

Mr Forester

For centuries the Wish Hound Inn on Thornham Common had provided a last stopping place for weary travellers on their way to the capital. Now it was an Irish-themed pub, and Thornham was a sprawling suburb on the fringes of South London, whose hotchpotch of terraced houses, chain stores, small factories and allotments vied for space between a criss-cross of congested roads and rail tracks. King Henry VIII had destroyed the Benedictine abbey in the 1500s and soon after that the great manor house and part of the church had mysteriously burnt down, leaving the medieval core of St Michael's to be buttressed and turreted by succeeding generations. The rugged grassland of the common itself, however, had survived the years more or less unscathed. The wide curve of stony ground opposite

the pub, where the village stocks once stood, was now used as a bus lay-by. The drovers with their flocks of sheep and geese had been replaced by dog walkers and skateboarders; children sailed toy boats on the dew pond and the ancient trackways were now a series of tarmac cycle paths that provided handy short cuts to the furthest reaches of Wolfie's paper round.

He stuffed a crumpled copy of the *Thornham Gazette* through the last letter box on Blackthorn Drive, sped home past a gang of workmen scratching their heads over a burst water main and pushed open the back door. Sarah hastily pocketed a letter, her face pale.

"What's up, Mum?"

There was no use pretending.

"It's a final demand from the cash and carry. We've got to pay them by today or. . ." Her voice faltered. "I tried ringing all day yesterday but Mr Pullen won't take my calls – his secretary says he just wants his money."

"I'll make you a cup of tea," offered Wolfie, not knowing what else to say. He held the kettle under the tap and waited for the ancient plumbing to wheeze into action. Instead of the usual hissing and rattling in the pipes there was a violent gurgle and a pounding stream of water hit the bottom of the kettle and bounced onto his jumper. He snatched up a dishcloth. Underneath it lay his maths book and a history worksheet. He groaned loudly. He'd forgotten to do his homework. Just his luck that the strictest teacher in the school took him for both subjects.

He didn't know which he dreaded more, a mob of angry bailiffs or the wrath of Mr Grimes. A splinter of sunlight pierced the clouds, slanting straight into his eyes. He blinked and the perfect solution to both his problems popped into his head.

"I know," he said, with what he hoped was a tone of martyrdom, "I'll look after the shop while you go down to the cash and carry. If you see this Pullen bloke face to face, maybe he'll let you off till you get paid for Monty's portrait."

Sarah looked up into her son's wide green eyes, gold-flecked and glittering in the sunlight. She blew her nose.

"Well . . . I hate to ask you to miss school, but this *is* an emergency."

"If you want I could look after the shop all day," he offered nobly, but Sarah had already grabbed her coat and was rushing out of the back door.

Gloomily Wolfie opened his maths book. He had been set a series of geometry problems involving circles, squares and something unfathomable called pi. Although he carefully measured out lines with his ruler and swung the compass around the paper, the result was nothing like the neat diagram Mr Grimes had drawn on the board. Wolfie's looked more like a spiralling spider's web. He gave up and began to draw a cartoon of Mr Grimes impaled on the point of a compass.

Art was the only thing Wolfie was good at and, just like

Sarah, images had flowed from his fingers from the moment he had been able to grasp a crayon. The walls of his room were covered with his inventive fantasies: strange landscapes peopled with bizarre characters; comic-strip adventures starring heroes of his own devising; and terrifying monsters, whose leering faces sometimes startled him when he woke up in the night.

The doorbell jangled. He hurried into the shop and recognized the tweed plus fours, buckled, mid-calf, over red and purple chequered socks. The thickset elderly man inside them was struggling to free himself from a woolly hat, caught in the strap of his satchel. In a flurry of flailing arms, a bush of white hair finally burst free and shook itself like a small damp dog.

“Can I help you?” asked Wolfie.

Burrowing in his bag, the man pulled out a roll of yellowing parchment and, using the brass weights from the scales to anchor the curling edges, he spread it across the counter.

“Yes, lad, possibly you can.” A pair of bright blue eyes stared eagerly at Wolfie from beneath jutting white eyebrows tinged with ginger. “Where might I find St Michael’s Church?”

Reading upside down, Wolfie made out the words *Thornham Magna* written in old-fashioned script and some funny little drawings of buildings, fields and trees overlaid with a criss-cross of faded ink marks. It was some kind of map.

"St Michael's is across the common, next to the gasworks," he said helpfully.

"I see. And is it true that the ancient rite of raising the giants is still practised here?"

Wolfie shrugged. "Yeah, they do it every year."

His visitor trembled with excitement. "I do hope I get a chance to see it for myself."

Wolfie looked at him suspiciously. Why would anyone want to watch a bunch of pensioners with twigs in their hats doing the conga round the graveyard?

"And what do you know of the ghostly hound said to haunt the common?"

"The what?"

"The wish hound. . ."

"It's a pub . . . the Wish Hound is a pub," said Wolfie.

The man shook his head absently. "And where exactly is Dodds Hill?"

Wolfie pointed across the common. "Over there." In the corner of the map he made out the words *In the year of our blessed Lord fourteen hundred and fifty-seven*. "Er – you might do better with an A-Z. This map looks a bit . . . out of date."

The man jabbed a triumphant finger at a pencilled cross. "So! Just as I thought, your shop would be here."

"Maybe, but I'm pretty sure we've got some new street maps in the back. . ."

"No need, no need." The stranger stuck out a beefy hand. "How rude of me! Let me introduce myself. The name is Forester, Remus Forester."

Wolfie shook his hand doubtfully. It was a bit early in the morning for fending off lunatics. "Wolfie Brown."

Mr Forester looked around the shop approvingly. "I think this will do very nicely."

"What will?" snapped Wolfie, panicking that this weirdo was a debt collector from the cash and carry.

"You do take paying guests, don't you?"

Relieved, Wolfie shook his head. "It's Mrs Baxter at number 29 who does bed and breakfast."

"Number 29?" The eyebrows bristled. "That wouldn't do at all."

"I've heard it's great. They've got central heating, satellite telly. . ."

"No, it's got to be here. Any other number is quite out of the question."

"But we don't take lodgers."

"Are you sure?"

"Course I'm sure." Wolfie was beginning to lose patience.

Remus Forester leaned across the counter, sweeping a pile of paper bags to the floor. "Perhaps you should consider the advantages – a regular rent, almost no effort on your part. I'm not the demanding type. I wouldn't expect hot meals – I am a fruitarian, of course."

Fruitcake, more like, thought Wolfie, gathering up the bags.

"My needs are few. I wouldn't use up your hot water. A

bracing cold shower is more than sufficient to set me up for the day."

"Look, I'm sorry, Mr Forester. I don't care how often you wash or how hot you have the water," said Wolfie irritably. "We haven't got room for a lodger!"

"I have references," said Mr Forester, waving a couple of battered envelopes.

Wolfie was beginning to wonder if he was on one of those hidden-camera TV programmes. Just in case, he gritted his teeth into something that might pass for a smile and took the envelopes. One letter was typewritten and headed *The Society for the Investigation of Lost Knowledge*. It said that Remus Forester had been a member of SILK for many years and was best known for his seminal monograph entitled *Evidence for an Electric Universe*. The other, handwritten by a Mrs Stokes of "Moor View", Bodmin, advised that Mr Forester was a lovely gentleman, who hadn't been no trouble and always paid his rent on time, not like some others she could mention.

Mr Forester produced a large, leather-bound tape measure and, seizing Wolfie's hand, looped the ring at the end of the tape over his thumb.

"Stay there, lad," he ordered and began to walk backwards towards the door, unwinding the tape as he went. As he reached the magazine rack a sharp-faced man in a leather jacket hurried in from the rain.

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Mr Forester. "You are that reporter from the television news. Rex Slinfold, is it not?"

I find your despatches from the far-flung corners of our planet most informative.”

“Oh . . . thanks,” said the new customer. “Look, sorry to jump the queue, I’ve got a plane to catch.” He turned to Wolfie. “Can you cancel my papers for the next two weeks?”

Wolfie let go of the tape measure. It sprang back into its case with a satisfying ping, making Mr Forester leap in surprise.

“Going somewhere nice, Mr Slinfold?” asked Wolfie, hunting for the order book.

“India. I’m covering the election. Got to rush, I’ll let you know when I’m back.” Sidestepping Mr Forester, Rex Slinfold hurried away.

Wolfie gasped. Mr Forester was chipping at a crack in the wall with a small metal pick.

“Extraordinary,” he declared as the pick bit into something solid, sending a shower of tiny sparks into the air. “Has your family lived here long?”

Wolfie was just wondering if he should phone the police when Sarah came running in, her hair tumbling out of its knot.

“It’s going to be all right,” she panted, unbuttoning her coat. “I saw Mr Pullen and he said if I do a painting of his son’s stick insect he’ll give us till Friday to pay the first instalment. Thanks, Wolfie. You can get off to school now. I’ll finish serving this customer.” She beamed at Mr Forester. “What can I get you, sir?”

Mr Forester beamed back. "I need a room that faces east."

Wolfie rolled his eyes at his mother. Then he noticed that she was still wearing her pyjamas. For the first time in his life he felt a desperate urge to get to school and experience the soothing sanity of being shouted at by Mr Grimes.

Remus Forester shook Sarah's hand warmly. "Perhaps we could discuss this over a cup of tea? I make my own tea bags, you know."

Wolfie backed away. As he wheeled his bike across the yard he could still hear a booming voice recommending an infusion made from the bark of the weeping birch.