



**THE
NIGHT
OF THE
TRIFFIDS**

SIMON CLARK

Simon Clark read John Wyndham's *The Day of the Triffids* when he was twelve-years-old. He loved this brilliantly inventive Sci-Fi classic so much he searched in vain for a sequel. Many years later, he was delighted and honoured to be granted the opportunity to continue the story of those menacing walking plants in his best-selling book *The Night of the Triffids*, which has been translated into many different languages and won the British Fantasy Award for best novel 2002. Simon's novels include post-apocalyptic thrillers such as *Blood Crazy*, *Stranger* and *On Deadly Ground* (formerly *Kin Blood*), and the time-travel epic *The Fall*. 2014 sees the publication of *Inspector Abberline & the God of Rome*, a crime mystery, featuring the real-life Inspector Abberline, who led the hunt for the notorious serial-killer Jack the Ripper, and who went on to become head of the Pinkerton's National Detective Agency in Europe. Simon Clark lives in Yorkshire, England. His website is www.nailedbytheheart.com

Also by Simon Clark

Blood Crazy

The Fall

Darkness Demands

Judas Tree

Stranger

On Deadly Ground

Hotel Midnight

The Dalek Factor

Blood and Grit 21

Sherlock's Demon

Death's Dominion

Inspector Abberline & the Gods of Rome

The Night of the Triffids

Simon Clark



To the memory of John Wyndham (1903–69)

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PROLOGUE

It is now twenty-five years since three hundred men, women and children withdrew from the British mainland to establish a colony of survivors on the Isle of Wight.

There, in every library and in every school, is a mimeographed typescript of William Masen's account of the Great Blinding, the coming of the triffids and the fall of civilization.

Comprising little more than two hundred quarto pages, it is bound between covers of stiff orange card. Inside you will find no illustrations and not so much as a single photograph.

It is a vivid enough story nonetheless.

This is the final paragraph of William Masen's book:

So we must regard the task ahead as ours alone. We think now that we can see the way, but there is still a lot of work and research to be done before the day when we, or our children, or their children, will cross the narrow straits on the great crusade to drive the triffids back and back with ceaseless destruction until we have wiped the last one of them from the face of the land that they have usurped.

That is the end of William Masen's testament. What follows now is the beginning of another – in a world that still lies in thrall to the dreadful triffid . . .

WORLD DARKENING . . .

When nine o'clock on a summer's morning appears, so far as your eyes can tell, as dark as midnight the very depths of winter, then there is something very seriously wrong somewhere.

It was one of those mornings when I awoke instantly alert, refreshed and ready for a new day. I was, my mother Josella Masen would have put it, bright-eyed and bushy-tailed.

Only, for the life of me, I didn't know why I felt that way. Raising myself onto one elbow, I looked round the bedroom. It wasn't just dark. That's too tame a word for it. There was an absolute absence of light. I saw nothing. Not a glimmer of starlight through the window. No lamplight from a house across the way. Not even my hand in front of my face. Nothing.

Only darkness in its inky totality.

There, I remember telling myself firmly, it's still the middle of the night. You've been woken by some cat giving voice while following its natural instincts. Or perhaps the old man in the next room had to get up for some reason. Now, go back to sleep.

I lay flat on my back and closed my eyes.

But something was wrong. A mental alarm bell jangled faintly yet with some urgency deep inside my head.

I opened my eyes. Still I saw nothing.

I listened suspiciously, with all the intensity of a house-holder hearing a floorboard creak beneath an intruder's stealthy foot.

Now I was certain that it was the middle of the night; there could be no doubting the evidence of my eyes. I couldn't see even the faintest glimmer of dawn beginning to filter through the curtained window. Yet at that moment understanding at last dawned on me: the sounds I could hear were those of a summer's morning, when the sun should have been streaming across the island's fields.

I heard the clip-clop of a horse passing the cottage, then the brisk rap of a stick on the pavement as one of the Blind went about their business. There came the clatter of front doors. Water rushed down the drain. And, perhaps most noticeable of all, there was the wonderful sizzle of bacon being fried for breakfast, accompanied by its tantalizing wafting aroma.

Immediately my stomach rumbled hungrily. But with those first pangs of hunger I realized that the world, somehow, had gone all wrong. Profoundly wrong.

This was the moment when my life, as I had known it for the last twenty-nine years, ended. Right there, on that Wednesday, 28 May. Nothing would ever be the same again. There was no tolling of a funeral bell to mark its passing. Only the sounds that should not be – indeed, *could* not be! – those morning sounds so strangely out of place here in the dark heart of the night: the sound of a horse pulling a cart to the beach; the smart tap of sticks as the Blind went up the hill to the Mother House; the sound of a man's cheery goodbye to his wife as he set out for his day's work.

I lay there hearing it all perfectly. But, I confess, none of it made sense. I stared up at the ceiling, stared for a full five minutes – five seemingly endless minutes – in the hope that my eyes would adjust to the gloom.

But no.

Nothing.

It remained as dark as if I'd been sealed into a box and buried deep underground.

~~I felt uneasy now. And within seconds that uneasiness spread like the very devil of an itch across my body, until soon I could lie there no longer. Quickly, I sat up and swung my feet out of bed onto cool linoleum.~~

Now, I was not at all familiar with the room, unsure even of in which direction the door lay. She fate had placed me there. I'd been taking a flying boat on a short hop from Shanklin across the four mile stretch of sparkling sea to Lymington on the mainland where I was to pick up a foraging party.

I'd been flying the single-engine plane solo – those little hops from the island to the mainland were no more dramatic than a local cart journey after all these years. The sky was clear, the sea flat calm mirroring that flawless blue; my spirits were high with the prospect of a trouble-free flight on such a perfect summer's day.

However, fate always lies in wait to trip the complacent, with results that are either comic, irritating – or lethal.

The instant I overflowed the Isle of Wight coast a large gull exchanged its earthly existence for the chance of some avian paradise by the simple expedient of flying into my aircraft's one and only propeller. Immediately the wooden blade shattered.

And a flying boat without its propeller is about as airworthy as a brick.

Luckily I managed to tug the nose of the aircraft round in a U-turn as it glided downward, the slipstream whistling through the wing struts.

The landing, while lacking any elegance whatsoever, was at least adequate – that is to say, damaged nothing when the flying boat flopped onto the surface of the sea just yards from the beach.

The rest of that particular incident was without drama. A fishing smack towed me to a jetty where they moored the plane. Then I walked to the little seaside village of Bytewater where I radioed back the news that I'd been downed by a seagull.

After the obligatory laughter and leg-pulling I was told that a mechanic and a new propeller would be dispatched to Bytewater the following morning. Meanwhile, I should find myself a bed for a night.

I then spent a messy hour or so removing what remained of the carcass of the bird from the plane's engine.

But I should have saved a feather from that bird as a good-luck charm, I really should. Because unknown to me, the bird had just saved my life.

And without its sacrifice you certainly wouldn't be reading these words now.

My predicament showed no signs of improving as I sat there on the bed. My eyes still told me it was the middle of the night.

Yet my ears – and my nose – retorted emphatically that this was well after sunrise.

There were sounds of people working. Sounds of people moving around outside. All the buzz and murmur of daylight hours.

Then, suddenly, I heard a burst of unintelligible shouting in the distance. It was perhaps nothing more than some contretemps between a man and his wife, I thought. I even waited for the slam of a door to indicate the dramatic finale of the disagreement.

The voice became abruptly silent.

Indeed, the sound of the tapping stick stopped as quickly.

Seconds later the steady clip-clop of the walking horse became a sudden clatter of hooves again.

the road surface as it bolted.

Then that too faded to eerie silence.

And this all-pervading darkness . . .

It was really too much.

I was a pilot. A man of steady nerves. But this dark was beginning to eat into me, unsettling more than I could say.

I called out the name of my host.

‘Mr Hartlow . . . Mr Hartlow?’

I waited, expecting at any moment to hear the door open and Mr Hartlow’s kindly voice saying ‘Now, now, then. What’s all the fuss, David?’

But there was no Mr Hartlow who, after thirty years of blindness, could find his way around his house with as much assurance as a young man with twenty-twenty vision.

‘Mr Hartlow . . .’

That hungry darkness greedily devoured my voice.

A nasty feeling began to run through me. Powerful. Undeniable. The resurfacing of those childhood fears that you put away as you mature into adulthood. Suddenly they were racing back.

That dread of the dark. When the silhouette on the wall can become a cruel, nameless beast that is waiting to pounce and rip at your throat . . . and that creak of a floorboard – it heralds the arrival of a madman coming through the door, wielding a bloody axe . . .

At that moment I realized: those fears don’t disappear with age, they merely hibernate. They only need the right environment and back they come, loping like phantom hounds from the recesses of your mind . . .

And the reason I can’t see, and the reason I can hear people moving about as if it’s broad daylight is because . . .

A deep shiver ran through me as the words came slowly yet inexorably from somewhere deep inside my head. I cannot see because: *I am blind.*

As a newly blind man I had none of the self-assurance of one of the old Blind who’d lost their sight when the strange green lights had flooded the night sky three decades ago.

Instead, I must have made a pathetic, shambling figure as I crossed the bedroom, my hands stretched out in front of me. All I could hear now was the loud pounding of my heart.

‘Mr Hartlow . . . can you hear me?’

No response.

‘Mr Hartlow . . . Mr *Hartlow!*’

No reply.

I moved through the door onto the landing, still engulfed by that all-encompassing darkness. No longer was there soft carpet beneath my bare feet. I shuffled forward. My fingertips pressed against the rough textures of wood-chip wallpaper, then there was the cool hardness of a door frame, followed by the door itself.

I opened it, calling, ‘Mr Hartlow? Are you there?’

There was no answering reply. My terrified breathing, which overlaid the thump-thump-thump of my heart, was far too loud to allow me to hear any subtler sounds that might be stirring the air.

I struggled on, opening doors. Calling.

By now I was becoming disorientated, not even sure in which direction my own room lay.

So this is what it is like to be blind, I told myself. A world of endless night.

An ominous thought struck me.

~~Had those mysterious green lights that had blinded more than ninety per cent of the population a~~
those years ago returned to the skies? That strange cosmic firework display that had entranced
many people on the same night that my father, Bill Masen, had lain in a hospital bed, his eyes
bandaged after triffid venom had sprayed into his face?

I cast my mind back.

I'd gone to bed after a pleasant evening listening to a piano recital on Island Radio and chatting
with my host, Mr Hartlow. He'd poured me a glass or two of his excellent parsnip brandy to speed me
on my way, so to speak. For the life of me, I couldn't recall seeing anything amiss with the night sky.

Perhaps, however, one didn't even have to see the green lights – (if they *were* responsible for my
lamentably sightless condition). Maybe they had flitted across the sky during the day, unseen by
people going about their work across the island. Was it possible that an *invisible* radiation they
emitted was responsible for burning out the optic nerve?

Ouch.

I had just found the stairs by stepping off the end of one. My foot slipped down at least three more
before I managed to grab the banister rail. Although I'd stopped myself from pitching forward and
breaking my neck, my ankle had taken a painful wrench.

Yet, in a way, that jab of pain along the arch of my foot did my nerves some good. It encouraged me
to stop my imagination roaming restlessly, and fruitlessly, over what might or might not have
happened to me, to stop wallowing in self-pity, and to damn' well do *something*.

When I reached the level floor below I stopped and listened, the stone slabs of the kitchen chillingly
cold beneath my feet.

No. I could hear nothing.

Limping slightly from the sprain, I moved across the kitchen, hands outstretched to detect
obstructions (and all the time irrationally expecting my fingers to touch the soft hollows and contours
of a living human face). I stubbed a toe on a stool leg and for a few seconds the pain made me lose
interest in pretty much everything else, provoking from my lips a few words that I would never have
uttered in the presence of my mother, unshockable though she was.

Again I reached a wall. Tentatively, as if the wall might suddenly sprout sharp-toothed mouths to
snap at my fingertips (my blindness had certainly unleashed a hundred irrational fancies!), I moved
slowly along it. First, I reached a curtained window (the Blind still draw curtains through habit).
Quickly I tugged open the curtain, vainly hoping light would cascade dazzlingly into the room.

I sighed.

Darkness – still darkness.

I moved on, touching pans hanging from hooks, a row of knives, bunches of dried herbs.
Somewhere a clock ticked with a ponderous, doom-laden rhythm.

Tick . . . tock . . . tick . . . tock . . .

An insufferable noise that I hated – again irrationally – with a passion.

Tick . . . tock . . .

If I should happen to lay my hands on the clock I would smash the damnable thing against the floor.

'Mr Hartlow?' Then I added, rather illogically, 'Can you hear me?' Because if he had heard, he
would have answered, surely.

Tick . . . tock . . .

'Mr Hartlow?'

Tick . . . tock . . . tick . . .

As I reached a doorway my hand brushed against an electric light switch. In a small village like this there would of course be no electricity. Electricity, after all, was a precious commodity reserved for workshops, hospitals, clinics, communications – and for laboratories like my father's. Nevertheless, I gripped the switch eagerly. The thing obviously hadn't been used for decades; metal contacts grate across an accumulation of grit as it clicked downward.

No light.

With the rational part of my mind I had expected none. But a tormenting voice inside my head sang out loud and clear that light – lots and lots of lovely brilliant light – had cascaded from the bulb and flood the kitchen. *But you can't see it, because you really are blind, David Masen . . . sightless as an* *three blind mice . . . three blind mice running after the farmer's wife . . .*

Stop that, I told myself sharply, fighting down the wave of panic rolling dangerously through me. *Stop that at once.*

Once more I fumbled my way across the walls. Now there were worktops.

A sink. Cooker.

More cupboards, with plates from—

I stopped.

A cooker?

Quickly, I groped back through the cloaking darkness until I found the burners and the iron stand on which to set the pans. There I could feel the round gas-control knobs, hard beneath my anxious searching fingers.

Gas. Yes – yes.

I fumbled for a lighter that must, I thought, be close by.

After a few moments' fruitless search I began cursing – an equally fruitless occupation.

I realized too that there must be candles and lamps nearby. Not for Mr Hartlow's use, of course, but for any sighted guests he might entertain.

But, for me, these might as well have been hidden on the dark side of the moon as I groped sightlessly through what seemed to be endless racks of plates, cutlery and vegetables in baskets. A candle might have been right there in front of me, only I couldn't, for the life of me, find it.

As it was, my characteristic impatience rescued my ailing sanity.

I found the cooker again.

Or rather, I located it – by blindly putting my hand in the hot bacon grease in the frying pan. I turned the knobs at the front of the cooker, instantly hearing the methane as it hissed odourlessly from the burners.

Right, this was crude . . . but if it worked . . . well, that would be just tickety-boo by me.

I reached out again to the worktops. My fingers found a pan – one that was satisfyingly heavy – and I picked it up. Then, with the gas hissing from the cooker vents, I brought the pan down hard against the iron stands.

The impact clanged mightily.

I struck the top of the cooker again.

And again the metallic clang rang loud in my ears.

Then, at the third attempt – this time swinging downwards with all my might, shattering the wooden pan handle – my plan worked.

The two metal surfaces crashing together produced a single spark.

With a loud pop, followed by a *whoosh*, a ball of flame blossomed under my nose.

I reeled back from the smarting rush of heat, the smell of singeing telling me that I'd been too slow.

to save my eyebrows.

~~But I didn't care. I didn't care the tiniest bit. Because something wonderful had happened.~~

I could see.

I saw in perfect detail that brief blossom of orange and yellow fire. Within a moment it had died back to four discs of blue flame where the gas jets burned from their vents.

They were anything but bright. Yet they cast a faint bluish light across the kitchen, revealing the stairs, table, radio – and here were Mr Hartlow's pipe and tobacco pouch on a shelf by the window.

And, more importantly, I could see on the wall the clock from which issued those lugubrious ticks and tocks. For a second I thought my eyes really were playing tricks.

The clock, if it was right, told me it was ten minutes past nine o'clock.

I looked outside.

That was the moment when I realized that either I had in some way gone spectacularly mad and was imagining all this – or that it really was the end of the world. For all I could see beyond the window was absolute darkness. That tormenting voice of unreason wasted no time before murmuring: 'You're right, David Masen. The sun is dead. And this is the beginning of everlasting night.'

AN OLD FOE

What should have been giddy relief at being able to see again gave way immediately to a sheer stunned perplexity.

This was a May morning after nine o'clock. The village and surrounding fields should be awash with daylight. Instead there was only that velvet black. So, where had the sun gone?

The idea that it had simply just not risen hurtled across my brain. Could it be that during the night some disaster of cosmic proportions had knocked the earth from its orbit? Or that the earth had stopped revolving and from now on would present the same face to the sun in the same way that the moon eternally presented only one side to the earth?

But that was too fantastic. A disaster of those proportions, such as a comet plunging into our planet at thousands of miles an hour, would have caused tidal waves, earthquakes, continent-shattering explosions.

But here on the Isle of Wight everything was quiet, peaceful as a summer's morning should be.

My mind was a confused whirl. Because I remembered waking to hear people starting their working day as if nothing was amiss. But why had they gone about their business as if everything was normal? As if the world hadn't gone topsy-turvy? And hadn't been left in total darkness?

The resoundingly simple answer to that, I realized, was that Bytewater was a community of the blind.

How could they know there was no light?

After all, darkness doesn't impress itself against your skin; it can't be smelled, can't be tasted. If a man is blind there's no way he can tell the difference between light and dark. Unless, that is, he is standing in sunlight strong enough to warm his skin. Instead he must rely on the chiming of clocks and the word of the sighted.

So the Blind of Bytewater had simply woken into total darkness, then unwittingly started the day believing it to be like any other.

After staring through the window out into the dark for a full three minutes I shook my head. I had to do something; I couldn't wait in the simple hope that the sun would suddenly return in a blaze of glory. The first obvious move was to put some clothes on.

Now, there was no difficulty at all in finding a candle. And that light – that beautiful, wonderful light! – a miracle in the darkness, lit my way back to the bedroom.

Once dressed, I made a quick recce of the house. No Mr Hartlow to be seen. Perhaps he'd gone to feed his rabbits. He must have thought me an Idle Jack for snoozing away the morning while others worked.

Exchanging the candle for a brighter oil lantern, I left the cottage, carefully closing the door behind me, mindful that my host wouldn't thank me for letting every cat in the neighbourhood into his kitchen. Once I'd done that, I set off along the road that led inland.

The lamp cast a yellow smudge in front of me; nothing more than a speck of light in this all-encompassing darkness. But I remember thinking then that this postponement of the dawn could be nothing more than a freakish pall of cloud that had temporarily blotted out the sun, and that it should pass soon enough.

I paused every so often to raise the lamp, looking for one of the Blind who might be tending his

her cattle in a field, still oblivious to the dark.

I saw no one.

At the edge of the road were the white-painted guide rails that the Blind villagers would follow. The rails were made of wood and ran at waist height. Here and there, signs in Braille directed the Blind to turn right or left to reach a particular cottage, the inn, or the Mother House. The Blind would always keep the guide rail to their left, so avoiding colliding head-on with a neighbour. But, in fact, they were so well adapted to their condition that they moved briskly around their territories with hardly as much as a fingertip brush of the rail.

I walked faster.

The oil lamp had no reflector plate to focus its light; instead I walked in the middle of a soft-edged glow. Consequently I could see no more than a dozen feet in front of me at any one time.

So when I came upon Mr Hartlow sitting alone on a roadside bench it was something of a surprise.

Mr Hartlow was a well-built man in his mid-sixties with close-cropped white hair. Long ago he had been a London solicitor specializing in copyright law.

He looked up even though I'd stopped and the sound of my footsteps had ceased. His keen hearing must have picked up the sound of my breathing.

'Who's there?' He sounded immensely tired.

'It's David Masen,' I said, walking forward.

'Ah, David . . . come here, please . . .'

He held out his hand which I took in mine. Immediately he clasped it in a surprisingly fierce grip.

'What's happened, David? Something's gone wrong, hasn't it?'

'It's dark. All dark, as if the sun hasn't come up.'

'Dark. Ah . . .'

His voice sounded hoarse with exhaustion; as if he'd just come through the grimmest battle of his life. 'For a moment I wondered . . .'He shook his white-haired head. 'I wondered if the green lights had come back.' He raised his own sightless eyes to the sky. 'I heard Tom Atkinson shouting earlier . . . oh, you don't know Tom, do you?'

I told him I didn't.

'He's one of the few Sighted here in the village. He's a fisherman – and he's one of the biggest grumblers I've ever met. He's always too warm or too cold, or the fish won't bite, or the wind blowing in the wrong direction . . . Ah . . .'

He broke off. For a moment I thought he was simply going to nod off there on the bench. I raised the lantern to look at him, but his head hung down wearily.

'Mr Hartlow?'

He seemed to pull himself together. 'Sorry . . . I don't know what's come over me this morning. I tripped into the hedge back there. Must have fallen over my own two feet. Clumsy devil I'm becoming. Never done that before . . .'

He suddenly seemed to shake himself awake. 'Yes, I was telling you about Tom Atkinson, wasn't I? He was shouting out in the street that he couldn't see. At first, as I say, I thought the shooting stars or whatever they were had come back – those damnabable things that burned out our eyesight thirty years ago.' He paused, then took a deep breath. 'You know, David.' His grip on my hand tightened further and he began to speak in a low voice. 'That fear came back to me. Just like it did after I stayed out in the garden that night all those years ago. My God. We even made a party of it with the neighbours because they said it was something we'd never see again. He gave a colourless laugh. 'Never see again. How right they were. Because in the morning we were all blind. And of course I never saw my family again, even though they were in the house with me. But I could hear them screaming. Oh, by heaven, I could hear that all right, just . . . just screaming with panic as their eyesight faded away.'

The grip on my hand, which had relaxed slightly during Mr Hartlow's sad reminiscence, tightened again. He turned his sightless eyes to me. And even though I knew he was one of the old Blind, at that moment I believed he not only looked *at* me but right *into* me, into the depths of my soul.

'David. You know, I had a beautiful, intelligent wife. I had two pretty daughters – just ten and thirteen they were. And thirty years ago, suddenly blind . . . stone blind . . . I stood every day in the doorway of our house and called for help. And I listened to my wife and daughters cry themselves to sleep every day for the next three months. You see, we ran out of food. I couldn't find any more . . . He shook his head. 'I hated myself, David. I was too weak to find a way of helping them. My God, I wish I could turn the clock back . . . I wish I had just the one chance to help them; stop them suffering . . . because . . .'

'I'll take you back to the cottage,' I said gently.

'Maybe in a moment. You know, I haven't an ounce of strength left in my body. What on earth happened to me, David?'

'Don't worry, Mr Hartlow, it must be the shock of the fall, that's all.'

'Falling over into bushes? Time they put me out to pasture, eh?'

'You'll soon be fighting fit again, Mr Hartlow.'

'Maybe, David. Maybe. Now, do you see any sign of that old moaner Tom Atkinson?'

'I can hardly see a thing. This lantern doesn't cast an awful lot of light.'

'But how in heaven's name did it get so dark? It doesn't feel like rain so there can't be so much cloud that . . . ah . . .'

The grip on my hand suddenly loosened. His head hung forward again.

'Mr Hartlow?'

'Oh . . . uhm? Sorry, David . . . I'm just so light-headed. I feel as if I've put away a jug or two more of ale than I should have. Now, this darkness . . . what do you suppose is responsible?'

'I don't know – cloud, maybe. But it must be incredibly dense. Without a lamp I can't see my hand in front of my face.'

'Now that kind of darkness is a great equalizer between the two of us, isn't it?' There was no maliciousness there; the old man sounded as kindly as ever.

'Mr Hartlow, I'll help you back to—'

He waved my helping hand away. 'No, David. Not yet.' He took a deep breath. 'David . . . you know, I've always suspected something like this would happen. All these years I've sat in my cottage and thought about the terrible calamity that befell the planet, and how people like your mother and father and Ivan Simpson worked their miracles, how they saved so many people – Blind as well as Sighted – and how they embedded a tiny sliver of civilization in this island.' He sighed. 'But long ago I came to the conclusion it was all a waste of time and effort. Three decades ago Mother Nature, father or God Himself decided that Man had ruled this planet long enough; so an attempt was made to wipe Man out; render him extinct. Very nearly succeeded, too. Still, as I said, due to the brave efforts of the Masens and people like them we cheated extinction. But I tell you this, David.' He looked at me, those sightless eyes once again seeming to pierce my soul. 'I tell you, God will not be cheated. Nothing Man can do will thwart His plan. We are all going to die. He has decided. The last twenty-five years here have been nothing more than a peaceful interlude. An intermission between two halves of a titanic catastrophe that will destroy all human life. Now He—' Mr Hartlow pointed skyward '—is going to finish the job. Remember the Bible's Book of Exodus. One of the plagues to afflict Pharaoh was darkness. The Lord said to Moses "Stretch your hand toward heaven that there may be darkness over the land of Egypt, a darkness to be felt".' Eyes glittering strangely, the old man lifted his hand as if to

touch the encircling darkness. 'In every culture darkness precedes Armageddon. The Vikings predicted the end of the world would begin when the monster wolf, Fenrir, swallowed the sun bringing darkness. The ancient Sumerians told how nearly all the people of the earth were killed "when daylight turned to darkness" and their god "smashed the land like a cup . . ." Mark my words David. Mark them well . . . this is the beginning of the end.'

'Mr Hartlow, you're tired. Let me get you back home.'

'Thank you, perhaps . . . Oh . . .'

'What's the matter?'

'My face is sore. I must have grazed it when I fell.' He touched his cheek.

'Let me take a look at that . . . Mr Hartlow . . . *Mr Hartlow?*'

His head sagged forward and I had to grip his shoulder to stop him falling. Not that it mattered Mr Hartlow now. As I lowered him sideways onto the bench I instinctively knew he was dead.

I raised the lamp to look into his face.

There, in the glow of the lamp, I could plainly see the bright red streak across the old man's cheek.

Now I knew what had killed him.

I stooped quickly, using the back of the bench to shield at least part of my body. Then, raising the lamp as high as I dared, I looked at the dark shapes of the bushes and trees. But the light was too weak to identify individual species. They might have been everyday alders, sycamores, immature oak young chestnuts – but they might have been something entirely different. Something infinitely more sinister.

I knew there was nothing more to be done for Mr Hartlow. What mattered now was that I should warn Emergency HQ at Newport.

Keeping as low as I could, I ran at a crouch.

And even as I ran it started. A hollow drumming sound of wood on wood. A sound that every child on the island had been taught to recognize.

Something rustled in the hedgerow beside me.

Ducking my head still lower, I hurried on.

In front of me lay the dark form of a horse. The animal was stone dead.

A little further on, I saw a pair of waders protruding from the long grass at the side of the road. That would be Tom Atkinson; silvery fish from his basket lay scattered across the ground. He'd landed his last catch.

The drumming grew louder. A maddening tip-tap-tip-tap.

Ahead I saw a cottage from which hung a post-office sign. I raced for it, seeing from the corner of my eye a monstrous shadow moving jerkily through the gloom.

My voice rang out into silence as I burst into the building.

'Hello! Anyone home?'

Silence – as oppressive as the darkness.

Now it seemed that I was alone in the village. With the lamp casting shadows that leaped crazily up the walls, I searched the post office until I found the room that served as the radio cabin. Here I sat myself before the small set and switched it on. Seconds later valves glowed yellow through the ventilation slots.

Something tapped at the open window above my head.

Using the radio set's Braille instruction booklet as a makeshift shield to guard my face, I jumped up at the window, shoved it shut, then locked it. Now at last I could make that call for help.

I pressed the transmit button. 'Hello, this is an emergency transmission on frequency nine

Emergency HQ, Newport, do you read me, over?’

Static hissed.

For a moment I was convinced I’d receive no reply. Already I was too late – the island had been overrun.

I tried again, tension making my voice sound higher: ‘Emergency HQ, Newport, hello, do you read me, over?’

‘Caller on frequency nine. We read you; please stay off the air.’ Weariness permeated the radio operator’s tones. It sounded as if he’d had a long night.

‘But I need to report an emergency. Over.’

‘The darkness? Oh, yes, thank you, caller, we know all about that.’ The man had clearly written me off as a dim-wit. ‘Now, I’m waiting for a number of fire reports. I have to keep this frequency clear. So, caller, please go off air. Over.’

‘Good grief! You can’t be serious,’ I shouted, forgetting on-air etiquette.

‘Sir, I appreciate you must be anxious about the darkness. The official line is to stay put. It’s probably an unusually dense cloud layer that has obscured the sun. So, kindly switch off—’

‘No . . . listen to me! I have something else to report. Over.’

‘Go ahead, caller,’ came the voice, reluctantly.

‘My name is David Masen, calling from Bytewater. I wish to report a triffid incursion.’

There was a pause. Static crackled on the ether.

At last HQ responded in a voice that came close to stunned disbelief. ‘Say again, Mr Masen. It sounded as if you used the word “triffid”. Over.’

Something lashed against the window.

‘You heard correctly. And until someone can tell me anything different, I’d say we’ve just been invaded.’

EYE OF THE STORM

More than twenty years ago my father, Bill Masen, sat down at his desk and during one long snowbound winter wrote a deeply personal account of what happened to him during the aftermath of the Great Blinding and the coming of the triffids. By now, it must be a familiar-looking book to all the colonists, not only on the Isle of Wight but on the Scillies and the Channel Islands as well. This mimeographed quarto publication bound within its bright orange covers is instantly recognizable.

Along with Elspeth Cary's *History of a Colony* and Matt and Gwynne Lloyd's documentary film that continue to chronicle the day-to-day lives of the colonists, it is an invaluable record of how we came to find ourselves on our island fortresses when the whole world fell under the dreadful sway of the triffid. This was the botanical freak, once trumpeted as 'the miracle plant that walks', that in a few short years became Man's nemesis – his destroyer.

Naturally, I read my father's account when I was a boy. How strange to rediscover my father as Bill Masen the complex individual in his own right rather than simply the cheerful, mostly optimistic – sometimes preoccupied – 'Dad' I'd known since birth.

I never thought I'd write anything to compare with his book.

Until now my writings had been restricted to pre-flight notes to do with weather reports, wind speeds and navigational calculations, jotted on the backs of old envelopes and sandwich wrappers, and often as not picturesquely decorated with an oily fingerprint or two.

Now I find myself sitting here at a table, a dozen blank notepads in front of me. I tap a pencil against my lips. My brow furrows as I wonder just how on earth I can recapture in the written word all those strange adventures – those sometimes nightmarish adventures – that have dominated my life since that fateful 28 May three decades after the fall of civilization.

That was the day I awoke to a world of darkness. And that was the day the triffids once more invaded our hitherto safe island home.

Some say the second coming of the triffids at that same fateful time when night refused to yield that day was too much to be pure coincidence. Some saw another hand behind it all – perhaps the divine hand of a vengeful god. Alas, I can cast no light on that (if you will excuse an unintentional pun). However, I remember a passage from my father's book wherein he contemplates the sudden blinding of the global population occurring at the same time that countless triffids escaped from farms and gardens. He wrote: 'Of course, coincidences are happening all the time – but it's just now and then you happen to notice them . . .'

And so, coincidence or not, I now sit here in a very different world from the one in which I grew up.

A colder wind than I have ever known before is blowing against this tower. Again and again the banshee shriek of the gale reminds me that, although I might have no natural literary abilities, I do have all the time in the world to write my book.

Therefore, I shall write down what happened to me.

And I shall begin at the beginning . . .

My childhood was idyllic. I grew up amid the rolling chalk downs and green-clad hills of the Isle of Wight. A tract of fertile land that only became an island some six thousand years ago when the sea

level rose to flood a valley that is now known as The Solent. Since then the island has played host to prehistoric hunter-gatherers, to Roman farmers who named the island 'Vectis', to Saxon immigrants and then eventually to Victorian holidaymakers, including Lord Tennyson who declaimed that 'the air on the Downs is worth sixpence a pint!' And, more recently, to a few survivors from the mainland. I'm surprised I remember these facts from some history lesson of long ago when Mr Pinz-Wilks tried so hard to instil into me a little academic learning. In fact, I'm certain Mr Pinz-Wilks (who must surely have gone to his final reward by now) would be astonished, too. I remember only too clearly how he raised his blind eyes in frustration to the ceiling so many, many times. Sadly, I retained historical facts as easily as a sieve holds water.

There, in the heart of the Isle of Wight, I shared a large house in the picturesque village of Arretton (population forty-three) with my mother, father and two younger sisters.

As soon as I was old enough I roved away across the poppy-strewn fields, exploring and looking for 'Mantun'.

This was the name I gave to my imaginary lost fairy city – a childhood fantasy that often perplexed my parents. And when rain or parental punishment for my deeds of natural mischief confined me to my bedroom, I'd grip a pencil in my chubby hand and draw pictures that showed a host of buildings as spindly as bamboo canes. Of course, when my parents asked me what I'd drawn I'd proudly reply 'Mantun'. My imagination was young and supple then. Entertaining for me, yet puzzling to others.

My father worked mainly at home in his glasshouses and laboratory. He grew triffids with scrupulous care, then dissected them with that same painstaking attention to detail. When I was five or six I'd watch him mixing nutrients, which he dissolved in water, before feeding the plants from a watering can. He'd stroke the leaves, as you or I would stroke a cat, and sometimes he would murmur to the plants as if they were his closest friends.

For a long time I believed that he loved the plants – as if they were some cherished branch of our family – so it was something of a shock when, at the age of eight, I learned that he was trying to find a way to kill them. Bewildering stuff indeed. Even more so when he told me he wasn't content just to kill those triffids that were in our glasshouses but that he wanted to destroy every triffid in the world. Running his fingers through a handsome head of greying hair, he'd speak to me of defoliants, growth hormones, cellular degenerators, pollination inhibitors, mutant triffid species with guaranteed reproduction capability.

More bewildering stuff. Double Dutch, as the old saying goes.

Then I'd tug the sleeve of his whitelab coat, demanding that he come and help me fly my kite. More often than not he'd flash his big good-natured grin and say, 'Give me ten minutes, then meet me up on the hill.'

All this should really have given my father at least a good hint of where my future lay. Viz.: my incomprehension of botany (evidenced by my lack of interest therein) plus no head for academic subjects meant that my following in his footsteps was extremely doubtful.

No doubt my father cherished dreams of my pursuing a career in applied botanical science – or, more specifically devoted to the eradication of the triffid menace. But love him as I did, and try as I might to master the baffling language of botany and the Byzantine complexity of test tube, retort and Bunsen burner, I must have been something of a puzzle to him. But to say I was a disappointment to him would have been putting it too strongly.

Because, quite simply, Bill Masen loved his children. He allowed us to cultivate our own interests and not for a moment did he wish for us to be mere facsimiles of himself or our mother. (Although my

sister Lisabeth did inherit my mother's literary abilities – and a mischievous appetite to shock – with her steamy stories of *affaires d'amour* that appeared in the *Freshwater Review* when she should, according to her disapproving headmistress, have still been a blushing seventeen-year-old.)

My total ineptitude at laboratory research came to a head one Tuesday evening after school when I was 'helping' my father. I was twelve years old. I managed, quite inadvertently, to concoct an explosive blend of the familiar pink triffid oil in its raw state with an equal amount of wood alcohol. Father told me to leave the glass beaker somewhere warm for the alcohol to evaporate. I had a sudden brainwave. I'd speed up the process by boiling off the alcohol with the flame of the Bunsen burner.

Then I sat back to watch, beaming proudly at my own brilliance.

The explosion that followed was as impressive as it was loud. It was even heard by the Mothers up at Arreton Manor. I lost most of my hair in the fireball. And lost – permanently – my part-time job as my father's lab assistant.

My hair did grow back, although it acquired a pure white fleck in its otherwise jet-black fringe which earned me the nickname 'Snowdrop' at school. (And, oh, how I'd cringe whenever friends teased me with *that* one.)

Later, that same day of the explosion, after my father (and his more competent assistants) had remedied much of the damage I'd wrought, he visited me in my bedroom. He stood there, a candle in his hand, the light shining on his greying hair. For a while he gazed down at my bandaged head, thinking I was asleep; I heard him exhale audibly through the white bristles of his moustache.

I had expected an extremely colourful, not to say high-volume, description of my inabilities.

Instead, I realized that as he looked down at me he was thanking heaven I hadn't taken my head clean off in the explosion. (After all, Dr Weisser had had to tweezer half a dozen slivers of glass beaker from my face.)

My father pulled the blanket up around my shoulders, then affectionately laid his hand on my arm.

'I didn't mean to wreck the lab, Dad.'

'I'm sorry, David, did I wake you?'

'No. I can't get to sleep.'

'Does it hurt?'

'Not really.' I said this as manfully as I could. 'Just stings a little around my eyes.'

'Don't worry, the stuff Dr Weisser gave you will numb it soon enough. It'll make you sleep, too.'

'Will you ever be able to repair the lab?'

'Good heavens, yes.' He gave a chuckle as he set the candle down on my table. 'It took us a good couple of hours to undo what you managed to do in two seconds, but it's fine now. In fact, I've managed to wangle some replacement equipment from the old general, so it's not only as good as new, it's *better* than new.'

'I don't think I'll be much use to you as an assistant, will I, Dad? Perhaps Lisabeth or Annie would do a better job?'

'Now don't you worry about that. You're in one piece; that's all that matters. And you're not to bother yourself about your hair: it will grow back, you know?'

'Maybe I'm not cut out to be a scientist, after all.' I sat up in bed. 'Perhaps I ought to think of some other career?'

My father smiled and crinkling lines appeared around his bright blue eyes. 'Now, my father, bless him, was an accountant for the civil service in the old days when the United Kingdom had a much-disliked institution called the Inland Revenue. He took it for granted that I'd follow him into what he called "the family firm".' Still smiling, he shook his grey-haired head. 'Alas, I was no good with

figures.'

'Like I'm no good with test tubes and stuff?'

'Quite. I could manage well enough counting on my fingers but if you asked me to divide one hundred and twenty-one by seven I'd make a pitiful sight, scratching my head, counting on my fingers. My father would never criticize me for my ignorance if he sprung a surprise piece of mental arithmetic on me. But as he watched me floundering away his face would go redder and redder and redder. However, I did eventually find my vocation in life. So: believe one who speaks from experience – *experto crede*, as a certain Roman gentleman put it. You'll find yours one day if—'

At that moment his voice trailed away as he suddenly seemed to notice for the very first time what littered my room. Papering the walls were photographs of aeroplanes and dirigibles, while all over the room were models, from incomplete skeletons to finished aircraft complete with tiny engines, and fuselages and wings covered with tissue paper that had been wonderfully transformed into a hard lacquered shell by modeller's dope. Hanging by lengths of fishing line from the ceiling was a handsome biplane, painted a brilliant strawberry red. I'd successfully flown this machine from an orchard, over the Mother House to a distant field on the far side of Downend. There were also kits and blueprints, as well as aero-modelling books and ancient aviation magazines printed before the end of the Old World. And on the table by the window was my pride and joy – a plywood rocket plane of my own invention that would boast a seven-foot wingspan when it was fully assembled.

As I said, my father looked at all this as if the scales had fallen from his eyes and he was seeing for the first time (even though he'd often heard my mother complain about the state of my room).

That was the moment when, as the old saying goes, the penny dropped for my father and for me.

A pilot. That was what I would do with my life.

Of course, I was far too young then to begin training as a pilot for the island's meagre air fleet. But the seed was sown. In my mind's eye I saw myself in the cockpit of a fast jet, soaring through the clouds high above land and sea.

On a more practical level my father encouraged me. He found more aviation books and magazines for me. He also gave me my own workshop where I could work on my beloved model aeroplane. Wisely, he chose one well away from the house when he learned that my rocket plane was fuelled by a substantial quantity of gunpowder that I stored in a biscuit tin beneath my bed. I singed away the downy black hairs of my adolescent moustache on more than one occasion when test-firing that rocket motor, I can tell you.

Meanwhile, I continued my studies at school – a bit more enthusiastically now that I realized I would need at least a few academic qualifications before enrolling on a pilot's course.

However, one of the core subjects at school was the study of the triffid: its origins, life-cycle attributes; its dangers.

In the early years of the colony the triffid had been demonized and held responsible for the destruction of the Old World in the middle years of what was then known as the twentieth century. Then the only talk was of how evil the plant was, how it could be kept off the island. How it could be annihilated.

Now a more balanced view had developed. With an irony that any satirist would have found delicious we had come to depend on the triffid for oil, fuel, cattle fodder and about fifty other commodities. While the only triffids grown on the island were a few docked specimens for research purposes, we harvested vast numbers on the British mainland where they grew wild and unchecked in their millions. After being felled by heavily protected 'logging' teams, the plants were shipped to the Isle of Wight for processing. Of course, every child was still taught to recognize the plant from

infancy.

As the son of Bill Masen, the world's greatest expert on triffids, schoolmasters would always – so it seemed to me – ask me all the toughest questions about that peripatetic plant. (As if knowledge of the triffid could be transmitted genetically from father to son. Or perhaps more appropriately considering the botanical nature of the subject, via some mysterious process of osmosis – some hope)

‘Masen,’ Mr Pinz-Wilks might begin in those grave Oxbridge tones that would rumble out from beneath his handlebar moustache. ‘Masen, would you please describe the triffid plant to the class?’

(This question was asked repeatedly despite the many posters of the plant that hung on the wall.)

‘The mature plant stands around eight feet tall,’ I would recite, parrot-fashion. ‘A straight stem grows from the woody bole; er, at the top of the stem is a funnel; inside that is a sticky liquid that traps insects upon which the plant feeds by dissolving and drawing the nutrients down through the stem in a solution of sap; its sprays of leaves are green and leathery. The triffid possesses a sting that is curled into a whorl – something like a gigantic pig’s tail.’ (Laughs from the class; I’d shoot a grin at my friends.) ‘This it can uncurl at high speed to whip at its prey. Er . . . uhm . . .’

‘And what else, Masen?’

‘Er, the sting is venomous. Lethal if it strikes the exposed skin of a man or woman.’

‘Indeed, they can fell a cow or a horse. Any other pearls of wisdom, Masen?’

I could tell that Mr Pinz-Wilks was less than impressed by my pedestrian recitation. By that time moreover, I’d be shifting uncomfortably from foot to foot.

‘Perhaps, Masen, you could have begun with the plant’s origins. After all, was it present when the Emperor Claudius conquered the British Isles in AD 43? Can we be so fanciful as to imagine its discovery was splashed across the front pages of Rome’s *Acta Diurna*?’

‘No, sir.’

‘Or did it arrive on this planet from outer space, perhaps hitching a ride on the tail of a comet?’

‘No, sir. Er . . . it is thought that triffids were developed by scientists in Russia, after, er, World War Two, sir.’

‘That is correct, Masen. A hybrid created from many different species. But have I ever mentioned that Ur is the ancient Sumerian city in Iraq that flourished two and a half thousand years before the birth of Christ?’

‘Sir?’ I was confused.

‘It is just that you have such a fondness for punctuating your sentences with the name “Ur” that I thought you might be contemplating some deep and rigorous study of that fabled city of Sumer.’

My confusion got a whole lot worse. The school-master’s legendary wit was often as impenetrable as it was sarcastic.

As I said, botany was a weak point, a very weak point in my somewhat lacklustre portfolio of academic abilities. Often, at times like this, the schoolmaster would point unerringly with his white stick at a boy he could not even see, then ask that so much brighter individual to continue.

Crisply the boy would canter through the facts. ‘The triffid, or more properly *pseudopodia*, takes around two years to develop the lashlike sting that can strike at a victim ten to fifteen feet away from itself. The sting is generally fatal to humans unless an antidote can be administered by hypodermic injection into the carotid artery. What is most unusual about the triffid, compared with other plants, isn’t that it is a flesh eater – the Venus flytrap feeds in a roughly similar way – it is that the plant can walk. It walks by using three bluntly tapered projections that extend from its lower part. At first thought, mistakenly taken to be roots, these support the main body of the plant and raise it perhaps a foot above the ground. The triffid walks rather like a man on crutches. Two of the blunt legs slide forward, then the whole plant lurches

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