



THE TRAP

Fred woke twice in the night to find his nose pressed against the bare stones and mud of the floor and his breath coming in gasps. His father's back was turned to him, and he wouldn't look round, even though Fred screamed until his lungs were empty.

'A dream,' he muttered. 'Dreams don't matter. Not real.' But it had felt very real: real like blood is real.

He looked up through the vines to the canopy above them; he squinted, trying to memorise every inch. The second he got home he would draw the canopy for his father, in full colour. His father would

buy him pencils in a dozen different greens.

Fred didn't want to risk closing his eyes again. It was a powerful relief when the sun came up, and he could creep out of the stone hut into its warmth.

There was a chilly lump of guilt sitting in his stomach, left over from the previous night. He had never stolen anything in his life, never even tried. He looked towards the vines, shining vivid emerald in the morning light. He thought of the look on the explorer's face; it had been more than angry. It had had fear in it.

He would have to apologise. The thought made Fred's stomach squirm with humiliation; but he couldn't leave the explorer thinking he was a habitual thief, a liar, a cheat. He wasn't sure if the man was the kind to accept apologies; it might be akin to apologising to one of the stone statues. But he would try.

He tipped up his boots, checking them for scorpions; all the books he'd read had been very urgent on the matter of scorpions.

Fred's fingers were clumsier than usual; his upper body was quivering with nerves.

The ruin looked different in the sunrise. It looked more alive. There were places where vines had covered the half-fallen remnants of walls that ran along the far end of the square; places too where the vines had been hacked back, and he could see the marks on the stone where it had been cut from the parent rock.

Fred walked slowly through the open square, staring upwards. The canopy over them was intricately constructed, woven from the branches of the trees that had sprouted among the stones and nestled against the city walls, and from a network of vines. It was a green tablecloth for a giant, laid out atop the trees.

There were holes in the green scattered everywhere, where the sun burst through in bright light, and one vast gap, just above the statues, where the stones shone yellow. Directly under it, a single tree stood, burnt of all leaves. Perhaps by the sun, Fred thought, or a very small forest fire.

A tiny mouselike creature with enormous ears was basking in the heat of the morning; it scuttled away as he came near.

Fred approached the stone statues, his stomach knotting tighter with every step. They were twice as tall as he was, and so worn by rain and time that their faces were smoothed of expression – the man and the woman were identifiable only by their bodies, the panther by her tail – but still, in places, he could see where tools had cut at the stone. He reached out and touched the panther's paw. Only half of it remained, but he could see where her claws would have been, how her yellow stone would have glowed when she was new.

The explorer, though, was nowhere to be seen.

Fred was just about to turn tail and run when he heard deep breathing ahead of him.

A tree had grown through the stone floor to the left side of the statues. The explorer was asleep in a hammock woven from lianas, in the shade of the tree. He lay in it diagonally; stretched out in that

direction it was almost as flat as a bed. Fred made a mental note to only lie in hammocks diagonally from now on.

Under the hammock was a cluster of things: a small pot of ink, a quill made from a vulture feather, a piece of bark with some notes, and an enormous pair of shoes.

Fred moved closer. The explorer looked much younger asleep, and softer.

'Boy.' The man did not open his eyes; at least, he didn't seem to. 'I hope you have a good reason for waking me.'

Fred's chest grew hot. 'Sorry, I -' he began. How did he know it was him? He must, Fred thought, have been peeping from between his eyelashes.

'I could smell you,' said the explorer, as if Fred had asked the question aloud. 'And you all breathe differently. The English girl breathes through her teeth, the Brazilian girl with the ropes of hair breathes as though she fears waking the world. The small boy appears to be breathing through a veritable

revolutionary barricade of snot. And right now, you are breathing as if you're afraid I plan to throw a knife into your kneecap.'

Fred flinched, but the explorer didn't seem to notice. He sighed and stretched.

'It's no good. I'm awake now.'

'Oh. I hope you slept well?' asked Fred.

The explorer sat up and scratched his chin. 'This isn't a rooming house in Bournemouth. You don't have to talk like an old woman.'

Fred felt his forehead grow hot. 'I was trying to be polite. My father says, "Be ruthlessly polite, if only because it's easier than all the alternatives."' "

'How practical of him.' The explorer extracted a red and black beetle-like insect from the hem of his trouser leg and crushed it between his palms. 'In future, boy, it's best not to come near me when I'm sleeping. If you need to wake me, throw something from a safe distance.'

'Why?'

'I have a startle reflex.' Fred must have looked as

puzzled as he felt because the man added, 'I was captured once.'

'By Germans?'

'No.'

'By natives?'

'Not by the people you're thinking of — not by the indigenous people to whom this land belongs. By the owners of a rubber company. I didn't like how they were treating the people who lived in the forests around them.'

'Is that how your leg —'

'I have very little desire to talk about it.'

Fred stepped backwards. There are looks that make you want to hide behind your own back. He forced himself to speak. 'I wanted to come and say, I'm really sorry. About last night.' It was coming out wrong — he sounded as if he were apologising for failing to hold open a door. He swallowed. 'Properly sorry.'

The explorer raised a single, unimpressed eyebrow. Fred began to stammer. Fear dug into his belly. 'It

wasn't — we weren't going to do anything; we're weren't going to take anything, or break anything. But —'

'But it was dishonest and counterproductive?' said the explorer drily. 'Quite.'

Fred flushed. For the first time, he met the explorer's eye. He nodded. 'Yes. It was. I didn't mean to be those things. But I was. You're right to be angry.' He stared at the floor as he turned away, back towards the sleeping house.

'Wait.'

Fred turned. The explorer began to tie his shoes, meticulously tugging at the ends of the laces to get them exactly even. Then he pulled a knife from his pocket and began to sharpen the blade on a rock. Fred waited, the tension building in his chest. He wondered if the man really was planning to cut off his fingers. He thrust his hands deep in his pockets.

At last the explorer said, 'I'm going to set a trap.' He splashed water on his face. 'You might as well learn how, if you're going to provide for yourselves on your

trek home.' Carefully, methodically, the man began to shave with the knife. 'You interested in coming?'

'Yes!' said Fred. 'Very.'

'Just a moment, then.' The man puckered his mouth, pulling the skin on his cheek taut. 'I warn you - you can't let a beard grow too long, out here. Next thing you know you've a family of glow-worms living in your sideburns.' He looked sternly at Fred. 'Which is not as appealing as it sounds.'

'Thank you,' said Fred. He tried not to laugh. 'I'll remember that. Although I can't actually grow a beard.'

The explorer pulled off his jacket and hooked it on a branch on the tree. The jacket was made from a variety of dark furs; some still had legs attached. The tree, Fred could see, was used as a kind of wardrobe; it also had a spare shirt hanging from a convenient branch.

Fred looked closer. The branch the jacket hung on had been tied to the tree by hand, looped in a figure of eight with vines. He felt a jag of recognition run through his blood. He shivered.

The explorer looked surprised. 'Are you unwell, boy?'

'No! Nothing like that. It's just - I've seen a branch tied on like that before. On a mooring post. At the den. Near the bees. It must have been you.'

'Very likely. I use that knot a good deal. It lasts for years, if you get it right. Are you sure you're not sick?' The explorer looked sharply at him. 'I have no wish to care for a sick child. There's a waterproof great-coat I made somewhere, if you don't mind the smell of fish.'

'I'm fine, really.'

'And I made a scarf, once, out of monkeys.'

'Monkeys?' Fred tried not to look as appalled as he felt.

'Yes. But they kept fighting and it wasn't worth the fleas.'

'You made a scarf out of *alive* monkeys?'

'A scarf may have been a somewhat hubristic exaggeration - I draped half a dozen small monkeys around my shoulders. It was not ideal.'

The explorer set off up the steep incline that surrounded the clearing. 'Keep up.'

'Were they tame?'

'I thought they were.' He picked up a machete, smacked the flat side against his palm. 'I'd been taming them for a year. It turned out they were less docile than I imagined. Until you've had a monkey mistake your nose for a fig you don't know what waking up too suddenly means.'

The explorer strode out, heading to where the forest grew thickly. 'Don't lag!' he called.

Fred thought guiltily about the others, who might at any moment wake up and find him gone, but most of his energy was needed to keep up with the man's pace. Despite his limp, he moved twice as fast as Fred, and five times as quietly.

'Don't we need to mark the trees to find our way back?' panted Fred.

The explorer turned. He looked astonished; or it might, Fred thought, have been affronted.

'What do you take me for? No, we don't need to

mark the trees, no more than you would need to mark the wall between your bedroom and your lavatory. This is my home.'

He gestured to the trees around them, which were thinner than those circling the city, and a lighter shade of green.

'We'll get wood here, for the trap. See this?' He pointed to a branch as thick as Fred's wrist.

'Cut me two branches like that. They should be as straight as possible. That's a good tree, over there. Here.' He handed Fred the machete, and began stripping down a vine into a thin rope.

The machete had a wonderful weight to it; it was exquisitely made, with a carved handle and a blade that caught the sun and threw back light in silver and green.

'This is beautiful,' said Fred. He gave it an experimental swipe.

'Watch it! Kindly refrain from chopping off your own hand. And cut straight, boy! Don't damage the trees.' The explorer bent and brushed some debris

away from a green shoot so pale it was almost white.

'And cut only what you need. Don't hoard. Leave enough that the tree can replenish itself. The greatest threat to living things is man, which is not a thought to make one proud.'

He waved a hand to encompass the close-growing trees, the boundless green spreading leaves. 'It is humans who bring about the end of all this. Do you understand? The city, and the trees that disguise it from the land and sky? It needs protecting.'

'Protecting from us, though?' said Fred. He swept the machete through the air again; it made a very satisfying whistling sound. 'What could we do to it?'

'You can *talk*. Children are terrible at keeping secrets. And some kinds of knowledge are vulnerable, like a breathing thing; they require great care.'

'I've kept hundreds of secrets!' Fred said. But as he turned towards the trees he wondered if that was true. He had never had a secret so valuable. He had never had a secret that would make his father put down his newspaper and turn to look at him.

'This place needs protecting from humans,' said the explorer. 'I find it hard not to be wary of my fellow countrymen. They care about the wrong things. I used to sit in the train carriage with the same men every day, on the 7.15 to Paddington – and I would look at them and think: you wake up in the morning and you put on your trousers and you don't even think about the beauty of the Amazon River! How do you justify that?'

'And I did not admire our prime minister. He is very well dressed, but despite his many protestations to the contrary, I am not one hundred per cent convinced he can read.'

He shot out a sudden hand and grabbed Fred's wrist, mid-machete swipe.

'Boy! Careful – hold it with the blade facing away from you. Cutting yourself with a machete is extremely gauche. Here – cut that branch – the green one.'

Fred swept the machete down over a branch as thick as his wrist. The first time the machete got stuck in the wood, and he tugged at it.

'I recommend you take care,' said the explorer. 'Whatever our differences of opinion, I have no wish to see you open a blood vessel.'

On the second try it came away with a satisfying thump.

'Good. Are you watching? I do not expect to have to show you twice.'

The explorer selected a springy sapling tree, four feet tall, its trunk barely thicker than Fred's thumb.

'Tie the rope around the tip of the sapling,' he said.

Fred did so, while the explorer searched around the ground and located a Y-shaped branch the size of a catapult. 'Good. Hand me the machete.' He held out his hand, a surgeon mid-operation. Carefully, using the handle of the machete, he knocked the Y-shaped branch into the ground near the sapling, so that only the Y was showing.

'Now, tie the other end of the rope around your green branch – in the middle, yes – but leave the end free. The end needs to be a noose – a loop knot. We're building a spring snare.'

Fumbling, Fred followed the man's instructions. He had practised knot-tying in his bedroom, under the covers late at night, in the forbidden small hours. The explorer nodded approval, and Fred felt a surge of pride prickle in his fingers.

'Now, watch.' The man pulled down on the rope and the sapling bent forward as if saluting. He wedged the green branch into the Y, the rope stretched taut.

'The slightest movement will make the green branch spring free. So an animal puts its foot in the noose, the sapling springs up, the slip knot tightens – and you have dinner.'

'What's it for?' Fred asked, examining it from every angle. 'What does it catch?'

'Come on,' said the explorer. 'Let's go. I have other things to do. It's for whatever crawls into it. Rats, armadillos.'

'You eat rats?'

'Of course. If I have to. I've eaten many things over the years that I have not precisely enjoyed but have appreciated nonetheless. Snails, spiders.'

'Spiders?'

'Certain spiders are remarkably delicious. I could help you find them. But I have no desire to help you, unless you swear to keep silence about this place.'

Fred bit his lips together.

'No?' the explorer said. 'You would prefer to align yourself with men who loot from the land and its history?'

'They don't!' Fred thought of the men striding across the pages of his books. 'They don't all do that!' 'Certainly, there are some who do not – but how many? You wish to invite the world to come and stare; you gamble on the morality of the world at large, do you?'

Fred's stomach contracted. He said nothing. His heart thrummed painfully, but he forced himself not to look away.

Brusquely the explorer took the machete from Fred, and began to hack off thick branches for firewood. His ring caught the light.

Fred tried to change the subject. 'Your ring.' He was about to say, 'Why do you wear a ring in the jungle?' but, he thought, the explorer didn't seem to welcome personal questions – and he was swinging the machete very close to Fred's knees. 'Um ... what's it made from?'

'Fish scales, and caiman bone.' The explorer's pride in it seemed to wrestle with his anger at Fred; then he took the ring off and held it out. 'Here.' On the inside rim words had been cut.

Fred read: 'Nec ... *Aspera Terrent?*'

'Latin. Roughly, it means, "*Difficulties be damned.*" Do you think it's peculiar, to wear a ring out here?'

Fred did think exactly that, but it seemed a bad place and time to say so. He laughed awkwardly instead.

The explorer raised his eyebrows. 'While we're on the subject – why did you dress like a minor state administrator to come to the jungle? You look like you're running for mayor of Tunbridge Wells.'

Fred looked down at himself in surprise. 'This

is – was – my school uniform. And my cricket jersey. My father says you should always wear a uniform where possible. He's that kind of man. I didn't know I was coming to the jungle.'

'You should always dress as if you *might* be going to the jungle. You never know when you might meet an adventure.'

'I'm at a boarding school. In Norfolk. Gresham's. On the Cromer Road.'

'And?'

'It's just, I'm much more likely to meet a geography teacher than an adventure.'

The explorer looked at the world around them, and then, hard, at Fred. 'And yet, here you are,' he said.

With great care, he detached a branch covered in berries from a tree and threw it to Fred, who caught it, realising a second too late that the branch was covered in thorns. He said some words his school did not allow him to say.

The explorer arched his left eyebrow a quarter of an inch. Fred instantly stopped swearing.

'Make sure the small one – the boy with the leaking nose – eats some. He's too thin. Try one.'

Fred put the largest berry in his mouth. The juice burst on his tongue; it was absolutely hideous. He wanted to spit it out, but he had a feeling the explorer wouldn't approve. He swallowed, and scrubbed his tongue on the back of his hand. 'It tastes of petrol!' he said. 'And badgers.'

'I know. But you should eat them anyway; they're rich in vitamins. And they'll be easy to find on your road to Manaus; they grow near the river.'

'I think maybe I'd rather starve.'

'No you wouldn't. It's a long walk. It's best not to get too hungry if you can avoid it. If you get hungry enough you will start feeling that your bad ideas are your good ones. If you get truly famished, you start feeling like a French philosopher, and that's unwise.'

And he strode back through the trees, leaving Fred to run, jumping over roots and anthills to keep pace with him.