



THE CHILD

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THE CARDBOARD BONFIRE

For two weeks every child in the street had been in a mounting state of excitement. Broomsticks had been begged or 'borrowed', old sacks stuffed with old clothing or straw, pink cardboard masks bought for a precious penny, hats, gloves and old socks wheedled from mothers, as every backyard, prepared for the big communal event of the year - Bonfire Night. The 'Guys' that were the end result of all this endeavour were pushed up and down the pavements after school, as the men were going to the pub, or at weekends coming home from the pub as well, in the glorious hope that instead of a frown, or a gruff "Clear 'orf" there would be a halfpenny thrown into the cap or tin. They used old prams, push-chairs, home-made carts - even scooters - but Howard, Sam, Dorrie and Rene had theirs on a long, low trolley they had put together out of two planks and four pram wheels. The Guy had to lie down, which was

unfortunate, but they were proud of him, sure he was the best, with his pin-striped waistcoat, navy-blue trousers, torn white shirt, greasy bowler hat, and his pink face sporting a bushy, glued-on moustache.

Most of the clothes had come from the girls' household - their father was known locally as the 'gentleman' as he always dressed himself in a navy blue suit, with knifelike creases in the trousers, even when he went out to work at his jewellery makers, and always walked so erect, with his head held high, and spoke to no-one. But the pieces of wood and the pram wheels had been provided by the boys' mother, and for the past few weeks all four had been hilariously, dangerously hurtling down the sloping street, lying on the platform, holding the rope tied on to the front wheels, and attempting to make the turn into their entry without falling off. The boys, after much practice, eventually allowed each of the girls to sit on the back, holding on to the sides, as two by two they made the hair-raising trip, until Dorrie, braver than any boy, insisted on doing it alone. They knew better than to refuse. Howard still smarted from the memory of having made her angry, of being knocked down into the long, shallow drain in their backyard, and jumped on. She may be only a girl, she may be only nine and he was nearly ten, but she was a force to be reckoned with.

The object of all this effort was to get enough pennies to buy some fireworks. Bengal matches, sparklers, and one or two cheap fountains; not expensive rockets, though the boys hoped to buy jumping crackers as well, just to scare the girls. Parents were not to be approached - they soon found that out - but the cry of "Guy, guy, guy, a penny

for the guy" was heard in every street around, and no objections were raised when the four did likewise in their own street.

They managed to collect enough for the sparklers and Bengal matches, and one fountain, but with sinking hearts learnt there was to be no bonfire. There was nothing to burn, and it would annoy the neighbours in the top right-hand corner of the yard, and they knew both statements were true. Whenever they played ball, especially cricket, the tall, angular lady in a black, high-throated dress, her grey-streaked hair drawn tightly back in a bun, a severe expression always on her face, would come out of her house and tell them to keep the ball away from that corner. To be sure there was a small greenhouse attached to her house, but as the stumps were chalked in the middle of the long wall which ran at right-angles towards the entry, the pitch only extending to the brewhouse on the opposite wall, well below the greenhouse, they never broke a single pane of glass. You had to hit the ball always towards the entry, that was all.

But - no bonfire! They joined up after tea by the chalked stumps, almost obliterated by the November rain, and crouched on the brick yard, disconsolate. Sounds of preparation, flames from fires already lit, came from the adjacent backyards. And then Dorrie had one of her brilliant ideas. "Let's go up to the factory at the top - there's always plenty of cardboard lying about. And they'll still be open. Bet they'd give us some of their rubbish."

They did - with an indulgent smile or two from the workers - and triumphantly carried back all they could manage. Old squashed boxes, pieces with holes out of them, off strips - surely no-one would object to them burning a bit of cardboard! Alright, it was disobedient, but they were bolstered by Dorrie's instinctive contempt for silly grown-up rules and felt excited and happy. It smouldered a lot to begin with, but then flared up, and four delighted faces sprang out of the darkness. For a few minutes they stood, entranced, holding out cold hands to the yellow flames, and then, horror, there was the dreaded sound of a sash window being pushed up, and a woman's voice called out "Come here!" It was the girls' mother; she was at an upstairs' window and had something bulky balanced on the ledge, but though the gas mantle was lit behind her they couldn't see what it was. However, each of them felt sure that they were to be scolded, told to put the fire out (it was almost burnt out anyway) and slowly, reluctantly went over to the window. And then they saw. It was an old mattress, an old straw mattress, the sort the girls slept on with a flock mattress on top.

"Don't come too near" she warned, and pushed it out off the cill. It landed at their feet. "If you must have a bonfire" her tone was stern, disapproving, and they all knew why. It was against her principles to give in to children - she had to show them that - but her heart and mind was on their side. She soon appeared by the fire - you couldn't trust children to burn a mattress on their own. That needed a grown-up around.

The sparks, the golden, glowing bits of straw flew upward, and disappeared, dying, in the cool darkness. The younger girl watched, entranced, an unlit sparkler clutched in her hand. This was far more beautiful than anything she had ever imagined, and for a brief instant was caught up and held in the marvellous magic of fire and night, an old, old magic that never fails. The other children whirled and whooped around her, their sparklers making arcs against their jumping, dancing figures. But she just stood, lost in wonder. Their bonfire was far, far better than any other in the yards that stretched on either side, the flames from theirs touched the clouds that drifted overhead, turning them into a rosy, golden fleece. And no amount of later argument ever unconvinced her. Cardboard and a straw mattress - that was all you needed for a wonderful, magical bonfire.