uneasy. He glanced back at the uneven ground which lay between them and the main island, the causeway, and safety. The sand was soft and deep. It would impede a man's progress. He wondered how fast the giant crabs would be able to move over such terrain, whether he and Pat would be able to outdistance them.

Pat whispered urgently. 'You don't think they've scented us?'

'I don't know,' he replied. 'I wouldn't have thought so, but... get ready to run. Hold on to me.'

The giant crabs were on the move. Advancing in a distinct military formation they made some sort of clicking noise as they moved. They were covering the ground fairly quickly, but Cliff Davenport had a nagging feeling that they were moving at only half-speed.

On and on they came. He gripped Pat's clammy hand tightly. The crabs were almost level with them now, moving parallel to them and following a course that would take them to the South End tip of the island. He braced himself. At the very first sign that King Crab was ordering his 'troops' to move inshore, Cliff would haul Pat to her feet and run as he had never run before. Mentally he cursed himself for having brought her in the first place, but he knew in his heart that nothing would have made her remain behind at Llanbedr.

The monster crab was barely twenty yards in front of them. Suddenly it paused. Cliff's muscles tensed and he was on the point of starting a mad dash for safety when the huge creature increased its pace again, that fearful 'clickety-click' sound echoing across the dunes.

'They haven't spotted us.' Cliff breathed a sigh of relief as the waddling army continued on its parallel course. They're on to something, though. Look, they're almost running!'

It was true. The horrific creatures had broken into a fast shamble, moving with a precision that spoke of a definite purpose. This was no casual foray on land!

Cliff and Pat found themselves unable to take their eyes off the monstrous leader. Its waving pincer directed every movement of the other crabs. They obeyed it instantly, veering to left or right, speeding up or slowing down.

Something else moved on that moonlit beach some distance ahead of the crabs. Something that shambled and lurched with an ungainliness similar to their own.

'Christ!' Cliff Davenport adopted a kneeling posture, a look of fear and helplessness on his lean face. 'That's what they're after. Bartholomew! He hasn't seen them either!'

It was true. Bartholomew, dragging one leg behind him, pausing every few yards to search amongst piles of seaweed, was barely twenty yards ahead of the advancing crabs.

'Oh, my god, no!' Pat Benson clung to Cliff. 'Can't we do something? At least warn him?' He shook his head slowly. 'No,' he breathed. 'There's nothing whatever we can do. He's deaf. He can't hear. He hasn't even seen them. They're almost on him. Oh, my god!'

The absence of Bartholomew's scream was the most horrific factor of all. Cliff and Pat had an unrestricted view of everything that happened. One moment the man was beachcombing, the next a mighty pincer had caught him by his game leg. King Crab was claiming him for his own. The crack of splintering bone was audible above the clattering of the excited crabs.

For one split second Bartholomew was free. Cliff and Pat saw him roll over, away from his attacker, his one leg a bloody stump from which scarlet fluid pumped, glowing like best vintage claret in the moonlight.

They had a full view of his face as he saw the crabs for the first time. The large eyes widened and the malformed mouth formed silent curses, perhaps pleas, maybe even prayers. He clutched at the place his leg had been and his fingers came away scarlet.

King Crab moved in again on his helpless victim. The rest of the crabs just stood back in complete silence. They made no move towards the dismembered man. Obviously such a prize was royal property.

With amazing speed that razor-sharp pincer caught the other leg, amputating it with even greater ease. Two bloody stumps. An arm made a token resistance. Another snap. Then another.

A helpless pitiful trunk of humanity squirmed on the blood-soaked sand. Eyes that pleaded for death. King Crab was in no hurry. He picked up a leg, held it aloft, seemed fascinated by the dripping blood and then with a move that was almost too fast for the eye to follow, the limb sailed through the air into the midst of the clustered crabs.

Excited clicking, A sudden rush. They began quarrelling over the tasty morsel. They need not have worried. Another leg and two arms fell amongst them. The clicking was like rapid machine-gun fire.

The monster crab ignored them. He had what he wanted. Bartholomew's life was ebbing from him fast but unconsciousness still cruelly eluded him.

The bloody pincer gouged downwards and then upwards, entrails dangling from it before they disappeared between the cavernous jaws. Again and again.

Only when all the flesh had gone was the crunching of bone audible to the watching humans. The giant crabs did not believe in waste.

Chapter 6

SUDDENLY the clicking and crunching of bone ceased. The silence was even more terrible than had been the sounds of carnage. The crabs just squatted on the sand as though paying homage to their King. His eyes were on them, his countenance evilly bloated.

Of Bartholomew there was no sign. Not even a splinter of bone remained. On the silver sand there was a large, dark patch but even this was fast disappearing as the tide stretched over it as though thirsting for the last remains of the beachcomber.

'How, how awful.' The words came in a tortured gasp from Pat. She felt as though she was about to faint. She was glad of Cliff Davenport's comforting arm. Together they vomited into the spiky grass of the sand-dunes, all the time fearful that the sound of their spewing would be heard by the nightmare army of horrors from the deep.

'What are they doing?' she whispered at length, peering over the top of the dunes.

'Nothing,' Cliff replied, 'at the moment, anyway. Maybe they're satisfied now that they've feasted, or perhaps they'll ... search for more!'

'Hadn't we better go while we can?' she urged.

He nodded. He knew it was the logical thing to do. Yet somehow ... it was like being hypnotised. He just had to stay and watch.

The clicking began again. Slower this time. King Crab's claw was in the air, circling, slowing down like some pointer of doom seeking another victim. Instinctively Cliff ducked, pulling Pat down with him. The pincer came round, faltered as it centred on the place where they lay hidden . . . and then passed on.

The two humans sighed with relief. They had not been singled out as crab-food.

The monstrous creature's claw came to a halt - pointing out to sea! Immediately the clicking began again. A mass of shambling, shuffling shells was on the move. Quickly the incoming tide covered them as they headed back to the deep. Except King Crab. Only he remained behind after the rest had gone, almost as though he was reluctant to leave dry land, perhaps gloatingly surveying it as a possible future addition to his watery domain.

At last he too slid into the water, almost gracefully, and disappeared from sight. The waves lapped over the spot where he had stood.

'Well,' Cliff stood up, helping Pat to her feet also, 'they've gone.'

'It was ghastly, revolting, horrible!' She was trembling violently. 'Oh, Cliff, what's it all mean? Have they gone for good do you think?' There was false hope in the last question.

'They'll be back,' he said grimly, and began leading her across the sand-dunes, picking his way with ease. The full moon was directly above them and they could see every detail of the landscape clearly. Tents flapped gently in the breeze as their occupants slept, totally unaware of what had gone on so very close to them.

'They'll be back,' Cliff Davenport repeated. 'Nothing's so goddam certain. They've discovered a taste for human flesh -and bone - and they won't let up now. So far it's only been unlucky people who have perished. Like Bartholomew - and Ian and Julie. It's only the beginning. Did you see the size and strength of them? Imagine what they could do if they ventured inland in force . . . That big fellow wasn't just any other crab.'

He knew what he was doing. He can think! He's capable of organising them into

a well-drilled army!'

'Oh god!' she gulped. 'It, it doesn't bear thinking about. We can't just ignore what we've seen, Cliff. We've got to do something! Do you hear me? We've got to do something, anything!' There was a wildness in her voice.

He tried to calm her rising hysteria as they came in sight of Llanbedr. The village had an eerie appearance, seeming to proclaim that it knew. As though it had known all along and was just waiting.

'Yes,' he nodded. 'I'm fully aware of my responsibilities. What we've seen tonight is one of the most terrible sights ever witnessed by human beings. We still have no proof, but that doesn't matter. I'm going to do my damndest to convince the authorities that these creatures actually exist.'

'How?'

'First we must rest.' He paused in the doorway of their hotel. 'Then, first thing in the morning I shall make a phone call to London. The Ministry of Defence. I've already called on a friend of mine to get me out of a scrape recently. He would help me again, but I'm afraid he just isn't high enough. I must go right to the top. I shall be ridiculed to begin with but I must insist and insist and insist. I... '

'We,' she reminded him.

'Thank you, Pat.' He squeezed her hand. 'We shall be ridiculed. We have no actual proof except the evidence of what our own eyes have seen tonight. Perhaps we shall manage to convince them in the end. If not,' he smiled wryly, 'then we shall at least have clear consciences when ... when ...'

He left the sentence unfinished.

'You'd better come to my room,' he whispered as they tiptoed upstairs. 'I'd prefer you not to sleep on your own after what you have seen tonight.'

They stripped off and squeezed into the single bed. Suddenly they realised just how exhausted they were, physically and mentally. Even the feel of their naked bodies against each other did not fully arouse their desires. Within minutes they had fallen into an uneasy, sleep.

Cliff Davenport was downstairs fully dressed and shaved before Mrs Jones had begun cooking the breakfast.

'Goodness me, Professor!' She looked startled as he poked his head round the kitchen door. 'You're up early. You ...'

'I'd like to use your phone, Mum.' His smile could not hide the gravity in his eyes.

'Why yes, of course. Carry on. Is anything the matter, Professor?' she asked.

'Urgent business, Mum,' he replied. 'A call to London.'

'The phone's through there,' she added as she began cracking some eggs. 'Help yourself.'

The tall, grey-haired man had barely entered his office when the telephone rang. He tutted in annoyance. Marjorie should have known better than to have put the call through. She knew that he didn't like to be disturbed before ten

o'clock at the earliest.

'Grisedale!' he snapped as he lifted the receiver.

'I'm terribly sorry to trouble you, sir,' his secretary's voice answered him, 'but there's a gentleman on the line who simply will not be put off. He says he must speak to you at once on a matter of national urgency.'

'Does he, by jove!' Grisedale's jaw tightened. 'A crank, no doubt.'

'He gave his name as Professor Davenport,' she went on. 'He's ringing from somewhere in Wales and he said you'd know his name.'

'Put him through,' Grisedale barked, a puzzled expression replacing the one of irritation.

'Clifford!' he boomed the moment they were connected. 'What the devil's the meaning of phoning me at this hour? You what? Oh well, I suppose I'll have to listen then. Go ahead. I'll try not to laugh.'

For fully ten minutes Grisedale listened to what Cliff Davenport had to say. He ummed and aahed and clicked his tongue but he did not laugh. A worried frown appeared on his face as, one handed, he fished a cigarette out of his case and lit it.

'Christ!' he exclaimed at last. 'If it was anybody else but you, Cliff, I'd have them certified and put away for spreading rumours liable to cause panic among the public. I believe you, though, but whether anybody else will is a different matter. Yes, yes, I know I'm number one up here, but I'm still only a servant of the government. Everything has to go before a bunch of born sceptics. Yes, yes, of course I realise the urgency of it. Hold on a moment.' He paused, reached a diary out of his desk and began flipping through the pages. 'I'm flying to Belgium tomorrow. Top level talks. I'll send Colonel Goode down. No, no. It's the best I can do. The only thing I can do in fact. You won't like him. He's a sarcastic sod. I hate his guts! But if there's anything in what you say, he's the man to deal with it. He'll have half the troops stationed in this country down there by this time tomorrow. All right then, ring me when I get back on Friday if anything further crops up. Best of luck, old boy.'

Grisedale replaced the receiver and lit another cigarette.

'I hope he's not going off his rocker,' he muttered.

He dialled a number on the internal telephone.

It was late afternoon when Colonel Goode arrived in Llanbedr. He was a short thickset man, a heavy moustache adorning his upper lip, and his ruddy complexion had not been caused by the sun. Whisky was his only love in life and it was the uppermost thought in his mind as he got out of his car.

'Colonel Goode, I presume,' He looked up to see Cliff Davenport coming down the steps, hand outstretched and a smile on his face.

So this is the bloody nutcase in person, the man from the Ministry of Defence decided. Old Grizzly seems to think he's sane, too!

'I could do with a drink.' Goode wiped his brow. 'Whisky. I'm parched.'

'I'm afraid this place isn't licensed.' Cliff was taking an instant dislike to

this pompous individual. 'There's a place ... '

'Not licensed!' Colonel Goode interrupted. 'What have I come to? When I heard your story from Commander Grisedale I thought maybe they had whisky on the house down here!'

Cliff Davenport clenched his fists and fought to control his temper. How could he possibly hope to convince a man like this that there was a race of monster crabs lurking somewhere along this coast?

'Well, I'm going into the village to get a drink.' The Colonel turned back to his car and lifted out a small overnight case. 'Take this up to my room. I'll see you later.'

The Professor stood and watched as Goode drove off in the direction of the village. He heard Pat Benson come up behind him and then her arm slipped through his.

'I might as well not have bothered,' he murmured. 'Still, we shall have to try and convince him just the same.'

Colonel Goode had obviously found his whisky. That was evident to both Pat Benson and Cliff Davenport as the man from the Ministry lowered himself into an armchair in the lounge. All the other guests had retired for the night and Mrs Jones, sensing that something important was afoot, had made sure that they were left in peace.

The Colonel hiccupped and his eyelids drooped.

'Now,' he said, 'what's all this nonsense about?'

'Firstly, Colonel,' Cliff began, as he seated himself on the edge of the table, 'it isn't nonsense. Both Mrs Benson and I have seen these crabs. Last night we watched them catch and devour a local beachcomber by the name of Bartholomew.'

'The whisky,' Goode laughed unpleasantly. 'That's what whisky does for you. Does it for me too. I've seen those crabs on plenty of occasions. Especially when I've been eating them! Don't let it worry you. They won't hurt you. They're always gone by morning.'

'Colonel!' Cliff brought his fist down on the table. 'I am not joking. Human life is at stake. It might even stretch further than that!'

'Oh, rubbish!' Goode waved a hand in the air and his eyelids began to droop again. 'All rubbish. Bloody rubbish. I didn't like to tell old Grizzly so. After all you don't get an expenses paid trip to the coast every day. Gotta get back tomorrow, though. Gotta be up early and on the road. Must turn in now.'

'Colonel!' Cliff banged the table again in an attempt to keep the other awake. 'We want you to come with us tonight. Across to Shell Island. We want to show you these creatures. Then perhaps you'll believe us!'

'I'm going to bed.' Colonel Goode rose unsteadily to his feet. 'If you want to go and sit on the beach, don't let me stop you.' He staggered to the door and held on to it as he turned back to look at them. 'Order me an early breakfast. Gotta be on the road early.'

Cliff and Pat sat in silence and listened to his footsteps as he went up to

his room.

'Well, that's that, then.' Cliff hung his head and thrust his hands deep down into his pockets. 'So much for our attempt to warn the authorities. Now we'll just have to wait and see what happens next!'

Colonel Goode, as it transpired, sat down to a late breakfast. Bleary-eyed he gazed venomously at his two companions who had already progressed as far as the toast and marmalade.

'We've just been listening to the news.' The Professor leaned across the table. 'Two more swimmers have disappeared. This time as far north as Rhyl. What do you say now, Colonel?'

'Huh!' The Colonel began spooning his porridge into his mouth. 'People want to learn to swim before they start bugging about in the water. Bring back conscription, I say. Teach 'em all to swim!'

Cliff sighed and helped himself to some more marmalade. Now they were really up against it. His warning had gone unheeded. His first reaction was to head back to London himself. Yet he knew he could not. He would have to see it through now. And besides, he wasn't going to leave Pat Benson on her own, crabs or no crabs.

Chapter Seven

THE sentry was bored. Night duty always bored him. It wasn't really as if there was anything to stand guard over. A few unmanned aircraft which the boffins liked to mess about with. It was their way of playing at model aircraft, in this case at the taxpayer's expense! Christ, nobody would want to pinch one of those,

Still that chap had been snooping about the other day. As crazy as a coot. He couldn't understand why they'd let him go. Particularly as there had been a bomb-alert earlier in the week.

He yawned and leaned against the corner of the concrete blockhouse. That damned rifle was too heavy to hold all night. He leaned it up against the wall and delved into the top pocket of his tunic for a crushed pack of cigarettes. He found one, straightened it out and lit it. He drew deeply. Strictly against regulations, of course, but a chap would go barmy if he didn't have a smoke between sunset and sunrise.

He couldn't understand why they wouldn't let him sit in one of the huts. Probably thought he'd doze off. He might do that anyway. His eyelids felt heavy.

The moon was bright again tonight. He looked at it and couldn't understand why anybody would want to go messing about up there. Bloody crazy. He wouldn't

have gone. Never knew what you might find pissing about in space. All sorts of weird monsters.

Clckety-click.

He straightened up. What was that? Sounded like somebody using old-fashioned morse code. He picked up his rifle,

Click, Click. Clickety-click.

Blimey! Those cattle had broken in through the fence. They were always rubbing themselves up against it. Never thought they'd actually manage to get inside.

He sighed. Better go and shoo 'em out again.

Then he saw the first pair of eyes. It reminded him of a groundhog. Shining like the CO's Land-Rover headlights. There were more of them. Scores of them!

He stopped in his tracks. The nearest was no more than fifteen feet away. 'What's goin' on?'

He gulped. Christ, fucking crabs.'

His rifle came to his shoulder. They wouldn't have much answer to that. He squeezed the trigger. The report was deafening, echoing around the concrete buildings and dying away somewhere far out to sea.

He couldn't believe it. The bastard hadn't budged! Wrong. It was coming towards him. They were all coming towards him. Waddling. Not hurrying.

He fired again. Twice. Three times. He kept on shooting until the magazine was empty. Run!

He turned. His heart nearly gave out. He felt his senses reeling. It wasn't the fact that his retreat was cut off. That would have been bad enough. It was the creature barring his way that caused him to cross over that thin borderline which separates sanity from madness.

He screamed at the top of his voice, wielding his rifle by the barrel. The stock smashed to matchwood on that armour-plated pincer. He backed away and then he started laughing. He adopted a fighting pose, his fists clenched.

'AH right!' he yelled. 'Come on then, you bastards. Let's see how good you are in a straight fucking fight!'

Mercifully the slashing claw of King Crab caught him directly on top of the head, splitting his skull in two. He was dead before he hit the ground and escaped the torture that Bartholomew had suffered as he was dismembered.

The searchlight was just in time to reveal the last of the mutilation to the two horrified gunners in the tower. They did not recognise that last joint of human meat disappearing into the jaws of the monster crab as belonging to their colleague. All they saw were the crabs. That was enough!

'Fucking hell!' the sergeant cried as he brought the light machine-gun to bear on the crawling mass. 'What the hell are they? This'll sort them out!'

The clatter of machine-gun fire rent the night air.

Click, Click. Clickety-click.

The whole camp was awake by now. Someone had opened the armoury. Men with rifles were rushing to every available vantage point and opening fire.

A battery of gunfire exploded.

Click. Click. Clickety-click.

Hailstones or bullets. They were all the same to the giant crabs. They just bounced off. They did not like the sensation of having things vibrating on their shells, though. It made them angry. Very angry. They didn't like the noise and the flashes either. Above it all, though, they sensed the prospect of sweet, tender human flesh.

'Christ!' the machine-gunner in the tower swore as he paused to reload. 'It hasn't bloody touched 'em! Might as well use a peashooter!'

Suddenly he heard a cracking of timber below and felt himself and the machine-gun starting to slide.

'They've wrecked the fucking tower!' the sergeant screamed, and then they were sailing through the air, hurtling down to the waiting jaws and pincers.

Two snipers threw down their empty rifles and made a run for the gate. Beyond lay the causeway. They would probably have made it had not the gate been closed. They started to scramble up it. Vicious pincers snapped at them. Legless, they fell back.

King Crab waved his claws and clicked loudly. Instantly his minions became silent, looking to him for orders, not daring to disobey. Half-eaten humans were forgotten.

A wave of a great claw pointing to the shore. Retreat Seconds later the seawards shamble had begun. There were no obstacles in their way. The barbed-wire fence had been flattened in the attack.

A few shots, more in anger than anything else, followed them and then as the ominous clicking became fainter Shell Island began to count its losses. An emergency call to the mainland brought ambulances speeding to the scene. Nevertheless they had to wait half an hour for the tide to uncover the causeway before they could cross.

Crowds gathered from the nearby camping areas. The majority were genuine helpers bringing their own first-aid kits with them. But among the throng were also the ghouls, those who loved scenes of disaster, those who loved to gloat over the mutilations.

The losses were slight in comparison to the ferocity and size of the attack. Five dead. The first sentry, the two machine-gunners and the two hapless snipers who had been foolish enough to try and reach the mainland.

Police followed the ambulances.

'Good lord!' The easy-going Sergeant Hughes's features were paler than any of the locals had ever seen. 'What in the name of heaven were they?'

'Crabs!' A serviceman paused to light a much-needed cigarette. 'Bloody great crabs as big as horses!'

It wasn't long before the telephone lines to London were buzzing.

'Im sorry, Clifford,' Grisedale said as he sipped his whisky in the Victoria in Llanbedr and regarded Cliff Davenport and Pat Benson. 'I'm sorry I doubted you. Believe you me. They fetched me back from Belgium in the early hours of this morning and I came here post haste. That bloody fool Goode.'

'Don't blame him.' Cliff drew deeply on his pipe. 'Even if he had believed me and we'd gone out on to the sands, we wouldn't have been able to stop the attack. More than likely we'd have been caught up in the invasion and wouldn't be here now to tell the tale.'

'You always did look for the better side in people,' the other remarked with a smile. 'The fact is, this thing's serious now. The place is crawling with police, troops and the press. Every newspaper is carrying the most far-fetched yarn imaginable and crowds are pouring in. We've had to evacuate the island. Consequently every hotel between Rhyl and Borth is bursting at the seams, and caravans and campers are everywhere. If there's another of these invasions...' his voice tailed off.

Cliff Davenport nodded. In front of him he had a map of the Welsh coast spread out on the table.

'Let's start at the beginning,' he said, 'We first saw these crabs a week ago. My nephew and his girlfriend disappeared the week before that, so we can safely say that these creatures arrived here no more than a fortnight ago. They're a freak species never before known in history. We can do little more than hazard a guess at their origin. Underwater nuclear experiments in another part of the world causing them to grow to tremendous proportions? That's just a theory of mine, but at this stage we're not so much concerned with that as to how we are going to deal with them - if and when we locate their underwater hideout. It must be somewhere on this coast between Rhyl and Borth. But where? There must be thousands of caves below the sea which could hide a million of them!'

'Personally,' Grisedale interrupted, 'I think they bit off more than they could chew when they attacked the WD base.' Grisedale lit another cigarette. 'Maybe they won't venture ashore again.'

'Don't you believe it,' the Professor replied. 'They didn't suffer one casualty. They survived rifle and machine-gun fire. Now, there's a colossal crab which leads them. I've named him King Crab. Believe you me, he thinks. He's cunning. That attack was more of an experiment than anything else. They've found bathers easy prey and now they want to see how they fare on land. They've discovered that bullets can't hurt them, so next time they'll be more venturesome. The invasion will be on a much bigger scale and they'll hit one of the towns.'

They'll rue the day they do,' Grisedale quipped. The army have got tanks stationed at every village and town on this coast, plus troops standing by with mortars and grenades. And if that doesn't put paid to 'em then the RAF will give 'em some stick from the air. They've backed a loser!'

'I wouldn't be too sure of that,' Cliff's expression was serious. 'You haven't seen these monsters, Grisedale. If you had, you'd know what I mean. I'd have to see 'em blown to smithereens with my own eyes before I'd believe they're not invincible.'

'Well, I take it you won't be going back to London just yet,' the Ministry of Defence man observed lightly as he noted Cliff's hand squeezing Pat's thigh.

'No,' Cliff assented. 'I guess we'll be around for a bit yet. I've no doubt in my mind what happened to Ian and Julie and I'd like to see this thing through to the end.'

'Good man.' Grisedale stood up. 'Well, I've got a meeting in Barmouth this afternoon, so I must push along. Keep in touch.'

Shortly after midnight that night Cliff Davenport let himself quietly out of his bedroom. As he tiptoed along the corridor in his stockinged feet he hoped that nobody would hear him. His heart pounded wildly and his mouth was dry. For once he was not thinking of those horrific crabs. The army was here to deal with them now.

He paused outside the door of room four. He knew that Pat wanted him to come to her, yet, since that night in the sand-dunes, nothing had happened between them. Their minds had been too occupied with the present horrors. Of course, the logical thing would have been for him and Pat to have shared a room. But that sort of thing wasn't possible at Mrs Jones's. She knew everything that went on, and she most certainly would not have approved.

His hand trembled as it rested on the handle of the door and then he entered, closing it quietly behind him.

'Cliff!' Pat's welcome whisper allayed all his fears. The night was warm and she was lying naked on top of the sheets. The silvery light filtering through the small window, not nearly so bright now that the full moon was waning, was sufficient for him to see every detail of her body. Her breasts were perfectly rounded. Her thighs were parted and almost guiltily she snatched her hand from between them.

'I was thinking about you,' she sighed as he seated himself on the bed beside her. He bent and kissed her. Slim fingers felt at the front of his trousers, perhaps to determine the purpose of his visit, and she laughed softly as she found that everything was to her satisfaction.

He began to take off his clothes. Her eyes followed his every movement. At last he stood before her as Adam had once stood before Eve, tempting her to tempt him.

Her fingers closed over his erection and drew her to him. He rolled on to the bed and then she was dragging him on top of her.

'You're in an awful hurry!' he gasped as she helped him to attain an immediate penetration.

'I've been waiting for you to come to me for three nights now,' she breathed. 'I was beginning to think that you had decided upon a platonic friendship after all! '

He thrust madly, unable to hold back any longer.

'Does that answer your question?' he murmured, but her reply was lost in the moans and the writhings of their united bodies as they reached the ultimate possible peak of pleasure which any man and woman can climb.

Afterwards they just lay quiet, still joined, delighting in their closeness.

'Cliff.' Pat was the first to speak after some considerable time. 'What. . . what will happen when the army have cleared up this crab business? I mean,

what about us? There won't be anything to keep us here any longer, will there?'

'No.' He kissed her again. 'There won't be anything to keep us here. I guess we'll go back to London then.'

'We?' Her voice trembled at the very question which had plagued her since the first time they had made love.

'We,' he assured her.

Her fingers went down to him again in an attempt to arouse him a second time.

Chapter Eight

SAM OWEN always fished by night. He had done so ever since he was a youth. Experience had taught him that his catches were heavier and there was more room to move in and about Barmouth harbour without that cursed ferry churning up the estuary and disturbing the shoals of fish every half-hour. Besides that he just liked being afloat on moonlight nights.

He was forty-two, and a strong, silent man. He lived for the sea and his one wish was that he would not die on dry land, When his time came he wanted to pass away peacefully in his little fishing smack out on the open sea. Maybe he'd drift away for ever and they'd never find him.

The warnings of the police and the armed forces didn't worry him. OK, so something had happened on Shell Island. That was their worry. It was ten miles away up the coast. That was far enough away. And those stupid bathers who got lost off the beach? Cramp probably.

Sam Owen was at peace with the world as his boat bobbed just outside the harbour entrance at the mouth of the estuary. By tomorrow night the moon would be no good for night-fishing. He lit his pipe and relaxed. It had been a good week.

Half an hour later he knew he'd got the catch of his life. There was something big in the net and the boat was listing to stern as a result. Whatever it was, it was thrashing madly. He had visions of hauling in another Moby Dick as he set about trying to land his catch.

The water foamed. The bows were right up in the air now and he struggled to keep his balance. Hell! There was only one thing for it. He would have to cut the net free and lose whatever was in it as well.

The moonlight flashed on the steel blade of his pocket-knife. He leaned over and began to slash at the netting. He could see something struggling in the mesh. Christ! What was it?

His knife was blunt. Had it been sharp he might have cut through the net quickly and escaped. Instead, he had to saw with the blade. As he leant overboard something clasped his wrist. Something that was razor-sharp. Before he realised it, his bloody hand and the knife had dropped into the sea with a dull plop. The silvery water had a spreading dull red patch on it.

He staggered back, screaming. Blood spouted into the night air like an oil strike. In vain he grabbed at the stump and tried to stem the flow with an oily rag. The blood spurted into his face, blinding him.

The boat lurched again as a huge claw appeared over the stern and two glowing eyes regarded the man who was now easy prey. The giant crab could smell blood. Human blood. Awkwardly it began to clamber aboard.

Sam Owen caught a glimpse of the advancing creature through a red haze. Blind panic seized him. He staggered to the bows, blood still pumping fiercely from his severed wrist. He was going to die one way or another. He would either bleed to death or this nightmarish monstrosity from the deep would mutilate him and eat him. His thoughts turned to the sea. He decided that he would die in the way he had always wanted to, with salt water filling his lungs and the fish which had provided him with his living feeding off his body.

His strength ebbing fast, he pulled himself up over the side of the boat. A pincer fastened over his ankle and he knew his foot was gone. What did it matter though? The coolness of the sea seemed to revive him temporarily. Instinctively he tried to swim but it was impossible without the full use of his limbs. He felt himself going down, down, down. He touched the bottom. The red mist was before him again. Eyes were glowing all around him. Something gripped his neck. It was sharp. He'd once read a book about the French Revolution. It had said that the guillotine was painless. He would soon find out. Then blackness surged over him.

At 1.25 a.m. the invasion of Barmouth began. The waning moonlight was in the crabs' favour. A few nights ago they would have been spotted earlier - not that the outcome would have been any different.

The soldiers in the tank on the quayside were the first to see the creatures, 'Look!' The gunner shook his mate into instant wakefulness. 'They're here!'

It was a matter of seconds to bring the big gun to bear on the nearest crab. The sights were adjusted - and at that range it was impossible to miss.

The gun spat out its shell.

The crab keeled over, fragments of shell flying through the air.

'Got him!' the gunner yelled jubilantly. 'Invincible? A load of balls! This'll sort the bastards out!'

As he reloaded and brought his gun to bear on the crawling crabs again, a movement caught his eye. He paused.

'Shit,' he gasped. 'The bastard's getting up again!'

The creature had indeed struggled upright. With the help of its companions it had regained its balance. Its eyes glowed venomously and, apart from some shards chipped from its shell, it appeared to be all right.

'It couldn't,' the corporal grunted incredulously. 'Nothing could withstand that - not at that range anyway!'

'Well, it has,' the gunner snapped, taking another sighting. 'See that big sod? The one the size of a fucking house. Well let's see what it does to him!'

The quayside shook with the explosion.

King Crab was thrown backwards, yet did not roll over. For a few seconds he just squatted, dazed, and then he advanced. His army, well in excess of a hundred crabs, followed him. The clicking was deafening, mind-searing.

The large claw waved and came to rest pointing directly at the tank. There was no mistaking his command.

'Shut that hatch!' the gunner yelled. 'They're coming at us!'

The hatch clanged shut. The soldiers felt secure. The enemy was too close for another shot. They would just have to hold out until reinforcements arrived. The corporal lit a cigarette. His hands were shaking.

'They can't get at us in here.' His laugh was strained and hollow inside the confined space. 'Remember the time we broke down, Sarge? They couldn't tow us and had to repair us on the spot. Took 'em two days.'

'Shut up!' The sergeant's nerves were stretched to breaking point. He didn't like the look of those crabs one little bit.

They heard claws scraping on the steel.

'Come on you bastards!' the corporal yelled hysterically. 'Try and shift us!'

'For Christ's sake shut your bloody trap!' The gunner's fist caught the corporal in the mouth and his head hit the steel wall with a dull clang. He slumped back in his seat.

The gunner felt the tank move. Impossible. He looked out. Dozens of crabs were gathered around the mobile steel fortress. He felt it move again. Upwards.

'They've, they've lifted it up!' He cast a glance at his companions. The corporal was still unconscious. He shook him roughly.

'Wake up!' he snarled, panic starting to creep into his voice. 'Wake up. They're carrying us.'

The tank shook and swayed as crabs crawled beneath it while others lifted. Their shells provided an ideal means of transport as they set off in the direction of the harbour wall.

The sergeant started to scream, slapping his comatose mate frantically; but the corporal's head merely lolled from side to side. Then they stopped. The tank lurched forward and seemed to be suspended in mid-air for a split second before it hurtled downwards. A mighty splash and it was sinking. The murky waters closed over it. A bone-jarring thud followed as it became embedded in the deep mud and started to sink. Inside all was silent. All three men were dead.

The armed forces swung into smooth action following the first report of the tank's gun. Hardly had its echoes died away before two truckloads of troops

were speeding to the scene. It took them only three minutes to reach the harbour. It had taken the crabs less than two to deal with the tank.

The driver of the first truck was braking the moment he saw the crabs. They were everywhere. The road was packed with them. And they were advancing towards the town. He started to reverse but his progress was delayed by the driver of the second truck who had difficulty in going backwards at any speed. There was no hope of evading the columns of advancing horrors.

Soldiers jumped to the ground. Grenades were hurled. Automatic rifles were brought into action.

The promenade and harbour shuddered under the explosions. Vivid flashes lit the night sky. Smoke billowed out in clouds as a disintegrated sea-front shelter caught fire.

Relentlessly the giant crabs advanced. Burning debris lay before them, but the flames went unheeded. They were impervious to fire!

Captain Oliver of the Royal Shropshire Light Infantry holstered his smoking pistol. His face was smoke-blackened and his hat was missing. They had failed. That much was obvious, and he was not prepared to sacrifice his men needlessly. He shouted above the din for them to retreat.

The trucks were abandoned as the soldiers fell back. Behind them lay a piece of waste ground on which stood an amusement arcade, swings, dodgems and coffee stalls. They headed towards it.

Everywhere people were fleeing in panic. Men in pyjamas and dressing-gowns hustled their families away from the battleground. Women and children screamed.

Captain Oliver watched as the two heavy transport trucks shared the same fate as the tank. The crabs lifted them with ease, hurling them over the harbour wall. The fire began to spread. Rows of buildings became a blazing inferno. A burning beam fell across one of the crabs. It brushed it aside and carried it on its way.

'Not even fire can stop them!' Oliver muttered. 'It's as though they've come from hell itself!'

More soldiers were arriving from the north. They set up a mortar and scored a direct hit with the first shot. The scuttling ranks parted but came together again almost immediately. There was not a single casualty!

At 3.30 a.m. King Crab sounded the retreat with a clicking and waving of his pincers. Like a well-disciplined army the creatures headed back to the harbour and within a few minutes not a single one was to be seen.

The Battle of Barmouth was over. The fire-engines moved in and the demoralised troops began mopping-up operations. Those whose homes remained returned to them. Many wept over their losses. And everybody wondered when the crabs would return - as surely they would.

Inside the Town Hall it was hot and stuffy. The men seated on either side of the long table sweated profusely. Outside they could hear gangs of workmen attempting to clear the debris. The streets were crowded with holiday-makers who were intent only on viewing the results of the invasion. They constantly ignored police warnings to keep clear.

Cliff Davenport loosened his tie and looked around him. The large room was crowded. There must have been two hundred in there. Mostly they were from the armed forces, from top brass down as far as mere captains. The Mayor was present, along with his councillors. Naturally, the Press was not missing out on it, either.

'Gentlemen.' Grisedale stood up and addressed the gathering. 'Last night this town suffered an attack far worse than anything it has ever experienced in its history. We had anticipated a move of this sort ever since the invasion of Shell Island. The precautions taken were, it seemed beforehand, perfectly adequate. However we had underestimated the enemy. It now appears that they are immune to the weapons of warfare; nor, it seems, do they fear fire. There is, therefore, only one course open to us. We shall take immediate steps to locate their underwater hideout and once this has been discovered I have no doubt that they will be unable to survive the charges which we shall explode beneath the surface of the sea.'

'You mean a nuclear device of some sort?' a reporter asked.

'I said nothing of the kind,' Grisedale retorted.

However he was well aware of the story which the early editions would carry.

'We have among us,' he went on, 'Professor Davenport, the well-known marine biologist. It was he who first discovered the presence of these creatures on our shores and he has agreed to collaborate with us in our attempt to exterminate them.'

'I feel sure that his knowledge of the ocean bed will be invaluable to us in seeking out these terrible creatures. I would add that while for the moment their reign of terror is confined to this part of the coast it could spread much further. They will breed if they are not destroyed. Not only this country but the whole world would be in peril then!'

A murmur ran through the listeners. Heads turned to look at Cliff Davenport. For once in his life he felt slightly embarrassed. Proud too. The safety of the human race lay in his hands. He was being asked to deliver them from this peril of the deep. It was one helluva responsibility.

'But you don't have to dive down there, do you?' A look of dismay spread across Pat Benson's face when Cliff returned to Llanbedr and told her over dinner what had transpired at the meeting.

'Well I can't examine the sea-bed by sitting safely in a motor launch,' he smiled.

'In that case,' she replied, 'I shall be sitting in the launch. You're not leaving me out of this now.'

He sighed. Already he was learning that it was futile to argue with Pat once her mind was made up.

Chapter Nine

THE sea was calm. There was barely a swell as the Welsh Queen chugged out of Barmouth harbour. It was hotter than ever that day. The sun blazed mercilessly down, but Cliff Davenport knew that before long he would be down there in the cool depths where it rarely penetrated. Another world altogether.

They were five of them in the launch. Pat Benson's face was white and strained. She gazed seawards, preferring not to look back at the devastation on the quayside. The man at the helm wore a navy blue sweater and slacks. His complexion was the colour of tanned leather from a lifetime spent ferrying trippers between Barmouth and Fairbourne. The other two were from the Ministry of Defence. Young fellows who glanced uneasily at each other. Their job was to assist the Professor in his diving.

Behind them purred another boat, much sleeker in appearance. A speedboat in case it was necessary to get away from the scene in a hurry. A gunboat kept level with them, grey and forbidding. Occasionally a helicopter flew over, circling around them and then heading back in the direction of Barmouth.

'But supposing you do find them,' Pat voiced her thoughts, 'what will you do? I mean, they might not just be in one place. They could be living in dozens of caves.'

'Somehow I don't think so,' Cliff replied. 'You remember that monstrosity of a leader they have? Well, he's got them organised. At his beck and call night and day. It's my guess that they'll all be together - if I find them.'

'But suppose ...' she had difficulty in getting the words out 'Suppose... they find you first!'

He shrugged his shoulders.

'Someone's got to look for them.' He smiled and patted her thigh.

After half an hour or so he began stripping off and donning his frogman's suit. The seamen looked round at him expectantly.

'Head inshore towards those tall cliffs,' the Professor shouted above the roar of the engine. 'We'll make a start there.'

The launch changed course. The speedboat and the gunboat followed. Twenty yards from the cliff face engines were switched off and anchors dropped.

Pat stepped up to Cliff and their lips met. He looked at her. Clad in sweater and jeans she was the most desirable thing in his life. He thought about what lay ahead of him in the murky fathoms. Why did it have to be him? Why couldn't he and Pat go back to London and leave the authorities to deal with the giant crabs? He knew, though, that there was no other answer. He thought again of Tan and Julie. As soon as the creatures were destroyed he could learn to live again.

'I'll be careful,' he promised.

The two men helped him over the side. The last thing he saw was Pat's anxious face and then the dark green waters swallowed him up. It was then that he realised that he was alone. Everything depended upon him alone. There was

nobody to help him down here. The gunboat might as well have been a million miles away.

Soon he was on the sea-bed feeling his way along the base of the cliff. A tiny crab scuttled away at his approach. He shuddered involuntarily. He pressed on.

There were numerous caves. Many were so small that a glance inside was sufficient to reveal in the beam of his waterproof torch that they housed nothing more dangerous than sea-anemones. He moved cautiously where the larger caves were concerned. It was not, however, just a simple case of systematic searching. He was looking for signs on the sea-bed that would reveal the presence of a large number of crabs. Claw prints would be washed away by the currents; rather he was looking for marks on boulders that would be caused by the constant scratching of hundreds of huge pincers passing regularly to and fro.

After an hour he surfaced.

'Nothing doing?' There was relief in Pat's voice as she helped him aboard and handed him a mug of tea,

'Not yet,' he chided humorously. 'I didn't expect it to be that easy but you've got to make a start somewhere. Two hundred miles of coast will take an awful long time this way.'

'How long are you keeping it up for?' she asked, noting one of the others producing a fresh cylinder of oxygen.

'Oh, I'll probably try four or five dives today.' He tried to appear casual. 'Then tomorrow we'll make an early start.'

She sighed and began helping him back into his diving gear.

The rest of that day revealed nothing and as they chugged back into the remains of Barmouth harbour they noted tanks taking up positions on the wrecked quayside. The British Army did not acknowledge defeat.

The following morning they started their search immediately after breakfast. The night had been quiet, and along the Welsh coast there had been not a single alert.

'Maybe they've given up and gone back where they came from,' Pat remarked hopefully as Cliff donned his diving suit.

'I very much doubt it,' he replied. 'It's the moon. As I've said before, it lures them out. Last night was moonless. Too much cloud and the full moon's gone anyway. That doesn't mean that they won't attack in the dark. It's just that the inclination isn't so strong. They might even attack in daytime if it comes to that.'

Then Cliff Davenport dived, aware that for the rest of that day he would spend many hours deep down in the murky depths. Other divers were searching as far afield as Colwyn Bay and Borth. He feared, though, that inexperience might cause them to overlook the slumbering crabs.

It was during the afternoon of the second day that he discovered the gigantic caverns. The bed of the sea in that particular area was composed of soft sand with few rocks and boulders and there was no sign of any crab's movements. He didn't even realise when he shone his torch into the first cavern that it was anything more than just a large cave with only one entrance. Until he noticed

the circular gap in the far corner. The roof was approximately fifteen feet above his head, the walls slimy and covered with underwater growth.

He crossed to the exit opposite and shone his torch into it. It was a passage, maybe ten feet wide by twelve feet high, and he could not see beyond the first bend. He ventured further. There was another bend and the floor was beginning to slope downwards. Bend after bend, and all the time the tunnel was becoming larger.

It was pitch black now and without his torch he would not have been able to see at all. He moved warily. He tried to estimate how far he had come. He judged it must be about three or four hundred yards at least

Suddenly the tunnel widened out into another huge cavern. He could only guess at its size for the beam of his powerful torch did not reach as far as the opposite wall.

Then one of his flippers kicked against something. It was too light to be a rock and too heavy to be an undersea plant. He shone his beam down.

His stomach muscles tightened and the shivers running up and down his spine were not due to the coldness of the water. Before him lay a piece of shell. It was flesh coloured and roughly the size and shape of a car mudguard. There was no mistaking where it had come from. It was a piece off one of the shells of the giant crabs!

He appeared to be standing on a ledge of some sort, a protruding shelf of rock about two or three yards wide with a drop below him. He shone his torch over the edge and then doused it immediately. Below him slumbered the objects of his search -hundreds of the giant crabs all clustered together! At least, he hoped they were asleep. They certainly hadn't been moving when he had caught that quick glimpse of them and he prayed that the light from his torch had gone unnoticed. They appeared to have withdrawn into their shells.

He stepped back and rested his back against the rock wall. His mission was over. All he had to do now was to make his way back to the launch, report his find, and the authorities would do the rest. He wondered if they really had considered a controlled nuclear explosion. It wouldn't be necessary here. All that would be required would be a powerful depth charge in that outer tunnel to bring the roof down and seal those freaks of nature in a watery tomb from which even they would be unable to escape.

Suddenly he sensed a movement. It came from the tunnel through which he had entered. Something was stirring, coming in the direction of this massive cavern. Something that caused the water to churn and swirl. He dared not use his torch. Not that he needed to. He knew what it was. One of the crabs was in the tunnel! Maybe it was returning from a foray in the open sea or perhaps it was a sentry which somehow he had passed by unnoticed. Whatever the creature's duty in this crab army one thing was certain. Cliff Davenport's retreat was cut off!

He pressed himself back against the wall. There was absolutely nothing he could do except wait. He could feel it getting closer and closer. Something brushed against his leg and he flinched. The thing had actually touched him with its pincer. He braced himself, almost praying that the end would come quickly. Nothing happened. He edged back slowly. The creature was stationary now. Perhaps it was waiting. Just gloating over him. Preparing to pounce!

Cliff felt a gap in the wall of the cave behind him and reaching out with his hand he explored it. It was a narrow crack. A kind of alcove. He eased himself

into it, having to bend his shoulders to do so. It was silly but he felt a lot safer in there.

Nothing moved. He didn't know whether or not the giant crab was still in the entrance to the passage. There was, he reflected, only one way in which he could find out; it was not a pleasant thought.

Time passed. He began to get anxious. He wished that he had some means of calculating the time since he had dived. He knew there could not be much oxygen left in the cylinder now. He had a choice. He could either venture forth and take his chance with the crab on sentry-duty or he could stay where he was and suffocate.

He straightened up and started to move back along the ledge towards the tunnel.

'He should have been back by now,' Pat Benson muttered anxiously, as she glanced at her wristwatch for the hundredth time. She looked nervously at the two Defence men. 'What can have happened to him?'

'His oxygen must be running low,' said Stan Williams, the younger of the two, smiling and trying to allay her fears. 'Maybe, though, he's stopping down the full limit in order to cover as much ground as possible. I make it he can last another twenty minutes yet.'

The minutes ticked slowly by. Pat felt her frustration building up. Her impulse was to dive overboard, going down as deep as she could and at least make some attempt to search for the man she loved. The fact that she was not doing anything at all made her feel totally helpless.

'Ten minutes.' Stan Williams stood up and moved towards the small cabin. 'I reckon I'll just put on a small reserve supply but I don't want to leave it till the very last minute.'

When he emerged on deck again he was wearing his frogman's outfit. Somehow, to Pat, he looked sinister. More frightening even than the prospect of meeting up with the giant crabs. It was as though - she tried not to think of it in that way - he sensed that Cliff Davenport wouldn't be returning and was merely making a token dive to search for him.

Bob Wildman, the other diver, helped Williams adjust the breathing apparatus. Pat stood as though hypnotised, watching him clamber over the side and gradually lowering himself down into the water.

'Do you ... do you think . . . ?' She couldn't get the words out

'The Professor will probably bob up any minute,' Wildman replied, taking care not to let her see the worried look in his eyes. 'Then we'll all be sitting here for the next hour or so waiting for Stan to come back. Would you care for a cup of tea while we wait?'

Diving was just a job to Stan Williams. Like writing out reports or filing ledgers away. It was something one did without actually thinking about it. He wasn't too keen on meeting up with the crabs, but, after all, it was like looking for a needle in a haystack. Probably by now they were miles away.

He moved along the sea-bed much faster than Cliff had done. It was not his job to examine this underwater terrain for signs of the crab colony. He was simply looking for a man. He kept his torch on the whole time. If he didn't spot Cliff, then maybe Cliff would see him.

He reached the rock face and moved along it in a southerly direction. That was the way the man he was looking for would have gone.

Eventually he came to the big cave. He shone his torch inside and then he spotted the tunnel. For a minute he debated whether or not it was worthwhile venturing further. In the end he decided to take a look. It was just the sort of place the Professor would have explored. Ten to one he had discovered some form of rare plant life and had dallied while he examined it, oblivious to everything else. That was the trouble with his sort.. .

Just as he reached the first bend he felt a movement in the water coming towards him. He held up his torch. Professor Davenport had not taken as much finding as he'd anticipated.

Then his relief turned to horror as the giant crab loomed up in the black waters.

Chapter Ten

CLIFF DAVENPORT could sense that the monster was still there. Some sixth sense warned him that it was squatting in the only exit from that terrible place. How great was its vigilance he would discover in the next few seconds.

Still keeping to the wall he edged his way slowly into the tunnel. His flipper brushed against something hard and he knew without a doubt that it was one of the crab's claws. He had to fight down his panic. Judging its position he lifted his leg as though he was straddling a fence. Again he brushed against the pincer and then he was past it. He continued to move slowly. His instincts told him to start swimming back to the sea as fast as he could but he feared that any sudden movement might draw the creature's attention to his presence. Obviously the crabs felt secure in these caverns and did not anticipate an attack of any kind. They were all asleep.

He reached the huge outer cavern, still following the walls and declining to use his torch. He knew that he had escaped the clutches of those that still slumbered behind him but there was always the chance of meeting up with the odd one returning from a constitutional on the ocean bed.

The blackness of the water was turning to a deep murky green. Gradually it became lighter and it was with immense relief that he emerged from those cliff caves.

The tension of the past half-hour (it had seemed like five hours!) had made him ignore such basic things as the efficiency of his breathing apparatus. As he leaned against a rock for a moment to recover he realised with a start that his oxygen was running out. The air he was breathing was thick and stale. He knew also that he would never be able to make it back to the Welsh Queen, not below the surface anyway.

He struck upwards. Air was top priority. If he surfaced alongside the cliffs he would then be able to swim out to the launch - and Pat.

Never had he gulped in fresh air with such gratitude. He trod water, gasping in the cool sea breeze and unable to open his eyes fully in the bright sunlight.

At last refreshed, his eyes finally accustomed to the brightness, he looked out towards the spot where the Welsh Queen should have been bobbing at her moorings. There was no sign of it. The gunboat and the speedboat were not to be seen either. The sunlight sparkled and danced on an empty bay.

Stan Williams had lightning reflexes. Had this not been the case the first blow from that mighty pincer would surely have killed him there and then. Even as he gazed horrified at the monstrosity which confronted him he was back-peddalling, treading water fast. The claw grazed his shoulder as he turned and began to swim in the opposite direction.

He was forced to leave on the light in his headpiece. Without it he would most certainly have swum straight into the wall at the very next bend. However, not only did it serve to show him the way, but it also acted as a guide for the pursuing crab.

The diver had the advantage in the tunnel for he could negotiate the bends much quicker than his pursuer. Still, Stan Williams would never have believed that a crab could scuttle along with such speed. Every so often he felt the striking claws missing him by inches. He had no alternative other than to swim as fast as he could. Yet once they were in the open . . . It just didn't bear thinking about.

Across the big cavern and then the exit loomed before him. He tried to increase his speed, but he knew that he was tiring quickly. He dared not look behind him. He knew only too well that it was gaining on him.

If only he could beat this thing through the entrance and strike upwards immediately he was clear of the cavern he knew that he stood a chance. He felt the rubber flipper on his left foot being ripped to shreds. But he was still unscathed.

Freedom lay ahead of him. One final spurt. He started to rise. It was that which was his undoing. The giant crab gained another couple of feet as its prey changed course and its one last despairing lunge made contact.

Blinding pain surged through Williams. He knew that his left leg had gone just below the knee. Desperately he tried to put the pain out of his mind, and then he was shooting upwards, leaving his .attacker far behind him. A dull red trail followed him.

'There!' Pat Benson screamed as she saw the frogman surface. She had no idea which of the two men it was. She just prayed that it was Cliff Davenport.

Wildman was focusing a pair of binoculars on the distant black object. A puzzled look appeared on his face.

'It's Williams,' he snapped. 'He's, he's in trouble. Haul that anchor up. He'll never make it across here!'

But the speedboat beat them to it. By the time the Welsh Queen reached the place where Stan Williams had surfaced he had already been hauled on board the

other craft. As they drew alongside they could see him lying on the deck amidst a crowd of helpers, his right leg a ragged stump from which blood was pumping.

The flow of blood was slowing up as they clambered on to the speedboat. The frogman's face was deathly white and his eyes were closed.

'Crabs,' he stammered, the words barely audible. 'Down ... there... big cave... tunnel...'

'Where, man, where?' Grisedale knelt beside him.

But the information was not forthcoming. Stan Williams was dead.

Grisedale rose to his feet and looked at the others, 'They're down there.' His voice was low. 'But where?'

'Shall I go down and have a look?' Wildman's question lacked enthusiasm. It was the last thing in the world he wanted to do. But duty made him offer.

'No,' Grisedale shook his head. 'We've lost two men already today. Something else must be done. Submarines perhaps.'

Pat Benson turned away. She didn't cry. That would only have been an outward show of her emotions. She wished she could die. She would willingly have donned a frogman's suit and gone down below.

'We'll head back,' Grisedale announced. 'There's not much more we can do here at the moment'

Minutes later the tiny convoy was on its way back to Barmouth. Once again the enemy had triumphed.

Cliff Davenport rested on the rocks until he felt his strength returning. The cliffs above him were too steep to climb. There was only one way back and that was to swim along the rocky coastline until he came to somewhere where he could clamber ashore.

A quarter of an hour later he found the place he sought. A small shingle beach leading up to some sheep fields. As he dragged himself on to dry land he glanced down and grinned. Pausing, he removed his flippers and goggles. Perhaps anyone who saw him now would take him for an eccentric bather. For one of the few times in his life he felt ridiculous.

He followed the shoreline until eventually Barmouth came into view. He could see the wrecked promenade and the small fairground. It came as a grim reminder of what he had seen down in those caverns.

He quickened his step. There was no time to be lost. The sooner he imparted the information which he had gained, and something was done to destroy the crabs, the better.

People gazed at him in astonishment. Children pointed and ran away. As he passed by the harbour he noticed the Welsh Queen and the speedboat moored to the quayside. He could not understand it. He felt angry. Why had his colleagues abandoned him? There had to be a reason.

He had difficulty in convincing the soldier on the Town Hall steps of his identity.

'I want to see Commander Grisedale,' Cliff demanded impatiently. 'My name is Professor Davenport'

'Professor Davenport!' The squaddie's eyes widened in surprise. 'Did you say Professor Davenport, sir?'

'That's right,' Cliff snapped. 'Now... '

'But... but...' the uniformed man stuttered, his eyes wide in disbelief, 'the crabs got you!'

'Did they now?' the Professor laughed hollowly. 'So everybody thought I'd been eaten up, did they? That's why they cleared off home in such a hurry. Worried lest they might be late for tea, I suppose!'

Without further ado he pushed past the startled sentry and mounted the wide stairs leading to the first floor. Across the landing behind the closed double doors was Grisedale's temporary headquarters.

Cliff Davenport did not hesitate. Without even knocking, he pushed them open and entered. The occupants of the room whirled round, expressions of annoyance changing to incredulity.

'My God!' Grisedale's jaw dropped. 'It can't be. But it is!'

'Thought I was a goner, didn't you?' Cliff sneered. 'You didn't waste much time looking for me.'

'We, um, we . . . ' The Ministry of Defence boss gave up talking and just gaped. The words he sought eluded him.

'Where's Pat?' Cliff snapped, his words cutting through the air like a whiplash. 'Come on, answer me one of you. Where is she?'

'She's been taken back to Llanbedr,' Wildman answered. 'She's suffering from shock.'

'I should bloody well think she is.'

There were seven or eight men in the room. For the most part they were high-ranking officials from the armed forces. Every man-jack of them just stood and stared, unable to believe that Professor Clifford Davenport stood before them - alive.

'I think it would be better if we both told our respective stories,' Grisedale said at length, closing the door. 'Obviously things are not what we thought they were.'

Half an hour later Grisedale rose to his feet

'Remarkable,' he commented. 'Totally remarkable. Of course when we pulled Williams aboard and saw what had happened to him we naturally presumed that they had got you too, Cliff. And, of course, you wouldn't have spotted the blood because your torch was out. It'll be a simple matter to destroy them now. A controlled nuclear explosion in those caves. I'm afraid I shall have to ask you to go below water again to show our chaps the way, though.'

'That won't be necessary,' Cliff replied. 'A limpet mine will do the trick. All that's needed is an explosion large enough to collapse the tunnel leading to the cave where these horrors are hiding out. Then they'll be sealed in

there for all time. I could manage it myself without any trouble. It would be best to leave it until tomorrow though. If we tried it tonight they'd probably be out feeding during the nocturnal hours and then we'd just be wasting our time as well as turning them loose on the whole world. Without even their home to return to there's no knowing where they might go.'

That makes sense,' said Grisedale, turning to the others. Nods and murmurs of assent followed.

'Right then.' Grisedale turned to Cliff. 'I'll run you back to Llanbedr in my car and you can put Mrs Benson's mind at rest. I'd like to make an early start in the morning, though. The sooner we blast these hell-spawned creatures the better I'll like it!'

Pat Benson was sobbing quietly on the bed when Cliff entered her room. At first she showed no surprise, presuming it to be all part of her dream about the man she loved. It was only when he sat down beside her and touched her that she started up.

'Cliff!' she cried. 'I... you... '

'No, I'm not a ghost.' He squeezed her hand and kissed her

'I'm real flesh and blood and nothing really terrible happened to me down there.'

She clung to him desperately as though fearful that he might vanish suddenly like some sea sprite which had been sent to torment her.

'What, what happened?' she sobbed.

He told her the whole nerve-racking story.

'Oh, Cliff,' she cried as she flung her arms around him. 'Don't go back down there, please. Let them plant the bomb. You've done more than your share already.'

They wouldn't be able to find the cave,' he explained. 'Besides, there won't be any danger this time. All I've got to do is to stick a limpet mine in the tunnel and get away. It'll be timed to go off about an hour later.'

'And that will really be the end of them?'

'The finish,' Cliff Davenport assured her. The giant crabs will be no more!'

Gently his hands began unfastening zips and clasps. Together they slid into the cool inviting bed. As they came together they were living for the present only. That which had gone before and that which awaited them on the morrow was pushed out of their minds.

Just one more day. That was all that stood between them and a life of happiness together. Time was running out for the giant crabs.

Chapter Eleven

A SEA mist hung over the bay as the gunboat put out from Barmouth. This time there was no need for the launch or the speedboat. The mission was simple. Cliff Davenport would dive and place the mine. They would be back in harbour by the time it went off. In a way it seemed almost like shooting a sitting rabbit.

Pat Benson had remained behind at Llanbedr with Mrs Jones. For once her insistence on accompanying Cliff had been overruled.

'There's no point,' the Professor had told her, 'I shall be back here well before lunch-time.'

As they dropped anchor Cliff began donning his frogman's suit.

'You're sure you wouldn't like me to send Wildman along with you?' Grisedale asked for the umpteenth time.

'Positive,' Cliff replied. 'There's no point in risking two lives. Not that there's any real risk. The crabs should be sleeping, but one never knows.'

The distant mountains were invisible behind a thick bank of hill-fog. It was drizzling slightly. Cliff shuddered. A bit of sunshine would have made all the difference to everybody's spirits.

The water closed over his head. Strapped to his waist was a circular object roughly twice the size of a Mills bomb. Attached to it was a flat rubber suction pad. Simple yet deadly.

Cliff Davenport was uneasy as he followed the base of the cliff along to the entrance to the big cave. It was all too straightforward. In fact it seemed ludicrous that the giant crabs which had withstood the weapons of modern warfare with such invincibility could be destroyed by a device which had been rarely used since World War II. However he could see no way in which they could escape.

He had to summon up every ounce of courage which he possessed to enter that opening at the base of the cliffs again. Every shadow seemed to hide a sleeping monster. He fought to control his nerves. The mission had to be carried out effectively. The bomb had to be placed in exactly the right place in the tunnel.

This time he knew what lay deep within the caves. Previously it had been uncertainty, the comfort of searching for something which he would probably never find anyway. He entered the tunnel, breathing a sigh of relief when he saw that it was devoid of life. His only fear now was that the crabs would see the reflection of his light in the water and come to investigate. He knew, however, that his task would not take more than a couple of minutes at the very most.

He unstrapped the limpet-mine and decided on a suitable place to fix it. A straight smooth area of rock on a level with his own head and shoulders seemed ideal. He pressed the suction pad on to it and tested it for firmness. It held. With trembling fingers he set the dial of the timing device. One hour.

He began to make his way back to the open sea. The crabs had only a short time left. Then the world would be safe.

'Well?' Grisedale wore an anxious expression on his face as Cliff was helped on board the gunboat.

'OK,' said Cliff and grinned. 'I think that should do it. Now let's get going. It may only be a limpet mine but I'd rather not be around when it goes off! It could start an avalanche.'

An hour later Cliff heaved a sigh of relief. Of course, they would not hear the explosion, but if everything had gone according to plan it should be all over by now.

In his office in the Town Hall, Grisedale poured out two whiskies. Their glasses clinked together. They looked at each other and smiled. Words would have been superfluous.

'Well,' Pat Benson sighed as she sipped her coffee after dinner that evening, 'I guess it's all over now. That's the end of the crabs for all time, I hope.'

Cliff Davenport noted the regret in her voice. He understood. It wasn't that she was in any way sympathetic towards the giant crabs. It was just that there was no longer any common bond to hold them in Llanbedr. Now they could drift apart at any time they wished.

'Telephone, Professor!' Mrs Jones poked her head round the dining-room door.

'That'll be Grizzly,' Cliff remarked and rose to his feet, scraping his chair back. 'He said he'd give me a ring this evening. They've put a couple of divers down to see what the result of our little explosion was. Be back in a minute.'

When he returned to the table a few minutes later he was grinning and rubbing his hands together in obvious glee.

'Bang on!' He put two spoonfuls of sugar into his cup. 'Not only has it brought the roof of the tunnel down but the outer cave has also collapsed. Nothing could get out of those caverns. It's an even bet that the inner cave has fallen in too and crushed the crabs beneath millions of tons of rock. Grisedale's back in London. He went by air.'

'So that really is it!' Pat lit a cigarette and inhaled deeply. 'The case is closed then?'

'Almost.' Slowly and carefully he stuffed tobacco into the bowl of his pipe. 'Except for us.'

Her heart leapt.

'You mean . . . ?'

'It's a beautiful evening,' he said, grateful for the opportunity to glance out of the window. 'I was just thinking how pleasant it would be walking. It won't be dark for another couple of hours yet.'

'Not on the island!' She rested her hand on his.

'No,' he replied. 'I've had quite enough of Shell Island for the time being. Suppose we take the car along the coast road and walk from there.'

'I'd love that,' she said, stubbing her cigarette out in the ashtray. 'Come on. What're we waiting for?'

'We can't just drift apart, Pat.' Cliff Davenport spoke the thoughts which had been troubling him all evening. 'I mean ... I know it's been rough, meeting in these circumstances, but as the old saying goes, it's an ill wind that blows nobody any good. I... er... I.'

'Yes?' She moved closer to him and for some moments they stood on the cliff path admiring the sunset, the golden rays reflected on the calmness of the bay, the sea mist that had prevailed all day now having disappeared.

'I think the fine spell's going to continue,' he murmured.

'That isn't what you were going to say.' She squeezed his hand. 'You said something about an ill wind... '

'Er . . . yes.' He was nervous now, far more so than he had been at the prospect of meeting up with the giant crabs again earlier that day. 'There is something positively terrifying in asking a woman straight out if she will marry you,' he went on. 'Right now my knees are knocking and I feel as if I'm going to faint'

'How soon?' She kissed him. 'Don't make me wait too long, Cliff!'

'As soon as we get back to London,' he promised, expelling a long sigh of relief. 'I was thinking that maybe we might start back the day after tomorrow.'

'I can't get back quick enough,' she sighed and then surrendered to a long embrace.

They walked on. They felt as though they just wanted to keep on walking forever. Their course took them along the cliff tops until in the gathering dusk they could spy the lights of Bar-mouth in the distance.

'Maybe we'd better be getting back,' Cliff said as they stood watching a colony of rabbits playing on a grassy part of the cliffs.

'I could stay here forever,' Pat murmured dreamily. 'Couldn't we just sit down awhile and relax? We haven't relaxed once since we've been together.'

They sat down with their backs against a large rock beneath a grassy knoll. The rabbits kept on playing. Either they were unaware of them or else they had no cause to fear them.

Suddenly, as if at a given signal, a dozen or more white tails bobbed in the air and then the rabbits were disappearing down the entrances to a nearby warren.

'Goodness!' Pat frowned. 'What on earth's up with them? We've been here for nearly half an hour. We didn't frighten them.'

Cliff Davenport's eyes were scanning the sky. Maybe a sparrowhawk ... A couple of seagulls lazily flew over their heads on their way out to roost on the mudflats. Otherwise the sky was empty of bird life. Perhaps a stoat or a fox ...

As his sharp eyes searched the sloping ground in front of them, down as far as

the hollow a hundred yards away and then upwards to the rocky peaks on the skyline, he caught a movement. It was becoming dark by now and whatever it was, it was hidden by the shadows of the towering crags. Just a patch of deeper darkness. He watched it carefully. It definitely moved. Of course, the nearby farmers took advantage of this type of hilly ground to graze a few extra sheep. This was bigger than a sheep though. Maybe a pony that had broken its tetherings and frolicked forth in search of freedom.

It moved on to some lighter ground and then he could see it clearly.

'My god!' he hissed. 'What in the name of... Pat! It's one of the crabs!'

'Oh, no!' She followed his gaze. It was true enough. A giant crab squatted amidst a patch of rough mountain grass and bracken. Suddenly it was joined by a second. Then a third appeared behind and above the first two.

'Where the hell are they coming from?' Cliff breathed. 'They can't have scaled the cliffs. Not even they could do that. There's nowhere else though. It's as if they're just appearing out of the ground!'

'It's impossible!' Pat wailed, hoping against hope that she would wake up and discover that they had fallen asleep in the grass and dreamt it all. 'They couldn't. You said yourself they couldn't get out of that cave!'

Cliff Davenport was silent. He just could not accept that these creatures were free ... even that they were alive!

But it was true enough. More and more crabs were appearing on the hillside opposite. They just seemed to materialise out of the ground, grouping together, hardly moving. Waiting. For what?

'King Crab!' the Professor cursed. 'See the devil? Twice as big as any of the others. He's more cunning than any human being. Somehow he's got them out of there. But how?'

'What do we do now?' Pat Benson whispered. 'I mean, we were just congratulating ourselves on having cleared it all up and then, bang, we're back where we started!'

Cliff Davenport glanced at his watch. He could just determine the position of the two hands in the deep dusk. It was nine o'clock.

'Grisedale will be back in his London flat.' His whisper incorporated everything that his strained nerves had experienced during the past three weeks. 'I guess I'll just have to phone him and tell him to get back here as quick as he can. It's back to square one I'm afraid. The troops moved out this afternoon as well. Just a few stayed behind to help with the clearing up. Everybody will have to be recalled. Let's just watch these horrors. They can't stop here forever. I want to see which way they go.'

The crabs seemed quite content to remain bunched together on that stretch of hillside. More and more of them appeared out of the darkness, squatting together. Some even withdrew into their shells. They were in no hurry to go anywhere.

Then darkness cast its cloak over them and the watchers were unable even to discern the shapes of the foe which had returned from the dead.

'Come on,' said Cliff, helping Pat to her feet. 'We'd better be leaving. I don't like the idea of stumbling about in the dark with those creatures

crawling around!'

'Are you sure, man?' Grisedale's voice was strained with the fatigue of his long journey and the fact that all their efforts now appeared to have been in vain.

'Of course I'm sure,' Cliff expostulated. 'I wouldn't have rung you if I wasn't. We saw them with our own eyes!'

'But how?'

'I can only hazard a guess. Beyond the big cave where they lived there must have been another tunnel leading upwards. They're out in the open now. Christ knows where they'll go! They just squatted there until it got too dark for us to see them any more. They'll have to get back to salt water eventually, though. Maybe they'll just go back to the sea and leave us in peace.'

'Maybe,' Grisedale groaned, 'and maybe not. I'll come back first thing in the morning. In the meantime I'll notify the Ministry of Defence. God knows what we're going to do now, though. Short of dropping a nuclear bomb on them I haven't a clue. Maybe they'd even survive that!'

Pat stooped and kissed Cliff as he replaced the receiver and sunk his head into his hands.

'You've done everything you could possibly have done,' she consoled him. 'It's not your fault Can't we just go away and leave them to it?' He shook his head.

'No,' he sighed. 'I've got to see it through. I'm afraid we'll have to postpone that wedding. Maybe it'll only take a few days. Perhaps somebody will come up with something.'

'I understand.' Her voice trembled and he sensed that she was very close to tears. 'I'm stopping on with you though. Whatever crops up we'll see it through together. Make no mistake about that.'

He nodded. He had not got the heart to tell her that he felt that it was just beginning all over again.

Chapter Twelve

'Not a sign of them. Not a bloody sign!'

Cliff Davenport and Pat Benson paused on the top of the hillside where they had sat and viewed the giant crabs the previous evening.

Soon after first light the two of them had set out from Llanbedr, using the binoculars frequently in an attempt to locate the crab army. The hills were deserted except for some rabbits - probably those they had seen - peacefully grazing the tough wiry grass.

'Let's see if we can find out where they came up,' Cliff suggested. He began walking towards the opposite slope. 'If there is a tunnel it shouldn't be too hard to find.'

It wasn't. Amidst a clump of gorse and bracken they discovered the overgrown mouth of a shaft some twelve feet in circumference. The undergrowth which had hidden it was flattened and in a patch of soft earth they discovered those only too familiar claw prints.

'It slopes down fairly gradually,' Cliff remarked as he peered down into the gloomy opening. 'No doubt potholers have been having a whale of a time here for years. Why ever didn't I think of something like this?'

'Nobody would have done,' Pat exclaimed consolingly. 'All the brains of the Civil Service and the Ministry of Defence studied your plan at length. They even had a map of the area in front of them. It's just one of those things!'

'One of those things that could prove costly,' Cliff retorted as he straightened up. 'Well, we'd better get back and have some breakfast. We can't do any more at the moment. All the same, I'd love to know where the crabs are at this very moment.'

After breakfast they had a visitor. As they left the dining-room, Cliff recognised a car which had just pulled to a standstill in the drive outside.

'Colonel Matthews,' he muttered to Pat. 'Push along, darling, and amuse yourself for half an hour. No doubt Grizzly's been giving his telephone bill a bashing already.'

Colonel Matthews was a short, stocky, self-important individual. At forty-seven it was his considered opinion that he should have risen much higher in the British Army than he had already. The giant crabs had presented a challenge to him. His resentment towards the Professor had been only too evident the previous day when the limpet mine had been planted. Now he was bolstered by fresh hope of glory.

'It didn't work then!' he boomed, his eyes betraying his gloating. 'We'll get 'em this time though.'

'If you can find 'em,' Cliff countered, as he ushered the other into the deserted lounge. 'At the moment they seem to have vanished off the face of the earth.'

'Oh, nonsense!' the Colonel retorted. 'I only wish they'd sent me here in the first place. What happened in Barmouth was totally unnecessary. The troops were badly placed. One tank. A mortar which was brought on the scene too late.'

'Tanks and mortars are worse than useless against this type of enemy,' Cliff replied. 'That has already been proved.'

'Rubbish!' Colonel Matthews went red in the face. 'It was the fools who were in charge of them who were responsible for the failure. If the weaponry had been used effectively those creatures would never have got further than the harbour.' 'Have it your own way,' Cliff sighed. 'I take it Commander Grisedale has been liasing with the services, and we've got to get together again.'

That's about the size of it,' Matthews grunted. Too many cooks are liable to

spoil the broth, though. Priority number one is to locate the enemy. Obviously they've gone back to the sea, so my first move will be to reinforce the troops in Barmouth. It's just a question of waiting for them to come to us then. I thought that in the meantime it would be beneficial to search the remaining underwater caves along this stretch of coastline. I reckon that's where we'll find 'em. Might save ourselves a lot of time and trouble.'

'Please yourself,' said Cliff Davenport with resignation. He shook his head slowly. 'If you want to send divers down that's up to you. Quite frankly, though, I think we've learnt our lesson regarding undersea warfare against them.'

'So you're not going to dive again.' Colonel Matthews's bottom lip twisted in a sneer. That's all right by me, Professor. I can get plenty of men who'll go down. Though what you're going to do in the meantime beats me!'

'Finding them is only half the battle,' Cliff observed, trying not to show his annoyance. 'Exterminating them is quite another matter, Colonel. That you will discover in due course!'

A week passed. The inhabitants of the Welsh coast from Colwyn Bay to Borth began to relax. Public opinion held that the crabs had left for good. Maybe they could crop up elsewhere in a far land across the mighty ocean. If so, then that was not their worry.

The heatwave broke on the following Wednesday with one of the most violent thunderstorms on record. The skies darkened. Thunder crashed and forked lightning flashed. Then the rain fell in torrents. The streets of Barmouth were awash within an hour.

'Strewth!' Cliff Davenport hustled Pat Benson into the welcome shelter of Davy Jones's Locker. 'I reckon this could be what we've been waiting for.'

'Why's that?' she asked as she shrugged herself out of her sodden raincoat and spooned sugar into her coffee.

'Crabs are instinctively governed by the elements,' Cliff explained as he began to fill his pipe. 'Deep down on the ocean bed they are fully aware what is happening above. The habits of our friendly little common crab can be compared with these horrors, of that I feel sure. The crab fishermen know that after a stormy night his catches will be increased tenfold. They will seek shelter in the rock pools and on the beaches of sheltered bays. That's why I feel that this larger species will develop a sudden desire to be on the move again. Wherever they have been resting up, they'll decide that it's time for action once more!'

'Well, my love,' said Pat, reaching under the table and squeezing his hand, 'if it means that our wedding date will be brought forward, then I'm all for it!'

They both laughed. Uneasily.

The sun broke through the low clouds later that afternoon. The mountains, however, remained screened by a, thick hill mist. It was warm and sultry, and the atmosphere was pregnant with menace, as though still charged with the tension from the electric storms earlier. It was a time of waiting. A lull.

The evening was hot and stifling. Cliff and Pat used the car after dinner in preference for embarking upon a constitutional which would have been nothing better than an obstacle course of puddles and thick mud. They drove

southwards, parking on a headland which offered them a view of the coastline as far as Barmouth. Yet with the coming of dusk their thoughts turned to matters other than the ever present threat of the giant crabs!

The morning dawned dull and foggy. During the night hours a sea mist had crept in, reducing visibility to less than twenty yards.

A train-driver's job is at its most hazardous at such times. Dai Peters was due to retire at the end of the month. He had been looking forward to the day when he would no longer have to drive the early morning train to Barmouth from Dolgelly in those thick pea-soupers which were liable to start any time after September. And now this! Just like a winter's morning, bang in the middle of August! He cursed as the train halted at the whistle-stop station of Arthog.

'Morning, Dai,' the porter called as he threw a parcel into the guard's van and then approached the engine. 'What's it like back there?'

'Bloody awful,' Dai grimaced. 'The speed we've come, you could've walked it quicker.'

The train moved on even more slowly. Dai Peters had never liked the estuary crossing. It was a silly feeling, and he would never have dared let his fears be known amongst his fellow drivers but... well, he didn't trust the old bridge. It was looked after regularly and the experts said it was good for another century but that did not prevent him having nightmares about it. He had lost count of the number of times that he'd woken up in the middle of the night in a cold sweat shouting in abject terror. His wife was used to it and it was she who always calmed his fears... almost!

The dream was always the same. High tide. The water muddy and deep in the estuary below. Swirling like a whirlpool gone berserk. The train going at a snail's pace in spite of the fact that he was giving it full throttle. Slowing to a crawl for some unaccountable reason. Then the creaking of over laden timbers as the engine finally came to a halt. A splintering and cracking beneath. The bridge sagging and then snapping in the middle. A lurching. The train hurtling down towards the estuary. The screaming, his loudest of all. The water closing over his head. That was when he usually woke up.

On a morning like this morning his dreams did not seem to be altogether the figments of a fevered, slumbering brain. They could so easily become reality.

He hated the crossing. Less than five minutes on a clear morning. It might have been five hours on one such as this. Five hours of bloody torture. He eased the throttle right down. Ten miles an hour. He looked down. Through the grey drifting vapour he could see the estuary below, grim and forbidding. He shivered.

He forced his gaze on to the track ahead, the parapet of steel girders on either side. They looked strong enough anyway. All the same he would be glad when it was all over, and they drew into Barmouth station.

Suddenly a shape materialised out of the fog ahead of the train. Automatically he started to brake. With an agonised shriek the wheels began slowing down. Whatever it was, it was still on the line. Right in their path and refusing to budge an inch. It looked as though somebody's cow had wandered on to the bridge when nobody was looking. If it didn't move soon it was bound to be run over. Stupid bloody animal. Trains can't just stop dead in their tracks!

He could see it more clearly now. Christ! That was no cow. It was too big. Wrong shape.

'Fucking hell!' he cursed aloud. 'It's one of those bastard crabs!'

The train was nearly at a standstill. He could see the crab. Every detail. Its face. Its eyes. The thing knew. Knew he would stop. Well, he'd show it. His hand left the brake and returned to the throttle. Full speed ahead. More of them on the line up in front. Bloody crowds of 'em. Show 'em all. Crush 'em to pulp!

The engine had picked up to 20 mph when it made contact with King Crab. Another screech of anguished metal. A jolt that threw all the passengers forward. Dai Peters sprawled on the floor of his cab.

For a split second everything seemed to stop. Time stood still. Then the engine was rearing upwards, its wheels spinning uselessly in the air. Carriages buckled into one another, overturning, rolling sideways against the steel girders. People were screaming,

Dai Peters tried to grab the controls. Brake, throttle, anything. The engine was lurching at a crazy angle, almost as if it was running on a model railway and the owner was picking his toys up. The driver just clung on for his very life.

He could see the water below him again, the current swirling as though ready to receive him. Another crash. Steel girders flying through the air. Hurling, spinning, still hanging on.

That same dream. He started to yell. 'Emma! Emma! Wake me up! The bridge . . . the water . . . for God's sake wake me up!'

Amid a pile of falling debris the train slid into the water like links of sausage being carelessly tossed into a pan. A mighty splash, the murky waters foaming, and then a sudden silence.

Nothing moved. Except the crabs. Scuttling down the bent and broken supports they dropped back into the water, hastening to claim the prize that was theirs. Tender human flesh.

'Fucking hell! It's getting thicker!' The man in the bows of the leading lifeboat peered through the gloom. 'Can't see anything. Wait! There's the bridge. Christ Almighty!'

The second boat drew alongside. Debris was floating everywhere. Not a sign of the train or its occupants. It was impossible to see down into the muddy depths.

'Can't see a bloody thing!' the second lifeboat skipper called. 'Hey, what's rocking the boat?'

The lifeboat lurched to one side, its occupants being thrown together in an ungainly heap on the deck.

'Bloody hell! What's going on?'

The first lifeboat had its bows clear of the water. Men tumbled everywhere. Two were flung overboard. More screams and yells.

'It's, it's the bloody crabs!' The skipper lost his precarious hold and was just in time to see the vicious claws before they claimed him.

Everybody was in the water. Panic reigned. Men were being dragged down, some managing to avoid the fate of their comrades for a few minutes - but their escape was only temporary. The end was inevitable.

The capsized lifeboats began to float with the current. Here and there the brown water was tinged with red. A row of seagulls perching on a mudbank rose into the air, circled, and headed seawards. Some strange sense had warned them that this was no place for them.

Chapter Thirteen

'THEY were in the estuary all the time!' Grisedale banged his fist on the table. 'While we've been scanning the shore with troops and having heavy artillery placed along the coast, they've been lying low in the estuary!'

He looked at Cliff Davenport and shook his head.

'This fog isn't helping any either,' he groaned. 'Of all the times to choose, a sea mist has to descend upon us now! '

That's what King Crab was waiting for,' the Professor commented. 'He's the most cunning enemy the world has ever met. And he doesn't intend to confine himself to the Welsh coast alone. I'd stake my bank balance on that.'

'What can we do?' There was despair in Grisedale's voice now as he gazed out of the window of his hotel room on to the promenade. The swirling mist hid the sea from his view. 'There's an emergency meeting at half-past two. All the top brass. The troops and munitions are already on the way. But are they going to be any good against these bloody crabs?'

'I'm afraid not,' Cliff drummed on the desk with his fingers. 'Somehow, somewhere, there must be an answer. They just can't be totally invincible. They must have an Achilles heel. It's just a question of finding it.'

'This meeting's going to be awkward,' Grisedale put in. 'I've worked night and day, collaborated with all the armed forces, but everybody's saying "Grizzly isn't doing anything". Quite frankly, I just can't think of anything except a nuclear bomb, and that just isn't on! '

Their raids are commando style,' the Professor mused. 'A quick attack and back to the sea. I've been asking myself why they don't venture further a field. It isn't the fear of counterattacks which makes them retreat. It's simply that they can't exist out of salt water for more than a limited period. Take an ordinary crab. He can survive on a beach between tides. Say twelve hours. These monsters, it appears, can't last much longer. Maybe not as long. Perhaps their resistance out of water is not as great in that respect. They can stand up to heavy artillery but... Well, take the Battle of Barmouth, or the Shell Island invasion. They weren't ashore for more than a few hours on either occasion.'

'I can't even see how that helps us,' Grisedale commented. 'All it means is that if you live far enough inland, you're safe. That being the case, apart from air travel, we'll all be prisoners on this island. Once they start breeding not even the big ships will be safe. They'll increase in numbers, rule the oceans and spread a reign of terror along every stretch of coast around the globe.' 'Nevertheless,' Cliff Davenport said determinedly as he stood up, 'I'm going to work on this. Somehow there must be a way. There must be something so simple that we haven't even thought of it!'

Towards mid-afternoon the sea mist began to disperse as a freshening breeze sprang up from the sea. Weak sunlight filtered through the low cloud.

The village of Arthog was a hive of activity. Detachments of troops passed through on their way down to the beach at Fairbourne. Cranes and other heavy machinery arrived so that repairs to the bridge could be started with the minimum of delay.

The villagers could not resist clustering on the platform of the tiny station. From there they could see right across the estuary, Barmouth now appearing on the opposite side through the thinning mist. Men were clambering over the skeleton of the wrecked bridge, shouting and cursing.

The tide began to ebb. Gradually at first, so that it almost went unnoticed. Then the mudbanks came into view, more and more of them becoming visible every minute.

The watching people moved closer. Something was sticking up above the surface of the receding water. A carriage. Buckled and twisted almost beyond recognition. Then they saw the engine, its nose buried deep in the sucking mud.

Rowing boats were being dragged down to the water's edge. A gasp of horror ran through the crowd. Brave men. Where had the crabs gone? Nervously they looked about them. Everywhere was peaceful. Even the rushing current had been reduced to a gentle trickle.

The boats reached the wreckage. Men clambered on to the remnants of the train. They wrenched open carriage doors and smashed windows. Some went inside. Minutes later they emerged shaking their heads and climbed back into the bobbing rowing-boats.

They had found no bodies.

The night passed peacefully except for the rumble of tanks and troops arriving to reinforce those already there. Nobody in Arthog slept. They just lay and listened to the noises, feeling more secure at the sound of each new arrival of either soldiers or artillery.

A destroyer was stationed at the mouth of the estuary. Two more patrolled the open sea. Aircraft were passing to and fro all the time. This time the people were confident that the crabs were finished. Certainly the horrific creatures were trapped in the estuary. The choice was theirs. They could either stay there or die, or try to escape and be blasted off the face of the earth. Either way it spelt disaster for King Crab and his terrible army.

Two days passed. The heatwave returned. Work on the bridge was progressing well. New girders were replacing the old. Heavy cranes had retrieved most of the wrecked train. Twenty-four people, including the crew of the two lifeboats, were reported missing. Not a single body had been recovered.

And still the armed forces waited. Everybody waited.

The weather became still hotter. The open sea sparkled a deep blue. Even the muddy estuary seemed less formidable. All bathing had been curtailed but still the holiday-makers poured in with the same eagerness with which they would have gathered around a horrific road accident.

Troops and police formed a wide cordon to keep the people away from the beaches altogether. Tents appeared on the slopes of the hills in the background adding a bizarre carnival atmosphere to the whole situation. Roads were blocked by ten-mile traffic jams. Only the complete and utter destruction of the giant crabs would bring a permanent aura of peace back to that part of the Welsh coast again.

'The bastards have got to make a move sometime,' Colonel Matthews stated, puffing his chest out as he addressed his senior officers in their temporary billet in Fairbourne. 'They can't stay in the estuary forever!'

'Unless they aren't in there at all,' a young captain spoke up. 'Maybe they went back to the sea after they wrecked the lifeboats.'

'Nonsense!' Colonel Matthews snapped and turned back to his wall map. 'If they don't show up in twenty-four hours we're going to start dragging for them!'

While Colonel Matthews talked on, something was happening in the estuary. It was low tide, the lowest for weeks, leaving only a narrow channel of sluggish flowing water between the large sloping mudbanks. Those repairing the bridge took advantage of the brief period when the supports would be more easily accessible.

Suddenly the current began to increase its pace. Those working with the water up to their waists had to grasp at the steel struts above them to prevent themselves being swept away.

'Hey!' one gasped as he clung desperately to a rusty girder. 'There's a bloody tidal wave starting.'

'Look!'

Heads turned. A large wave enveloped the men leaving them gasping for breath. Another was following in its wake. In comparison the Severn Bore would have seemed a ripple in a woodland stream. Something was churning the water into a foaming cauldron.

Someone up on the bridge was shouting. Those on the bridge began running back along the structure to safety. The men in the water were less fortunate. The next wave swept them away. There was no hope of being able to swim. The pounding waves tossed them up and then dragged them down into the deep mud,

'The crabs! The crabs are coming!'

The fearful cries of the terrified workers carried across the estuary. Soldiers who had waited patiently throughout the long period of inactivity reached for their weapons. This was it!

Like a never-ending column of soldier-ants the crabs marched out of the estuary in single file. In fact only in such formation could they have remained hidden for so long during the low tides. Their method of concealment was a mystery no longer.

On and on they came. A hundred. Two. Three. Four... It was impossible to count them.

Clickety-click. Clickety-click.

The five men on the bridge ran for their lives. With luck they would be on terra firma ahead of the advancing crabs which waddled with astounding speed across the mud beneath them.

They might have made it had not one of them stumbled and the other four stopped to help him. As they pulled the fallen man to his feet they realised that their last hope had gone. Two of the crabs had turned back and come up to the bridge after them. The rest of the ever-increasing column continued its advance on Arthog,

The men ran back the way they had come. Their pursuers seemed to be in no hurry. Possibly they realised that there was no escape whatsoever for the humans.

'What do we do now?' The men in overalls pulled up abruptly on the brink of the jagged gap in the bridge. It was too wide to leap across. He looked back. A steady click-clicking filled the air as the crabs deliberately slowed their pace. Two pairs of evil eyes glinted in the bright sunlight.

'Jump!' It was the man with the twisted ankle who spoke. 'Into the water. Swim for it!'

As one they leapt into space. Accomplished swimmers all, they made a perfect landing. Perhaps they would have made it had not it been for the three massive crabs, perfectly camouflaged against the background of mud, which slid towards them.

In the distance the first shot rang out.

Cliff Davenport and Pat Benson strolled down to Barmouth harbour. There was little else to do until something happened. Without each other's company life could have become considerably boring.

Cliff bought a paper from a stall and they sat on a bench overlooking the harbour. Restoration work was in full swing and already evidence of the invasion of the crabs was becoming erased except from the memories of those who had witnessed it.

Idly Cliff opened his newspaper. Naturally the Welsh coast was still commanding front page space on most of the London dailies.

WHERE ARE THE GIANT CRABS NOW? the leading Headline ran. He skimmed through the article rapidly. The whereabouts of the crabs was certainly not going to be pinpointed by Fleet Street.

Pat was reading over his shoulder.

'Poor kiddy!' she muttered.

'What's that?' he grunted, being more concerned with the ridiculous views of some reporter who surmised that the crabs might be hiding out in the mountains.

'There,' she said, pointing with her finger to a small paragraph at the foot of the page.

CHILD DRINKS WEEDKILLER AND DIES, he read. 'An eight-year-old girl who drank a solution of paraquat weedkiller last week in her parents' garden in Surrey, died this morning. There is no known antidote. Parents are warned ... '

He broke off and suddenly his hand gripped Pat's until she gasped in pain.

'Ouch!' She snatched her hand away. 'Whatever's up. Cliff? 'It's a terrible thing to happen, I know, but there's no need to...'

'Paraquat!' He banged his fist into the palm of his other hand. 'Paraquat weedkiller. Deadly to all forms of life. Kills through the pores. Rots the lungs. I wonder... '

'Whatever are you getting at?' she asked. 'Have you taken leave of your senses or something?'

'No.' He rose to his feet and smiled. 'I've only just come to them. Come on, let's go and see Grisedale at once. We've no time to lose!'

'You could be right,' Grisedale observed after he had listened eagerly to Cliff Davenport's theory. 'It's worth a try anyway.'

Grisedale consulted a well-thumbed telephone directory and then, picking up the receiver, he dialled a number. After some delay he succeeded in being put through to the department he requested. The person at the other end of the line listened while the Professor's theory was repeated.

'Good. Good!' Grisedale sounded well pleased. 'How soon can you have it down here? Today? Excellent Yes, we shall required the sprays as well. Thank you.' He replaced the receiver.

'The Farm Supplies are delivering it at once ... ' He was interrupted as the phone jangled again.

'Grisedale,' he barked, an expression of irritation on his face, an expression which quickly turned to one of amazement and horror. 'Good grief! Right, we'll deploy all available troops. Right away.'

'That,' he said, turning to Cliff and Pat, his face ashen, 'was Colonel Matthews. The crabs are making a daylight raid on Arthog. Not only have they withstood close range fire from a Centurion tank but they have also rolled it down into the estuary. They are forcing the troops back!'

He crossed to the window and opened it. Across the estuary they could hear the firing.

'There's only one hope left now,' Cliff murmured, slipping an arm around Pat. 'I just hope that Farm Supplies truck gets here before it's too late!'

THE toppling of the Centurion tank was the signal for the troops to withdraw, forsaking their positions along the banks of the estuary. If the Centurion could not repel the invaders, nothing could!

Reinforcements began to arrive. Just as quickly they fell back. The crabs were almost at the station. Moving slowly. The firing ceased as abruptly as it had begun. It was just a waste of ammunition.

Between the station and the first houses lay several acres of waste ground. Mostly it was covered with long grass, tinder-dry from the scorching of the recent heat wave.

'Set fire to that grass!' Colonel Matthews roared. 'Quickly, before they reach it!'

'Fire doesn't affect them,' an officer replied. 'At Barmouth ...'

'Set fire to it!' the Colonel snarled, 'or else you'll find yourself on a charge!'

A match flared. The flames licked hungrily at the dry grass. The slight breeze fanned it. Within minutes a wall of fire sprung up in the path of the advancing crabs.

'That'll stop 'em!' Matthews's laughter was almost maniacal. That'll...'

King Crab himself was the first to enter the blazing area.

Smoke billowed as he moved. He did not even hasten his waddle. Others began to follow him.

'Impossible!' Colonel Matthews drew his revolver. His hand was shaking as he took aim and the pistol bucked. Six times he fired, and then the hammer was clicking on an empty chamber. Only then did he order his men to fall back to the road. His earlier confidence had abandoned him.

The driver of the Farm Supplies lorry from Dolgelly cursed as he caught up with the traffic jam. He could see the hundreds of cars, bumper to bumper, snaking in front of him until they disappeared over the brow of the next hill. Three hundred yards further on lay the toll bridge. It was closed. Two soldiers in khaki uniform carrying rifles stood at the entrance.

Then he saw the blue flashing lights. Motorcycle police. Two of them coming towards him, slowing when they saw the lettering on the front of his vehicle.

'OK sir,' they shouted, not even bothering to dismount. 'Just follow us against the line of oncoming traffic. We'll take the toll bridge road.'

He scratched his head as he let in the clutch. God, it must be bloody urgent. Somebody was really getting in a panic over their weeds! The man at his side said nothing. He was only too well aware what lay ahead of them.

'Here it is now.' The relief was evident in Grisedale's voice as he saw the lorry with its police escort turning into the small field where the helicopter stood. The pilot was leaning against it smoking a cigarette. 'Let's get cracking. We haven't got much time.'

Two men began to unload the lorry, carrying metal cannisters across to the helicopter. A crop-sprayer had already been fitted. It was only a question of connecting everything up.

The pilot dropped his cigarette on to the ground and put his foot on it.

'Well,' Grisedale said, 'I guess we're all set. Just the four of us. We two, the pilot and this feller here from Farm Supplies to work the spray. Look out crabs, here we come!'

Two minutes later they were airborne and heading out towards the estuary.

Colonel Matthews realised that the road was only their first line of retreat. The crabs were still advancing, ignoring the village itself. This time the creatures were not bent solely on destruction. They practically ignored the houses. All they wanted was to kill. Their taste for human flesh overruled everything else.

The colonel gave another order to retreat. This time the troops moved inland. To have gone down to the beaches at Fairbourne would only have been to invite disaster, taking the battle to the crabs' own domain.

'Christ!' the Colonel ejaculated when he saw the packed line of cars which jammed the road beyond the first military barrier. 'The stupid bloody fools!'

He realised immediately how complicated the situation had become. Their retreat would be hampered by the civilians. Already people were abandoning their cars and moving back up the road.

'Abandon all equipment!' he ordered. 'Move on foot only from now on. Get a move on!'

The crabs had reached the road now. They were barely a quarter of a mile behind the troops and they were turning inland'. This time they gave no indication that they would be returning to the sea after a quick sortie.

People began to panic. Some tried to turn their cars, but finding it an impossibility left them and fled on foot. Soldiers threaded their way between the vehicles, in some cases clambering over them.

The crabs reached the cars. There was no hesitation. Metal crunched as they crushed the vehicles beneath their advance, flattening the various models out of all recognition. The shooting had stopped. Even the rawest recruit realised that he was simply wasting ammunition and losing ground by pausing to fire.

'Look!' Colonel Matthews pointed to a distant speck in the sky. 'They've sent a bloody helicopter to see what's going on!'

The helicopter was flying low, barely skimming the tops of trees and houses.

'Great Scott,' Grisedale gasped as he saw what was happening below them. 'We're only just in time. Those crabs are barely two hundred yards behind the soldiers. Another ten minutes and ...'

'Go in low!' Cliff Davenport shouted in the pilot's ear and then turned to give his instructions to the agricultural engineer who sat patiently at the controls of the spraying equipment

'Let 'em have it. Now!'

A fine film of spray gushed from the nozzle of the spray-gun. For a few seconds a cloud of vapour hung in the air and it began to drift slowly downwards. The man increased the pressure. The vapour became thicker, more condensed.

'That's the stuff!' Cliff Davenport cried enthusiastically, gripping his seat until his knuckles showed white. 'Go down lower. Make sure the big feller gets it!'

King Crab, previously unperturbed by any attacks from land, sea or air, sensed that this was no ordinary, puny human assault. The spray caught him in the face, stinging and almost blinding him. The machine hovered only a few feet above him. His pincers waved wildly. It was almost as if there was something personal in the way he was being attacked. Even he sensed that. He squatted down, all his instincts telling him to withdraw into his shell. Yet he knew he would be finished if he did. They had to return to the ocean bed as quickly as possible.

The advance of the crabs was halted. Blindly they huddled together for protection. It was as if all their resistance had suddenly been destroyed.

Perhaps without their leader they would have stayed and died where they were.

With a supreme effort King Crab turned back and shambled amongst his demoralised followers. Viciously his pincers struck out, striking shell after shell. The crabs were shaken out of their lethargy. Like robots they followed in the wake of the one whom they believed to be the supreme being.

Slowly the column headed back the way it had come. Claws dragged, gouging great scars in the tarmac surface of the road. They scarcely gave Arthog a glance as they passed by. Their instincts no longer craved for plunder and carnage. Survival was all that mattered.

'Keep at 'em!' Cliff Davenport shouted above the noise of the helicopter. 'Keep spraying 'em until they're in the water!'

The most bizarre retreat in the history of warfare. Shambling, clicking crabs, the helicopter keeping pace with them, barely ten feet above them, spraying them with paraquat weedkiller the whole tune. Past Arthog, veering to avoid the bridge, and then, as the monsters sensed the presence of salt water, they increased their speed. A last desperate effort so that they might die in their own domain?

King Crab remained motionless squatting alone on the bank as his subjects entered the muddy water, still in single file, and disappeared from view. Even then he did not move. Only his glinting eyes gave any sign that he was still alive.

'Go in on the bastard!' Cliff shouted. 'Give him everything you've got!'

The helicopter went still lower, paraquat gushing from the spray. The sandy-coloured monster crab became covered in foam. He rolled over. Then he righted himself again, his evil eyes raised towards the men and the machine responsible for his final overthrow.

A claw was raised. A gesture of defiance. An expression of unbelievable malignance. He might be thwarted but he refused to concede. He moved, scarcely able to drag himself down to the edge of the lapping water. Then he was gone with scarcely a ripple to show that he had ever been.

Cliff Davenport turned to the pilot. The Professor's face was lined and haggard. But he was smiling.

'We can go home now,' he said.

Two evenings later Cliff Davenport, Pat Benson and Grisedale dined together at Mrs Jones's hotel in Llanbedr. On the morrow they would all be returning to London.

'Well,' Grisedale started, beaming with pleasure as he sipped his coffee and lit a cigarette. 'It seems that paraquat was the answer after all. I'd have preferred to have seen 'em all lying dead in the roadway but it was not to be. The stuff isn't an instant killer. I just wish I knew where they'd gone to die. Just to satisfy myself that they're really finished. We've had divers down but there isn't a trace of them. Not a single corpse!'

'You've heard of the legendary elephants' burial ground in Africa?' Cliff asked, a thoughtful expression on his face. 'People have been searching for it for centuries. Nobody's ever found it. One never comes across a dead elephant either, out in the bush. There's a place somewhere where they go to die when they know their time is up. It's the same with these crabs, I reckon. God knows where they came from in the first place. Maybe they've gone back there to die.'

'I sincerely hope so,' Grisedale asserted. 'We certainly don't want a second crab war.'

Pat yawned.

'Can't say I'll be sorry to be leaving,' she said, resting her hand on Cliff's. 'It's had its compensations though.'

'I'd better be getting back,' Grisedale said tactfully. He looked at his watch. 'I've got to be on the road early. I'm flying back to Belgium again tomorrow evening.'

'Don't forget to be back in time for the wedding,' Pat reminded him.

'I won't miss that' He laughed. 'So long as there are no crab sandwiches at the reception afterwards.'

'No fear of that!' Pat grimaced. 'I never want to see another crab again as long as I live! Ugh!'

Next morning, as Cliff and Pat headed back along the coast road, the sea was a deep blue. Scarcely a wave rippled its surface.

'I wonder,' Pat mused, 'I wonder just what lies out there deep down on the sea-bed.'

Cliff dropped his left hand on to her thigh and squeezed it gently.

'Perhaps it's better not to know,' he replied. 'The secrets of the deep are better left undisturbed.'