



When I was quite small I would sometimes dream of a city – which was strange because it began before I even knew what a city was. But this city, clustered on the curve of a big blue bay, would come into my mind. I could see the streets, and the buildings that lined them, the waterfront, even boats in the harbour; yet, waking, I had never seen the sea, or a boat ...

And the buildings were quite unlike any I knew. The traffic in the streets was strange, carts running with no horses to pull them; and sometimes there were things in the sky, shiny fish-shaped things that certainly were not birds.

Most often I would see this wonderful place by daylight, but occasionally it was by night when the lights lay like strings of glow-worms along the shore, and a few of them seemed to be sparks drifting on the water, or in the air.

It was a beautiful, fascinating place, and once, when I was still young enough to know no better, I asked my eldest sister, Mary, where this lovely city could be.

She shook her head, and told me that there was no such place – not now. But, perhaps, she suggested, I could somehow be dreaming about times long ago. Dreams were funny things, and there was no accounting for them; so it might be that what I was seeing was a bit of the world as it had been once upon a time – the wonderful world that the Old People had lived in; as it had been before God sent Tribulation.

But after that she went on to warn me very seriously not to mention it to anyone else; other people, as far as she knew, did not have such pictures in their heads, either sleeping or waking, so it would be unwise to mention them.

That was good advice, and luckily I had the sense to take it. People in our district had a very sharp eye for the odd, or the unusual, so that even my left-handedness caused slight disapproval. So, at that time, and for some years afterwards, I did not mention it to anyone – indeed, I almost forgot about it, for as I grew older the dream came less frequently, and then very rarely.

But the advice stuck. Without it I might have mentioned the curious understanding I had with my cousin Rosalind, and that would certainly have led us both into very grave trouble – if anyone had happened

to believe me. Neither I nor she, I think, paid much attention to it at that time: we simply had the habit of caution. I certainly did not feel unusual. I was a normal little boy, growing up in a normal way, taking the ways of the world about me for granted. And I kept on like that until the day I met Sophie. Even then, the difference was not immediate. It is hindsight that enables me to fix that as *the* day when my first small doubts started to germinate.

That day I had gone off by myself, as I often did. I was, I suppose, nearly ten years old. My next sister, Sarah, was five years older, and the gap meant that I played a great deal alone. I had made my way down the cart-track to the south, along the borders of several fields until I came to the high bank, and then along the top of the bank for quite a way.

The bank was no puzzle to me then: it was far too big for me to think of as a thing that men could have built, nor had it ever occurred to me to connect it with the wondrous doings of the Old People whom I sometimes heard about. It was simply the bank, coming round in a wide curve, and then running straight as an arrow towards the distant hills; just a part of the world, and no more to be wondered at than the river, the sky, or the hills themselves.

I had often gone along the top of it, but seldom explored on the farther side. For some reason I regarded the country there as foreign – not so much

hostile, as outside my territory. But there was a place I had discovered where the rain, in running down the far side of the bank, had worn a sandy gully. If one sat in the start of that and gave a good push off, one could go swishing down at a fine speed, and finally fly a few feet through the air to land in a pile of soft sand at the bottom.

I must have been there half a dozen times before, and there had never been anyone about, but on this occasion, when I was picking myself up after my third descent and preparing for a fourth, a voice said: 'Hullo!'

I looked round. At first I could not tell where it came from; then a shaking of the top twigs in a bunch of bushes caught my eye. The branches parted, and a face looked out at me. It was a small face, sunburned, and clustered about by dark curls. The expression was somewhat serious, but the eyes sparkled. We regarded one another for a moment, then:

'Hullo,' I responded.

She hesitated, then pushed the bushes farther apart. I saw a girl a little shorter than I was, and perhaps a little younger. She wore reddish-brown dungarees with a yellow shirt. The cross stitched to the front of the dungarees was of a darker brown material. Her hair was tied on either side of her head with yellow ribbons. She stood still for a few seconds as though uncertain about leaving the security of the bushes, then

curiosity got the better of her caution, and she stepped out.

I stared at her because she was completely a stranger. From time to time there were gatherings or parties which brought together all the children for miles around, so that it was astonishing to encounter one that I had never seen before.

'What's your name?' I asked her.

'Sophie,' she told me. 'What's yours?'

'David,' I said. 'Where's your home?'

'Over there,' she said, waving her hand vaguely towards the foreign country beyond the bank.

Her eyes left mine and went to the sandy runnel down which I had been sliding.

'Is that fun?' she inquired, with a wistful look.

I hesitated a moment before inviting her, then:

'Yes,' I told her. 'Come and try.'

She hung back, turning her attention to me again. She studied me with a serious expression for a second or two, then made up her mind quite suddenly. She scrambled to the top of the bank ahead of me.

She sped down the runnel with curls and ribbons flying. When I landed she had lost her serious look, and her eyes were dancing with excitement.

'Again,' she said, and panted back up the bank.

It was on her third descent that the misadventure occurred. She sat down and shoved off as before. I watched her swish down and come to a stop in a flurry

of sand. Somehow she had contrived to land a couple of feet to the left of the usual place. I made ready to follow, and waited for her to get clear. She did not.

'Go on,' I told her impatiently.

She tried to move, and then called up, 'I can't. It hurts.'

I risked pushing off, anyway, and landed close beside her.

'What's the matter?' I asked.

Her face was screwed up. Tears stood in her eyes.

'My foot's stuck,' she said.

Her left foot was buried. I scrabbled the soft sand clear with my hands. Her shoe was jammed in a narrow space between two up-pointed stones. I tried to move it, but it would not budge.

'Can't you sort of twist it out?' I suggested.

She tried, lips valiantly compressed.

'It won't come.'

'I'll help pull,' I offered.

'No, no! It hurts,' she protested.

I did not know what to do next. Very clearly her predicament was painful. I considered the problem.

'We'd better cut the laces so you can pull your foot out of the shoe. I can't reach the knot,' I decided.

'No!' she said, alarmed. 'No, I mustn't.'

She was so emphatic that I was baffled. If she were to pull the foot out of the shoe, we might knock the shoe itself free with a stone, but if she would not, I didn't

see what was to be done. She lay back on the sand, the knee of the trapped leg sticking up in the air.

'Oh, it is hurting so,' she said. She could not hold back the tears any longer. They ran down her face. But even then she didn't howl: she made small puppyish noises.

'You'll *have* to take it off,' I told her.

'No!' she protested again. 'No, I mustn't. Not ever. I mustn't.'

I sat down beside her, at a loss. Both her hands held on to one of mine, gripping it tightly while she cried. Clearly the pain of her foot was increasing. For almost the first time in my life I found myself in charge of a situation which needed a decision. I made it.

'It's no good. You've *got* to get it off,' I told her. 'If you don't, you'll probably stay here and die, I expect.'

She did not give in at once, but at last she consented. She watched apprehensively while I cut the lace. Then she said:

'Go away! You mustn't look.'

I hesitated, but childhood is a time thickly beset with incomprehensible, though important, conventions, so I withdrew a few yards and turned my back. I heard her breathing hard. Then she was crying again. I turned round.

'I can't,' she said, looking at me fearfully through her tears, so I knelt down to see what I could do about it.

'You mustn't ever tell,' she said. 'Never, *never!* Promise?'

I promised.

She was very brave. Nothing more than the puppy noises.

When I did succeed in getting the foot free, it looked queer: I mean, it was all twisted and puffy – I didn't even notice then that it had more than the usual number of toes ...

I managed to hammer the shoe out of the cleft, and handed it to her. But she found she could not put it on her swollen foot. Nor could she put the foot to the ground. I thought I might carry her on my back, but she was heavier than I expected, and it was clear that we should not get far like that.

'I'll have to go and fetch somebody to help,' I told her.

'No. I'll crawl,' she said.

I walked beside her, carrying the shoe, and feeling useless. She kept going gamely for a surprisingly long way, but she had to give it up. Her trousers were worn through at the knees, and the knees themselves were sore and bleeding. I had never known anyone, boy or girl, who would have kept on till that pitch; it awed me slightly. I helped her to stand up on her sound foot, and steadied her while she pointed out where her home was, and the trickle of smoke that marked it.

When I looked back she was on all fours again, disappearing into the bushes.

I found the house without much difficulty, and knocked, a little nervously. A tall woman answered. She had a fine, handsome face with large bright eyes. Her dress was russet and a little shorter than those most of the women at home wore, but it carried the conventional cross, from neck to hem and breast to breast, in a green that matched the scarf on her head.

'Are you Sophie's mother?' I asked.

She looked at me sharply and frowned. She said, with anxious abruptness:

'What is it?'

I told her.

'Oh!' she exclaimed. 'Her foot!'

She looked hard at me again for a moment, then she leant the broom she was holding against the wall, and asked briskly:

'Where is she?'

I led her by the way I had come. At the sound of her voice Sophie crawled out of the bushes.

Her mother looked at the swollen, misshapen foot and the bleeding knees.

'Oh, my poor darling!' she said, holding her and kissing her. Then she added: 'He's seen it?'

'Yes,' Sophie told her. 'I'm sorry, Mummy. I tried hard, but I couldn't do it myself, and it did hurt so.'

Her mother nodded slowly. She sighed.

‘Oh, well, it can’t be helped now. Up you get.’

Sophie climbed on to her mother’s back, and we all went back to the house together.

The commandments and precepts one learns as a child can be remembered by rote, but they mean little until there is an example – and, even then, the example needs to be recognized.

Thus, I was able to sit patiently and watch the hurt foot being washed, cold-poulticed, and bound up, and perceive no connexion between it and the affirmation which I had heard almost every Sunday of my life.

‘And God created man in His own image. And God decreed that man should have one body, one head, two arms and two legs: that each arm should be jointed in two places and end in one hand: that each hand should have four fingers and one thumb: that each finger should bear a flat finger-nail ...’

And so on until:

‘Then God created woman, also, and in the same image, but with these differences, according to her nature: her voice should be of higher pitch than man’s: she should grow no beard: she should have two breasts...’

And so on again.

I knew it all, word for word – and yet the sight of Sophie’s six toes stirred nothing in my memory. I saw the foot resting in her mother’s lap. Watched her

mother pause to look down at it for a still moment, lift it, bend to kiss it gently, and then look up with tears in her eyes. I felt sorry for her distress, and for Sophie, and for the hurt foot – but nothing more.

While the bandaging was finished I looked round the room curiously. The house was a great deal smaller than my home, a cottage, in fact, but I liked it better. It felt friendly. And although Sophie’s mother was anxious and worried she did not give me the feeling that I was the one regrettable and unreliable factor in an otherwise orderly life, the way most people did at home. And the room itself seemed to me the better, too, for not having groups of words hanging on the wall for people to point to in disapproval. Instead, this room had several drawings of horses, which I thought very fine.

Presently, Sophie, tidied up now, and with the tear-marks washed away, hopped to a chair at the table. Quite restored, but for the foot, she inquired with grave hospitality whether I liked eggs.

Afterwards, Mrs Wender told me to wait where I was while she carried her upstairs. She returned in a few minutes, and sat down beside me. She took my hand in hers and looked at me seriously for some moments. I could feel her anxiety strongly; though quite why she should be so worried was not, at first, clear to me. I was surprised by her, for there had been no sign before that she could think in that way. I

thought back to her, trying to reassure her and show her that she need not be anxious about me, but the thought didn't reach her. She went on looking at me with her eyes shining, much as Sophie's had when she was trying not to cry. Her own thoughts were all worry and shapelessness as she kept looking at me. I tried again, but still couldn't reach them. Then she nodded slowly, and said in words:

'You're a good boy, David. You were very kind to Sophie. I want to thank you for that.'

I felt awkward, and looked at my shoes. I couldn't remember anyone saying before that I was a good boy. I knew no form of response designed to meet such an event.

'You like Sophie, don't you?' she went on, still looking at me.

'Yes,' I told her. And I added: 'I think she's awfully brave, too. It must have hurt a lot.'

'Will you keep a secret – an important secret – for her sake?' she asked.

'Yes – of course,' I agreed, but a little uncertain in my tone for not realizing what the secret was.

'You – you saw her foot?' she said, looking steadily into my face. 'Her – toes?'

I nodded. 'Yes,' I said again.

'Well, that is the secret, David. Nobody else must know about that. You are the only person who does,

except her father and me. Nobody else must know. Nobody at all – not ever.'

'No,' I agreed, and nodded seriously again.

There was a pause – at least, her voice paused, but her thoughts went on, as if 'nobody' and 'not ever' were making desolate, unhappy echoes there. Then that changed, and she became tense and fierce and afraid inside. It was no good thinking back to her, so I tried clumsily to emphasize in words that I had meant what I said.

'Never – not anybody at all,' I assured her earnestly.

'It's very, very important,' she insisted. 'How can I explain to you?' But she didn't really need to explain. Her urgent, tight-strung feeling of the importance was very plain. Her words were far less potent. She said:

'If anyone were to find out, they'd – they'd be terribly unkind to her. We've got to see that that never happens.'

It was as if the anxious feeling had turned into something hard, like an iron rod.

'Because she has six toes?' I asked.

'Yes. That's what nobody but us must ever know. It must be a secret between us,' she repeated, driving it home. 'You'll promise, David?'

'I'll promise. I can swear, if you like,' I offered.

'The promise is enough,' she told me.

It was so heavy a promise that I was quite resolved to keep it completely – even from my cousin, Rosalind.

Though, underneath, I was puzzled by its evident importance. It seemed a very small toe to cause such a degree of anxiety. But there was often a great deal of grown-up fuss that seemed disproportionate to causes. So I held on to the main point – the need for secrecy.

Sophie's mother kept on looking at me with a sad but unseeing expression until I became uncomfortable. She noticed when I fidgeted, and smiled. It was a kind smile.

'All right, then,' she said. 'We'll keep it secret, and never talk about it again?'

'Yes,' I agreed.

On the way down the path from the door, I turned round.

'May I come and see Sophie again soon?' I asked.

She hesitated, giving the question some thought, then she said:

'Very well – but only if you are sure you can come without anyone knowing,' she agreed.

Not until I had reached the bank and was making my homeward way along the top of it did the monotonous Sunday precepts join up with reality. Then they did it with a click that was almost audible. The Definition of Man recited itself in my head: '... and each leg shall be jointed twice and have one foot, and each foot five toes, and each toe shall end with a flat nail ...' And so on, until finally: 'And any creature that shall seem to be

human, but is not formed thus is not human. It is neither man nor woman. It is a blasphemy against the true Image of God, and hateful in the sight of God.'

I was abruptly perturbed – and considerably puzzled, too. A blasphemy was, as had been impressed upon me often enough, a frightful thing. Yet there was nothing frightful about Sophie. She was simply an ordinary little girl – if a great deal more sensible and braver than most. Yet, according to the Definition ...

Clearly there must be a mistake somewhere. Surely having one very small toe extra – well, two very small toes, because I supposed there would be one to match on the other foot – surely that couldn't be enough to make her 'hateful in the sight of God... '?

The ways of the world were very puzzling ...



I reached home by my usual method. At a point where the woods had lapped up the side of the bank and grown across it I scrambled down on to a narrow, little-used track. From there on I was watchful, and kept my hand on my knife. I was supposed to keep out of the woods, for it did occasionally – though very rarely – happen that large creatures penetrated as far into civilized parts as Waknuk, and there was just a chance that one might encounter some kind of wild dog or cat. However, and as usual, the only creatures I heard were small ones, hurriedly making off.

After a mile or so I reached cultivated land, with the house in sight across three or four fields. I worked along the fringe of the woods, observing carefully from cover, then crossed all but the last field in the shadows of the hedges, and paused to prospect again. There was no one in sight but old Jacob slowly shovelling muck in the yard. When his back was safely turned I cut swiftly

across the bit of open ground, climbed in through a window, and made my way cautiously to my own room.

Our house is not easy to describe. Since my grandfather, Elias Storm, built the first part of it, over fifty years earlier, it had grown new rooms and extensions at various times. By now it rambled off on one side into stock-sheds, stores, stables, and barns, and on the other into wash-houses, dairies, cheese-rooms, farm-hands' rooms, and so on until it three-quarters enclosed a large, beaten-earth yard which lay to leeward of the main house and had a midden for its central feature.

Like all the houses of the district, it was constructed on a frame of solid, roughly-dressed timbers, but, since it was the oldest house there, most of the spaces in the outer walls had been filled in with bricks and stones from the ruins of some of the Old People's buildings, and plastered wattle was used only for the internal walls.

My grandfather, in the aspect he wore when presented to me by my father, appeared to have been a man of somewhat tediously unrelieved virtue. It was only later that I pieced together a portrait that was more credible, if less creditable.

Elias Storm came from the East, somewhere near the sea. Why he came is not quite clear. He himself maintained that it was the ungodly ways of the East

which drove him to search for a less sophisticated, stancher-minded region; though I have heard it suggested that there came a point when his native parts refused to tolerate him any longer. Whatever the cause, it persuaded him to Waknuk – then undeveloped, almost frontier country – with all his worldly goods in a train of six wagons, at the age of forty-five. He was a husky man, a dominating man, and a man fierce for rectitude. He had eyes that could flash with evangelical fire beneath bushy brows. Respect for God was frequently on his lips, and fear of the devil constantly in his heart, and it seems to have been hard to say which inspired him the more.

Soon after he had started the house he went off on a journey and brought back a bride. She was shy, pretty in the pink and golden way, and twenty-five years younger than himself. She moved, I have been told, like a lovely colt when she thought herself unwatched; as timorously as a rabbit when she felt her husband's eye upon her.

All her answers, poor thing, were dusty. She did not find that a marriage service generated love; she did not enable her husband to recapture his youth through hers; nor could she compensate for that by running his home in the manner of an experienced housekeeper.

Elias was not a man to let shortcomings pass unremarked. In a few seasons he straitened the coltishness with admonitions, faded the pink and gold

with preaching, and produced a sad, grey wraith of wifehood who died, unprotesting, a year after her second son was born.

Grandfather Elias had never a moment's doubt of the proper pattern for his heir. My father's faith was bred into his bones, his principles were his sinews, and both responded to a mind richly stored with examples from the Bible, and from Nicholson's *Repentances*. In faith father and son were at one; the difference between them was only in approach; the evangelical flash did not appear in my father's eye; his virtue was more legalistic.

Joseph Storm, my father, did not marry until Elias was dead, and when he did he was not a man to repeat his father's mistake. My mother's views harmonized with his own. She had a strong sense of duty, and never doubted where it lay.

Our district, and, consequently, our house as the first there, was called Waknuk because of a tradition that there had been a place of that name there, or thereabouts, long, long ago, in the time of the Old People. The tradition was, as usual, vague, but certainly there had been some buildings of some kind, for the remnants and foundations had remained until they were taken for new buildings. There was also the long bank, running away until it reached the hills and the huge scar that must have been made by the Old People when, in their superhuman fashion, they had

cut away half a mountain in order to find something or other that interested them. The place may have been called Waknuk then; anyway, Waknuk it had become; an orderly, law-abiding, God-respecting community of some hundred scattered holdings, large and small.

My father was a man of local consequence. When, at the age of sixteen, he had made his first public appearance by giving a Sunday address in the church his father had built, there had still been fewer than sixty families in the district. But as more land was cleared for farming and more people came to settle, he was not submerged by them. He was still the largest landowner, he still continued to preach frequently on Sundays and to explain with practical clarity the laws and views held in heaven upon a variety of matters and practices, and, upon the appointed days, he administered the laws temporal, as a magistrate. For the rest of the time he saw to it that he, and all within his control, continued to set a high example to the district.

Within the house, life centred, as was the local custom, upon the large living-room which was also the kitchen. As the house was the largest and best in Waknuk, so was the room. The great fireplace there was an object of pride – not vain pride, of course; more a matter of being conscious of having given worthy treatment to the excellent materials that the Lord had provided: a kind of testament, really. The hearth was

solid stone blocks. The whole chimney was built of bricks and had never been known to catch fire. The area about its point of emergence was covered with the only tiles in the district, so that the thatch which covered the rest of the roof had never caught fire, either.

My mother saw to it that the big room was kept very clean and tidy. The floor was composed of pieces of brick and stone and artificial stone cleverly fitted together. The furniture was whitely-scrubbed tables and stools, with a few chairs. The walls were whitewashed. Several burnished pans, too big to go in the cupboards, hung against them. The nearest approach to decoration was a number of wooden panels with sayings, mostly from *Repentances*, artistically burnt into them. The one on the left of the fireplace read: ONLY THE IMAGE OF GOD IS MAN. The one on the right: KEEP PURE THE STOCK OF THE LORD. On the opposite wall two more said: BLESSED IS THE NORM, and IN PURITY OUR SALVATION. The largest was the one on the back wall, hung to face the door which led to the yard. It reminded everyone who came in: WATCH THOU FOR THE MUTANT!

Frequent references to these texts had made me familiar with the words long before I was able to read, in fact I am not sure that they did not give me my first reading lessons. I knew them by heart, just as I knew others elsewhere in the house, which said things like:

THE NORM IS THE WILL OF GOD, and, REPRODUCTION IS THE ONLY HOLY PRODUCTION, and, THE DEVIL IS THE FATHER OF DEVIATION, and a number of others about Offences and Blasphemies.

Many of them were still obscure to me; others I had learnt something about. Offences, for instance. That was because the occurrence of an Offence was sometimes quite an impressive occasion. Usually the first sign that one had happened was that my father came into the house in a bad temper. Then, in the evening, he would call us all together, including everyone who worked on the farm. We would all kneel while he proclaimed our repentance and led prayers for forgiveness. The next morning we would all be up before daylight and gather in the yard. As the sun rose we would sing a hymn while my father ceremonially slaughtered the two-headed calf, four-legged chicken, or whatever other kind of Offence it happened to be. Sometimes it would be a much queerer thing than those ...

Nor were Offences limited to the livestock. Sometimes there would be some stalks of corn, or some vegetables, that my father produced and cast on the kitchen table in anger and shame. If it were merely a matter of a few rows of vegetables, they just came out and were destroyed. But if a whole field had gone wrong we would wait for good weather, and then set

fire to it, singing hymns while it burnt. I used to find that a very fine sight.

It was because my father was a careful and pious man with a keen eye for an Offence that we used to have more slaughterings and burnings than anyone else: but any suggestion that we were more afflicted with Offences than other people hurt and angered him. He had no wish at all to throw good money away, he pointed out. If our neighbours were as conscientious as ourselves, he had no doubt that their liquidations would far outnumber ours: unfortunately there were certain persons with elastic principles.