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The Listener Pick of the Year

a prime example of the kind of drama only radio can do...robust and inventive enough to stay this side of mere whimsy

The Times Best of the Year

Altogether and enchanting play, written with an earthly impudence that took it completely out of the world of Faery while endowing it with a curious credibility

Him and It

a radio play by Steve Walker

MORRIS

(SPEAKING TO US, CLOSE, A SOFT FEMININE VOICE)

I don't know how I'm able to find places, but when I put my mind to it I know where everyone is, automatically, without trying. Places I've never been, people I've never heard of, a particular cow in a particular field on the other side of the country. I suppose there's nothing very special about such a gift. It's a natural thing. But it feels, sometimes, as if there's a tiny white eye inside my chest looking forever at an ever-changing and impossibly accurate map of the World. Anyway, not many of us have had the gift. Going right back through history, only ever a few at a time.

It was years and countless years since I'd been to see Commissioner Sylvia, but, naturally, I knew exactly where his log was. I flew straight to it. I'd been ill for a long time. Now, when I closed my eyes, there was a dream going on; me lying on a flat stone waiting to die. But I didn't die, did I? I was back on the wing again, off to see the Commissioner.

He wasn't dead either, I knew that - my little white eye could see him on the map. He was in the log, leaning in an obscure corner, deep in thought perhaps. I waited in the main hollow, sitting on a table, swinging my legs. Extremely brown in there. I was the only colourful thing I could see. Then I noticed lots of weenie toadstools, their red and yellow spots flashing before my eyes. Hadn't noticed them when I came in. They must have popped out of the wood the way snails suddenly pop up their horns.

(BRING UP SOUNDS OF WOODLAND. KEEP AT LOW LEVEL THROUGHOUT.)

Sick of waiting, I asked myself if there was a bell to push and immediately I knew that there was and where it was. It was in the corner of the top shelf

of an empty bookcase. I had to get a buzz up to reach. I pressed. No noise. I pressed hard. Still nothing. Then the rustle of the Commissioner's dress. It was the same white wedding dress:..

SYLVIA (A LARGE, POMPOUS VOICE, VERY ALOOF) It's you then is it?

MORRIS Sorry?

SYLVIA You're the one who was here last time?

MORRIS Could be.

SYLVIA (ABOUT TO LOSE HIS TEMPER) Well, are you or aren't you?

MORRIS Depends if anyone else has been here since I was here last.

SYLVIA So it is you, then.

MORRIS (HAPPILY) Yeah.

SYLVIA You've been gone a long time.

MORRIS (A LITTLE GUILTILY) Yeah.

SYLVIA A very long time.

MORRIS (APOLOGETIC) I suppose.

SYLVIA Perhaps because you've been ill.

MORRIS I HAVE been ill.

SYLVIA (ADMITS SNOOTILY) I have been ill·.also.

MORRIS (ANXIOUS) Very ill?

SYLVIA Just ill.

MORRIS (GRAVELY) I was very ill.

SYLVIA Couldn't be 'very ill'. 'Very ill' implies the possibility that you might have pegged out. Can't peg out, can we?

MORRIS I was very ill, Commissioner. Really I was.

SYLVIA Huh!

MORRIS (RESENTFULLY) Anyway, the others pegged out, didn't they?

SYLVIA Others? What others?

MORRIS The other fairies.

SYLVIA (VERY CERTAIN) Noooooooooooooo.

MORRIS They did.

SYLVIA (MORE ALOOF THAN EVER) They went away.

MORRIS Where?

SYLVIA (WITH A VAGUENESS) Away.

MORRIS (SCORNFULLY) They pegged out. I woke up one morning and they'd all dissolved.

SYLVIA (CORRECTING) You woke up one morning and they'd all gone away.

MORRIS Pegged out.

SYLVIA Gone away.

MORRIS Pegged out.

SYLVIA Huh!

MORRIS How'd you know that I'd been ill?

SYLVIA How'd I know . . . that you'd been ill?

MORRIS Yeah. How'd you know? That I'd been ill.

SYLVIA That you'd been ill?

MORRIS (INFURIATED) Yeah. Me.

SYLVIA A squirrel told me.

MORRIS Squirrels don't speak.

SYLVIA They do. To me.

MORRIS Never.

SYLVIA Oh, they do, they really do. Only the red ones, mind. Difficult to get hold of, these days, red ones.

MORRIS Didn't you have a red beard once?

SYLVIA I shaved it off during the Civil War. As a protest.

MORRIS I remember. You were in the running for Commissioner at the time.

SYLVIA (WITH PROUD NOSTALGIA) I was. I moved in here shortly afterwards. Never had a beard, have you?

MORRIS (SURPRISED AT THE QUESTION) I don't think so.

SYLVIA Perhaps I'll grow another. Ot two.

(THEIR CONVERSATION HAS RUN OUT)

SYLVIA (DETERMINED TO BREAK THE SILENCE) So you've been ill. In Wales. Nice place to be ill in, I imagine Wales.

MORRIS In the mountains. Yes.

SYLVIA (SOMBRELY) Very ill?

MORRIS I was fading away.

SYLVIA No!

MORRIS Yeah.

(THEIR CONVERSATION HAS RUN OUT AGAIN)

MORRIS Are you sure this is the same log?

SYLVIA Which log?

MORRIS This log.

SYLVIA What about it?

MORRIS Are you sure this is the same log?

SYLVIA Same as what?

MORRIS As the log you were in when I was here last.

SYLVIA In 1912, you mean. Oh yes. Most definitely the same. Of course, I've added a bit, an inch or two. A little chapel, you might call it. For thinking in. That's where I was when you came.

MORRIS And you're just the same yourself? You never leave the log.

SYLVIA (ASTONISHED AT THE QUESTION) Of course not. Never. What, go outside? Never.
(PAUSE)
Actually, I have been known to go out, now and then, for a special purpose, once every twenty years or so.

MORRIS It looks different here. Smaller, maybe.

SYLVIA More fungi than usual. Keep throwing it out, but it's back again the next morning. Dreadful stuff. (SYLVIA IS SUDDENLY VERY UPSET. NEAR TO TEARS. HIDES THIS BY BROACHING A NEW SUBJECT. IN A CRACKED VOICE) Stoats have had a bad breeding season.

MORRIS (CURIOUS AT SYLVIA'S SUDDEN DISPLAY OF EMOTION) Have they?

SYLVIA (AFTER A SNIFF) In Wales, also?

MORRIS What?

SYLVIA (TRYING VERY HARD TO PULL HIMSELF TOGETHER) Stoats.

MORRIS None of them mentioned it to me.

SYLVIA I expect they were embarrassed.

MORRIS Is everything all right, Commissioner?

SYLVIA (BREAKS DOWN SOBBING) I thought you'd gone away, properly gone away.

MORRIS (CLOSE. THE SOBS CONTINUE UNDER THE FIRST PART OF THE SPEECH)
The Commissioner sobbed for hours, and where his tears dropped a nest of those weensie toadstools popped up but soon died in the salt from his tears. Being so huge, he could not embrace me, for fear of crushing me, so he embraced the air around me. His arms encircled where I was buzzing. His tears dropped past my face.
A squirrel appeared in the entranceway, a red one, nervously flinching back every time the Commissioner let out a sob. I buzzed off after it, chased it up trees and along branches. I found more and more squirrels and chased them all, faster and faster, till the whole forest was mad with my chasing. I was well. I was alive. I broke to the sky with rooks. When I returned the Commissioner was just about to finish his sobbing. His eyes were open but still blurry with tears. I inserted myself into his encircling arms. I flicked a tear off the end of his nose. Some of it ran down my arm and I shivered. Suddenly, I wasn't feeling well.
We sat on little wooden stools and drank cold nettle soup. There was a moment, only a moment, and it is one the most acute memories from all my seven hundred years, when the Commissioner and myself were close to death, about to die, nearly did. But we had a spoonful of soup each and life went on.

SYLVIA (NOT QUITE BACK TO NORMAL, SNIFFING, STUDIOUSLY REGAINING CONTROL) So, how have things been, then?

MORRIS What things?

SYLVIA Things in general. Spreading love about as usual?

MORRIS Yeah. Plenty of it. Mainly in Wales, you know.

SYLVIA There's been less love in Wales, then, since you've been indisposed.

MORRIS I expect. For all the difference it makes.

SYLVIA (BACK TO NORMAL, MASSIVELY CONFIDENT) Oh, but you mustn't say that, Morris. It's a wonderful thing you do, a fine and wonderful thing.

MORRIS I take empty, stupid, unloveable people and make them love each other. But I'm a stinking cheat - cos they're still empty, stupid, unloveable people, aren't they? If it wasn't for me going back, again and again and again, they'd end up hating each other.

SYLVIA Oooh, no, no, no.

MORRIS Yes, yes, yes.

SYLVIA You've got yourself an attitude problem, Morris.

MORRIS They do nothing but argue. The whole of Wales, the world world at this moment is arguing: Bapbapbapbapbap-pap!!!!

SYLVIA A few arguments, here and there, perhaps.

MORRIS Everywhere!

SYLVIA Noooooooooo.

MORRIS I've been out there, remember, not buried away in here like a gassed badger.

SYLVIA Please, Morris. I feel very strongly about the gassing of badgers. Anyway, I'm not as cut off here as you may think.

MORRIS No?

SYLVIA No.

MORRIS I suppose the stoats keep you genned up on things.

SYLVIA I would never speak to a stoat in any circumstances. Squirrels, yes. Stoats, never.

MORRIS Squirrels, then.

SYLVIA Actually, if you must know, I've had the odd guest.

MORRIS Guest? But who? We're the only ones left. (OUTRAGED) Oh, you haven't.

You couldn't have!

SYLVIA (DROPS HIS POMPOSITIVITY, INSISTS EARNESTLY) It's the only way, Morris, really it is.

MORRIS But they're always weird and they only die in the end.

SYLVIA (SADLY AND STIFFLY) It's what we are here for, our reason for existing, our place in the order of things.

MORRIS What is?

SYLVIA To instruct special particular people. To make them perfect where even the best of ordinary circumstances would have spoiled them. To send out that one man who will balance the World for its people, who will close the cities and send folk back to the forests and the tiny kingdoms··.

MORRIS Hoggywash.

SYLVIA Who at the very least will inspire everyone he sees, make them realize what it all should be like.

MORRIS (AS IF TO AN IDIOT) But it's never worked, Commissioner. They tried it again and again in the old days and look at the mess they got into. I had a changeling myself once·.

SYLVIA I didn't know.

MORRIS Way back when. A black boy. He went mad. They all go mad.

SYLVIA Not so. I have been very busy with it since I saw you last. I've had some very encouraging results.

MORRIS In what way·..encouraging?

SYLVIA (BUBBLING WITH PRIDE) Until he was eleventeen one boy was absolutely perfect. In every way. He really was. The child of a Station Master, you know. I fetched him on a stormy night, 1937.

MORRIS (COLDLY) What did you put in his place?

SYLVIA The body? Oh, I left it empty that time. Much easier. Nobody ever noticed. I believe it later achieved a high rank in the Electricity Board.

MORRIS And your lad was perfect till he was eleventeen, was he?

SYLVIA Didn't even cut himself a sword and go around whacking the heads off flowers. He understood. He knew. But as soon as he was eleventeen - oooh, you wouldn't believe the trouble he gave me. Nowhere near as bad as Simon, mind you.

MORRIS Simon?

SYLVIA He was the one before. Had ideas of his own. Simon did. Had to do away with Simon. George wasn't that bad.

MORRIS Who's George?

SYLVIA He's the one I'm telling you about. As soon as he was eleventeen I could tell he was no use. Pushed on with him for a while. But his essays were so passive. Perhaps I should have cut him a sword and sent him out one afternoon a week to whack the heads off flowers. I have thought very carefully about George and I've come to the conclusion that he was too happy here, didn't want to leave. It was the prospect of the great task ahead that upset him, nothing else. He'd have been no trouble if I'd said: 'George, you can stay here with me forever, no need toworry about putting the World right'. My fault, of course. Should have worked him up to a passion about the failings of his fellow people.

MORRIS He went mad, did he?

SYLVIA Not as such. I put him down in South America where I believe he is engaged in political work of some kind, albeit passively. Then there was Geoffrey.

MORRIS Not another one?

SYLVIA Geoffrey got on handsomely with the forest creatures, just like one of us. It was people he didn't like. Deep down, you see, he had nothing but contempt for them. 'No use to me, Geoffrey', I said to him, 'if you don't like people'. He said they weren't worth saving.

MORRIS Hoorah for him.

SYLVIA We had quite a row. The things he said to me! Hadn't heard anything like it since I drowned Simon. I turned my back on him. 'Go!' I said. And he did.

MORRIS Poor thing.

SYLVIA (VEXED) What, me or him?

MORRIS Sorry?

SYLVIA Am I the poor thing? Or him?

MORRIS You. Him. Both.

SYLVIA But I still have vague hopes for Geoffrey. I mean even if he doesn't like people as such, he could still involve himself in the plans that we set out together. As an abstract problem. He could work his way through it that way, bring about an earthly paradise though continually disinterested in it himself.

MORRIS (CLOSE) The moment the Commissioner mentioned Geoffrey I knew where he was and all the things that were around him. Cruel of me, but I had to tell. It might stop the Commissioner wasting what little time and energy he had left on a repetition of such a nonsensical project. Aphids were licking our soup bowls clean.

MORRIS Would you like to know where Geoffrey is?

SYLVIA (DELIGHTEDLY EXCITED) Oooooooh yes. Do tell.

MORRIS He's in a hotel room in Brighton.

SYLVIA (IN A HURRY) Where the Prince Regent built his thing. I know it.

MORRIS He is sitting on the edge of a bed. He has a glass in one hand, pills in the other.

SYLVIA Ah, yes. A headache. He was prone to those. Especially after double-history.

MORRIS He has a large bottle of pills. He is taking them all. He is washing them down with whisky.

SYLVIA (WITH BLANK SADNESS) Geoffrey. (PAUSE THEN BACK TO NORMAL)
Oh, well. It wasn't a total disaster. In many ways Geoffrey was very encouraging. Next time I shall be better prepared. (A RALLYING CALL)

TO HIMSELF) I've another try in me, one more try. And with you here to help me, Morris.

MORRIS (VERY EMPHATIC) Not me!

SYLVIA Of course you will. Your experience will be most useful in the choosing. It's all in the choosing, you know. Says so quite plainly in the Big Book. The choosing, it says, is the most essential decision of all. Get that right and you're well on your way. When I picked out Simon I was blasé, I thought anyone would do. But I nearly got it right with Geoffrey. Is he.?

MORRIS He is sleeping now.

SYLVIA I have some notes here on the antecedents of a number of babes due to be born shortly. Shall I read them out for you? There's a couple of possibles here, I'm sure.

MORRIS You do your own choosing. I want nothing to do with any of this. It's double-daft, triple-daft.

SYLVIA It is your duty.

MORRIS One man can make no difference to it all. No matter how clever and marvellous you make him. Anyway, look at you! You're in no fit state. You'll never see the pestilential changeling through his course.

SYLVIA (EARNEST) One more try, Morris. One more.

MORRIS I can't stop you. But it's a waste of effort. At least my love-matching can amusing.

SYLVIA And you'll help me choose?

MORRIS No.

SYLVIA Please, Morris.

MORRIS No.

SYLVIA (MORE POMPOUS THAN EVER) As Commissioner of Fairies I order you to assist me in the endeavour.

MORRIS No, siree. This girl's got better things to do with her time.

SYLVIA (AFTER A PAUSE) Girl?

MORRIS (A TRIFLE EMBARRASSED) Yeah. Girl.

SYLVIA (GENUINELY UNCOMPREHENDING) Where? What girl?

MORRIS I was referring to myself.

SYLVIA You! But you're a . I mean, I always assumed. Ha! Ha! Haaaaa!

MORRIS (MIFFED) What's so funny?

SYLVIA This is superduper news! If only I'd known! That's it, then!

MORRIS What is?

SYLVIA The solution to all our problems. You and me.

MORRIS What?

SYLVIA Together.

MORRIS Together what?

SYLVIA You know.

MORRIS No.

SYLVIA I've never done it myself, but there must be a chapter on it in the Big Book. And there's bound to be some tedious ritual to go with it. I'll take my clothes off now, shall I?

MORRIS Hold on, Daddy-o, just hold on. You're forgetting something. You're a girl too.

SYLVIA Me? Never.

MORRIS You were the first girl ever to be elected Commissioner. There was quite a lot of fuss about it at the time.

SYLVIA But I shave every morning.

MORRIS Lots of girls do. Pretty-pretties in magazines and oil paintings even.

SYLVIA No. I'm a man. I'm sure. I wouldn't forget something like that.

MORRIS Why you called Sylvia, then?

SYLVIA (DEFENSIVE) What's wrong with Sylvia?

MORRIS It's a girl's name.

SYLVIA Never.

MORRIS Is.

SYLVIA Wasn't there a King Sylvia?

MORRIS (SCORNS) Where of?

SYLVIA (HUNTS IN HIS MIND FOR A MOMENT) Belgium.

MORRIS Why don't you just look at yourself? That'll prove it.

SYLVIA I look at myself every morning when I shave. I've always looked like a man to me.

MORRIS I mean look at yourself, you know, under your skirt.

SYLVIA Under my skirt. Ooooooh, nooooo. I couldn't possibly do that. Out of the question, that is.

MORRIS I'll look for you, shall I?

SYLVIA (UNDECIDED) Ermmmm, yes, alright. No, wait. If I am, as you say, a girl, then it is permissible for you to look. But if I am, as I always thoughtlessly suspected, a man, then we'd be up to something thoroughly disgusting.

MORRIS Oh, let's have a look!

SYLVIA (YELPS AS MORRIS LOOKS, AFTER A PAUSE ASKS NERVOUSLY) Well? What am I?

MORRIS You're a girl.

SYLVIA (CRESTFALLEN) Oh. I was rather handsome as a man. As a girl I'm a bit of a sight. (MAKING THE BEST OF IT) Still, I'm glad I didn't have to you-know-what with you.

MORRIS It wouldn't have worked anyway. I'm not the sort.

SYLVIA I didn't mean to imply that you would readily commit something incorrect. But for the continuation of the race.

MORRIS I'm not a girl in the way you're a girl. I'm both.

SYLVIA Both what?

MORRIS (DEEPLY EMBARRASSED) Both a girl and a boy, if you must know.

SYLVIA (FASCINATED, OUTRAGED, AMAZED) Never!

MORRIS 25% of fairies are hermaphrodite.

SYLVIA That many. You don't say! (A SUDDEN IDEA) Ah then! We're in business again.

MORRIS What business?

SYLVIA You know how to do it, do you?

MORRIS Do what?

SYLVIA However it's done.

MORRIS What?

SYLVIA With yourself. To yourself. In order to, you know.

MORRIS (ANGRY) I don't know how and I don't want to know.

SYLVIA (EXCITED) I'll look in the Big Book, that's what.
(STOMPS OUT TO FIND BOOK, OPENS IT WITH A THUMP.)
What would it be under?

MORRIS (EXASPERATED) I've no idea.

SYLVIA Doesn't seem to be here. Funny. It's the sort of thing you'd think they'd have in. (IN A CONSPIRATORIAL WHISPER) Listen, I don't like to suggest this, but would it perhaps be in some way possible, for your man half to do something with me, as, apparently, according to you, I'm a girl? I'm probably too old to conceive, do you think? One-thousand-and-eighty sounds too old to me.

MORRIS I told you. It won't work. We're not built like that.

SYLVIA Who aren't?

MORRIS Hermaphrodites. Everything's tucked away.

SYLVIA Tucked away? What, in a drawer somewhere?

MORRIS (HIGHLY EXASPERATED) Tucked away inside. Inside me.

SYLVIA Oh. Pity. (SUDDENLY EXCITED) Ah! Look! Here it is! I've found it. Come here, Morris. Sit on my hand and read it.

(SOUND OF MORRIS'S FAINT BUZZING ACROSS THE ROOM)

MORRIS It's in Greek.

SYLVIA Of course it's in Greek. I'll translate, shall I? Errrrm, ah yes. Oh! What's a sphincter?

MORRIS It's an Egyptian cat with a man's head.

SYLVIA Eurgh! We need one of those, it says here, or it won't work. Sorry, we need two of those. We'll just have to try without. Here, look, some diagrams. Could you stand on the table and try that?

MORRIS (GIGGLES) I can't do that. It's horrible!

SYLVIA Oh. Pity. (IN FURIOUS CONCERN) We need an acorn somewhere - this shape, see. There's never a squirrel around when you need one. (WHISTLES AND CALLS 'SQUIRREL', THEN PERPLEXED TO THE GIGGLING MORRIS) Please, Morris, do take this seriously - you've got your wings in entirely the wrong position. You'll probably end up inducing an Indian summer. And do take your chemise off, will you?

(MORRIS'S GIGGLES RISE INTO WILD GLEE, FILLING THE LOG. BIRDS AND FOREST BEASTS JOIN IN HIS NOISE-MAKING.)

SYLVIA Oh. Pity. (FRANTIC. SHOUTING THROUGH THE HUBBUB) Shuttup, Morris! Shuttup, will you! You'll have the whole of creation at it! Morris! Morris!

(FADE ON MORRIS'S LAUGHTER AND THE EVER MORE FRANTIC HUBBUB.)

(PAUSE)

MORRIS (CLOSE, SPEAKING TO US) Often I have discovered people, sometimes quite old people, weeping at the loss of a parent. I remember one man particularly in Llandrindod Wells. So, what I do is fly about a bit till I find someone else weeping and get them together somehow. It's a nice enough game. Suddenly, I'd done the same for myself. I didn't exactly find myself actually Loving the Commissioner, in the romantic sense. I was more like a person whose mother had died years and years ago when he was young, returning home again, finding her somehow alive, delighting in her company and always on the verge of tears. I tidied up the log, cleaned out the fungi. I collected berries in the forest, coshed a few aphids and made them into pies. Both the Commissioner and myself felt much stronger. We spent hours each day going through those silly diagrams in the Big Book, never thinking that it would actually work, but just because in some perverse way, it excited us. One evening I even persuaded the Commissioner to go for a fly with me. He didn't go far from the log, and not very high, barely above bush level.

(EXTERIOR ACOUSTIC OF FOREST. SOME WIND. MORRIS AND SYLVIA.)

SYLVIA What's that?

MORRIS What?

SYLVIA Those buildings over there.

MORRIS A housing estate. They're everywhere these days.

SYLVIA They're very close. Far too close. I'll have to move if they get closer. (ANGUISHED) Why do they do it, Morris? Why can't they just go back to the forests and the tiny Kingdoms? The way it WAS, Morris!

MORRIS (CLOSE, SPEAKING TO US) He was upset after that. Sometimes when I woke from a sleep I'd ask myself where he was and I'd know he was in his little chapel with a great sheaf of papers on his lap. One night, halfway through reading me a story, leaving some poor princess in the most dreadful dilemma, he broke off and said:

SYLVIA (GRAVELY) I must choose, Morris. Very soon. It can't be put off any longer. You'll help me, won't you lad?

MORRIS (CLOSE, SPEAKING TO US) I refused to help. I refused even to listen. But he went on talking about it. Day after day it was his only topic. His pestilential choosing!!!! I spent more and more time on that housing estate, pairing people off, all sorts of people, husbands with other men's wives, wives with teenagers two streets away, all sorts of mischief. I'd come home with an armful of berries and the Commissioner would look up from his papers and say something like:

SYLVIA (CALLS) Always steer clear of the children of Bishops!

MORRIS (CLOSE, SPEAKING TO US) Another time, he shook the shelf I was sleeping on and boomed into my ear:

SYLVIA This one was a definite possible, but he is not, in my judgement, and after a concentrated day of thought, not the younger son sort at all. The younger son in the fairy tale is always the goodest, the most audacious and suchwhat. This fellow could only be the younger son if the real younger son was lost on an obscure pig farm with a sandal missing.

MORRIS (CLOSE, SPEAKING TO US) Then there was the afternoon when I'd been out for hours with some damn squirrel, having nuts opened up for our tea. But the Commissioner took no notice of the nuts. He kept on and on about his choosing.

(TO SYLVIA, TEETH GRITTED, FURIOUS)

If you don't stop ranting on about changelings I shall get a buzz-up and go back to Wales.

SYLVIA (CALMLY, ALMOST BLANKLY) If you don't come with me to fetch the babe, I shall dissolve myself.

MORRIS (SCORNS) You wouldn't never!

SYLVIA Would.

MORRIS (CLOSE, SPEAKING TO US) He began to fade away before my eyes.

Silver sparkles spat a hundred at a time through the fabric of his dress. His eyes were floating away in a disappearing head.

(SCREAMS, FRANTIC, TO SYLVIA)

Stop! Stop! I'll come! I'll do anything! Just stop!

SYLVIA (CALMLY, GHOSTLY) Thank you, Morris.

MORRIS (A SIGH OF RELIEF) You've chosen then?

(CLOSE, SPEAKING TO US) His mouth floated back into place and he spoke:

SYLVIA (BLANKLY) I have chosen. In a towerblock of flats in Middlesbrough. A child born this very day, far from forests, far from the World he will make. Malcolm Philpotts. Son of William and Doreen Philpotts. Him have I chosen.

MORRIS (CLOSE, TO US) We flew to Middlesbrough that same evening.. An ordinary evening, pale blue sky, rare balls of creamy cloud to aim for. Below us nothing moved except the motorcars, silly little motorcars. The Commissioner was a bad flyer. He kept sinking down towards the rooftops, where the smell of the cooking was sickening, or to the fields where the cows knew something was there but couldn't see what. We hit the coast at Wgitby and headed North with gulls all around us. Middlesbrough was just a smoky heap far in the distance when the Commissioner started cursing it. The air was suddenly full of colours, then a mortifying ack-ack of great black cinders coming up at us. Blasts of heat tripped up our wingbeats as we drwe closer in to the town. We landed in a street beside the towerblock. People were walking to and fro eating fish and chips.

(EXTERIOR ACOUSTIC.)

SYLVIA I can't remember the number,

MORRIS Flat 1215. Floor twelve. The mother and babe have just arrived home from the hospital. It is lying in its cot. Four people are regarding it.

(INTERIOR ACOUSTIC.)

BILL PHILPOTTS (DRUNKEN, HAS A THICK GEORDIE ACCENT, BABYTALKS TO HIS NEW SON)

Weeeeecheeeeeee-cheeeeeeeche-whooooooooooche-cooooooo. Who's a clever boy, then?

DOREEN PHILPOTTS How! E's a bairn, not a parrot.

BILL (ANGRY) Ye want clipped, lass?

DOREEN Yer wouldn't dare!

BILL (IMPLORES) How, woman, just leave us alone ter enjoy me kiddie, will yer?

DOREEN Look at that boozy-nosed git, Janice. What sort of a father de yer think he'll make, eh?

BILL A'll be a good father, me. A'll steal everything I can get me hands on and A'll never get caught. Whey, look at this lovely cot he's in - I stole more lead off more people's roofs to pay fer that.

DOREEN (SCORNS) Errrrrrrrrrrrgh.

BILL (FURIOUS) Hash it! Just hash it! Or I'll gis yer this!

DOREEN Hash it yersel!

BILL Divvent ye tell me ter hash it!

DOREEN (SCREAMS AS LOUD AS SHE CAN) Hash it!!!!

BILL (ENORMOUSLY IRATE) Who ye telling ter hash it?

DOREEN Yeeeeeeee!

BILL (COLDLY DETERMINED) Reet! Yer've got this cummin!

(BILL PHILPOTTS ATTACKS DOREEN PHILPOTTS, SHE SCREAMS. THE TWO OTHER PEOPLE PRESENT ATTEMPT TO INTERCEDE. THE BABY AWAKES AND STARTS CRYING.)

MORRIS (WHISPERS TO SYLVIA, AMAZED) Are you sure you've chosen the right babe?

SYLVIA My calculations were most meticulous. This is the babe.

BILL (CONTINUING HIS DRUNKEN RAGE) Haway oot, the lot of yer!
(AMID THEIR SCREAMS AND PROTESTATIONS HE SHOVES HIS

WIFE AND THE OTHERS OUT OF THE ROOM AND SLAMS THE DOOR, SCREAMING AT THEM) Ye'd have him grow up stupid like the rest of yers! Well, e's not gannin' tae! A've got plans for this bairn. (CALMLY TO THE YOWLING BABY) Wheeeeeche-cheeeeeche-coo! Who's Daddy's little centre-forward den?

(THE BABY FALLS SILENT.)

SYLVIA (WHISPERS TO MORRIS) Hurry, Morris, you distract that sot while I do my operation on the child.

MORRIS What'll I do?

SYLVIA I don't know! Buzz in his ear.

BILL My best pal, isn't yer, lad? Coochie-wooooochie. (IS ASSAILED BY A BUZZING SOUND) How! Ruddy wasp! Get away! How! Haway off! (THE BUZZING BUZZES AWAY, THEN BUZZES BACK) I'll get yee! Come on, wasp! De yer worst. A'll squash yer greasy!

(HE CHASES THE BUZZING AROUND THE FURNITURE, KNOCKING EVERYTHING FOR SIX, GRUNTING, BELCHING, YELLING AND SWIPING. HE HITS A WALL WITH A LOUD SLAP. THE BUZZING STOPS.)

BILL Got yer, little sod.

(THE BUZZING STARTS UP AGAIN. AT THE SAME TIME THERE IS A HAMMERING ON THE DOOR.)

BILL What's wrong wi yee hammerin'? I'm saving the kiddie from a wasp!

(THE BUZZING INCREASES IN VOLUME. PHILPOTTS CHASES IT SOME MORE. HE YELLS AT THE 'WASP', BECOMING MORE AND MORE OUT OF BREATH. FINALLY HE BELCHES LOUDLY, SIGHS SWOONISHLY AND COLLAPSES TO THE GROUND IN A CLATTER.)

MORRIS Phew! He's passed out. He nearly had me there, you know. Everything going okay?

SYLVIA (BLANKLY AND SINISTER) I have the spirit.

MORRIS Where? Where? Let me see. (EXCLAIMS IN AMAZEMENT AT ITS WONDROUS BEAUTY) Ooooooooooooooh!
(CLOSE, TO US) The Commissioner opened his hand and there it was, a babe no bigger than the speckiest speck of dust, kicking its legs. The big babe was in its cot, a blue-grey colour, dead-looking when its fingers weren't twitching.

MORRIS (STILL BREATHLESS) Ooooooooooooooh! You've got nothing to put in to fill it up. It's not right just to leave it empty.

SYLVIA (AGAIN BLANK AND SINISTER) Oh, but I've brought something to put in, Morris.

MORRIS What? Where?

SYLVIA You, Morris.

MORRIS (LAUGHS NERVOUSLY) Me?
(REALIZES THE HORRIBLE TRUTH OF THE SITUATION AND SCREAMS) Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!
(HIS SCREAM SINKS AWAY LIKE THAT OF SOMEONE FALLING DOWN A BOTTOMLESS PIT. WHEN IT FINISHES THERE IS SILENCE FOR A MOMENT, THEN A CONTENTED): Goo-goo. Ooooo-oooo. Goooo.

(FADE WITH GOO-GOOS. THEN A PAUSE.)

MORRIS (CALMLY RECOLLECTS, TO US) I couldn't help myself. I was sucked under, pulled along dark red corridors, narrower and narrower, tearing my wings. I was inside Malcolm Philpotts, remained stuck inside him, was him, dreamily, for seventeen years. The Commissioner had not, I knew, done it to me out of malice; he just wanted me out of the way so I wouldn't be a bad influence on his precious changeling. I was angry for a while, a year or two, and wouldn't stop crying, but I began to forget about my former life and concentrated on learning to walk and banging the kitchen table with a big silver spoon.
My father, Bill Philpotts, was by profession a criminal. One of my earliest memories is of a pair of whippets he'd kidnapped and was hiding in our flat in Middlesbrough. How I cried when he took them away.
Toughest time was when I was between six and eleven. Dad got put away for a post office job. Mam took me to stay with her sister and sister's husband Hughie in a caravan outside Leeds. I don't remember eating anything for years except baked beans and tinned mandarin oranges. At school I was the most popular boy and always top of the class. History was my best subject - after all, I'd lived through most of it. My father came

plodding up the lane one day, his pockets jangling with coins from some fruit machines he'd found on the way from the station. He put my sister and me on his shoulders and carried us into the caravan where, without putting us down, he gave Uncle Hughie the most painful going over. Mam and Auntie Doris were screaming. Hughie kept falling into the same corner, the caravan was bouncing to and fro, everything falling off the shelves, and all the while my sister and me were laughing and applauding.

When I was fourteen we spent the whole summer in a dingy hotel in Spain. When we came back we weren't called Philpotts anymore. We were called Bradshaw. Dad grew a beard and shaved the top of his head. It was about then that I discovered my talent for cards. Somehow, I always knew what cards the other players had in their hands and the exact order of the cards remaining in the pack. I had a trick where I'd get someone to shuffle the pack, then I'd rattle off the whole 52 in the right order. I was never wrong. One time Dad hit me hard in the face: 'How do you do it?' he said. 'I just can', I said. During the next couple of years I won a great deal of money, first in smoky back rooms, later in swanky establishments. Dad gave up his life of crime and became my manager.

Things were going great. I only had to look at a girl for her to fall for me. I loved playing cards. I was perfectly happy. Then one day I was waiting for a train and, not knowing quite why, I stepped off the platform, just as the train was coming in. My sister was standing behind me eating a chocolate bar. She cried out my name but I was dead before she finished saying it. I did fly back to the log immediately. I stayed in London, very ill, for some months, surrounded by pigeons. It wasn't the old illness. It was something new and horribly surprising. When I found out what it was I would have laughed, but suddenly the old illness was there also, heavy in my head. I flew back one evening in early October. The leaves were just beginning to fall. Under my arm I carried a large, damp cardboard box.

The face of the naked boy I found in the forest was the same face I had worn myself for seventeen years, but a calmer, kinder face than the one I had left under the train.

(EXTERIOR ACOUSTIC OF THE FOREST)

MORRIS (KINDLY) Hello.

MALCOLM (SPEAKS IN A REFINED GEORDIE VOICE, LIKE SOMEONE STUCK IN THEIR TELEPHONE VOICE) Hello.

MORRIS What's your name?

MALCOLM Malcolm is my name.

MORRIS Pleased to meet you Malcolm.

MALCOLM Pleased to meet you too, sir. May I presume to ask you your name also?

MORRIS Morris. I'm a friend of the Commissioner's.

MALCOLM Are you my father?

MORRIS I most certainly am not!

MALCOLM Please excuse me. Are you then perhaps my mother?

MORRIS No. Just a friend.

MALCOLM (DISAPPOINTED) Oh, I see. I do not wish to boast, but I possess exhaustive knowledge of astronomy, history, botany, biology, even how to manage a small kingdom, but I have no idea why my own parents are. Perhaps, may I presume, could you tell me if Commissioner Sylvia, my good and patient teacher, is he my father?

MORRIS If he was anything, he'd be your mother.

MALCOLM Mother? But he has a long red beard.

MORRIS You wouldn't think it to look at him, I know, but strictly speaking he is a woman.

MALCOLM (HOPEFUL) So he is my mother?

MORRIS No.

MALCOLM Father, then?

MORRIS (TESTILY) We've already eliminated that possibility.

MALCOLM Sorry, yes.

MORRIS Look, actually, perhaps I shouldn't say, but I happen to know your parents rather well.

MALCOLM (DELIGHTED) You do?!!!

MORRIS Yeah.

MALCOLM (VERY EAGER) My father, is he loved by his subjects?

MORRIS What subjects?

MALCOLM Of his kingdom, of course.

MORRIS (LAUGHS) But he's not a King, you stupid boy. He's a .well if you must know, by profession he's a burglar.

MALCOLM (HORRIFIED BEYOND BELIEF) A burglar?!!

MORRIS (WITH BLASÉ PRIDE) Yeah.

MALCOLM A common ruffian.

MORRIS (MORE DISTURBED) I suppose.

MALCOLM Gallowsbait?

MORRIS You could say that.

MALCOLM (CRESTFALLEN) I thought he had a Kingdom off Scotland somewhere. He never did, did he?

MORRIS Never did.

MALCOLM How is that I am the hope of the World? Me, the son of a burglar?

MORRIS Don't know. The Commissioner chose, went to great trouble he did. Out of everyone in the World, he chose you. Couldn't be wrong.

MALCOLM No, he couldn't be wrong.

MORRIS Been dragging you through great armfuls of the Big Book, has he? Preparing you for the historic task.

MALCOLM (A SCHOOLROOM VOICE) Yes, sir. I am quite shortly, in a brief year or two I believe, going out into the World in order to make perfection there, to send people back into the forests and the tiny Kingdom, to create for them the perfect environment in which they will not be able to stop themselves being good and true.

MORRIS And you believe all that hoggy wash he tells you, do you?

MALCOLM (OUTRAGED) You speak with disrespect, sir!

MORRIS (KINDLY) Sorry, Malcolm. You agree with the Commissioner, do you, lad? You think the World needs turned into a whopping big fairytale with all the Rumpelstiltskins ironed out?

MALCOLM (UNCERTAINLY) I do. Except that. (HESITATES)

MORRIS (EAGER TO HEAR) Yeah. yeah.

MALCOLM Except that I don't see why it's necessary or sensible to actually go back to the way things were.

MORRIS (WICKEDLY DELIGHTED) You don't?

MALCOLM People would still be people. They'd just start all over again, I'm sure, and remake the World I'd taken off them. You agree, do you, sir?

MORRIS Course I do.

MALCOLM (ENCOURAGED) It is my own opinion - may I please call you Morris?

MORRIS Sure.

MALCOLM That the forests, the happy valleys, the perfect Kingdoms should be made by each person himself, in his own way, in his own head, and carried around in there perfect and complete, regardless of whatever corruptions the wider World is displaying. Your wings are all torn Morris.

MORRIS Yeah. Pity, isn't it?

MALCOLM But still the loveliest that I have ever seen.

MORRIS (TOUCHED) Thank you Malcolm.

MALCOLM What, pray, have you in your box?

MORRIS Oh. A present. For the Commissioner.

SYLVIA (CALLS FROM A DISTANCE) Malcolmmmmmm! Malcolmmmmmm!

MALCOLM He's calling me in for tea. He'll be so pleased to see you, I'm sure. We never get visitors. Hardly any squirrels even. They all died, you know.

(FADE AWAY FOREST NOISES.)

(INTERIOR ACOUSTIC OF LOG. FADE IN SYLVIA HUMMING TO HIMSELF WHILE PUTTING OUT THE TEA THINGS. CHINKING OF CROCKERY, POURING OF TEA.)

SYLVIA Ah, Malcom. Sit down, lad. After tea we will discuss moral rectitude and the enigma of the chrysalis, in that order.

MALCOLM (EXCITED) Look who I've found, Commissioner. An old friend.

SYLVIA (COLDLY) Ah. Better tottle off, Malcolm, and see if those badgers have whelped yet. There's a good lad.

MALCOLM But·

SYLVIA (LOUDLY, STRICT) Do as I say, boy!

MALCOLM (CHEERILY) Oh, I get it. You want to be alone with your friend. (ON HIS WAY) See you later, Morris.

SYLVIA So. It's you then,

MORRIS (BLANKLY) Like the beard, Commissioner. Handsome.

SYLVIA Back sooner than I'd thought.

MORRIS (BLASÉ) Yeah.

SYLVIA Didn't last its time, then.

MORRIS Train hit it.

SYLVIA A train?

MORRIS (MIFFED) A train.

SYLVIA You don't say.

MORRIS (ANGRY) I do say.

SYLVIA So. You're back, then.

MORRIS Just stopping off.

SYLVIA Stopping off. Good.

MORRIS Don't want me here, do you?

SYLVIA (SUDDENLY DROPS HIS POMPOUS RESERVE, HURT) It's not that, Morris. I've missed you terribly, really I have.

MORRIS (SCORNS) Yeah.

SYLVIA Please believe me I have. But I can't have you about just now, not with Malcom at such a crucial stage in his education.
(BECOMING POMPOUS AGAIN, BUT NO LONGER UNFRIENDLY) I've very nearly succeeded with him, you know. Some work to do yet on the clarity of his social conscience, which, added to the superior audaciousness I am planting in his belly, will enable him to achieve greater insights into the human condition.

MORRIS He's a real humdinger is Malcom, no doubt of it.

SYLVIA (DELIGHTED) He is approaching perfection!

MORRIS (A QUIET THREAT) I've spoken to him.

SYLVIA (VERY WORRIED) I hope you've said nothing.

MORRIS I said nothing.

SYLVIA Nothing?

MORRIS Hardly a thing.

SYLVIA Does 'hardly a thing' mean nothing, or does it mean a teeny bit of something?

MORRIS Nowt. I said nowt at all. Squirrels. We discussed squirrels. I was just getting to know him.

SYLVIA (CONCERNED, ADMITS) He is not, as perhaps you've detected, quite tip-top material. I'm having, truth be told, a bit of a struggle with him. (RALLIES HIMSELF) But he's bright, so full of feeling. I've every hope, Morris. Every hope. You don't look well Morris.

MORRIS I'm coming down with something.

SYLVIA Something bad?

MORRIS Bad.

SYLVIA Very bad or just bad?

MORRIS Very bad.

SYLVIA (CHEERFULLY ENOUGH) Me too. I've a little while left though.

MORRIS So have I. Over the winter, I think.

SYLVIA (SUPREMEY CONFIDENT) Ooooooh, yes, Morris. Over the winter. (SUDDENLY CURIOUS) What's that you've got there?

MORRIS What?

SYLVIA You're standing on it!

MORRIS (TEASES) Ooooh, this. It's just a box.

SYLVIA A box?

MORRIS (GIVING UP HIS TEASE) It's for you. A present.

SYLVIA (VERY EXCITED AND TOUCHED) A present! For me, Morris. And after what I did. Oh, Morris. (BUBBLING OVER) What can it possibly be?

MORRIS (BLANKLY) Eggs.

SYLVIA (EXCITED) Chocolate eggs?

MORRIS My eggs.

SYLVIA Your eggs?

MORRIS I laid them myself.

SYLVIA (DELIGHTED AND AMAZED) NO!

MORRIS Yeah. All that palaver we did, the posturings I copied from the Big Book. It worked.

SYLVIA (BURSTING WITH EXCITEMENT) Eggs? Eggs? Fairy eggs?

MORRIS Uh-huh.

SYLVIA How many? Approximately.

MORRIS I can give you an exact figure. Nine-hundred-and-thirty-seven thousand, eight hundred and seventy-nine.

SYLVIA (BUSINESSLIKE) I'll just make a note of that. Nine-hundred-and-thirty-seven-thousand.

MORRIS Eight hundred and seventy-nine.

SYLVIA (HUGELY IMPRESSED) Why, that's an egg or two more than the population of Kuala Lumpur. It must have taken you ages to

MORRIS It did.

SYLVIA (HAS NEVER BEEN MORE ELATED) Of course, you realize what this means! It changes everything. A new generation of us, to continue the good work, to bring about perfection in the World. And not just for people either. No. No. A World in which we, ourselves, need no longer be fancies, but an integral part of a global society of forests and tiny Kingdoms.

MORRIS I thought you'd see it that way. Here you are then.

SYLVIA (VASTLY GRATEFUL) Thankyou, thankyou, Morris. You don't have to sit on them or anything?

MORRIS No-no. They hatch by themselves. In about three weeks, I reckon.

SYLVIA Just think, my successor, the next Commissioner, is in this box, all dreamy and soft-boiled.

MORRIS They'll keep you busy, then.

SYLVIA I'll not see them grow up, of course. But there'll be my notes and the Big Book and there's Malcolm.

MORRIS (WITH A TOUCH OF SARCASM) I thought he was going out to perfect the World.

SYLVIA Goodness, no. Malcolm? Disaster! Not the necessary moral fibre, you see. Went on with him. No choice. But now! He can look after the eggs. He'll be happy doing that. I'll tell him when he gets back. They'll find their own changelings. Millions of changelings in forty years or so. Can't fail. Oh Morris. I'm so happy. I can dissolve now with no complaints.

MORRIS (WITH FINALITY) Goodbye Commissioner.

SYLVIA Goodbye? Goodbye? What do you mean goodbye?

MORRIS I'm going. Back to Wales.

SYLVIA But you'll stay to see them hatched, surely?

MORRIS No.

SYLVIA But think of it, the air full of tiny wings.

MORRIS (BEGINS TO BUZZ, TO LEAVE. CALLS) Ta-ta, Sylvia. Ta-ta.

SYLVIA (CALLS AFTER, INCREASINGLY DESPERATE, RUNNING UP THE LOG) Don't go. Please don't go, Morris! (SOBS) Morris! Morris! It's so lonely without you! Don't leave me, Morris. (SCREECHES THE ORDER TO THE FAR DISTANCE, WITH TEARFUL POMPOSITIVITY) I order you! As Commissioner of Fairies, I order you.

(FADE ON HIS SCREECHES.)

(PAUSE.
EXTERIOR SOUND OF TRAFFIC.)

MORRIS (TO US, CALMLY, MORE AND MORE WEAKLY) This is as far as I could manage. A ledge under a row of warm lights. A garage. Not far from Worcester. I should have stayed in the log. The Commissioner would have taken care of me. All these moths, look at them, dead for years some of them, frazzled in the lights that make up the garage sign. Better to dissolve.

Much better. (SCREAMS IN PAIN) Ahhhhhhhh! Must keep talking, then I'll be alright. Know that if I stop talking that'll be it. It's the talking that keeps me alive.

(BREATHLESSLY, ANXIOUSLY, LAUNCHES INTO THE FIRST THING THAT COMES INTO HIS HEAD) Funny the things you remember; a particular spoonful of soup, Uncle Hughie falling down again and again into the same corner, a cavalry charge in the Civil War - can't remember whose side I was on though.

(SCREECH OF BRAKES, TOOTING OF HORN IN DISTANCE.)

Oh! There goes another hedgehog. I tell them and I tell them about roads, but it never gets through, they still think it's 1690.

On my map, my everchanging and impossibly accurate map of the World, which at any moment will be out of print, I can see all the hedgehogs in the British Isles, all the squashed ones, and the live ones looking for squashed ones and the live ones doing all the other things hedgehogs do, and they're looking at me, all those hedgehog faces. And badgers in gas-masks and what's that: I've never seen one of those before. This is wrong. This shouldn't happen. It's not on the map. I must keep talking. I must.

(HORNS PEEP FRANTICALLY. ENGINES REV. PEOPLE ARE IN THE DISTANCE ENGAGED IN SOME HUGE YATTERING ARGUMENT, ONE HORN GOES ON BLARING BY ITSELF, LONG AND MONOTONOUS - ON AND ON, THEN SUDDENLY STOPS. SILENCE.)

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