

2,500 words

## THE DAY THEY CAME

Lawrence Leonard

It was natural that they chose our village.

They need salt water, you see, and the Street is right next to it.

We're just a long terrace of stone houses facing the sea and protected from it by the sea-wall, as high as a man's shoulder on our side but falling nearly twenty feet on the other. Even so the waves splash over in winter.

Between the wall and the houses is the Street - a long, twisting alleyway built of the same stone as the rest and sometimes wide enough for three to walk abreast. It was there that we used to stop and gossip on our way to and from the Shop or the Fisherman's Arms. I doubt if there's a village like ours left in the whole of England.

Mind you, I'm a newcomer. Most of the others have lived here all their lives and you may well ask why I'm writing this instead of them.

The answer must be, I suppose, that out of those of us left, I'm the only one that can. Harry said it should be written up and if he says so, he's probably right.

The first we heard of them came from Jamie as he stamped into the Fisherman's all red-faced and dripping from being out

late-fishing.

"There's a lot of shadows round the old hulk," he said, as soon as he'd ordered.

The old hulk is the remains of a wrecked schooner, probably seventeenth century, that lies in the marshes north-west about a mile.

"There always is shadows round the old hulk," someone said - I think it was Ivan.

"These were moving." Jamie gulped down his pint and ordered another.

"They always move at full moon. Full moon brings wind."

"Wind don't figure if there's nothing to move and there ain't nothing to move in the old hulk."

"Marsh grass."

Jamie shrugged. "Alright - 'twas marsh grass. I couldn't care."

He was always like that if people disagreed with him, but much later he reminded us of what he'd said and we remembered it. He'd been the first to see them.

Opinions differ about the next sighting though we've argued about it often enough, and the reason must be that those were the days when they only moved at night. That and the fact that we're such a closed community, ruled by habit more than most I would imagine.

For instance, we only have two paths, both well-trod.

One leads to the five fields which are our eastern boundary and which keep us in grain and vegetables and the other leads to

the western shingle where we tie our boats up to the far end of the sea-wall. No-one goes anywhere else.

Why should we, there wouldn't be any point.

Some say there's another community about a hundred miles westward along the coast and once a Visitor arrived with news of another one further inland, although he knew little enough about it because he'd been chased away.

All in all, we're lucky. We have enough to eat and drink as long as we keep the ratio between births and deaths stable, and the street itself is still the same as when it was built, some time in the eighteenth century.

As I said, that's probably why they chose us.

Another bit of luck is our cellars, which are dry and well-constructed. They're all linked up now - it's the only way we can get from one house to another and if we hadn't managed to maintain contact with each other some of us would have gone out of our minds.

Mrs. Peaslip, for instance.

That was the first warning we had that they might be dangerous.

With the benefit of hindsight, we can see that they must have been coming down for their salt water every night for months before we noticed the smell, but Mrs. Peaslip's children would have noticed it first anyway, on account of their asthma.

That's only an assumption, of course, and I must be careful to draw a clear line between assumptions and facts.

The facts are that after the kids disappeared we followed

their foot-prints as best we could for as far as we could and they led north-westwards, towards the old hulk. When they reached the marshes we couldn't see them any more, naturally.

Listen, there must be dozens of reasons why two kids could disappear - wanderlust, curiosity or just sheer boredom.

This was the period when the smell was getting stronger. It wasn't unpleasant - rather like bleach - but it was remarked upon and the drains were cleared out as a result.

You probably think we were slow to catch on, but you must remember that between Jamie's first remark and the drains being cleared was about two months, with the disappearance of Mrs. Peaslip's kids as an isolated incident.

In fact, there wasn't even a Council Meeting until the night Flora came back screaming.

That was late - maybe two in the morning.

She and Tony were courting, so naturally they went outside the Street to discover each other and it was a real tragedy to all of us that he never came back.

We quietened Flora down as best we could and then took her to the Fisherman's Arms to find out what it was all about.

We established that she and Tony had been lying together in the big hollow about half-a-mile from the western end of the Street when they sensed they were being watched. Oddly enough, Flora said there was no smell, from which we deduced that it only came after they'd had their salt water.

"What did you see?" asked the Mayor - it was Harry that year.

"A big shadow."

"Where?"

"Behind us."

"How big?"

Flora gave a hysterical hiccup to get her breath. "Enormous."

"Was it an 'it' or a 'they'?"

"I don't know. An 'it' with a lot of them inside it."

"With eyes?"

"I don't know. It was watching us. They were."

"Did it move?"

"All the time."

Someone said, "Enough of this; let's go and find Tony. Bring something to hit with."

I brought my old scythe, which was awkward but sharp, and we all went out to the big hollow. There was nothing there except for some of Flora's clothes scattered around, so we tramped out to the marshes, the old hulk getting bigger and somehow more threatening the nearer we got to it. It's difficult going on the marshes even if you know the paths, which we did.

When we got to the hulk, there was nothing unusual about it - we climbed all over it and found nothing except a bit of cloth which Harry swore was part of a frock belonging to Mrs. Peaslip's youngest.

It was on the way back that we found Tony's skull.

It could have been anyone's of course, but we called it Tony's because it had a mark along the top where he'd once sustained an injury. It was odd that it should have become a skull so quickly.

We carried it back with us and it was only a few minutes

later that we found what we'd been looking for.

To put it more correctly, it found us.

The marsh wasn't very deep just there, which makes me think it can flatten itself out or puff itself up at will, but once we saw the size of the thing that began to heave itself out of the mud and the marsh-grass we all turned tail in a panic and ran for home.

From then on we began to feel like a beleaguered garrison that wasn't quite sure what it was beleaguered by.

One of the things about it that interested me was that no-one knew whether to call it an 'it' or a 'them', and it was this that gave me my idea.

We chose two of our oldest cows from the eastern fields and tethered them to the marsh's edge about half-a-mile away from each other. Then we mounted a watch and I took my old World War Three machine-gun with me.

They never came, of course, so we didn't learn much from it, except maybe something about their intelligences. At first we thought it was because of the gun, but we've found out since that guns are useless.

Personally, I think they were playing with us, because after we took the cows back to the eastern fields we heard them going down for their salt water again.

They made a lot of noise about it as well, and I think they did that deliberately because they'd always been silent before.

It was a sign of arrogance.

It hadn't taken them long to realize that there was not much we could do to stop them, and once they knew that they made an all-out drive for us.

First they split up and part of them attacked the eastern fields - there was no question of 'it' or 'them' by now - and then, one terrible morning, they came up the Street itself, from the western end.

In that enclosed space they reached up as far as the first floor windows, which was all most of us had. That was when we fled to the cellars.

Naturally, they took a lot of people with them.

We had a roll-call afterwards and forty-three never answered, mainly the old and the very young. From then on the Street was divided between those who wanted to leave and form another community elsewhere and those who voted to hang on.

It was the Council who decided on staying.

They argued that the cellars ought to be safe enough and they issued an order that the doorways between them were to be hacked down so that we could move freely from one to the other. They had in mind that the cellars under the Fisherman's held our store of grain and vegetables from the previous summer and that they would be needed by all now that the eastern fields were being destroyed.

For a few weeks life was tolerable.

They came by day or night now - there was no knowing when - but we posted look-outs so that we had at least ten minutes warning. Someone found the old church-bell clappers and that

was our signal to go below ground. When they had moved up the Street and could be seen obliterating what was left of the eastern fields, we would come out and clean up.

That was the worst bit, I suppose.

After that, there would be another roll-call. We used to take the bereaved up to the Fisherman's and get them drunk - it was the only anaesthetic we had.

People were beginning to pack up and leave now in spite of the Council's decision, and it was becoming increasingly difficult to make any sense out of the daily roll-calls.

Not that it made much difference. I can only think of one family that made a successful break-through.

They had us more or less encircled, you see, and whenever someone decided to make a bolt for it they always headed them off. We used to watch out of curiosity, but once they were caught we hadn't the stomach for it any more and we would turn away.

I don't want you to think we were totally passive and did nothing but dive down into our cellars. Guns, we tried. Mine was the best, so I know. The bullets just used to sink into them and be - well, digested would be the best word for it, I suppose.

We tried smearing the Street with a solution of mouldwarp while they were away but although it was pretty potent stuff it didn't seem to affect them. We tried elaborate traps made from the big shark-nets but they broke through them as if they weren't there.

Fire was best.



We made a big pile of treewood and kindling at the western end of the Street - they always came from west to east - and lit it just as they got up to it. I was part of the watch-party and I swear I saw their muscles contract for a second. Then they heaved themselves onto it and doused it with their weight and wetness.

It was about this time that we realized that our original instincts about 'it' or 'them' had some validity after all, because they seemed to be able to coalesce or separate at will. Also we were somehow aware that we were dealing not with one mind but many - capable of instant decisions perhaps, but only because each mind reached the same conclusion at the same moment.

It wasn't a collective will.

At this point I must pay tribute to the Street. In this adversity such as we had never before suffered, we survived in a way that did us credit. There were only about ninety of us left by now, but strange though it may seem, we were just about holding our own.

We even began digging in the hope of finding fresh water, and we actually found it, close to Mrs. Peaslip's house. Imagine that - a real stream of water that no-one had known about and which even had a species of tiny fish living in it. It's amazing what you can find underground.

For instance.....I'm sorry - I wanted to tell you about some of the other discoveries we made, but I find, regretfully, that I have to break off.

I told you before that Harry was nobody's fool and also that

he wanted me to write this chronicle. Perhaps he had a presentiment of what might happen or maybe it was just his love of order. Whichever it was, he's just come into the room in my cellar where I work to tell me I'd better prepare myself.

He was in a rather bad way, but even so he was gentlemanly enough to glance at my papers.

"Good," he said. "It'll be the Street's contribution."

Personally, I wish I could bring it to some sort of conclusive or at least helpful ending, but until I go up and see what's going on, I don't think I can.

Harry wasn't in a fit state to go into details. As a matter of fact, he didn't even want to leave my room, that much was obvious. He just kept looking around it in an absent-minded way and then he went back to my journal and began flipping over the pages.

"I don't know how to tell the others," he said at last. "I was the only one up there."

I just waited. I didn't want to rush him because it sounded as if his tongue was swollen.

"There was this noise from the west end where they go for their salt water so I went to have a look. It wasn't very loud."

"I ought to know about it so that I can write it down," I said.

"Yes, I see that."

He began trying to clean himself up but I knew that what he was really doing was thinking.

"It was like lots of people tearing up paper. I don't

know why it should have sounded so awful, but it did. And when I got there..."

He stopped. "When I got there..."

It was no good, even I could see that.

He was looking at the ground. "Just say 'they're hatching out'," he said.

So that's what I'll write, because I don't think there'll be time enough to write any more.

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