

CHAPTER ONE

THE Wash. Miles of flat, dark green saltings, adjoining the mud-flats which lie further out than the eye can see. Some has been reclaimed from the sea by man. Much is just the same as it has always been. Peaceful, friendly, and treacherous! Its moods change along with the shifting whispering quicksands. Safety here. Death there. No warning.

It was late October when the party set up camp along by Shep White's, a mile or so east of Sutton village. The old farmhouse on the other side of the big dyke was long gone, and just a crumbling ruin remained. Shep White wasn't around any more either. Desolation, utter and complete. The only company was the warbling curlews and the clamouring geese which flighted over the sea-wall night and morning.

The blockhouse was the obvious choice for a camp-site. It had weathered a quarter of a century of winters; built for a war in which it had played no part; solid to the last square of concrete. It needed little preparation. Sacking on the floor. Boards over the windows to keep the draught out. It smelled of stale urine and excretion.

There were just the three of them. Professor Lowson was small and wiry, and it was hard to tell his age, for a bushy black beard flecked with grey hid the wrinkles in his face. In a month's time he would be 55, but he felt ten years younger.

Gavin Royle was in his mid-twenties. Handsome, smiling, well-built and with long dark hair of which the Professor was constantly disapproving. Royle's recent appointment as an assistant curator at the British Museum put him on an equal footing with the leader of this small expedition, but the Professor could not recognise equality.

Liz Beck, who completed the party, was the Professor's twenty-year-old niece. Ever since her parents had been killed in a road accident almost ten years ago she had had to rely upon this crusty old archaeologist for her needs. In his own way he was kindly enough even if he was lost in the past. She had graduated to university, under his guidance, and had consequently developed a strong interest in archaeology.

It was a shame she couldn't spend the vacation how she would have preferred: just lying on some beach allowing the sun to tan her beautifully proportioned body to a rich brown. Still, Uncle did need somebody to keep an eye on him when he set off on these expeditions. King John's treasure, indeed! Men had been searching for it ever since it had sunk into the briny! The most up-to-date equipment in the world had been employed and still it refused to yield its secret resting-place. And now one more search party...

Gavin carried the last carton across from the Land Rover beyond the sea-wall and set it down in the doorway of their chosen headquarters.

'Well, that's the lot!' he breathed. Somehow he had the feeling that he was just the work-horse of the party. The labourer. Brought along to do all the digging.

'Mind how you handle that metal-detector!' the Professor's voice whined from the interior of his own quarters. 'You're handling valuable equipment here, my boy. Not just provisions, you know.'

'I'm the only one who handles bloody anything around here,' Gavin thought, but aloud he said, 'All right, all right. Keep your hair on. I know what I'm doing.'

The muttered reply was incomprehensible.

'Don't be too hard on Uncle.'

Liz Beck appeared in the doorway of the 'room' which she had allocated herself. 'He's not a bad old stick really.'

'I suppose not,' Gavin eyed her appraisingly, noting her petite body with its curves in just the right places. Perfect features, long raven-black hair. He sighed. They had only known each other a few hours since they had set out from London and already his mind was spinning; he wondered if she was a virgin and then forced himself to think of other things. It wasn't any of his bloody business whether she was or not.

'Give us a hand to unpack these few last things,' he said. 'A woman's always that much better at arranging a house than a man.'

'You think we're crazy coming here to look for a treasure which was lost seven hundred years ago and everybody's been looking for since, don't you?' he asked as they worked.

'Don't you!' she countered.

'I'm being paid for it.' He tried to appear mercenary in an attempt to disguise his true feelings. 'Besides it's a break from the routine of the Museum. It gets pretty deadly there at times.'

'Same goes for me. Besides, Uncle Jack really is a bit of a daydream. He needs somebody around to keep reminding him that he's still living in the twentieth century.'

They worked in silence. Eventually she lit the primus-stove and placed a kettle of water on it.

'I suppose I'd better think about preparing some tea,' she said. 'No doubt Uncle will prefer to eat in his own little den. He never does like company at meal-times.'

Gavin Royle was relieved at this prospect but refrained

from saying so. The more time he had Liz to himself the better he would like it.

They washed up in silence. Apart from the clinking of crockery the only other sound was the constant scraping of matches on emery paper as Professor Lawson lit and relit his massive blackened briar pipe.

'It'll be light for another hour yet,' Gavin commented as he dried the last of the plates. 'What say we go for a stroll along the sea-wall? It's a nice evening. Too good to waste sitting in here.'

'Fine.' She smiled with enthusiasm. "There's no point in telling Uncle. He won't miss us anyway.'

The air was fresh and clean, spiced with the smell of the sea. For some time they walked in silence. High above them small skeins of wild geese honked as they headed back to their roosting grounds on the distant mud-flats.

'Do you really think there's any chance of ever finding this treasure?' Gavin shook his head.

'Who knows?' The Wash is an awfully big area. Half of it you can't get at anyway, shifting mud and tides can cover up things for centuries.'

The sun was dipping behind the horizon and suddenly it seemed much colder, reminding them that it wasn't summer any more. They began to retrace their steps.

Gavin glanced at Liz. He began thinking about her again. He wondered if she had a chap back at the university. Most girls there had, and for a variety of reasons.

He dropped his hand and felt for hers, closing his fingers over hers, gently, casually, as if it were the most natural thing to do. It was. His heart pounded. He half expected her to draw herself away, embarrassed, but she didn't. For some time she did nothing. Then, as if she had been deliberating on a course of action her small delicate fingers jostled for a position of more comfort and squeezed her reply. Two hundred yards further on he released his hold and slipped an arm about her waist. Her body nestled against his. Neither of them spoke,

Dusk was falling when they arrived back at the blockhouse. They paused at the entrance facing each other. Neither of them could think of anything to say. Words seemed superfluous. Gavin drew her towards him and they kissed. Gently at first. Then more fiercely as they pressed their bodies together. Gavin thought about his hardness which was boring against her thighs. He longed to caress the curves beneath her sweater but managed to control himself. A step at a time. At the moment he was doing just fine.

'Liz!' Professor Lawson's voice caused them to spring apart. 'Liz! How about lighting these lamps?'

They sighed with sudden relief. The old boy had only just noticed that it was getting dark. He obviously had not even left his quarters during the whole time they had been away.

'Coming.' Liz called and went inside to look for the matches.

Gavin and Liz tried to read for a while, gave it up and made some coffee. Concentration seemed impossible, so they sat and talked.

A sudden pounding on the improvised door crashed through the quietness.

Liz was trembling a little. "This isn't exactly the place where one would expect callers. And we don't know a soul, round here. Whoever can it be?'

'Well, there's only one way to find out,' Gavin Royle's smile reassured her as he got to his feet and made for the door. He tugged at the wooden framework and with a grinding and screeching it was forced open.

'Good evening.'

The man on the threshold was tall and austere-looking, with an aquiline face with bushy eyebrows and a moustache which suggested he had been in military service at some time or other. The completely bald head seemed to add a sinister aspect, yet his tweed jacket, plus-fours and Wellington boots were in keeping with the surroundings.

'Do I have the honour of addressing Professor Lowson?' His voice was cultured, firm.

'Er - no.' Gavin was perplexed for a moment. 'But I'll fetch him for you. Would you care to step inside a moment?' 'Thank you.'

Gavin turned, but Professor Lowson was already in the 'hall'.

'Who is it?'

He wrinkled his nose, a habit of his when he was annoyed at being disturbed, and peered over the top of his spectacles at the newcomer.

Their visitor seemed equally surprised at the appearance of the Professor. 'My name is Haywood, Manton Hay-wood. You must have noticed the small lighthouse at the place where the road joins the sea-wall. I live there. I am an ornithologist.'

'A bird-watcher!' There was a faint note of contempt in Professor Lowson's voice.

That's right. I'm working at the moment in a survey to find out the number of pinkfeet geese which use the Wash as a wintering ground.'

Professor Lowson sneered. 'Very interesting I'm sure. But I fail to see how I can help you.'

'You can help me,' said the ornithologist, annoyed by the other's attitude, 'by keeping off the mud-flats. I was talking to Ramsey Keen the doctor in Sutton. He's a bit of an archaeologist himself. Knows all about you. Well, the mud-flats are the main roosting grounds of the wild geese in this area. Disturbance would scatter them and make my job ten times more difficult Therefore I must ask you not to go further than the edge of the saltings.'

Lowson's beard twitched. Liz knew the signs only too well. The storm clouds were gathering within.

'Oh yes,' the Professor thrust his head forward and glowered at their visitor over the top of his spectacles. 'Well let me tell you something Mister ... Mister...' he never could remember names, 'Mister-whatever-your-name is. The mud-flats are the property of the Crown. That means anyone who wants to can walk on them. Dig on them. Do what you like on them. Got it.'

Manton Haywood drew himself up to his full height, towering above the Professor. His fists clenched until his knuckles showed white. His complexion took on a purple tinge. His lips were white and bloodless.

Then without a word he turned on his heel and stalked outside. For some time the three of them stood there in silence. Nobody spoke until the last squelching footstep had died away.

'Damn the impertinence of the fellow!' Lowson adjusted his spectacles and smoothed his beard. 'Just who does he think he is? I think that tomorrow we shall begin our search on these very, mud-flats. A mission such as ours shall not be thwarted by the likes of man such as that'

He stalked back to his quarters and Liz put the kettle on again.

'Your uncle's determined isn't he?' Gavin laughed.

'When he's got a bee in his bonnet nothing'll stop him,' Liz smiled and added, 'me too!'

But hardly had they poured their coffee before another heavy knocking came upon the door.

'Who the hell.. .' Gavin struggled to his feet but Professor Lawson was already on his way to answer it, muttering angrily to himself.

'Confound the man!' he snarled. 'I thought I made myself perfectly clear.' He dragged the door open. 'Now for the last time.. .'

His words trailed off. It was not Manton Haywood who stood on the threshold.

This man was small of build. Several days' growth of beard covered sharp features and his deep, sunken eyes darted suspiciously in all directions. He wore a camouflaged army-surplus combat jacket and thigh-length waders. A tattered cap, several sizes too small, vainly tried to cover unruly locks of long grey hair.

'What d'you want?' Professor Lawson was in no mood to be amicable.

'That's just what I've come to ask you,' the other replied. 'Who the hell d'you think you are to move into this place just as though you bloody well owned it? You bloody shooters are a nuisance from the time the season opens until it doses. All you do is scare off all the ducks and geese so that there's none left for a feller like me who has to make a livin' out of 'em! '

'Firstly,' Professor Lawson took a step forward, 'we are not shooters. Secondly, as I've already told another of you locals, we shall do just what the hell we please while we are here. And thirdly, who are you to come banging on my door at this time of night?'

'Mallard Glover's the name.' The wildfowler stood with his hands on his hips, 'and what I say on this part of the marshes goes! I've been fowlin' and whelkin' here for nigh on thirty years. Never 'ad no trouble till you blasted tit-shooters from the cities started comin' 'ere. I ain't 'avin' none of it mate. I got me a livin' to make and I ain't 'avin' it mussed up by the likes of a bearded old bastard like you!'

The thunder clouds which had been building up inside Lawson suddenly burst. Rage replaced reason. His clenched fist swung in a wide arc and crunched with all the force of his body behind it on Glover's jaw.

The wildfowler seemed to become airborne and then he crashed full length into the mud. For some moments he lay still and then very slowly he forced himself up on to his knees. His features were completely hidden beneath a layer of thick marsh ooze.

'Uncle Jack!' Liz darted forward and placed a restraining hand on her uncle's arm in case he was thinking of following up the assault. 'Uncle Jack! You shouldn't have done that.'

'You're damn right he shouldn't 'ave.' Mallard Glover spat out mud as he spoke. 'That's assault that is. I could go to the police. But I won't. I'll get even just the same though. You see if I don't.'

'Clear off!' Gavin decided it was time that he took a hand. 'You only got what you asked for. Now clear out and don't come back. Otherwise you'll get my boot up your arse to help you on your way.'

Mallard Glover picked himself up, shook himself like a dog and without even a backward glance sloped off into the night.

'Christ!' Gavin forced the door closed and followed the other inside. 'It seems we're not exactly popular, to say the least!'

'Lesson number one. Never get involved with locals when you're on a job like this. You'll never get any help out of them. Only hinderance and trouble. They always think you're out to pinch something which is theirs by right. Now we'd better turn in and get some sleep. We've got a busy day in front of us tomorrow.'

He stalked back to his quarters,

Gavin looked at Liz.

'Well that's a jolly start to our stay on the Wash. I wonder why everybody wants us out of the way. Is it really just because we're likely to disturb the birdies ?'

'What do you mean, Gavin?' Her expression was puzzled.

'I don't know,' he replied, 'maybe I'm tired and just letting my imagination run riot.'

Their lips met in a lingering kiss. This time his hands caressed her breasts through her sweater. She did not draw away.

He watched her enter her room. His hardness and his instincts told him to follow her. Reason advised him to wait Just a little while.

CHAPTER TWO

THE following day was warm. Too warm, Gavin reflected as the three of them trudged out on to the mud-flats.' Each carried a small spade and enough provisions to. last the day. The Professor carried the metal-detector. His would be the decision to dig if necessary.

'Strewth! ' Liz commented, 'it's just like summer.'

'Too hot for this game,' Gavin replied. 'We should have come in the winter.'

The further out they went the more difficult their progress became. Twice they were instructed to dig. The first excavation revealed the remains of a motor-launch less than three feet below the mud. The second turned up a rusty iron bedstead. On the latter occasion they were forced to go down seven or eight feet.

Professor Lawson was unruffled.

'It will not be easy,' he told them as he methodically filled and lit his pipe. 'We shall have to dig many times, I have no doubt, before we stand any chance of success. Nothing can be ignored.'

'You wouldn't say that if you bloody well had to do the digging,' Gavin thought as he drained the dregs from his last can of beer.

The sun was past its zenith. The Professor consulted his watch and then his compass.

'We must start back towards the mainland,' he snapped. 'The tide will be flowing in in less than two hours. It can creep in and fill the creeks ahead of you before you realise it and then you're trapped.'

They began the long trudge back. Sticky squelching mud, and every step was an effort. Twice the detector chattered but there was no time to dig. The tide is a merciless foe. It waits for no man.

Eventually they saw the dark green of the spike-grass in the distance. Gavin looked at his watch. It was four o'clock; another three hours or so of daylight. He wished the Professor would put that damned metal-detector away. They had shifted enough mud for one day.

The saltings were a relief after the monotony of the mudflats. Liz looked expectantly towards her uncle but still he trudged on. He was not prepared to rest until darkness fell.

'I hope we're not going to have this caper every day.' Gavin muttered aside to Liz.

'Leave it to me,' she gave his hand a quick squeeze. 'I'll try and persuade him that we ought to search the sea-wall tomorrow. The treasure could've been dredged up and buried in it when the wall was built.'

Professor Lawson stopped and held up his free hand, the detector crackling again.

'Ah!' his bright eyes danced with anticipation. 'We are afforded yet another chance. Gavin, Liz, this patch of soft mud amongst the spartina grass. This is where we must dig.'

Gavin unslung his spade again with reluctance. 'Couldn't we come back and try it in the morning, Prof?'

'No!' Lawson was not one to listen to suggestions. Not when his detector had raised yet another flicker of hope. 'We must not delay.'

The soft mud pulled at their limbs, straining tired muscles, and at least half of each spadeful they removed only sloped back.

The sun was just touching the horizon when Liz's spade struck something hard. Something metallic. She stooped down and picked it up but before she could examine it Lawson had snatched it from her grasp, and held it up. It was in the shape of an oblong, about six inches long, twisted and charred as though it had been subjected to the heat of a furnace.

'It's a bit of old tat,' Gavin threw his spade down in disgust. 'Like the bedstead and the wreck. Waste of time and energy again.'

'Wait!' There was an excited gleam in the bearded man's eyes. He examined the object from all angles. A puzzled frown was on his face.

'Dig again!' he ordered, a tremor of excitement in his voice.

'For Christ's sake!' Gavin looked up to the heavens. 'We've spent between four and five hours today digging solidly. For what? A load of rubbish that the scrapman wouldn't accept as a gift. And now, just when we're about all in, you want us to dig for more.'

'This is no ordinary metal.' Professor Lowson's voice trembled. 'I have never seen anything like it before. It defies description. I beg of you to carry on digging. Just for a few minutes more.'

'Oh all right then,' Gavin picked up his spade. Perhaps the old chap had gone off his rocker at last.

They dug for another five minutes.

'Here's another piece.' Liz held up something which oozed mud.

'And another.' Gavin tossed his find up to the Professor Lowson.

Lowson wiped the mud from the object.

'Amazing ... amazing ... Whatever can it be? It is like a mixture of iron and alloy. Yet so light, so durable.'

Liz suddenly dropped her spade and clasped her hand to her nose. 'What a stink!'

Gavin coughed. 'We haven't struck a sewer by mistake have we?'

'It's like putrifying flesh.' Liz pulled a face. 'Hey, what's this?'

Her foot touched something solid in the mud. 'There's something else here Gavin. Come and help me scrape the mud away from it.'

They worked for a minute or two and then they saw it.

Liz stepped backward, an expression of sheer revulsion on her face.

'It's a hand!'

Professor Lowson scrambled down into the hole and joined them. 'Let me see!' he gasped. 'Good Lord! It's ... it's... something!'

'It's like a claw,' Gavin muttered, 'a webbed claw. Some reptile.'

They scraped some more mud away.

'There's a body under here,' Gavin snapped. 'Liz get out of this pit Stand and watch from the top if you want. But get out!'

The girl hastened to obey. She was going to vomit she was sure. The smell and... that!

'It's a body all right,' Lowson muttered. 'But nothing human. Just look at those scales: like a reptile, greyish green. Never seen anything like it. The stench. And ... just look at that face!'

A stone gargoyle would have been handsome by comparison. Squashed distorted features, and a flat nose with cavernous nostrils. It was hairless and earless, with the top lip overhanging the lower one, and covered in scales. Oozing a land of slime.

Liz turned away and retched. Below her the two men vomited showering the monstrosity with spew. The stench was far stronger now, hanging in the windless atmosphere.

Gavin clutched at the muddy sides of the pit for support. 'Whatever is it? Where the hell did a thing like that come from. Professor?'

Curiosity was beginning to conquer fear and revulsion.

'Look at those scales for instance: greyish green. The mud here is almost black. Surely it would have taken on the colour of its surroundings as do most reptilian creatures. See the slime too. That has come from the creature itself. Like a kind of perspiration. That's what we can smell.'

'BO, eh?' Gavin Royle was attempting to recover some of his composure.

A sudden scream from above them rang out on the still evening air. They whirled round.

Liz Beck was on her hands and knees peering down with a look of stark terror on her face.

'Look!' she screamed again. 'Just look! Oh, my God!'

'What is it? Liz for God's sake, what is it? Has your reason snapped girl?' Gavin sought a foothold in the soft sides of their excavations.

She was close to hysteria. That... that thing, it's ... its chest is heaving. It's breathing! It's (dive!'

They turned and looked again at the scaly, slimy monster.

Its chest rose and sank rhythmically. Now they could hear it: laboured, rasping. A bubble of slime formed on one of its nostrils, then burst. Mud trickled from its mouth.

Gavin grabbed hold of Lowson and pushed him up the side of the pit with a strength born of terror.

'Get out!' he yelled. 'Get out before it's too late!'

Liz helped to pull them to safety and they collapsed in an ungainly heap in the zos and spartina grass. Their power of speech seemed to have deserted them. Their muscles were incapable of moving. They retched and vomited again.

Below them all was silent except for that steady breathing.

'Well, it's still asleep.' Gavin found his cigarettes, lit two and passed one to Liz. 'Christ only knows what it

would have done if we'd woken it up.'

The Professor crawled back to the edge of the crater and peered down, his fear dispersing rapidly.

'Interesting,' he murmured to himself. 'Fascinating, unbelievable! And to think that we should have the honour of finding it'

'What do you think it is. Professor?' Gavin asked with an arm around Liz. 'Or to be more precise where do you think it came from? A prehistoric era? Life preserved in the mud?'

Professor Lawson shook his head.

'No,' he replied, 'definitely not. It is not of this earth. That slime is proof enough of that. I would say that somehow it has come from another world - a distant planet; another galaxy. Somewhere where it lives beneath greyish-green mud. Though how or why it is here is beyond me.'

That's crazy,' Gavin laughed. Hollow and unconvincingly. 'A beast from another planet! There has to be a logical explanation somewhere. Maybe it's come from a zoo, or a safari park. Caught up in the wilds of South America or some such place, then escaped.'

Professor Lawson rarely laughed. He did now, but there was no mirth in it, only peals of semi-hysterical laughter rang out until Gavin and Liz both feared that his mind had snapped. Suddenly he stopped. He was rational again and cantankerous.

'No,' he murmured. 'Not even the darkest jungles of the Amazon could produce anything like this. Yet it has come from somewhere and we have been privileged to find it.'

Dusk was now turning to darkness. A good half-hour's walk lay ahead of them and Gavin did not relish the idea of losing their way on the saltings. Especially with a loathsome creature like that in the vicinity. It was sleeping, yes, but surely it must awake sometime.

'We'd better make a move.' He helped Liz to her feet 'First thing tomorrow morning I'll get a call through to the British Museum. This is something they won't want to miss.'

But Lawson's voice stung him like a whiplash. 'No. This is ours. Yours, Liz's, Mine! The greatest discovery of all time and you would let someone else take the credit for it! Allow ourselves to be merged into anonymity? Think again, man! Anyway we haven't had a chance to examine it properly yet. We cannot dismiss it with a cursory examination in the half-light. The best thing we can do is to come back here tomorrow and have a good look in broad daylight; take a few tests, and then we can decide what we are going to do.'

Gavin nodded. It seemed logical. Just so long as nobody else found it in the meantime!

Professor Lawson followed Gavin and Liz. He spoke little, his mind occupied with recent events. That fool Gavin Royle. It was typical of his breed to want to call in the experts right away! Experts! They would have even less idea of the beast's origin than he had. His theories would be dismissed. Somebody in authority would come up with some preposterous notion. Earliest form of man and all that rot. He could visualise the small part his own expedition would play in the days that followed. The newspapers would report the thing as having been 'discovered by a small party searching for King John's lost treasure'. Maybe even no names would be mentioned. And what would they do with the monster? Most likely put it in a cage and charge extortionate prices for the public to come and gawp at it! It might even

die. Then the taxidermists would resurrect it There was something else though. Something which only he had noticed. Something which emanated from the thing. Power! He could not explain it even to himself; he just knew it - felt it! Like waves of atomic radiation. Evil but omnipotent

He thought about it again. Power was made to be harnessed, used and controlled. Take robots for instance: machinery, greater in strength than a whole nation of people; yet mindless and built to serve. This beast was a robot except that it lived. Probably it 'lacked the logic of even earliest man.

It needed a master, and only one man in a million would be able to do it: Professor John Lowson! He smiled at the thought. No good saying anything to either Gavin or Liz. Neither of them had any ambition.

It could be done. He didn't see how at this very moment but most certainly he would find a way. All he needed was time. Time for research. Time to apply the findings of that research. So far he had gained a day. Tomorrow they would spend with the slumbering beast, but the day after ... Gavin would certainly want to get in touch with the British Museum then.

Fortunately the darkness prevented the other two from seeing his expression. Nothing would stop him. There were ways and means of silencing his companions ... for good, even if one of them was his niece. Calor-gas had a nasty habit of leaking, particularly during the nocturnal hours when people slept... never to waken! Still, there was always the chance that they would listen to reason.

The block house loomed up ahead of them, gaunt and uninviting.

Liz collapsed into the nearest chair as soon as they entered, quivering with relief.

Gavin busied himself preparing the food. 'Perhaps it would be best if you stopped here tomorrow. After all, apart from that horrible thing in the mud that smell can't do anybody a lot of good. You stand a chance of catching diphtheria as much as anything.'

But her expression was defiant 'You two aren't going to steal all the glory. After all it's just a... Slime Beast!'

'The Slime Beast.' Gavin paused and turned round. 'Say, that sounds a good name for it. The Slime Beast... sums' it up perfectly.'

He handed the other two a mug of soup each and picked one up for himself.

'Well, I guess we'll know a good deal more about it by this time tomorrow. Then we'll really be able to give the boys some info to start on.'

Professor Lowson took his soup back to his quarters with him. He "would take no chances on his expression revealing his thoughts.

CHAPTER THREE

THE meal such as it was, seemed to revive them. New life coursed through their veins and all traces of tiredness disappeared. Gavin looked at his watch.

'Eight o'clock,' he said. 'Too early for an early night even. We could always go into Sutton for a drink. We can take the Land Rover.'

Liz began brushing her hair. 'Good idea. I could do with a break. Just to get out of this stuffy hole for an hour or so will be a relief.'

She went into the adjoining compartment to tell the Professor and found him seated at a card-table, surrounded by books and papers, busily writing in his notebook. He did not even look up.

'Uncle Jack,' she said. 'Gavin and I are just popping into Sutton for a drink.'

'Hmm. . .' he carried on writing. She went back to Gavin.

'He's lost in his own little world,' she smiled. 'Probably writing a thesis on the Slime Beast. Getting it all ready to hand over to the British Museum along with the thing itself. Ugh!' she shuddered.

There was only one pub in Sutton: The Bull, which stood just back from the estuary in the centre of a row of untidy cottages.

They noticed the name over the door as they entered:

Thomas Southgate - Licensed to sell Beer, Spirits and Tobacco.'

There was just a public bar: nothing else. Bare boards, half a dozen tables and chairs and a dartboard at the far end. Some fishermen were playing dominoes and three or four more clustered round the bar. The large bearded man pulling pints of ale was obviously Tom Southgate. He was sullen and spoke little.

Gavin ushered Liz into one of the chairs and walked up to the bar. Southgate looked up, saw him, scowled and carried on serving. 'Surly bastard,' Gavin thought

'A pint of bitter and a scotch and ginger,' he said when his turn came.

'You're one of these treasure-hunters I suppose,' Southgate mumbled as he took Gavin's money.

Gavin nodded. Probably Glover had been here shooting his mouth off.

'Wastin' yer own bloody time as well as spoilin' other people's livin' the landlord banged the change down noisily on the bar. 'Don't yer think the bloody stuff would've been found by now if it was there? Bloody 'ell! The Wash's been dug over about ten times by twits like you!'

Gavin felt his blood rising but fought to control himself. 'You should be glad of the trade. Just think of the crowds who would flock here if it really was found.'

'And we can bleedin' well do without 'em,' Southgate spat back. 'Tt ain't theirs to look for anyway. If it is out there then I says it should stop there. It ain't hurting nobody. People've got a livin' to make. Besides you don't know what you're meddlin' with. There's queer things go on out on them marshes. Take that meteorite the other night. If that wasn't a sign to warn you off then I don't know what was.'

'What meteorite?' Gavin was unable to curb the excitement in his voice.

The one that crashed down on the saltings just on closing time o'course,' Southgate had obviously little or no patience with anybody. 'Everybody round 'ere saw it. Came down slowly, almost driftin'. A flamin' mass. Landed out on the edge o' the saltings somewhere. Like I said you'd do well to mind yer bloody own business mister. Yer never knows. One might come down on that blockhouse you've taken it into yer 'eads to camp in. That's a bleedin' liberty if ever there was one!'

Gavin said nothing, ignoring the guffaws and aside remarks from the regulars. His mind was in a whirl as he carried the drinks back to Liz.

'Did you hear that?'

'About the meteorite? You don't think that what Uncle said could have been true do you?' Her complexion was a shade paler. 'I mean do you really think that the Slime Beast came from outer space? And if so, why?'

'I don't know what to think, but it certainly adds up. As to why it came ... well, the Russians experimented with monkeys in space, didn't they? Imagine an alien race, amphibians possibly on a distant planet, a world of mud and water. Perhaps their planet is drying up. They need to look for another. Earth has more than its fair share of the type of terrain they require to live in, so they sent the old Slime Beast as an experiment. But something went wrong, and the ship caught fire and crash-landed on the marshes of the Wash, burying itself and its occupant deep in the mud. As luck would have it the Professor's metal detector located the burnt fragments and we've dug up this monster. Miraculously its still alive. AH conjecture of course but where do we go from here?'

'It's too horrible to think about,' Liz shuddered and sipped her whisky. 'Just suppose they decided to send another. Or suppose they all came. Emigrated in force!'

Gavin drained his glass and stood up. 'For all we know they may be perfectly harmless. We're judging this one solely on its looks.'

'And smell,' Liz wrinkled her nose.

'Anyway we'd better get back and see what your uncle has to say to this latest development'

As they went out Gavin heard Southgate talking to one of his regulars. 'Interferin' bastards,' the landlord said, 'they oughta walk into the quick sands up to their bleedin' necks. If I was standin' nearby with a rope I wouldn't throw it 'em. Let 'em go under I would.'

Professor Lowson was still poring over his books and papers when Gavin and Liz returned. Gavin opened the door so that some of the tobacco haze could drift out, and briefly related what they had heard in The Bull. Lowson's eyes narrowed and he listened attentively.

'So,' Gavin concluded, 'there may be some truth in your theory after all.'

'Hmm,' the Professor looked thoughtful and then returned to his work. He was not in a communicative mood tonight.

Liz heard the door of her 'bedroom' open softly about half an hour after she had crawled into her sleeping-bag.

'Is that you Gavin?' she whispered.

'No, it's the Slime Beast,' he chuckled softly.

'Don't joke about it please, Gavin,'

She felt him lower himself down beside her.

'I'm sorry,' he kissed her lightly. 'I can hear your uncle snoring his head off. You didn't mind me coming in did you?'

'Of course not'

They lapsed into silence for some minutes. Gavin had brought his own sleeping-bag with him and was sitting on it. She stretched out her hand. He guided her fingers where he wanted them. It was as though an electric current had suddenly surged through his whole body. He pressed her backward and kissed her. Her hand never moved away.

'If we zip these two sleeping-bags together,' he murmured, 'we can make them into a double one.' . 'OK.' Her reply was eager. 'I'm not wearing anything at all by the way!'

'I shan't be in a minute,' he breathed, already unbuttoning his shirt and pulling off his jeans. 'We shall have to light the lamp so we can fix these zips.'

Gavin made sure that he was completely naked before he lit the lamp. As the small enclosed place began to fill with light he undid Liz's sleeping-bag and threw the top cover back.

They looked at each other. Her large brown eyes focused on his erect manhood, his on her small firm breasts. Subconsciously she brought her legs together as he looked and he had only a fleeting glimpse of the moist pinkness among the dark hairs.

Their 'double-bed' was ready. She slid into the soft quilt as he put out the light. Then they were together, their naked bodies responding to each other's touches.

Her shyness evaporated with the darkness, and her legs parted willingly to allow his eager fingers to probe between them. Her breath came faster and she moaned with delight.

'You ... you've done this to a girl before.' It was a statement not a question. Immediately she wished she hadn't said it. She had no right to pry into his past. 'I'm sorry Gavin I shouldn't have said that It's just, that you... seem to know exactly what to do to me.'

'There aren't many blokes over twenty who haven't been with a girl.' He chose his words carefully. He told her what she wanted to know. No details.

There was silence for some minutes.

'I ... hope you won't be disappointed in me.' She trembled as she spoke. 'You see... I'm a virgin,'

He pressed his lips to hers fiercely. Gavin had never slept with a virgin before. He would have to go carefully. He would either make or break their relationship.

Gently, very gently, he eased himself into her. A little at a time. Stopping and resting whenever she gasped with pain. At last he was there. All the way.

'You're not a virgin anymore,' he whispered.

'I wish you'd done it to me a long time ago,' she replied as he began to thrust gently. 'Oh God! Gavin, promise me you'll do it to me again... and again! '

'I promise.'

'What ... what if I become pregnant? The students at university take precautions. I've heard them talking about it'

'I'll be careful,' he breathed. Trust me just this once. After this we'll use something more reliable.'

She nodded and relaxed again. Perhaps she wasn't really bothered if he did get her pregnant.

Half an hour later, after having rested every few minutes, he knew that this time he would be unable to halt his desires. Swiftly he eased himself backwards. Just in time! Liz felt the warmth spurting on to her thighs. He had not betrayed her trust.

Then they just lay there, content in each other's spent body, quivering in the knowledge of what they had done. They dozed. Finally they slept

But Liz felt as though her eyes had hardly closed before they flickered open again. Her tiredness was gone. She was wide awake.

She felt Gavin's body close to her, and heard his rhythmic heavy breathing. She glanced at the luminous dial of her travelling alarm-clock on a crate by her side: 2.20 am.

She was puzzled. Very rarely did she wake in the night. Something must have woken her. Perhaps it was the excitement of losing her virginity. She felt her desires welling up again at the very thought. Her hand delved low and touched Gavin. His limpness excited her as much as his hardness had done. He stirred. She snatched her hand away feeling guilty.

Outside, the breeze rustled softly through the spike-grass. Then she heard something else. She could not place the sound. It was louder than the sighing of the wind, harsher too, like an asthmatic wheeze magnified a hundred times.

As she listened, it came closer. Now it was directly outside the boarding which covered the slotted windows and the doorway. Harsh and unreal, reminding her of the snuffling of some wild beast in search of prey.

Suddenly she was afraid. There was something outside. Something or someone was looking for a way in!

'Gavin! Gavin!' There was an urgency in her whisper. 'Wake up. There's something prowling round the blockhouse!'

He sat up. The sound came again. Laboured stentorian breathing. But there was something else. Something which sent shivers down his spine without any logical explanation.

The noise reminded him of something wet and slippery being forcibly dragged across terra firma, pausing every so often to rest as though the effort was too great.

Their nostrils twitched. The scent of the saltings which had been with them since their arrival was now masked by a far more powerful aroma. The cloying putrifying stench was only too familiar ...

'It's ... it's .. .' Liz choked and heaved and clung tightly to Gavin.

'Yes,' he breathed. 'That foul smell from the pit - the Slime Beast!'

'It can't be that foul thing out there...'

Gavin did not answer. He did not dare. How could that loathsome creature have risen from its marshy grave to prowl the saltings? Yet it had not been dead! They all knew that. It had been breathing. Therefore it was still alive. So why should it be incapable of movement? That was logic. All the same it didn't bear thinking about

The slithering stopped. The beast was outside the planking which served as an improvised door. A scratching sound - it had found the entrance, a flimsy structure which would be no match against sheer physical power. Liz felt the panic surging up inside her. Something splintered.

Gavin leapt out of the sleeping-bag. He wished he had a gun but it would probably have been useless. Nothing would penetrate that slime-covered, armour-plating. He found Liz's torch and switched it on, sweeping the beam round the small enclosure.

A weapon! He must repel this loathsome creature. Then an idea filtered through his fear-crazed brain. He saw the box of matches and the three-day-old newspaper. Fire! The scourge of all beasts of the wild.

Swiftly he opened the paper and rolled it into the shape of a giant spill, but as he did so there was a loud crack and further splintering of wood. He fumbled for a match and the flame caught, licking hungrily with each second.

The draught in the corridor fanned the fire and the flames filled everywhere with their golden glow, casting eerie shadows. He forced himself to look at the door. Pieces of broken wood lay inside on the concrete and something glinted in the jagged hole: a shimmering of greyish-green slime on a webbed claw which was already snapping off another length of wood.

For a second Gavin stood as though transfixed. Every movement in his body seemed to have been halted by some invisible force. He had read of people being paralysed by fear. He had never believed it... until now!

The flame wafted back towards him. He felt the heat on his face. He stepped back. He could move again.

Another chunk of wood bounced on the floor. Gavin leapt forward. There was no time to lose,

The gap was larger now. Something was thrusting itself inside. A head. Squashed scaly features, bared reptilian lips, gaping quivering nostrils, eyes glinting evilly, reflecting the light from the dancing flame.

The stench was overpowering. Gavin retched even as he threw the burning newspaper into the face of the fiend. He staggered back narrowly missing a blow from that mighty claw which would have meant instant death had it connected. He stumbled and fell in a heap on the floor.

A wild unearthly scream of rage and fear filled the night air. A thousand souls in the torments of hell could not have sounded more terrible. It seared his mind. He wanted to scream as well. Liz was already screaming.

Then suddenly there was silence for a few seconds. Nothing moved. Shambling slithering footsteps faded away across the marsh,

'What's going on?'

The beam from the torch blinded him but he recognised the Professor's voice. Gavin struggled to his feet. Liz appeared on the scene also and flashed her own torch revealing her uncle, hair awry, clad in his shirt and long pants.

Gavin fought to remain calm. 'We've had a visitor, but he's gone now. It was the Slime Beast.'

'Nonsense, you've been dreaming. . .'

'Just look at that then!' Gavin pointed to the splintered wood on the floor and the jagged hole in the door which was still dripping with foul-smelling slime. 'Can't you smell it, Professor?'

Lowson nodded dumbly.

'Well it's on the loose.' Gavin retorted, 'and we're responsible. We freed it from the mud. We must report it first thing tomorrow morning!'

'Oh yes,' Professor Lowson's tone was laced with sarcasm, 'and subject ourselves to ridicule. It might never be seen again. Then we should look fools in the eyes of the public. I think we agreed among ourselves that we should devote tomorrow to researching it. Then, in the light of our discoveries, we can determine our next course of action.'

'I suppose you're right,' Gavin began pulling on some jeans and attempted to make it look as though he had come out of his own room to repel the Slime Beast. 'There's one thing we must remember though. This beast is highly dangerous. Whatever the outcome of our research it has got to be destroyed. It's a menace to mankind!'

CHAPTER FOUR

THEY slept badly for the rest of the night Gavin knew well that his improvised repairs to the door of the blockhouse were not enough against the Slime Beast should it return. However it could not enter without making a noise and Gavin was relying on sufficient warning to enable him to use the burning paper again.

After the Professor had returned to his quarters Gavin and Liz went back to their sleeping-bag.

'It's too horrible for words,' Liz sobbed, pressing her body close to his. 'I mean it's all very well Uncle Jack wanting to keep it a secret, but we can't keep quiet about a monster like that on the rampage.'

'We'll have to for the moment,' Gavin replied. 'If we go and tell the authorities that this thing's on the loose without proof of its existence they'll put us in the nut-house for a spell!'

All three of them were up soon after dawn. Liz prepared a breakfast of bacon, beans and coffee after which they felt considerably better.

Professor Lowson stuffed tobacco into his pipe. 'Well, we can't make a move before nine o'clock. The tide doesn't turn until eight and we shan't be able to cross the big creek on to the other side of the saltings until then.'

It seemed a long wait. The Professor retired to his stuffy compartment, rummaging through books and papers. Gavin and Liz sat on the spartina grass outside the blockhouse and watched the sun come up.

'I wish we didn't have to go back to that awful hole,' Liz squeezed his hand as she spoke. 'Right now I'd like to pack everything up and go home. I don't ever want to see this horrible place again.'

'Don't worry,' Gavin tried to reassure her. 'Maybe as soon as your uncle's carried out an examination on the 'Slime Beast we'll be moving off. I guess poor old King John's treasure will take a back seat for a while.'

Liz suddenly sat bolt upright and pointed towards the sea-wall. 'There's somebody coming. Looks like quite a party too.'

Gavin focused his binoculars on the distant group.

'That's funny! They're police. Three in uniform and two who are obviously in charge. Plain clothes men. And somebody else. Seems to be showing them the way. It's that character your uncle punched on the jaw last night. The wildfowler fellow.' He lowered his glasses. 'Maybe he's come to prefer assault charges against the Professor. Still he'd hardly bring half the local police force with him. One constable would be enough.'

'Poor old Uncle Jack,' Liz moaned. 'Always in trouble over something.'

They sat and watched as Glover led the small parry across the saltings, taking a winding course in order to avoid the deep creeks. They could see them clearly now. The fowler had a worried, almost frightened, expression on his face. Hardly a trace of anger. The leading police officer was tall and austere, his companion short and stocky. The three constables had an air of perplexity about them.

They came to a halt in front of Gavin and Liz.

'Is Professor Lowson about?'

There was nothing friendly about the official man and Liz felt her stomach muscles tighten.

'Does somebody want me?' the Professor appeared in the doorway of the blockhouse, pipe in mouth, and an expression of annoyance on his face. Glover scowled at him but it appeared to go unnoticed.

'I'm Chief-Inspector Harborne,' the policeman held up his official card. This is my colleague, Detective-Inspector Borg.'

'What can we do for you?' Lowson was puzzled. He was not used to dealings with the law and felt at a strong disadvantage.

'There's been a ghastly murder committed.' Harborne's voice was terse, matter-of-fact 'A terrible mutilation with no apparent motive. I understand from Mr Glover here that the murdered man called upon you in the early hours of yesterday evening; a Mr Manton Haywood'

Gavin and Liz gasped audibly. Even Professor Lowson was shaken.

'What! ' he croaked. The bird-watcher ?'

That's him,'

While Harborne talked, Borg and the three constables wandered about the outside of the building. Mallard Glover fidgeted with his hands and looked down at the ground.

'He lived in the old lighthouse which you can see from here at the end of the sea-wall. I wondered if you saw or heard anything unusual during the night.'

Lowson became off-hand. 'Nothing at all. He did call here just after dark. Claimed we were disturbing his birds with our presence here, but he didn't stop long. Never came inside in fact.'

'I see.' Chief-Inspector Harborne fixed his gaze steadily on the other. 'Might I infer from that that it was not exactly a friendly meeting?'

'Not particularly.'

'Well,' Harborne's tones were grim. This is one of the vilest killings I've come across in my thirty years in the Force. The body was,' he lowered his voice so that Liz would be unable to hear him, 'mutilated and dismembered. The entrails have disappeared. Everywhere there was blood and ... slime! A horrible greyish-green slime that smells of putrefaction. The experts at this moment are trying to identify it. It's not of these marshes, that's a certainty! There was a trail of it leading from the sea-wall to the lighthouse, along the road into Sutton and back again out on to the marshes. Already most of it appears to be evaporating. Like some behemoth had risen from a watery lair and then gone back again. Trouble is you can't trace the stuff on the marshes otherwise we'd track it down without any trouble. My theory is that the murderer is a homicidal maniac. He used this vile stuff as part of a ruse to try and throw us off the scent Pretty crude, but its no monster! That stuff's for horror movies and comics.'

'Seems a bit far-fetched.' Lawson lit his pipe as though in boredom. 'If we see some monster about we'll get in touch with you.'

'Never mind the monster,' Harborne's tone was acid. 'It's a murderer we're after and we shan't rest until we've got him. So just keep your door locked at night if you must camp out here.'

Ten minutes later the party departed, Glover slowly leading them back to the sea-wall. Gavin turned on Professor Lawson. 'Why the hell didn't you tell them?' he snapped. 'You'll be in serious trouble for not disclosing valuable evidence. I wasn't going to show you up in front of them but if you don't go to them with the full story in the next twenty-four hours then I shall! We're in deadly danger out here. It could have been us three who were dismembered and mutilated instead of Haywood!'

'Now hold your horses. Another few hours won't make any difference. I want a chance to examine this monster.'

If you ask me, it slumbers by day and prowls by night. That gives us the rest of the day. Better start getting your things together. The tide should be well on the way out by now and we'll be able to get across the big creek easily.'

It was unusual for the bar-room of The Bull to be crowded so early in the morning. Usually for the first half-hour after Tom Southgate opened the doors he rarely saw a soul. A few drifted in for a pint and a sandwich around midday and then it went quiet again.

Not so this sunny autumn morning. Fishermen, whelkers, and local tradesmen all seemed to have taken the day off. Yet there was no holiday atmosphere in the place. Smiles were few and far between. Instead they were sombre and afraid.

'What the 'ell was it?' a small whelker croaked, turning to face the silent assembly. 'Musta come right by our cottage. Left a trail o' that filthy stinkin' stuff all down the lane. I see'd the slime with me own eyes. Not o' this world. Never. Not o' this world. You could smell it!' He paused. 'It smelt o'... the dead!'

'I reckon Glover knows sommat about it.' another one put in. 'Queer bloke. Spends most of 'is time out on the salt marshes. The trail led back out there. Besides,' and he leered, 'him and that bird-watcher bloke hated each other's guts. Glover's threatened to shoot him more than once. And now 'e's done it in a way so they can never pin any-thin' on 'im !'

'Rubbish!' Tom Southgate slammed an empty beer-mug down on the counter. 'You don't know what you're a-talkin' about Sam Slights! It's got nothin' to do with Glover, queer cuss as he is. Whatever killed Haywood is not of this world! And mark my words, it'll kill again... and again.'

'What're ye babblin' about, Tom?' one of the fishermen bawled out. Yet in spite of his dissent there was uncertainty in his voice. There's a maniac at large. You know that. We all know it. The police said so didn't they ?'

'Aye,' Southgate turned on the speaker. 'The police said so right enough. They had to. They don't want to spread panic do they? Treat us like children. Think it's best if we don't know.'

'Then what do you think's behind it all Tom?' someone else called out.

'Shall I tell you?' the landlord lowered his voice and leaned across the bar. Everybody became silent Fidgeted. Uncertain of themselves.

'Well,' he paused for effect, 'it's these treasure-hunters who are to blame!' He looked round. Murmurs of astonishment 'It's them who've stirred it all up. Perhaps none of you know the old legend. King John's treasure shall remain hidden for all time. It is no man's to claim. It belongs to John himself. To the dead! A sea-monster guards it night and day. Yet if any mortal shall dig close to the treasure this beast shall rise and go forth to seek vengeance. That's what it did last night Only the bird-watcher happened to be handy. It wasn't satisfied though. Oh no! It had slept for seven hundred years and it must've been mighty hungry. It came up to the village but found nothin'. Everyone was indoors sleepin' and it couldn't get at 'em. But it'll come back. Just you mark my words. It'll come back!'

'Where'd you get all this from, Tom?' a man from the back of the room called out

'Me ole Dad,' was the reply, 'and 'e got it from 'is dad afore 'im, who got it from 'is dad afore 'im, who got...'

'Yeah. Well suppose this is what's happenin' right now. How d'we get rid o' the curse?'

There's only one way as I can see.' Tom Southgate thrust out his bearded jaw and glared at the whole company. 'We gotta get rid o' these bastards from out of that bloody blockhouse. Drive 'em away. Worse if we have to. We'll know no peace until they're gone from the marshes. Alive or dead!'

The going seemed even heavier than on the previous day as the party trudged across the soft saltings. Only Professor Lowson seemed tireless, as though some invisible force was driving him on. Time and time again Gavin had to quicken his own pace and help Liz along in order to keep up with him.

It was shortly after ten o'clock when they saw their excavations of the previous day a hundred yards or so ahead.

'Well, there she is!' Lowson shouted.

Liz halted. She felt a desire to run. Anywhere. Just to get away from this dreadful place and the horrors which it held. Gavin turned to her.

'Perhaps you'd better stop here,' he said. 'Sit down in the sun for an hour or two. I'll go on ahead with the Professor.'

She shook her head.

'No.' She forced a smile. 'I've come this far and I'll not leave you now. I'd sooner stick with you.'

They caught up with Lowson. The pile of mud still stood on the spike-grass like a miniature pyramid. Beyond it lay...

The smell of seaweed was strong in the air today, and Gavin breathed deeply until a sudden thought struck him. They shouldn't have been able to smell it. Instead this pleasant tangy aroma should have been nullified by the putrifying stench which would cause them to retch and vomit.

The air was fresh and sweet.

Gavin joined the Professor on the brink of the pit Liz hesitated and stood back a yard or so. They looked down.

Thick black oozing mud. A couple of inches of water which had failed to seep away. Apart from that... nothing!

'My God!' Lowson sank to his hands and knees and continued to peer into the empty hole. Here and there were faint traces of the greyish-green slime, disappearing fast. Nothing else.

'It's gone.' Gavin's expression was tense and strained. The Slime Beast has gone! '

'Well,' Gavin turned to Lowson, an expression of triumph on his face, 'I'm calling the tune now. Prof. I've given you your chance. Now there's only one course left open to us. There's a dangerous beast on the rampage. It's already killed once. The chances are it'll kill again unless something is done. I'm going right back to Sutton to inform Chief Inspector Harborne and then to telephone my colleagues at the British Museum.'

Professor Lowson looked at him for some seconds and then burst into peals of laughter. His mirth was uncontrollable, insane almost. Bent double he cackled until a coughing fit finally turned his complexion a deep scarlet, then finally he spoke.

'You poor, poor fool!' His words lashed at Gavin with a venom which hitherto the young man had not suspected from this eccentric old man. 'Are you out of your mind? Even the police, who half suggested some horrific creature, will not believe you. They are seeking a homicidal maniac. Where is your proof? This slime melts into nothingness after a time. See, only traces remain in this pit. In an hour they will be gone. Just because you claim to have seen this ... this Slime Beast as you call it You and Liz.. '

'And you I' snapped Gavin angrily.

'Me?' The other was indignant. 'Me! I shall deny all knowledge of it. Pure fantasy on the part of two very highly-strung imaginative people. You fool. Do you think I'm going to let a chance like this slip through my fingers?

The greatest scientific discovery of all time. Almost within my grasp! Do you think I'm going to step down so that others can take the credit?'

It was Gavin Royle's turn to laugh.

'You're the fool.' he retorted. 'You're the one who's living on fantasies. The Slime Beast has gone, man. It's on the rampage. You'll never get a chance to study it.'

'Oh no?' Lowson was more rational, scheming. 'I intend to find it, my friend. If I have to search the whole of this earth. I'll find it, somewhere. Furthermore, you two are going to help me. Go to the police and I'll have you put in an asylum! You forget one thing. I am Professor John Lowson the greatest archaeologist in Britain, maybe the world. You two are nothing. A couple of kids helping me. Do you think your story would be believed against mine?'

'You might be one of the greatest archaeologists alive today,' Gavin snarled, 'but you're also a selfish scheming bastard! OK, so you hold the trumps. It can't do much without proof, I'll admit. Furthermore I'll help you locate the Slime Beast. But ... when, and if, we find it, don't rely upon either of us to go along with your schemes. I want to find it to safeguard mankind. For no other reason. If I can find a way to destroy it I will.'

They looked at each other in silence for some moments. Then Lawson nodded.

'On those terms then,' he leered, 'we are united. We are doing no good here obviously so the sooner we start back the better.'

CHAPTER FIVE

GAVIN and Liz ate their supper in silence. Professor Low-son had shut himself away, once they arrived back at the blockhouse. He had not emerged since.

'Do you really think we shall see the Slime Beast again?' Liz asked as she began clearing the table.

Gavin shook his head.

'I wouldn't like to say,' he murmured. 'I wonder just where it's hiding out. After all there isn't a lot of cover on these salt marshes and mud-flats. It's either got to submerge itself in the mud or be seen. Tomorrow we shall spend the day tramping up and down hoping to spot where it might have buried itself, but it's going to be hard work. Perhaps you'd better take the Land Rover into Spalding and spend the day there.'

'Not a chance.' Her mind was made up. 'Where you go, I go. No arguments.'

Gavin did his best to improve the security of the door before they retired for the night. Not that it would keep the Slime Beast out - just hinder it. Make a noise. He also saw that he had an ample supply of newspapers and a box of matches at hand.

'Anyway,' a sudden thought struck Liz as she pulled off her blouse and began unfastening her bra. 'Just supposing we do find the Slime Beast. What do we do? I mean we haven't got any weapons of any sort have we?'

'No.' Gavin smiled. 'But if our theory is correct it sleeps by day. If we can locate its hiding place I'm going to telephone the police straight away, no matter what your uncle says. We'll get the army in to deal with it then. Of course that'll be the end of my association with the Professor but I can't help that'

Liz shook her head.

'Once he gets an idea in his head there's no shifting it. He never forgives and he never forgets.' She stood there, naked to the waist, blushing with pleasure as his admiring gaze centred on her breasts and remained there. He stepped close, kissed her and fondled her. His fingers began searching for the fastenings on her faded jeans. Slowly he began to slide them down.

Crash! They both recoiled in alarm as something heavy struck the outside of the boards which covered the narrow slitted window.

'What the hell!' Gavin pushed Liz to one side. With trembling fingers she pulled her trousers up again.

'Is it... is it the Slime Beast?' her voice shook.

'If it is,' he replied, 'he's changed his tactics. That was a stone thrown by somebody with a very good aim. I'll just move the boardings a little and take a look. Keep those matches and newspapers handy. Just in case!'

Gavin pulled one of the narrow slats of wood to one side thus giving him a much restricted view of (he moonlit saltings outside. Even the Slime Beast would be unable to get more than a scaly webbed claw inside.

At first all he could make out was an area of spartina grass shimmering in the silvery moonlight. All was still save for the lonely warbling of a curlew. Then several beams of light stabbed viciously out of the semi-darkness. Searing at his eyeballs. Blinding. Something struck the concrete only niches away from his head and rebounded.

Voices - clamouring, angry, vicious.

'Come on out you bastards!'

'You've caused one death here. The next will be yours.'

'Grab 'em. Throw 'em in the quicksands!'

Gavin could make out moving forms. He counted three, but there were probably a dozen, all surrounding the blockhouse, bathing it in the beams from their torches.

'What is it?' Liz was at his side. He pushed her away from the window.

'Get down,' he hissed. 'It would appear the locals are resorting to mob-law!'

They heard a splintering sound. Someone was using an axe on the door.

Suddenly Professor Lawson appeared in the doorway, and from his appearance it was obvious that the noise had just awakened him.

'There's a crowd of people outside,' he snarled, 'shouting and throwing stones.'

Gavin turned on him. 'They're going to throw us in the quicksands Prof. You'd better do some fast thinking because right now I've run out of ideas.'

'I'll talk to them. Explain, reason with them.'

'You're crazy!' Gavin's only thought was for Liz's safety. 'They're not going to reason with anybody. They're scared to hell. Superstition is ruling their actions and they think our deaths will ensure that nobody else gets killed. It's like being back in the Middle Ages!'

Hastily Gavin began sorting out some wooden stakes from a pile in the corner. Most of them were rotten. Months ago some fisherman had probably used them for staking out his nets, left them in here for safety, and then forgotten all about them. Anyway they were better than nothing. If used properly they might crack a skull or two before snapping.

Gavin grimaced. Outnumbered as they were they would sell their lives dearly. He slipped an arm round Liz's waist and kissed her, trying to sound confident and reassuring.

'They're only a bunch of ignorant peasants.'

That was true enough; ignorant, but very dangerous.

The man with the axe had almost broken through. His companions surged to help him, ripping away the broken wood with their bare hands.

'Give us the girl before you throw her in,' a couple of the younger ones shouted. 'Don't waste her. Screw her first!'

With a crash the remains of the door fell inwards. Men clustered around it, half afraid of that which they might find inside. Gavin barred the corridor, his improvised club held firmly in his right hand.

'Come on then,' he taunted them, 'who's first for a cracked skull?'

The leader of the mob looked at the short axe which he held. It seemed to give him confidence. He stepped forward. It was the lead which the others sought and as one they surged in his wake.

Gavin braced himself. This was it, and it wouldn't last for long.

Then explosions reverberated along the corridor and into the three tiny compartments, echoing and re-echoing with increasing volume. The rush halted almost before it had begun. Someone was screaming. It was one of the youths who had already pulled down his zip and exposed himself in eager anticipation. He fell to the ground clutching at his legs. Blood was already seeping through his trousers.

'I've been shot!' he yelled. 'Somebody do something.'

But there was only silence. Nobody moved. Mouths gaped open, hi surprise, shock and horror.

Another violent, ear-splitting report came from outside. Closer this time. Something struck the roof of the blockhouse like a jet-powered hailstorm and chipped the concrete.

'All right, all right, that'll do. Hold it right there. The first one of you bastards to move gets it right hi the guts!'

The voice was vaguely familiar. Gavin recognised it A slow fenland drawl suddenly whipped into a spasm of fury that was Glover - Mallard Glover, the hermit wildfowler!

'Come on then. Back to your homes, all of you, you drunken sods. Carry that lout, he isn't hurt all that bad. One of you can dig the pellets out of his legs with a penknife when you get back.'

Slowly the men moved to obey. Two of them hoisted the wounded youth to his feet and supported him between them. Sullenly, dejectedly, they sloped off back towards the sea-wall.

Gavin stepped outside. Glover was standing about ten yards away, his long-barrelled shotgun cradled under his arm. His face was hidden in shadow. He did not speak.

Gavin made a move towards him, but stopped suddenly. The twin barrels of the gun were focused on his stomach.

'Don't jump your luck,' Glover grated. 'You can see how things stand now. Anyway they won't be back tonight, nor tomorrow if I know them, the yeller bastards.'

'Thanks.' Gavin was puzzled. 'You saved our lives. I don't know how to...'

'You needn't bother,' the fowler snapped. 'I didn't do it for you anyway. Now I'll be moving along. Just try and forget that tonight ever happened. No good can come of stirring things up.'

Professor Lawson and Liz joined Gavin outside. In silence they stood and watched as Mallard Glover set off across the saltings, heading seawards. Obviously he was still intent on a night's sport under the full moon in spite of the recent happenings.

'Well,' Gavin sighed and shook his head. 'If he hadn't turned up I don't think we'd be standing here now. He saved our lives. But why? Two nights ago he was warning us off, and got a punch on the jaw for his trouble. He doesn't want us here and that mob would have solved his problem for him. Yet he horns in and breaks the party up, risking his own life in the bargain. It just doesn't add up.'

'Maybe he's just got a kind heart underneath a rough exterior.'

'Not him, Liz. He wouldn't do anything without a reason, and I'd give the helluva lot to know what's behind all this.'

They went back inside.

'It's barely midnight!' Professor Lawson looked at his watch. 'Another seven hours till daylight and we haven't even got an excuse for a front door.'

'We'll have to take it in turns to keep watch. Those villagers won't come back but the Slime Beast might. It's between you and me, Professor. You take the first three hours, I'll take the last four, and don't doze off; you might not wake up!'

Gavin and Liz retired separately. With Professor Lawson on the prowl they would not be able to sleep together.

Dawn broke cold and dull. A sea-mist shrouded the salt-marshes. Visibility was reduced to twenty yards.

The archaeologists slept late. There was no point in making an early start. They could have passed within yards of the Slime Beast's daytime refuge and not even be aware of it. They could have become lost, wandered seawards and fallen victims to a ruthless incoming tide. Most of all though they needed sleep and only with the coming of daylight were they assured of safety.

It was noon before they set out. A breeze had sprung up and the fog had disappeared in a very short time, so that weak sunlight flooded the saltings.

'Walk in a straight line,' Professor Lowson ordered, 'no 48

more than twenty yards apart, and keep your eyes peeled. It's a big area. Look in every creek. Move slowly.'

They set off. The going was heavy but the coolness was a relief. The hours went by, and they kept searching, but there was nothing, nothing but an expanse of grass and mud.

They arrived back at the blockhouse at 5.30 pm. They could have stayed out another hour but the door had to be repaired before nightfall.

They were silent as Liz served the evening meal.

The Professor was dejected; he had not envisaged failure.

Gavin was angry; an organised party armed with the necessary weapons should have been searching for the Slime Beast.

Liz was frightened; another night of fear lay in front of them - the villagers, the monster; darkness brought it all back to her.

After they had washed up she and Gavin sat talking. Lowson resumed his lengthy sessions with his books and papers. They did not put the radio on, much as they would have welcomed it, for it could well serve as a cover for other sounds. It was a matter of life and death.

'How much longer are we staying on here?' Liz threw the paper she had been reading into the corner. 'It's getting me down. We haven't seen a sign of the Slime Beast today and we've walked miles. It just seems to have vanished, and Uncle appears to have forgotten all about the treasure, which is what we came here for in the first place. We can't sleep properly at night for fear that that monster will show up or else a bunch of superstitious villagers will try and throw us in the quicksands. I can't stand much more Gavin.'

Gavin pulled her on to his knee and kissed the nape of her neck.

'Don't worry, love,' he murmured. 'Well give it one more day. Then, if there's no sign of the beast, you and I'll go back to London. If the Professor chooses to stay on here by himself then that's his business.'

She leaned back on him. 'Thanks. I shall be glad to get away from here. So long as we're together.'

For the next half hour not a word was spoken between them. There was no need. Their hands explored each other's bodies without any hint of embarrassment. Gavin let her do what he wanted her to do, his breath coming faster and faster until finally his whole frame shook with the release of his tension.

Afterwards they just lay there partially clothed forgetting for a time the horror which surrounded them.

'There's somebody coming!' Gavin struggled to his knees, pulling his trousers up as he did so.

Liz paled. They both listened. Footsteps, hurried, panic-stricken, coming from the seaward side of the marsh. Squelching and splashing, stumbling, laboured breathing then a violent pounding on the newly repaired door.

'Who ... who can it be?' Liz breathed. 'God, never a night passes in this place without somebody brings trouble.'

'Well it certainly isn't the Slime Beast,' Gavin replied. 'Nor the villagers for that matter. Whoever it is, is badly scared of something. I'd better go see.'

'Don't. Please don't!' Liz caught hold of his arm. 'Every time somebody calls here it means trouble and terror. Don't open the door Gavin, Perhaps they'll just go away.'

Footsteps in the corridor heralded the approach of Professor Lowson. They saw him pass and then heard him tugging at the door. They moved to where they could watch fascinated, irresistibly drawn by the prospect of some fresh horror.

'Let me in! For God's sake, help me.' Clenched fists hammered on the woodwork even as the Professor tugged it back, then a man squeezed himself through the narrow opening. 'Shut it. Bolt it. Quick man or it'll get us all!'

'Glover!' Gavin exclaimed aloud. 'Mallard Glover.'

The wildfowler was trembling. In his hand he carried his long-barrelled twelve bore. His hair was awry and there was no sign of his woollen hat. His breath came in great gulps and his eyes rolled.

Professor Lowson forced the door shut and fastened it 'Whatever's the matter with you man?'

Glover appeared to be incapable of coherent speech for the moment. He leaned his back against the concrete wall and closed his eyes.

'My God,' he breathed. 'Oh my God!'

They led him into the living quarters and seated him on an upturned crate. Gavin found the medicine chest and poured out a liberal shot of cognac.

'Drink this,' he snapped. 'And then perhaps you'll be able to tell us what this is all about.'

The fowler downed the amber liquid in one gulp. He spluttered and coughed, then after a time he made an effort to pull himself together. All three of them looked at him. They said nothing. He would speak when he was ready.

'Bloody awful!' He blanched as he recalled his memories of the past half-hour. 'Never belongs to this world. That's what killed Hayward. No doubt about it. The villagers were right after all. A demon does guard the treasure.'

He paused for breath. Gavin and Liz looked at each other. Professor Lowson smiled triumphantly.

'The bastard nearly got me. Guns are no good against it.'

'Tell us from the beginning.' Gavin attempted to calm him in an attempt to extract the true facts.

'All right.' Glover accepted the cigarette which was offered, lit it and inhaled deeply before replying. 'I went across to the edge of the River Welland. There are a few geese moving about under this full moon and tonight was just right. I'd been there about an hour. Didn't see or hear anything so thought I'd move

on, further up. I heard something moving up a deep creek. Thought maybe it was a coypu. Then I saw it! I'll never forget that moment as long as I live. Thought it was a man at first, some other fowler dressed up in sweaters and waterproofs, then the moon shone on it Covered in scales like a bloody reptile, and the face - bloody hell! You should've seen its face! Straight out of hell. Then it saw me. We were twenty yards apart. I let both barrels go. Heavy goose-shot I was usin' too. Should've cut it in two. It never even noticed it had been shot at. Then it started after me. There's only one thing to be said in its favour - it can't move very fast. Just shambles, but it won't let up though. It doesn't have to go round the deep creeks, just goes through them, submerges itself and comes up the other side. At last I got away from it. It changed direction and headed back to the sea-wall. Going inland probably. Thought I'd best come here.'

They sat in silence for some time.

'Well,' Professor Lowson knocked his pipe out. 'We'd better get out there and try and locate it Follow it to its lair. You lead the way Glover. You know where you saw it last.'

Mallard Glover recoiled in horror.

'Not me mister,' he snarled, 'not for a thousand quid. Not for ten thousand. Nobody'd get me out there again tonight. If you want to try and find it go ahead. But I'm not coming with you. That's for definite!'

Gavin and Lowson looked at each other. Liz turned her head away.

'We can't force you,' Gavin replied calmly. 'Anyway we can't take Liz with us and I don't like the idea of leaving her here alone with that thing on the prowl. So the only logical answer is for the two of you to stop here while the two of us go.'

Glover sighed with relief. A gleam appeared in his eyes.

'OK, then I'll stay here.'

'One word of warning though,' Gavin's lips were tight and bloodless. 'If anything happens to Liz here, I'll hold you responsible and then it would have been better for you if the Slime Beast had caught up with you.'

As they made ready to set off, Liz pressed her face close to Gavin's chest.

'Do you have to go?' she pleaded, close to breaking down. 'Couldn't we just take the Land Rover into Sutton and telephone the police?'

He shook his head.

'Once again we've got no proof. Don't worry love. All we want to do is to follow it at a distance and find out where its lair is, and once we've established that fact I'm going to phone the police. No matter what your uncle says. With any luck we'll be away from the Wash for good by this time tomorrow.'

'I can't wait. I never want to see this place again as long as I live.'

Their lips met, and she closed her eyes. She could not bear to open them again. As though in a trance she listened to the footsteps of the two men receding across the salt-marshes. Then slowly the silence came surging softly back.

CHAPTER SIX

AFTER another tot of brandy, handed to him by Liz, Mallard Glover began to feel a whole lot better. He stopped trembling. After all he was capable of outrunning this hellish thing which the archaeologists referred to as the Slime Beast. So long as it didn't corner you, you were all right. He grinned to himself. Suppose it did manage to surprise the two men who had gone out to look for it, disembowelled them as it had done to Manton Haywood.

He glanced at Liz. Hell! He wouldn't have stopped that mob from the village if it hadn't been for her. And she didn't even realise ... She was lying on top of the sleeping-bag eyes closed, asleep. There were a couple of buttons on her blouse undone. She wasn't even wearing a bra. He leaned forward in order to obtain a better view. Now he could see a nipple. His eyes travelled down her slender form. There was a patch of wet on the outside of her jeans between her thighs. His imagination began working. She'd been playing around with that fellow called Gavin. He'd shot on to her. It brought back memories. He'd never had a woman properly, only Violet, the village pro, and everybody had had Violet. She'd been charging a quid since before the war. No fancy playing about for your money. Never even took her knickers off. That was why she always wore wide-legged ones.

He thought of Liz naked. He'd never even seen between a woman's legs properly. Something was pushing hard at his trousers. He couldn't remember the last time when it had reared up like that. He started undoing a few buttons, watching her all the time. Her eyelids did not even flicker.

Perhaps he could just enjoy himself for a while and leave it at that. She'd be none the wiser when she woke up. Maybe another stain on her jeans if he wanted to be really daring. She'd never guess ...

Minutes later his desires were mounting rapidly. He checked himself. It was just a waste. Pure fantasy! What were young girls for anyway?

He rose to his feet, still holding himself, and tip-toed over to her. He stood looking down on her. She had moved in her troubled slumbers. Her legs were wider apart now. Gently he lowered himself down and knelt between them. He stretched out a hand. The third button on her blouse was almost undone anyway. All it needed was a gentle touch. The garment fell open and now he had an unrestricted view of the pure white flesh, rising and falling in time with her breathing. The pink nipples seemed to invite his mouth.

Liz's eyes flickered open the moment Mallard Glover's lips closed over her left breast. She was filled with amazement and disgust. Instinctively her right hand came across his weather-beaten face with a resounding slap.

'You filthy lecherous pig!' Her eyes were blazing. As he reared back she rolled beneath him and jumped

to her feet. For the first time she noticed the lower half of his body. Fear stabbed at her heart. She almost retched. To think it had been so close!

'You foul demented snake!' she screeched, backing off and putting a packing-case between herself and Glover.

He grasped himself with both hands pointing the object of her disgust directly at her. He leered. Then his expression changed, almost pleading.

'I won't hurt you.' he avoided her gaze, 'just this once, please.'

'Don't you dare even touch me!' There was contempt in her voice.

He stood and watched her, only his hands moving. His lust was rising again. His features were contorted into a snarl. He was an animal - and he wanted a mate.

'So you're too good for me, eh?' he began to shout. 'You let that jumped-up kid do it didn't you? Maybe you let him do it regularly. Why not me then?'

She was frightened. If she didn't give him what he wanted, he would take it Any way he could. He was no better than the Slime Beast. Worse in fact. You knew where you stood with the mud monster.

He lunged forward. There was nowhere to dodge him in this cramped space. Her foot rested on the empty packing-case, and shot out in a sudden kick. The fowler staggered back as the wooden box crashed against his shins, and splinters embedded themselves in the flesh. He let out a shriek of pain.

Liz darted for the doorway. He grabbed at her and missed. She ran out into the corridor. Fortunately the door yielded as she pulled and then stuck. The gap was no more than a foot, but wide enough for her.

She felt his fingers closing on her blouse as she wriggled out into the night air. There was a tearing sound and then she was free. Naked to the waist, but free.

Glover had to waste valuable seconds forcing the door back enough to allow him to pass through, and Liz did not mean to squander that advantage. Leaping bounds took her on to the salt-marshes, the soft carpet beneath her squelching with each step.

The saltings were silvery beneath the full moon and she could see around her clearly. The sea-wall lay to her right. Beyond it stood their Land Rover. She started towards it then suddenly changed direction. Gavin had the keys to the vehicle for one thing. Another factor was that the big creek would be full as the tide was in by now.

She fought down her panic. Her best plan would be to keep parallel to the sea-wall, for way beyond the deserted lighthouse was a rickety old footbridge. She could cross there. After that Sutton would be her best bet. The nearest telephone box would soon settle Mallard Glover.

She glanced behind her quickly. The fowler was less than a hundred yards away, and he had one advantage over her. He knew every inch of these salt-marshes. But she had youth on her side. The contest could go either way.

Her heart pounded wildly. She prayed that she had the stamina to last out. If only the mud did not become any softer.

Liz could hear him now: closer. She followed the banks of the big creek. Fifteen feet of swirling muddy water lay to her right, dark and sinister. Yet she would plunge in and swim if she had to.

She dared not delay by looking back again. He was much closer now and the spike grass and tall reeds were impeding her progress. She could hear the breathing, laboured and rasping. How had he so suddenly gained on her?

She threw a quick glance over her shoulder. Merciful God! She screamed. Loud and clear. She fought to control her sanity. Compelled her aching muscles and bursting lungs to respond to an even greater effort.

It was not Mallard Glover who followed her.

It was the Slime Beast!

Subconsciously she could taste blood in her mouth. This sudden supreme effort was almost too much for her body. It cried out to her to surrender - to lie down and die.

Only her will-power drove her on. Yard after yard, slowing down all the time. The beast must catch her now!

She closed her eyes, waiting. She prayed again that it would be quick.

Then there was silence. She opened her eyes again. She was alone. The towering bullrushes around her could have concealed a thousand reptilian horrors such as the one which pursued her. Yet why should the beast resort to stealth when it had her at its mercy?

Now there were footsteps again. Rubber boots squelching in the mire. Glover! She must hide. It was too late for further flight now for he could be no more than thirty yards away.

There was a movement and a scream of sheer mortal terror. Then she saw Glover, staggering, yelling. His mind completely gone. On his heels was the Slime Beast! Two yards from him. A yard. The screaming died in a choking gurgle. She wanted to turn her head away but she could not. She was compelled to watch.

Scaly talons ripped through clothing and flesh simultaneously. Blood spouted. Greenish-grey scales became scarlet in a matter of seconds. Clawfuls of bloody entrails were crammed into cavernous jaws. The dripping slit-like mouth was incapable of taking it all, much of it running down on to the body and splashing in the mud.

The Slime Beast ripped at the original incision, widening the wound and enabling it to search inside for more. Methodical yet ravenous.

At last there was no more offal. Scraping claws yielded only bloody flesh. It grunted with rage. Suddenly it picked up the mangled human remains by the neck and held it up at arm's length. A clenched claw thudded down on to Glover's skull with the force of a steam-driven piston. Bone cracked, then split, and brains oozed out of the splinters.

The monster pulled its victim closer, into a horrific repulsive embrace. A long sliver of yellow tongue darted back and forth glinting in the moonlight, and within seconds there were no brains remaining in the pulped skull.

The corpse was cast aside; forgotten. The Slime Beast turned round and Liz pressed herself even closer to the ground. The thing's hunger was satisfied for the moment - or was it? Was it capable of remembering that it almost had two human beings within its grasp?

Liz vomited again. She hoped it could not hear her. She wondered if it had any powers of scent. Unconsciousness would have been merciful. She would have been unaware whether or not it discovered her. Yet the desire to faint had gone. Revolted as she was by the mutilation she had just witnessed she was thinking clearly, decisively.

Escape was uppermost in her mind. Yet she could not run again. Every muscle in her body refused to respond to the urge to flee. She would be incapable of outrunning the Slime Beast should it find her.

Her only hope lay in the fact that it might not detect her. Perhaps it would go away and then she could make her way back to the blockhouse. She felt no remorse over Mallard Glover's death. He had brought it upon himself. Had he not tried to rape her he would still be alive.

The Slime Beast remained stationary for some minutes, just standing there. Silent. Then it moved. Casually almost. A shuffling gait treading down the bullrushes before it Liz held her breath. It was coming directly towards her! She bit her bottom lip in order to prevent herself from screaming. She could not run. She closed her eyes. At least she would know nothing about it!

She felt the mud squelching over her. Something brushed against her head. That nauseating stench again. Burning into her nostrils and down into her lungs. She held her breath awaiting the crunch of the massive foot which would crush her head into the mud and into oblivion.

It never came. The Slime Beast advanced and passed on not even noticing her half-naked body in the rushes. A massive slimy footprint either side of her head was the only proof that it had passed by her at all. She had missed death by three inches!

A few minutes later she struggled to her feet. Every part of her body was trembling. She must head for the blockhouse, and find Gavin and her uncle. They might be back already. She must get help. Someone who would destroy this loathsome beast, and then she would be back in London.

These thoughts were uppermost in her mind as she set off back across the silvery marshes.

CHAPTER SEVEN

PROFESSOR LOWSON and Gavin Royle halted on the banks of the big creek. It had been their intention to cross it and gain access to the sea-wall a mile or so away, for from there they would have an

elevated view of the saltings. Also there was the chance that if the Slime Beast did decide to visit Sutton village again it would have to pass this way.

Now their plans were thwarted. The tide had come in much quicker than they had expected probably because of the full moon. Eight feet of water swirled before them and it was rising every second.

Professor Lawson turned to his companion. 'We'll have to try that rickety old footbridge further up. I had a look at it yesterday. It should bear our weight all right provided we don't both cross together.'

The bridge had been constructed by fenmen before the war and now age was beginning to eat into its structure.

'I'll cross first' said the Professor, testing the rotting beams with his foot. They creaked ominously. He took another step. Two.

'Seems all right,' he commented, 'I'll.. '

Had Gavin been much shorter he would never have managed to reach Lawson in time. The main supporting beam parted from the planks above with a pistol-like crack. The bridge swayed, vibrated and then collapsed.

Gavin's strong fingers caught the Professor's outstretched arm and pulled, allowing his own body to fall backwards at the same time. Together they sprawled in the mud, Gavin supporting the other with one hand while grabbing at a tussock of grass with the other. The steep bank was slippery, yet somehow he managed to hold on.

Together they watched the debris being swirled round the bend out of sight

'That was close,' Lawson breathed, 'too close. Thanks!'

'We shan't make the sea-wall tonight,' Gavin panted as he edged them both back up on to the safety of the comparatively firm spartina grass. "Guess we'd best keep walking.'

It was then that they heard the scream. Just once. Then complete silence.

'It-came from over that way,' the Professor snapped. "Somewhere by the bend in the creek, about five hundred yards away. Come on!'

'Take it steady,' Gavin restrained him. 'We don't want to run headlong into trouble. Let's follow this path quietly through these rushes, and keep your eyes peeled.'

The path was soft and marshy and they were forced to move slowly. Every so often they paused to listen. Everywhere was still and eerie, the moonlight casting weird shadows.

'What's that?' Gavin pulled up abruptly and the Professor cannoned into him. They listened.

A slurping sound came from not very far away, then silence again. Something cracked and crunched like pieces of thin wood being snapped. A movement. They heard heavy determined footsteps, slow and measured.

'Get down quick!' Gavin snapped. 'It's coming this way!'

They dived back into the reeds, just in time. Seconds later they saw the Slime Beast as it crossed the narrow marsh path less than ten yards away from them.

'Christ Almighty!' Gavin breathed. 'Just look at that! You can smell it too. And those scales - they're dripping with something else as well as slime: blood!'

'Follow it!' Lawson snapped. 'Don't let it get out of our sight!'

That scream...'

'Whoever it was they're beyond help now. We mustn't lose it. Get going man!'

The Slime Beast's progress was not difficult to follow. The flattened rushes made the going much easier for them and the wind was blowing in from the sea. They retched as the beast's odour was carried back to them.

Once clear of the large reed-bed they had to hang back for they would be seen too easily on the flat marsh. However the Slime Beast forged steadily ahead never once looking back.

They followed it, keeping a distance of five hundred yards or so behind. In the moonlight they caught a glimpse of something which shimmered in the distance.

'The mud-flats!' Lawson hissed. 'Or rather, the sea. The tide's in. That's where the Slime Beast's heading.'

It was true. The Slime Beast was making directly for the mud-flats. It was taking a definite course out towards the tide-line.

'You're right!' Gavin snapped. 'Just look at that. It's walking straight into the sea. That's where its lair is: on the sea-bed!'

There was nothing more they could do. Slowly, without a word to each other, they turned and retraced their steps back to the blockhouse.

It was a very frightened Liz Beck who unfastened the door and admitted them.

'Whatever's the matter?' Gavin caught her by the shoulders and pulled her towards him. 'What's happened? Where's Glover?'

'Dead!' she sobbed and burying her face against his broad chest she shook with tears.

Slowly, with many pauses, she told them the full story.

'It was ... horrible,' she concluded. 'Can't we get away from here? Right now. Please!'

'Well we're safe enough for tonight,' Gavin said pouring the remainder of the brandy into a tumbler and handing it to her. 'The Slime Beast's gone back into the sea. It is satisfied for the moment so the odds are it won't venture forth until tomorrow night. So, first thing in the morning I'm going into Spalding to see Chief-Inspector Harborne. I want you to come with me, Liz. We'll tell them the facts just as we know them. The ball's in their court then.'

The expected outburst from Professor Lowson was not forthcoming. Instead he merely nodded, turned on his heels and went back to his quarters.

'No protest.' Liz was more composed now and managed a weak smile. 'I expected him to blow his top.'

'Probably he realises the futility of it.' Gavin slipped an arm round her and kissed her. 'All the same I don't trust him. He's got something up his sleeve. I can't see him just giving up and leaving it all to the authorities.'

'Nor can I. One point though. If and when we manage to convince them that there's a dangerous beast, possibly from outer space, on the loose, what then? Do we go back to London?'

'I'll put you on the first train,' he promised.

She shook her head and a defiant gleam crept into her eyes.

'I said we,' she snapped. 'What about you, Gavin?'

'I'll probably hang on for a day or two,' he said, trying to appear casual. 'I'd like to see this thing through since we were in at the start of it'

'Then I'm stopping with you. I don't go from here until you do.'

He stood up. 'There's no point. Look at it from a reasonable point of view. The army'll take over no doubt. There won't be any danger.'

'So there'll be no harm in me staying on.'

Gavin wrung his hands in despair.

'All right,' he sighed. 'We'll see what Harborne and Borg have to say. We can't make any plans until we've talked to them.'

Once they had snuggled down in their sleeping-bag their fears seemed to diminish. As they felt each other's naked body the Slime Beast might have been a million miles away, back in his original habitat. Their lips met, tongues probed, and then their hands explored.

Gavin felt Liz stiffen as his fingers found her small neat breasts and teased the nipples to an even greater degree of hardness than they had attained during the whole of the previous night. Then he eased his hand down and she eased her thighs open. Gently he located the soft warm moistness and she moaned with pleasure.

Her hands groped for him and closed over his hardness. It gave her an added thrill to pull him closer and closer to her until suddenly they made contact. She sucked her breath in sharply and then, her desires ruling her reasoning, she pressed his manhood tightly against her.

Gavin eased himself up and rolled between her open legs.

Her heart was pounding and her breath was coming faster and faster. 'Give it to me properly, Gavin, like every woman wants her man!'

Slowly he slid into her and it was only when he had penetrated her fully that he spoke.

'Liz!' he murmured. 'Oh Liz! Believe me, I want to give it you properly but... damn it! You could end up pregnant as it is. I'll try and do the same as I did last night. I...'

'No, please no,' she swung her legs round and closed them over his body in a vice-like scissors grip. 'I won't let you draw out. I want all of you ... everything ... inside me... even if I do have a baby!'

He lowered himself down on to her and their lips brushed.

'Liz,' he breathed, 'Liz ... I'm in love with you. I know we've only known each other a few days but... but I'm not doing this just for a thrill. I want to be part of you. I don't ever want to be away from you. I'd ... I'd love you to have my baby. That is, if you really wanted to ...'

'Of course I want to.' She tried to press him further still inside her. 'I love you too, Gavin!'

She dared not voice her innermost thoughts. It was only then that she realised exactly what she was trying to do. In some ways it frightened her, disgusted her. Wench who thought there was a good catch in the offing did things like this. She knew full well that she was trying to trap him! She was using a ploy as old as the hills. Eve might even have used the same tactics to secure Adam. Liz despised herself for it. Once she was pregnant Gavin would not leave her. He wasn't the type.

For a long time they were in a world of their own. The Wash, the Slime Beast, Professor Lowson, all were forgotten. Just a gentle rhythmic movement of two bodies, each caring for and trying to please the other. Every so often they relaxed, trying to prolong the greatest joy known to mankind for as long as possible. Liz released her captive grip on her man. It was not necessary. Nothing on this earth would have stopped him now.

Suddenly, neither of them could contain themselves any longer. Rising tensions burst open and then they were both jerking and writhing in unison. Liz felt as though she was being hurled and then suspended in mid-air, before falling into a bottomless chasm. On the downward journey she sensed a beautiful warmth spurting into her with force, engendering a feeling which she had never experienced before.

Totally exhausted, they lay in each other's arms, thinking of nothing except what they had just done.

'I... I never thought I'd ever let anybody do that to me outside marriage,' Liz murmured drowsily. 'Oh, if only we weren't in this terrible place. Gavin I wish we'd never come here.'

'Then, we wouldn't have met each other, would we?' Gavin laughingly replied and kissed her passionately. 'I guess we can thank old King John for this. Blow him, he can keep his damned jewels. I've found some treasure even if the Professor hasn't!'

They dozed uneasily. The thought of that monstrosity at large on the marshes did cast a cloud over their supreme happiness. Gavin promised himself that on the morrow he would do everything in his power to bring about its total destruction. If only the police would listen to them...

Chief-Inspector Harborne looked across his desk at the two young people who had just told him the most amazing story he had ever heard in all his years in the Force. He studied them intently before replying.

'Any other time I'd ask for you to be examined,' he said. 'It's like something out of a weird science-fiction magazine. Yet, things have happened here these last few days which we are unable to explain logically. For instance this strange trail of stinking slime which the thing left behind it; it evaporated into nothingness before we had a chance to examine it properly. Nobody apart from yourselves has seen the creature, but tell me, why has Professor Lawson not accompanied you here this morning? I should have thought that he would have shown more interest in this matter than he has done so far.'

'Uncle's too wrapped up in other matters,' Liz put in diplomatically before Gavin had a chance to speak. 'He lives in the past He's not interested in the things which happen around him.'

'I see.' Harborne turned to Detective-Inspector Borg who had so far remained silent. 'Naturally we shall make investigations into what these people have told us. However we can't really call in the army yet to deal with some mythical creature which only they have seen. Perhaps then Inspector you would take some men and locate the body of this man Glover.'

Borg nodded and left the room.

'Thank you for coming to see me,' Harborne smiled as he ushered them to the door. 'Please don't think that I disbelieve you. There is something very strange going on certainly. Yet I feel sure there is a logical explanation for it all.'

'Like what?' Gavin fought to control himself. The bloody fool was going to waste more valuable time in trying to find some down-to-earth solution.

'Well,' Harborne coughed and looked away. The idea of something out of space is a bit far-fetched you must admit. We must look for something more explicable. There are creatures on this earth which man has never or seldom set eyes upon. The ocean bed holds many secrets, so do the jungles of the Amazon. Could not some exploration party returning from South America have brought this Slime Beast back with it secretly? It escaped and its owners feared to report it to the authorities. There are many lines of thought available to us.'

Gavin remembered his own earlier theories and was silent

Professor Lawson had gone off on his own somewhere when Gavin and Liz returned to the blockhouse.

'So much for that,' Gavin mused as they ate sandwiches and drank coffee. 'We've virtually got nowhere. The police don't actually disbelieve us which is something I suppose. Now we've got to wait a few days until the experts come up with something. It'll either be a giant gila monster secretly smuggled into the country or a homicidal maniac who has discovered some kind of slime with which to throw the police off the trail! Whatever they decide it all adds up to one thing - delay. Every hour of indecision means another hour of freedom for the Slime Beast!'

'Couldn't we destroy it ourselves?' Liz lit a cigarette and began clearing the packing-case which they used as a table.

'What!' He looked up at her, amazement and concern evident on his face. 'Are you crazy, girl?' Then more gently, 'you've been through a helluva lot this last few days. Maybe I should take you back to London after all!' She smiled, confident, taunting him. 'You're the one who's backing down now,' she said. 'It's just that I've been doing a lot of thinking lately and I've come up with a theory. If you'd just shut up for a minute and listen...'

'Go on,' he sighed, 'let's hear it. We've had that many theories today that one more won't make any difference.'

'Well,' a smile touched the corners of her pert mouth. 'You remember when the Slime Beast tried to get in here and you repelled it with burning newspapers?' He nodded.

'It's obviously a creature that thrives on cold and damp,' she continued. 'Fire will frighten most wild beasts, but I think we could go a stage further with this one, and subject it to the exact opposites to the requirements of its body. Dryness and heat are the reverse of damp and cold. Its body structure could not stand up to it I'm sure. Look how the slime which it leaves evaporates after a while. Anyway, those scales, from what I've seen of them, are tougher than armour-plating, so a bullet or even a heavy missile would just bounce off them.'

'What are you getting at?' Gavin was intrigued.

'Just this,' she said. 'I believe that the Slime Beast could be destroyed by fire. I don't mean just a bundle of blazing papers, I mean fire projected at it with force. A flame-gun for instance. One of the paraffin models you can buy for a few quid. Lots of people use them for clearing weeds in their garden.'

He was silent for a few moments. Then he looked up and the sarcasm had disappeared from his expression.

'Maybe you've got something there Liz. You may just have hit on the very thing that will rid the world of this monstrosity. At least if the flames don't kill it they'll certainly keep it at arm's length. Probably drive it off. So there won't be too much danger in giving it a try.'

She smiled but said nothing. He looked at his watch.

'I'll go in to Spalding tomorrow morning and buy one. If I remember correctly today is half-closing so all the shops will be shut. We'll stop in here tonight and hope that the Slime Beast gives us a miss. There's nothing we can do for the moment.'

It was half-past four before Professor Lawson arrived back. They noted the expression on his face and said nothing. He was not in a good humour and was best left alone, but they saw that he was carrying something under his arm. Whatever it was it was concealed in hessian sacking and was very bulky.

'Now what's he been up to?' Gavin whispered to Liz as the Professor ignored them and shut himself in his own room.

'He needs watching,' she murmured. 'He's always been a queer cuss but lately he seems to have really gone round the bend. Whatever the reason you can bet that it's something to do with the Slime Beast!'

It wasn't until he was safely in his own compartment of the blockhouse that Professor Lawson tipped out the contents of the large sack. His eyes gleamed brightly as yards of specially reinforced netting tumbled loosely on to the floor. He gave the sack another shake and four iron grappling hooks clanged on to the concrete.

He carefully filled and lit his pipe before commencing work. Gnarled but nimble fingers unrolled the netting and then began tying the hooks securely on to all four comers. He pulled hard on each one testing its strength. There must be no slip-ups! A faulty knot could ruin the whole plan as well as jeopardising his own life. He tried each square of mesh. The fisherman who had sold it to him had assured him that it was

capable of holding a fully grown shark. It needed to be far stronger than that though if it was going to ensnare the Slime Beast!

He rolled it up again, carefully, ensuring that the four corners were folded on top of the bundle temporarily held together by the four hooks. He lifted it up and poised it above his head. It was more manoeuvrable now; ready to be thrown, and to open out as it became airborne. All that was required now was a true aim... and the Slime Beast!

Throughout the day the wild geese had fed in the large field. There were gleanings in plenty here. Careless potato-pickers had left ample tubers lying amid the scattered tops. There was no need to hunt for food. It was there for the taking.

The afternoon wore on. Once they saw a man in the adjoining field and had slowly walked away in the opposite direction, gagging in mild alarm. Yet he had not troubled them and soon they were feeding peacefully again.

The sun began to dip behind the far horizon. The massive grey gander who had brought them here day after day for the past week suddenly stretched his long neck skywards and honked loudly. Sixty pink feet stopped feeding. They gagged, flapped their powerful wings and knew it was time to go. A rush of wingbeats, a wild musical chorus, and then they were airborne, gaining height rapidly.

Soon they had formed themselves into a perfect 'V' formation, the old gander in the lead, taking a direct course towards the distant mud-flats shimmering in the late afternoon sun.

As they passed over the dark green saltings they struggled to reach an even greater height. The reports of the guns far below were only too familiar to them. Only in a gale or fog would they be forced to fly lower and run the gauntlet of the waiting wildfowlers. Then, some of them would not make it, and would plummet downwards struck by a charge of shot, to thud lifelessly on to the spartina grass.

That was life though. They accepted it, and maybe even regarded it as a challenge. Tonight the shot did not reach them. Still the fowlers kept on firing, hoping that a lucky pellet might bring a hapless goose down, but it did not, and the skein flew on unscathed.

Another few minutes and the old gander saw the mudflats directly below. They were safe now. They could rest their wings and glide, losing height rapidly until they came to the banks of the Welland Channel where they could roost in safety. The tide was flowing but it was of little importance, for they could sleep afloat as comfortably as on the mud.

Suddenly a movement on the banks of the channel caught the gander's sharp eye. A wailing gunner? His wing beats were increasing and he was fighting for height even before he could discern it clearly. The remainder of the skein followed suit, honking in alarm. They tensed themselves for the shots for they were well within range.

None came. The shape materialised, rising from its bed of mud like Behemoth awakened from centuries of slumber.

The formation was forgotten as the geese scattered to right and left, passing within fifteen yards of the scaly man-shaped monstrosity. A ghoulish face was upturned, soulless eyes noting their presence, yet the webbed claws did not grope vainly in the hope of securing a fat goose.

The Slime Beast had little interest in animal or bird-life. Human flesh and entrails were more tempting to

its vile appetite.

The geese honked on into the gathering gloom, their favourite roosting-ground forgotten. They flew for fully two miles before planing down again towards the mud, and they decided to settle only after they had circled several times in order to ascertain that no horror lay in wait for them.

As deep darkness closed in they huddled together, feeling more secure in numbers. Yet few slept peacefully. Like Gavin and Liz in the blockhouse four miles away, they feared that the monster from the mud should slink silently upon them, materialising evilly out of the darkness.

The old gander had come to a decision in his own instinctive way. Tomorrow he would take his skin further a field. It was quite apparent that this was no longer the domain of the pink foot goose.

CHAPTER EIGHT

THERE was virtually no wind again that night and a mist was forming across the salt-marshes, that would thicken as the moon rose. Gavin was grateful that they were not setting forth on any kind of expedition tonight. The perils of the Wash would be increased tenfold. Not only was there the chance of walking into the Slime Beast but also the dangers of quicksands and fast-running tides.

'Not a night to be abroad,' he told Liz as he pulled the thick wooden board back over the slitted window. 'I hope there's no mist tomorrow or it could be doubly tricky.'

Shortly after nine o'clock they heard footsteps in the tiny corridor and then the door being wrenched open and closed again.

Gavin rose to his feet. 'Your uncle's going out. On a night like this. I half-suspected it though. He's not said a word to us since he came in.'

'He must be mad,' Liz snapped. 'He'll fall in a bog or something if the Slime Beast doesn't get him. We'd best follow him don't you think?'

Gavin shook his head.

'No,' he replied, 'definitely not. I'm not going out and neither are you. That's final. If he wants to end up in a watery grave that's his business. Nobody asked him to go. We're not going out and that's that. Not without that flame-gun anyhow!'

Professor Lowson was breathing heavily by the time he reached the edge of the spike-grass. The netting was heavier than he had thought, so he dropped it on to the ground behind him, to rest his tired muscles.

He consulted his compass for the umpteenth time that night. Damn this mist! It would decide to come down tonight of all nights. He peered in front of him, but visibility was restricted to five yards at the most, and he could not even see the mud-flats although he knew that he was standing on the edge of them.

Maybe the weather was to his advantage though. He might be able to get right up to the Slime Beast without it even being aware of his presence. He smiled at the thought. He had no fear of it His reasoning went beyond that. He thought of the future after he had captured it. There was no doubt in his mind that he would take it prisoner. If not tonight, tomorrow or the next night. If only that fool Gavin Royle would aid him. Still, now he would have the power all to himself. There would be nobody to share it with.

He lit his pipe and settled down to wait It was going to be a long, cold night

The moon was high above him when he heard the first squelching splash of lumbering footsteps. The Slime Beast was coming up out of the sea! He fumbled for the net and released the four grappling hooks. There would only be one chance!

The mist seemed to thicken still more. It swirled in front of his face blotting out everything. There was only silence, nothing moved. He listened again, as the minutes ticked agonisingly by. What was it doing? Had it sensed his presence? Perhaps it could see through fog! If so, surely it would attack him.

Then he heard it again, rasping, grunting, far away behind him. He was angry, perplexed. How had it passed him without him hearing it? It was far from a silent mover.

He walked a little way to his left following the line of spartina grass where it adjoined the mud-flats. Then suddenly he stopped. Another step and he would have fallen into the muddy depths of the big creek where it ran into the sea.

Realisation dawned upon him. The Slime Beast had floated inland on this deep rivulet! Blast the fog! He would have seen it otherwise. He swung the bundle of netting on to his shoulder, consulted his compass, and trudged back into the spike-grass. It would be hopeless to try. and follow the beast. Maybe tomorrow night there would be no fog ...

Sutton village slept. The mist which had filtered up from the salt-marshes became thick fog which seemed more eerie in the bright moonlight which struggled to penetrate it.

The rows of cottages and houses were reminders of a past era, of primitiveness, and poverty. Even in this affluent age they had not moved with the times. That was the way these people of the Wash wanted it: static; removed from the outside world.

Far away across the Fens the church clock at Holbeach struck one. The sound was muffled by the thickening vapour yet almost every inhabitant of Sutton heard it. Almost all were in bed yet none slept Few had slept easily in Sutton these past few nights.

Some remembered the legend of the guardian of King John's treasure. Tom Southgate had seen ,to it that those who had not heard of it were duly informed. The story spread faster than the fire which had once ravaged Harrison's Mill, fanned into further destruction by the sea-breeze.

'It's them lot in the old blockhouse .who've stirred it all up,' the landlord had boomed countless times from behind his bar. 'There'll be no peace in Sutton until they've gone!'

Angry murmurings had run through the crowded bar. Yet there had been a reluctance to go out and 'do

'em' in contrast with the other night. There was something unnatural about the whole business. Why should a man like Glover decide to help the party? Without his interference the archaeologists would have been deep in the quicksands, by now.

Silence, except for the clattering of a dustbin lid behind Growson's shop. Everybody heard it. They knew what it was and breathed easily. Rex, Growson's massive black Alsatian was always loose at night, prowling like the wolf it resembled. It harmed none. It just scavenged.

People tossed restlessly in their beds. Some dozed. Few slept deeply. The Holbeach church clock chimed the quarters. Two am. More dustbin lids clanged.

Rex reached the wharf and sniffed the river. Usually he liked a foul stench. It reminded him of the food he ate. It was worse than usual tonight though. His hackles rose slightly and a low growl rumbled in his throat. There was something that he did not understand in the night air; something evil - powerful. It frightened him a little. He decided to head back home.

The smell seemed to follow him. It was pungent and penetrating. He growled again and increased his pace to a steady lope. The fog did not worry him. He knew every alley in Sutton by scent. He did not need to see. He ran past The Bull into the Main Street, then suddenly he stopped.

There was something in the road. He could make out a vague shape, similar to Man yet it was not Man! The stench was stronger now, halting him like an invisible barrier. He looked up. The thing was much bigger now than it had at first appeared. A breeze was blowing, dispersing the mist with every second. Slimy scales glinted in the moonlight. Rex wanted to flee, but his muscles refused to yield to his natural instinct. He barked. It sounded feeble. The beast let out a low rasping growl. It took a step forward. Then another. Then it had him.

The long drawn-out howl of canine fear brought the usually slow-moving Tom Southgate from his bed to the windows in a single bound. He peered out. The mist had cleared completely. Then he saw the Slime Beast for the first time. It was holding Rex at head height. The Alsatian was struggling desperately, snarling and snapping at the scaly claws which held it. Vicious canine teeth clamped down on a stinking slimy arm. They crunched and snapped, and a smattering of broken bloody fangs dropped to the road.

'What is it?' Marjorie Southgate sat up in bed. 'What's going on out there Tom?'

The publican clutched at the window-sill for support. 'It's a... beast! It's killing Rex! It really exists.'

The Slime Beast had got Rex by the neck now. Snapping the vertebrae was a simple matter. It flung the lifeless Alsatian to the ground. Claws sunk into the fur and ripped at the flesh, then the beast dropped down on all fours in order to dismember its victim more easily.

Rex was disembowelled in a matter of seconds. The Slime Beast grabbed ravenously at the heart and liver, stuffing them simultaneously into the slitted mouth. It gurgled and squelched as it masticated, blood and entrails dripping.

Tom Southgate pushed Marjorie back roughly as she approached the window.

'Don't!' he yelled, 'for Christ's sake don't look. It'll send you out of your mind!'

She flopped back on the bed quivering.

The landlord rushed to the far corner of the room. He grabbed the twelve-bore which lay on top of the wardrobe and fumbled in the dressing-table drawer for cartridges. It seemed an eternity before he located a couple and pushed them in to the open breech. He did not speak. Words just would not come. Possibly because there was nothing to say. nothing intelligible anyway.

The window-sash was stiff, and he had to use all his strength to force it open. The beast was still there, but there wasn't much left of poor old Rex now, he noted. Head. Legs. A few strips of fur. He remembered the reports on Manton Haywood's corpse. There was no doubt what had been responsible for that.

The thing stood up and turned in Southgate's direction. Did it see him? If so, it gave no sign. He sighted it. The fearsome countenance was directly in line with the twin barrels. He squeezed the triggers, both together. Take that you bastard!

The recoil from the double charge flung him backwards. He staggered, regained his balance and rushed back to the window. The beast was still there, unmoved, just looking up at him. Sightless or seeing?

'Jesus wept!' He pushed Marjorie back again. 'More cartridges, quick woman. Tip those drawers out. Shell the bastard.'

Windows were being flung open down the street. A man cursed. Some women were screaming. The men folk had been roused by Southgate's shots. The idea caught on. Moonlight glinted on several pairs of gun barrels. Breeches snapped shut. Safety-catches and hammers clicked.

But the Slime Beast appeared not to heed them. It had fed and was satisfied, so there was nothing further to detain it here. It began to lumber off up the street in the direction of the salt marshes, greyish-green slime dripping from its scales, blood trickling from its jaws.

Then a deafening boom rang out. Somebody was using a heavy four-bore, its cracking report almost drowning those of the lesser gauges. Fire, reload, fire! Flame stabbed from a dozen or so windows, in a vicious crossfire of angry lead shot, fired by men who could kill a springing teal in the half-light of dawn or dusk simply by snap-shooting. Now they were presented with a target a hundred times larger, almost stationary.

Tom Southgate dropped his gun to the floor. There were no more cartridges. The barrels were almost too hot to hold anyway. Somewhere at the end of Main Street somebody was still shooting. The man with the four-gauge. It was his last cartridge, and the Slime Beast was level with him now. Twenty yards, no more. An easy head shot. His shoulder ached but he punished it again. Dense clouds of black-powder smoke filled the room and hung heavily over the village street.

The Slime Beast moved on, unperturbed.

In the end house a large man was pulling on a dark blue uniform. The silver-plated buttons were more difficult than usual to fasten. He reached for helmet and truncheon, changed his mind and picked up the telephone receiver. This was no matter for a village constable. A higher authority had to be consulted.

CHAPTER NINE

IT was midday when Chief-Inspector Harborne and Detective-Inspector Borg arrived at the blockhouse. They had noted the absence of the Land Rover by the sea-wall and at first glance the concrete building appeared to be deserted. However, just as they were preparing to enter, Professor Lawson appeared in the open doorway. He was unkempt and dressed in an open-necked shirt and ex-cavalry trousers. He gave the impression of just having risen from his bed.

'Good morning gentlemen.'

He was more affable than usual. 'What can I do for you?'

'We've now established beyond all doubt,' Harborne was inclined to be abrupt, dispensing with any formal greeting, 'that there's a dangerous creature on the loose. God only knows where it came from and where it's hiding. Anyway it paid a visit to Sutton village last night, killed a dog... and ate it! Almost everyone who owns a gun opened up on it. They might just as well have used pea-shooters for all the difference it made.'

Professor Lawson lit his pipe and waited for the other to continue.

'Where's Mr Royle and Miss Beck?' Harborne snapped.

'Gone into Spalding for supplies,' Lawson replied, eyeing the two official men keenly. He was far from pleased but managed to conceal his feelings. Too many people were showing an interest in the Slime Beast for his liking. He made no effort to invite his visitors inside. The sooner they left the better.

'I've called in the Army.' Harborne made no secret of the importance which he felt 'Some heavy artillery and a few soldiers will be moving into the village this afternoon. I have no doubt in my own mind that this creature will return; if not tonight then tomorrow, or the next night. Whichever it is, we'll settle it once and for all. Make no mistake about that!'

Lawson wished they would go. However they did not seem to be in any hurry to depart

'We retrieved the remains of Glover yesterday afternoon,' Harborne growled. 'On the face of it it appeared to have been the work of a homicidal maniac again. Terribly mutilated but that foul slime had disappeared completely. Never seems to last more than a few hours. We've got a top boffin down from London, but he can't fathom it out either. Any ideas?'

'Search me!' Lawson gave a hollow laugh. 'Everybody else seems to think it's come from outer space. Might as well go along with that idea. It's as good as any.'

'It's crazy. There's got to be a logical down-to-earth explanation. No doubt we'll find one when we nail this monster once and for all. Sightseers are flocking in from everywhere. Word soon gets around, and that fellow Southgate's making a bomb out of it. He sold more beer this morning than he's sold all year. He's fully booked up too. There's caravans and campers all over the place.'

Lowson fumed inwardly. Bloody interfering busybodies. Just when he wanted to be left alone. One more night, that was all he asked. A chance to drop the net over the Slime Beast. After that it wouldn't matter any more.

'Which brings me to another point,' Harborne went on.

'I'm not too happy about you lot camping out here. Especially the girl Mr Royle informed me yesterday that you've had a couple of close scrapes already. It isn't worth the risk. Move out for a couple of days. Professor. Just give us a chance to clear this whole business up and then you can come back in peace.'

'Certainly not!' Lowson's eyes blazed and his beard bristled. 'I am here for a specific purpose. This expedition is in the interests of the public. I have a job to do and I intend to do it no matter what. I don't give a damn for space monsters or whatever you call them!'

'You're a bloody fool,' Harborne snarled, 'like all these other idiots who've moved in today. You're just asking to get yourself killed I could get an order to move you but why the hell should I? I've got enough to do as it is without worrying about you lot.'

With that he stormed off back across the saltings followed by the silent Detective-Inspector Borg. Lowson stood in the doorway and watched until they were mere dots along the sea-wall.

He knocked the ash out of his pipe and went back indoors. Damn them. Damn them .all! He would still capture the Slime Beast, no matter what

It was just after three o'clock when Gavin and Liz returned. Their growing tenseness had been eased by temporary jubilation at the successful purchase of a flame-gun.

'Even if it did take us six shops to find one, we got it in the end,' Liz joked as they approached the blockhouse,

Gavin was carrying their latest weapon in the war against the Slime Beast wrapped up in brown paper.

'Better not let your uncle see this,' he murmured, 'the old devil's up to something himself, I'm sure. He didn't spend all night out on the salt-marshes for nothing.'

They went inside. The place was empty. Even the tobacco smoke filling the Professor's compartment was stale.

'He's gone off somewhere,' Liz muttered, 'been gone an hour or two by the staleness of this pipe smoke.'

'Well in that case,' said Gavin, wrapping their parcel inside a bundle of blankets, 'I'm going to take a quick dekho inside his quarters.'

'It seems a bit sly.'

'To hell with that! No doubts he's been poking through our stuff while we've been out. In fact I'm sure of it. Come on!'

Professor Lowson's concrete cubicle was a mass of papers and books. Sheets and sheets of foolscap were covered with his sprawling handwriting, but Gavin gave them scarcely a glance. He would not be

able to decipher them anyway. In fact he did not know what he was looking for until he found it, and even then it was some seconds before he recognised the object.

'Why, it's a big square of fishing-net!' he exclaimed after he had unravelled the bundle which they had found beneath a couple of packing-cases. 'Now just look at these. Tied on all four corners. Grappling hooks. What the devil's he up to?'

'He's going to try and catch the Slime Beast alive with it!'

'Christ Almighty!' Realisation dawned on Gavin. 'So that's why he was out half the night. Crazy, but it might just work.'

Suddenly a shadow filled the small doorway. They whirled round in alarm.

'Hah!' There was triumph and sarcasm in Professor Lowson's voice. 'So you have decided to rifle my belongings eh?'

Gavin decided that the best form of defence was attack.

'Now let's get this straight Professor,' he snapped as Liz began to blush with guilt 'As members of your expedition, supposedly to locate King John's treasure, we've a right to know what's going on. You seem to have forgotten all about our original reason for coming here. You're obsessed with this Slime Beast Hoping to catch it alive with your net, eh? Like a minnow in a rock pool. You must be stark raving mad. This place is crawling with monster-hunters. The army has moved into Sutton, and set up defences in the middle of the village street, all loaded up with armour-piercing shells, grenades and the lot. What chance do you think you stand with a bloody fishing net?'

That,' replied Lowson thrusting his face close to Gavin's, 'is my affair. You wouldn't co-operate with me in the beginning so from now onwards we'll work separately. The police were here earlier, suggesting we packed up and got out. I told 'em what they could do. It might not be a bad idea if the pair of you opted out though. The law doesn't want you, and I certainly don't If you want to stay then keep out of my way!'

'We will, don't worry,' Gavin snarled, motioning Liz to follow him. 'If that's how you want it Prof, from now on it's every man for himself. And we're staying!'

The inhabitants of Sutton had overcome their fear with the coming of the army, and the terrors of the previous night were almost forgotten with the excitement of having a tank stationed in the car-park of The Bull. The sight of the heavy artillery, a crate of Mills bombs and a few .303 rifles soon restored their confidence. The beast from the marshes was as good as dead!

'I wouldn't be too sure,' said Tom Southgate, making the most of his popularity in his crowded bar. 'This ain't no ordinary beast. Armour-piercing shells won't make any difference to it. You mark my words. I fired half of a box of BB cartridges at it last night. Every one was on target, full in the face, from no more'n twenty yards, and it never even blinked!'

The evening wore on. Scant attention was paid to the portable television set until ten o'clock. Then as the news came on everybody surged forward. They gazed open-mouthed at the picture of the very pub in which they now stood and fell silent as the newscaster's voice came over the air.

'A strange beast is believed to be on the prowl on the marshes of the Wash in the area of Sutton village.

Two killings, previously believed to have been the work of a homicidal maniac are now attributed to this creature from the deep. In the early hours of this morning several villagers opened fire from their bedroom windows on what appeared to be a lizard but having marked human features. The beast killed an Alsatian dog and then escaped apparently unhurt, surviving a number of point-blank shotgun blasts. An army defence post has now been set up in the village anticipating a return of this monster. Gerald Watson. News at Ten. Sutton, Lincolnshire.'

A buzz of conversation broke out again in the bar-room and Tom Southgate switched off the set This was great. The longer the creature delayed its reappearance, the better. He made a mental note to telephone the brewery in the morning to ask for an extra delivery of bitter. This business could go on for a very long time.

Soon after dark Gavin and Liz heard Professor Lowson go out. They had not spoken to him since their earlier defiant exchange, and the tension which had built up since seemed to ease with his departure.

'Why don't we follow him?' Liz asked as -they heard his footsteps dying away.

'No point,' Gavin replied, pulling on a thick polo-necked sweater. 'He's got no more idea of where to find the Slime Beast than we have. If he had he'd either have got himself killed last night or else brought it in alive. I reckon our best bet is to hide up somewhere down by the big creek where it flows out into the mud-flats. That's where we saw the thing walk off into the sea, and it's as good a place to start as any.'

Carefully he unwrapped the flame-gun and made sure it was in working order. Then he fetched a can of paraffin from the hall and filled the container.

'Seems just the job,' he murmured. 'You know Liz, I'd feel much happier if you stopped here until I get back. If this thing doesn't work or doesn't keep the Slime Beast off...'

'Just suppose the Slime Beast comes here while you're down by the big creek,' she countered, 'and finds me all on my own.'

'You win,' he sighed. 'Maybe, though, we just ought to leave it all to the army... and the Professor.'

But she did not reply and five minutes later they pulled the door shut behind them and set off into the night. Once again the moon was sufficiently full to bathe the saltings in its silvery glow and enable them to see their way with ease. There was no sign of any fog. Instead a fresh sea-breeze blew into their faces, the salt making their lips smart.

'There's the big creek ahead,' Gavin pointed to a swirling muddy channel amid the thick spike-grass. 'On second thoughts we won't wait at the mouth. If the Slime Beast should emerge on the opposite bank we won't be able to get within range. As it is, if we take up a position further .back I can leap across where it narrows if necessary.'

'Seems a good idea,' she replied. 'Let's get settled in somewhere. I shall be glad when this night's over.'

Professor Lowson smiled to himself as he arrived at the mouth of the big creek. The small hollow on the near bank afforded shelter and cover as well as an ample view of the mud-flats in front of him. Carefully he unpacked his roll of strong netting, folding it neatly into a small square with the iron hooks resting on the top. He tested its weight with his right hand. Heavy but manoeuvrable. He lit his pipe and settled down to wait.

CHAPTER TEN

THE tide flowed. Paused. Ebbbed. Seldom did it reach beyond the line of zos on Shep White's except during spring tides and in gales.

It was high tonight, coming almost within fifty yards of the old blockhouse, and creeping relentlessly. Only once had it ever been inside the concrete building, fifteen years previously when two visiting fowlers had disregarded their tide tables and camped there. Both had been drowned.

The salt residue sparkled in the moonlight as the water receded. Somewhere wild geese gaggled. Yet the saltings were not deserted altogether. In front of the sea-wall crouching behind the trunk of a dead tree which had been washed ashore during the summer a man waited. There was nothing about him to invite the interest of a passer-by. He was of average build and clean-shaven, no different from any of the other sensation-seekers who preferred to conduct their vigil within the confines of the village, secure in the knowledge that the army would protect them from the perils of the night. Every so often he gazed affectionately at the expensive camera and flash equipment which hung from his neck. It had cost him an awful lot of money. With luck it could earn him a great deal more.

Something moved. He heard it rather than saw it. Way out to his left where the reed-beds began. Perhaps it was a coypu or an otter. Maybe even a seal venturing far inland.

It was cold and he was bored. He thought again of his camera. Magazines paid well for nature pictures. Not as well as the leading dailies would pay for some of the Slime Beast but what was to stop him trying for both.

He rose to his feet, and choosing each step with care in an attempt to avoid noisily slurping in the patches of mud he headed towards the reeds. He could still hear it. 'Somewhere on the banks of the narrow channel it was wallowing in the sticky ooze. It probably was a coypu. He adjusted his flash attachment and entered the tall reeds. It was darker in here. More shadows. Difficult to see clearly. Blast! That was twice he had squelched in a patch of mire. Surely his quarry must be aware of his approach by now.

Silence. Perhaps it had gone, drifted to safety with the currents. He could see moonlight reflecting on water through the edge of this reed jungle. Another couple of yards and he would be in the open. His finger rested on the button of his camera. He would have to be quick.

He stepped into the open, but saw nothing, just moonlight, mud and a slow-moving current. The banks were empty, totally devoid of life. He gazed down at them in disappointment. Suddenly he noticed something. He stooped down for a closer look; footprints. Or was it the impression in the mud of some creature, possibly a coypu, which had hopped from one place to another leaving the indentations of its body to mark its progress. The prints were certainly large enough: a good twelve inches long by five across, yet they resembled claw marks, webbed claws, pointing in the direction from where he had

come. A stagnant smell hung in the night air.

Realisation dawned upon him, but too late. There was a rustling and parting of rushes, a grunting and rasping of laboured breath, and a choking, foul odour. Slime covered scales, gaping jaws, fish-like eyes...

The man screamed. He might have run had not his feet sunk above the ankles into the sucking mud. Too late. His finger caught the button of his camera as the first slashing blow tore the flesh from his collar-bone.

A blinding eyeball-searing flash. The man felt the pain in his shoulder, and warmth of the blood welling up inside his tattered shirt. He closed his eyes tightly hoping the next blow would be swift and painless. A quick end to it all.

He opened his eyes again. Something was wrong. He was still alive. The beast was nowhere to be seen. Only its odour remained, wafting on the breeze until it was replaced by the sweet-sour aroma of seaweed.

Eventually his ears picked up a faint sound. Distant footsteps squelching and splashing across the salt-marshes, hurrying in fact, going towards the sea-wall. Perhaps the Slime Beast was not going to Sutton after all tonight. Or maybe it was just making a detour. The man forgot all about his camera lying there in the mud.

Tom Southgate would have been quite happy to have kept the bar of The Bull open until the morning. Nobody showed any inclination to retire to the rooms which they had booked for the night. Indeed he would have continued pulling pints until the first faint light appeared in the eastern sky had not the law poked its head round the door shortly after eleven o'clock.

"Ere, 'ere," PC Thorpe tried to appear stern although his instincts told him to go home, change and then return to the flowing ale. "This ain't New Year's Eve y'know Tom!"

'OK, OK,' Southgate began draping tea-towels over the bar-taps. 'Just closing anyway Joe.'

However it was twenty minutes before the bar was empty. Even those who had taken rooms upstairs did not mount the narrow wooden steps to the floor above. Instead they flocked out on to Main Street, Everybody in Sutton was on Main Street. One or two of the householders were selling tea and coffee from open windows. People laughed and joked. There was no hint of terror. Only curiosity. After all, the army would protect them!

"Aren't you coming to bed?" Marjorie Southgate wiped the last of the glasses and turned to her husband who had been looking out of the window for the last ten minutes.

'Wouldn't sleep if I did,' he replied without turning his head. 'Nobody'll sleep in Sutton tonight There ain't a soul who'd miss seein' this Slime Beast cop one of the big shells.'

"It probably won't turn up after all. Can't say I blame it with all that lot out there. It'd hear 'em a mile off. Well I'm going to bed. You can please yourself Tom Southgate whether you come or not!"

He grunted. His thoughts returned to the scene outside. Maybe those half-dozen boys in khaki would appreciate a crate of beer. Trouble was they wouldn't want to pay for it, so there was no point in taking them one.

He opened the door and stepped outside. It was warm, almost like summer, and too nice to stay indoors. He headed across the street to where the soldiers were grouped around the small tank. He noted that someone had already supplied them with beer.

'Could do with a job like this every week,' a corporal was telling some young girls who were hanging around. 'Gives a chap time to appreciate life. No fear of getting a sniper's bullet in the back every minute of the day. For me, this here beast can take its time. Keep showin' up just enough to keep the top-brass happy. After all we don't want to kill it too soon do we?'

Peals of laughter. Southgate smiled. The Slime Beast was certainly doing everybody a big favour.

The slight breeze was blowing off the land. It made a pleasant change. Gave a man a whiff of the farms, of newly harvested potatoes and barley stubble.

Southgate paused. His nostrils twitched. It seemed like somebody's spuds were going rotten already. Or maybe it was the large pond beyond the village, stagnant after the dry spell, its surface covered with floating algae. Somehow the foul odour seemed familiar.

The laughter around the tank increased. Somebody brought some more beer. Then came the first scream. Loud and piercing embodying every vestige of human terror. It was one of the girls about a hundred yards inland from the tank. One of the young soldiers was with her. They had been enjoying themselves in the seclusion of a side alley... until they discovered that they were no longer alone.

The creature seemed to materialise out of the shadows. They might have smelled it first had their attention not been diverted elsewhere. The apparent slowness of the Slime Beast was deceptive. Its scaly webbed claw flashed up and down in one blur of shivering moonlight. The talons touched flesh, closed and then pulled. The girl's left breast came away in one piece trailing bloody roots and exposing a pumping gushing heart in a gaping hole.

The soldier's reactions were hindered by the fact that his trousers and pants were around his ankles. His hand, reached for the .303 propped up against the wall but he never made it. The beast's other claw flashed down scraping the young man's thighs as it did so. Once again it grasped flesh, and gave another tug. There was more screaming, more spurting of blood, and the soldier sank down on top of the dead girl's body, his own life's fluid mingling with hers. The most pleasurable act available to mankind had ended in death for both of them.

'What is it? What's up?' The tall sergeant fought against the drink which was beginning to dull his brain and pushed the two girls away from the tank. "There's something going on up the other end of the street. Come on you chaps. Rifles at the ready!"

Five khaki-camouflaged figures advanced commando-style, yet somehow they lacked professionalism. The surroundings did not blend with the school which had taught them. The relaxed atmosphere beforehand had dulled their appetite for action, and the beer had clouded their thinking. Their foe was unreal. Had not the CO in Lincoln joked and told them that their main enemy was the superstition of a bunch of east coast peasants? This was not war.

Then they saw it! Lurking in the shadows. Crouched, watching, waiting, but not afraid.

The sergeant missed with his first shot. Splinters of brick flew from the cottage wall above the Slime Beast's head, and the slug whined harmlessly, viciously into the air. The creature turned, moving out from the shadows. Now they could all see it clearly. Its slit-like mouth was open, steadily chewing and

slobbering the human flesh. Blood trickled down the hideous countenance. It gulped, swallowed, and then it roared, bellowing with anger and frustration at the continual harassing by those who sought only to fire leaden missiles at it.

The sergeant's finger was tightening on the trigger for the second time. He paused. The noise seemed to have a paralysing affect on his brain. It was as though his whole body jarred and vibrated. His skin crawled. Everybody else stopped too. It was the first time they had heard the Slime Beast give full vent to its vocal chords. The previous raspings and gruntings were like sweet melodies by comparison.

The sergeant forced himself into action. He pressed the trigger and held it back. The stabbing flashes of flame from the barrel of the automatic weapon were virtually constant. The others were firing too. Yelling 'Give it to the bastard!' They were scared. They had to boost their confidence to stop themselves from running.

The Slime Beast just stood there. Bullet after bullet was on target. Jets of thick foul slime marked (he place where each slug had struck, like pebbles thrown into a pond.

It just stood there.

'Keep at it!' the sergeant shouted There was a lull as trembling fingers fitted fresh magazines into the rifles. 'Keep firing! Mow it down. It can't take much more. Corporal get the tank round. Blow it to hell! '

The corporal turned and ran back down the street glad to be away from it for a few minutes. The watching crowd had swelled. Every upstairs window seemed to be full of watching white faces.

There was another burst of firing, and gunfire from the cottage windows too. Everybody was determined to throw some lead at this thing from the deep.

Street and houses trembled as the tank lumbered under way, sweeping round in a wide arc and heading back up the road. The corporal manipulated the searchlight. God! The creature was more terrible than ever in the circle of white light. Every detail was exposed. Slugs were still pouring into it. Puffs of grey vapour marked where each one had struck. The stench was vile.

The sergeant was moving his men well dear, at the same time shouting for the crowds to get back.

'Keep well away,' he yelled. 'Give us a chance to get the big gun on it. Blow its guts out, corporal. Give it the lot. Straight hi the belly!'

The soldier in the tank was swinging the big gun round. Then suddenly the arc of white light was empty. The Slime Beast had moved back into the shadows. Another burst of rifle fire rang out, wild and erratic this time. Windows smashed. People were screaming. The watching crowd panicked. Some ran back towards the wharf. Others pounded frantically with their fists on locked doors.

'Hold your fire!' the sergeant yelled, not wanting half a dozen deaths to answer for. 'Keep the searchlight on it corporal!'

This was easier said than done. The Slime Beast suddenly seemed to have become gifted with cunning. No longer was it just a horrific foe relying on brute strength and fear. It clambered over the brick wall which bordered the front gardens of the terraced cottages. Now it was on all-fours, the searchlight revealing only occasional glimpses of its back as it smashed through the flimsy wooden fences separating one patch of lawn and rose bushes from the next

'Keep following it!' The four infantrymen piled on to the rumbling tank as they endeavoured to keep abreast of it. Somebody leaned out of an upper-storey window and discharged both barrels of a twelve-bore at no more than five yards range. He might as well have thrown a bucket of water for all the difference it made.

The sergeant was tempted to radio for reinforcements. More men and more powerful weapons would soon put paid to it. He hesitated and changed his mind. That wasn't the way to quick promotion.

Then they lost their quarry. Somewhere it discovered an alleyway, a temporary escape route to the rear of the buildings.

The corporal brought the tank to a standstill and switched off the engine. Silence. Even the screaming stopped. 'It's bloody well disappeared sarge!'

'Keep the searchlight on the street. It can't hide for ever.'

Tom Southgate had been watching from the window in the bar. He could not see much but he did not want to go out and leave The Bull empty except for Marjorie upstairs. It wasn't the Slime Beast so much that he was worried about. Rather it was the crowd outside. A good many of them had had far too much to drink already. A locked door would not halt their search for more.

But the firing had stopped now. People were running in the direction of the wharf and screaming. Well at least they wouldn't be thinking of beer for a while. Everywhere was quiet, too quiet. Suddenly he heard a faint movement. Somebody was in the cellar.

The lousy shits!' he snarled and went upstairs for the twelve-bore.

'What's the matter?' Marjorie was in bed but still awake. 'Aren't we going to get any sleep tonight? D'you mean to tell me that a bunch of soldiers and a tank can't exterminate that monster after all this time?'

'Seems like they must've got it,' he replied, pushing a couple of shells into the double-barrelled gun. 'The shooting's stopped. The crowd's got out of control though, running riot all over the place. Some of 'em have got into the cellar through the chute in the car-park. Well they're in for a shock. A helluva bloody shock!'

He went back downstairs and unbolted the cellar door. He remembered as he did so that he had forgotten to replace the bulb which had blown earlier in the evening. Still, the moonlight streaming through the gaping hole where the grid should have been would give him enough light to see what was going on.

Slowly he descended the narrow stone steps. A foul aroma filled the small cellar as though the tide had been in recently and left a residue of filth behind it.

Something moved hi the far corner.

'All right you bastard!' he snarled, 'you'd better come out before I shoot. Come on! I'm not fooling!'

CHAPTER ELEVEN

BLAST the shadow! Tom Southgate knew that somebody was in the far corner. He could hear him breathing. Loud rasping like the thief had been running. Maybe it was fear though, fear of being caught! The landlord cocked both hammers loudly.

'Come on!' he snarled again. 'Let's have you. I haven't all night to stand about here!'

Something moved, paused, then moved again. Then he saw it as the first moonbeam glinted on green slimy scales. The Slime Beast!

Southgate fired at point-blank range A yard. No more. Both barrels straight into its face. Acrid choking smoke. He coughed and closed his eyes for a second. Nothing could live after that double-charge. He'd done what the army had failed to do. He'd be a hero. He'd...

Two webbed fingers were thrust into his open mouth. The sharp claws lacerated his tongue, and he choked on his own blood. The beast had a grip on his cheek. It pulled. Half his face came away effortlessly leaving distorted bone streaming with blood. He could not see. His eyes were being gouged. Sharp incisions were made to get behind them. Torn from their sockets.

He prayed for the first time in his life. For death. It came with the slashing of the jugular vein, spouting blood turning his attacker's scales scarlet Tom! Tom I Are you all right?'

The Slime Beast turned its head. It saw the woman standing at the top of the stairs. The bulbous breasts were clearly visible through the semi-transparent nightdress. It watched her collapse and keel over down the narrow steps lying with her head towards him, breasts now fully exposed. It recognised them. The recent flavour. The slurping tenderness there for the taking. It turned. Something halted it Instinct calling from deep within. Compelling a minute brain to obey, to flee, back to the mud. Safety.

It obeyed unquestioningly. The moonlit square above it pointed the way. Minutes later it was standing on the tarmac of the deserted car-park. The sound of voices reached it from afar. The easy route back to the sea was blocked. What did it matter though? It had no sense of time.

It set off at a lumbering shambling gait. The sea-wall was visible a mile or so to its right across the stubble-fields. Safety.

The wounded man found that he could cover no more than ten yards without stopping to rest. His shirt was a matt of dried blood and his shoulder felt as though it was on fire. Dimly he recalled his camera lying back there somewhere in the mud. He grieved its loss, but not for ten such cameras would he have retraced his steps. That nightmarish creature would live with him for ever. Indeed he feared that his sanity had already left him.

He had heard the gunfire in the distance. Then silence. They must have killed it. He cursed himself for not having remained in the village.

His strength was failing him fast now. He could no longer stand upright. Progress on hands and knees across the marshes of the Wash was slow, really almost impossible. He wondered if he would ever make it. Perhaps the gulls and crows would be picking his flesh at dawn.

Someone was coming, heading towards him. He tried to stand up in order to see over the top of the spike-grass but he fell back again. He sobbed softly. Suppose they missed him. He must attract their attention. He braced his vocal chords.

'Help! Help! Over here. Please... help me!'

His voice died away. He knew that he could neither crawl nor shout anymore.

The footsteps altered course. His cries had been heard. He began to sob with relief.

His sanity left him completely the moment he caught sight of the Slime Beast. It wasn't even horrible. It was beautiful. He couldn't understand why everyone had made such a fuss about it. He hated the villagers for trying to kill it. If only they had offered it the hand of friendship, of course it would have responded. The pain had gone now. It hadn't really hurt him. It had all been in his mind. He could think clearly now, but the others couldn't. All it wanted was a friend. He was surprised to find that he could stand up now. Easily. He smiled. Held out his hand. He would go back to the village with it. Show everybody. Make them feel sheepish. The soldiers too.

See! Its hands were out Embracing him. Claws around his neck. Ice-cold fetid breath on his face. Perfume. He never believed that he would pass out with sheer happiness ...

Liz nestled closer to Gavin for warmth as they listened to the firing coming from the distant village.

'Seems we chose the wrong place.'

'Sounds like the army are having the whale of a time up there.' he replied and kissed her. 'I'm glad. It saves us a lot of trouble.'

'Uncle too,' she smiled. 'He'll be livid when he learns they've killed it.'

He laughed softly.

'I'm dying to see the look on his face.'

'Can we really go back to London tomorrow?' she murmured.

'All the treasures of all the kings of England wouldn't keep me here a day longer,' he promised and pressed his lips to hers, his tongue searching out her mouth.

Suddenly he stiffened, and held his head to one side.

'What is it?' The anxiety had returned to her voice.

'I don't know for sure,' he replied, 'but I thought I heard something, down by the mouth of the big creek, probably about a couple of hundred yards away. Let's watch quietly for a minute. It may be nothing.'

The minutes passed then they heard a faint stirring of the spartina grass. A sucking noise such as that made by a Wellington boot being forcibly withdrawn from mud. The figure of a man was silhouetted against the silvery sheen of the receding tide. The outline was plain and only too familiar. Safari-type hat, bushy beard.

'It's Uncle!'

'Yes, it's him all right,' Gavin snapped. 'He must have been there all the time. Well I think we'll just hang back and let him make his own way to the blockhouse. Relationships are somewhat strained at the moment to put it mildly, and I've no particular desire for his company out here at this time of night. I think somehow that this expedition will be permanently dissolved tomorrow.'

They watched as Professor Lawson gathered up his bundle of netting and set off across the salt-marshes. In spite of their recent animosity towards him they could not help admiring his agility.

They let him go a distance of about three hundred yards before they decided to follow.

Professor Lawson was seething with anger. He, too, had heard the shooting followed by the silence.

The fools. The bloody fools! The most marvellous scientific discovery of all time was within the very grasp of mankind. And what did they do? They blasted it to eternity as though it were a wild animal escaped from a zoo. Now its origin would never be discovered. He thought of Gavin's theory; maybe the young fool did have something after all! A pioneer from another galaxy. Perhaps another would be sent when this one failed to return, yet it could land anywhere. He might never have the chance again.

Depression clouded his mind. The power of which he had dreamed would never be his after all. Yet, how powerful had the Slime Beast been? Had it not after all fallen to rifle bullets! He would have staked his life on the fact that those scales were virtually impenetrable.

He plodded on, his pace slowing. All was lost. He looked up. The moon was less bright now. There was a paleness in the eastern sky. The false dawn. Another half hour and the real dawn would follow. The night was almost spent.

He changed course slightly to avoid having to wade through a maze of small pools. The narrow path alongside the reed-beds was the easiest route to take.

The tall rushes were swaying, yet the breeze had dropped. There was no wind at all. A less observant man than Professor Lawson would not have given it a second thought, but his years of thoroughness in all he did had taught him to query everything. He took nothing for granted. A moistened finger was held up. There was definitely no current of air in any direction. The reeds were still moving. Something was forcing its way through them.

He stood and watched. Whatever it was, was moving very slowly. In fact it took almost five minutes to cover the remaining fifteen yards before it emerged on to the well-trodden marsh track.

It took some moments for the scene before him to register on Lawson's brain. He just stood there and looked at the Slime Beast. It gazed back at him with glazed expressionless eyes. Neither of them moved. It was as though old friends had been reunited after a short absence.

Then the Professor smiled in the same way he might have done when meeting a friend. He smiled and then he laughed. There was no fear in his heart. Only joy. Jubilation.

'So you were master of mankind after all, my friend,' he chuckled. 'They couldn't beat you in the end, not even with their rifles and tanks.'

The Slime Beast still remained on all fours just looking up at him. The slime was running freely from its scales trickling down on to the saltings and forming small greyish-green pools. Wisps of vapour were rising from its body carrying the putrifying stench into the air where it hung in small clouds. It was almost as though its terrible power was evaporating from it second by second.

There's something the matter with you old son,' Low-son murmured in the most affectionate terms he had ever used. 'You're losing your slime. If you were of this earth I'd say you were bleeding to death!'

He thought rapidly. There was no wound as such on the creature's body. The hail of rifle fire which it had withstood appeared not to have left a mark upon it. Perhaps other factors had interfered with its make-up, like lead-poisoning, climate or salt residue from the marshes. It could be any one or a combination of all.

He came to a decision. A cure was impracticable, impossible and there was no time. There was only one thing to do. He must examine the Slime Beast while it was still alive. Before it was too late. All was not lost after all!

He bent down and picked up the net. It was almost too easy to be true, like shooting a sitting rabbit.

Still the creature did not move. Its strength was draining away rapidly. Maybe he would not even need the net. Yet he could afford to take no chances.

He drew back his arms, poised for a second and then the net sailed from his grasp. It spread out, appearing to hang motionless for a split second before plummeting downwards. Perfect, beyond his wildest dreams.

The Slime Beast remained immobile. If it was aware of the fact that it was now a prisoner it gave no sign. Baleful expressionless eyes looked through rising clouds of stinking vapour and its breath rasped, becoming weaker by the second.

Professor Lowson knew what he must do. He was certain that the Slime Beast's power emanated from the foul slime which constantly oozed from its pores. Once free of the body this evaporated into nothingness within a very short time. However if a sample of it were taken and kept in an airtight container he believed that it would remain in its original form allowing him to carry out the necessary tests.

From his pocket he withdrew a small, empty medicine bottle. He uncorked it and stepped forward. The most constant flow of slime was pouring from the flared nostrils like mucus. It was from there that he must take the sample he required.

CHAPTER TWELVE

'On my God! Look!' Liz Beck recoiled at the sight which greeted them as they rounded the bend in the reed-bed. Gavin's restraining hand pulled her back.

'He's caught it,' he breathed, admiration and fear in his voice. The Professor's actually captured the Slime Beast!'

'What's he doing?' she whispered. 'It's almost as though he's fondling it, patting it.'

Gavin peered through the hazy moonlight. It was becoming lighter every second. Although they were still fifty yards or so from Professor Lowson and his captive they could barely make out the details.

'He's doing something with a bottle,' the young archaeologist murmured. 'Taking a sample of that foul slime.'

Slowly the level of slime in the tiny bottle rose. The creature's breathing was becoming fainter and fainter.

'Ah!' Lowson grunted with satisfaction. 'I think that should do the trick.' He stood up. 'Thank you my friend. You have given me the power for which I have searched for a lifetime. Your visit to Earth has not been wasted.'

The Slime Beast breathed deeply, a shuddering which shook its whole frame. Then its breath grew faster. The flow of slime changed to a gentle oozing.

Suddenly for the first time Professor Lowson felt a twinge of fear. The Slime Beast was not going to die. It had merely been resting. Recharging itself to build up that tremendous power again! The stench, too, was increasing.

Lowson coughed and retched. It reminded him of the day when they had first discovered it.

Now there was a movement from the trapped monster. A stirring. It struggled to rise, and fell back. The netting had done its work I

A terrible roar echoed across the marsh. It gave vent to full voice. The Professor cowered back. He knew that his only chance of survival lay in flight. No longer was he concerned about the Slime Beast. The soldiers could come and finish it off in safety if they liked.

But his boot caught against a tuft of spartina grass and he was sent sprawling, the tiny bottle flying from his grasp. Frantically he searched the long marshy grass. He could not leave without that,

The Slime Beast crouched like a tiger waiting to spring. Its huge form tensed, took the strain and the entwining netting stretched, resisted and held for a moment, before finally bursting asunder. The creature fumbled for a second and then it was free.

Professor Lowson looked up as it towered over him, astride him like a colossus. He knew without a doubt that he was going to die.

It seemed to hover over him for an eternity. He saw it as a grotesque stone gargoyle, motionless except for the occasional drip of slime which ran down the scaly countenance and fell to the ground. Some dripped on him, and he felt its coldness burning into him like acid, painful yet at the same time invigorating. His veins coursed with fire at its touch and for a brief moment he imagined the sensation of bathing in it, covering his whole frame with invincibility, with power. He closed his eyes at the thought.

Suddenly he was airborne. The Slime Beast was swinging him aloft above its head crushing his ribs in a powerful grip. Liz's scream projected Gavin from the state of self-hypnosis into which he had drifted. Everything was so unreal. Perhaps he preferred to dream after all.

The flame-gun was in his hands. His cigarette lighter usually efficient, refused to spark at the first flick. Valuable seconds were lost. Then the paraffin fumes were belching forth flame. He adjusted the licking tongue of fire to its maximum length. There was no point in going any closer to this horrific creature than was absolutely necessary. Then he broke into a run.

Professor Lowson was already dead, yet the Slime Beast was not finished with him. Some instinct told it that within its grasp was an enemy more deadly than those who had attacked it in the village. It began to roar. One claw held the dead man by the waist whilst the other sought and found the scraggy neck. It braced itself and pulled. There was a loud crack followed by a tearing sound, as head and body parted. It tugged again and snapped the remaining sinews.

Perhaps only then it realised that it was not alone. The reptilian mouth opened to emit another bestial roar, but it was too late. The searing flame took it straight between the lips licking viciously up the wide nostrils and eating at the fish-like eyes. Rivulets of slime sizzled and steamed with the intense heat.

Burned, it struck out with mighty blows but its attacker was already behind it guiding the flame on to its broad back. It whirled round and then Gavin had the flame gun on its torso and belly.

The roars were now screams of fear. Steam obliterated most of his target but Gavin did not ease up. Out of the corner of his eye he noticed that Liz had fainted. It was better that way.

Suddenly Gavin saw that his foe seemed much smaller: a head and shoulders shorter than himself. As realisation dawned upon him he felt his stomach heaving with revulsion. He vomited as he attacked, fearing to pause lest the Slime Beast should take advantage of even the smallest respite,

It had neither head nor shoulders now. Yet still it lived! Twisting and turning, lashing out in an attempt to avoid the flame which was eating it away.

Now its arms were gone. Just a trunk on two legs remained, belching forth clouds of putrifying vapour. It was being consumed by the second, but it refused to keel over and die. It knew no surrender.

Two legs. Independent. Upright. Steaming. Wriggling. Then claws. Not even webbed.

Finally nothing. Not even a pool of slime on the marshy ground. It was finished. Disintegrated. It might never have existed. Only the bloody mangled decapitated body of Professor Lowson convinced Gavin that it had actually happened. A few yards away the bearded head stuck upright in the mud. The eyes were open, sightless, in an expression of defeat. A lifetime's ambitions had been dashed in a matter of seconds:

Gavin switched off the flame-gun and knelt beside the still form of Liz. Her breathing was regular. Soon her eyelids nickered open.

'Is ... is ...' her lips moved as she struggled to sit up. He moved his body so that she could not see what lay behind him on the narrow track.

'Yes,' he murmured, kissing her. 'It's all over. Finished.' She was silent 'Uncle's dead.'

'Yes,' he replied. 'But he brought it about by his own hand. Do you feel well enough to walk back to the village?' She nodded.

As she stood up her feet caught against something in the long spartina grass. It was a small glass bottle. Gavin bent down, grasped it and held it up to the eastern sky which was now yielding to the coming dawn.

'My God!' he gasped. 'So that's what the Professor was doing. Taking a sample of the slime.'

They gazed at the thick liquid within the container.

'Are you going to take it back for analysis?' Liz asked. 'I mean, that's the only thing that's left of the Slime Beast isn't it?'

Gavin shook his head. Then he uncorked the bottle, holding it at arms length in order to avoid the obnoxious odour. Slowly he turned the bottle upside down and they both watched the fluid ooze out and drip into the reeds. Then it was all gone, the last of it glistening on the tops of the rushes before evaporating into nothingness.

Gavin glanced at the empty bottle in his hand and hurled it as far out into the dense reed-bed as he could. They heard the resulting 'plop' and their eyes met.

Gavin slipped his arm around Liz's waist to support her and slowly they set off in the direction of the sea-wall.

'Well,' he sighed deeply. 'That's the end of the Slime Beast and I can't say I'm sorry.'

'Me neither.' She squeezed his hand tightly.

'Amazing. Too amazing for words.'

Chief-Inspector Harborne looked across his desk at Gavin and Liz and shook his head for the umpteenth time, 'Your story tallies with everything that has happened in this macabre business! Mr Royle, scientists will argue over it for a decade. A multitude of theories will be expounded concerning the origin of this creature called the Slime Beast. Whether it came from another world or originated in the mud of the Wash will never be known. The business of the shooting star and those charred fragments of an unidentifiable metal would seem to suggest the former.'

'Are we free to return to London now, Inspector?'

There was an eagerness in Liz's voice.

'Most certainly you are,' Harborne smiled. 'Now that the inquest on your uncle's death, and those other unfortunate people who were killed when the beast went on the rampage, is over, there is nothing further to detain you here. As they walked out into the street where the Land Rover was parked at the kerbside, stacked with all the equipment which they had brought with them, Liz heaved an audible sigh of relief.'

'Oh to be in London,' she murmured. 'We won't ever have to come back here will we Gavin?'

'Unless you fancy the Wash for a honeymoon!' he joked and she punched him playfully. 'I don't ever want to set foot on the beastly place again,' she said. 'Not even to look for old King John's treasure. It can stay where it is forever as far as Fm concerned.'

'It probably will,' he replied. 'They say it brings ill-fortune to those who seek it. It certainly has this time. Too many people have died as an indirect cause of our excavations.'

'D'you think the world's seen the last of the Slime Beast?' she asked. 'I mean, wherever it came from, d'you think they're likely to send any more?'

'If they do,' and his face held a serious expression, 'then I pray to God we're not around. I only hope, if a race of them exists on some planet somewhere, that they've decided that Earth isn't the place for them after all!' He opened the passenger door for her to climb in. Suddenly a wild clamouring sound filled the air, a sound of musical honking, gagging.

Sedately, in a perfect 'V' formation, the skein of wild geese passed over the village and began to lose height as they approached the mud-flats. This was their domain. The marshes of the Wash.