

The General and I looked out at the destruction we had wrought.

London was burning. As we stood atop Primrose Hill, hand in hand, we passed a set of binoculars back and forth in order to watch the flames spread outwards to engulf the whole world.

The General sat down and opened a small Tupperware box containing our lunch. Inside sat neatly cut triangles of bread containing either ham or cheese. There were also two apples and a large kit-kat which we intended to share. I joined him, resting my rump on the rather damp grass and swigging heartily from my strawberry ribena. The General spoke through dainty mouthfuls of his sandwich, the crumbs sticking to his moustache:

“Is it right, Brompton?”

“You wanted to fix things didn’t you?”

“Yes. Yes of course. But...”

“It’s the answer to your problems. If we’re to make things anew, then first we have to unmake what there is.”

“But all the people...”

“Will be fine. They’ll get over it.”

His cowardice was putting me off my lunch, and I tossed my empty ribena away. I stood up and strolled over to the bench, tired of my arse being cold and damp. This should have felt like a massive victory but instead I just felt rather glum.

I looked over at the General and found all my affection for the man had vanished. Now, it was like looking at an overweight, overripe sentient melon. I rolled myself a cigarette and brooded, the mile high flames shooting out across the Earth doing nothing for my spirits. For his part, the General had started on an apple; I’d had enough.

“Come on. We’re leaving.”

“Leaving? Now? But why?”

“Phase Two.”

“Already?”

“Why wait?”

“We haven’t finished lunch!”

I pulled out a pistol from my jacket pocket and shot the apple from his hands. He yelped in surprise, his eyes wide with a sense of betrayal. It almost made me sneer.

“Phase Two, already! Now come on.”

The General scrambled to his feet, breathless and ungainly, like some doomed beast. He nearly toppled and fell as I strode down the hill. I could feel the heat of the flames already.

“But where are we going, Brompton?”

“The pub of course.”

—

A putrid stench rose from the Regent’s Canal. The surface of the water looked like soup. I could see the bones of some large animal sticking out the water here and there, and a faint vapour seemed to engulf the tow path. The General shivered and grabbed my arm.

“We ain’t going down there, are we?”

“There’s people up here we don’t want to mingle with. For instance...”

I pulled away from his grip and pointed at the Chinese restaurant moored nearby. From within we could hear the screams of young children, and the sound of several shots. A moment later someone emerged from a window and tossed a small bag into the canal. I half expected it to bounce back out. Instead, before it even touched the surface, an enormous snout emerged from the water and snatched it out of the air. Sharp teeth tore the material as the entire thing was swallowed whole.

“What the hell was that?” The General trembled some more.

“Giant alligators. Must have escaped out of the zoo. We’ll need to keep our wits about us. Now come on...”

As we descended the steps I drew my weapon and motioned to the General to keep silent. We stepped on to the tow path and began to quietly make our way along the water. The stench was far worse here, and the humidity was immense. I loosened my scarf and undid the buttons on my three-quarter length overcoat, and drew a second pistol from my belt.

The General, for his part, was carrying a machete and a small service revolver, and despite his size and fondness for meringue, I knew he was a dab hand with both.

As we passed under tunnels we tried not to think about the unseen, squelchy things beneath our feet. Sometimes one would squeal, or emit a small mournful passing of air. I rubbed the tears from my eyes.

Every now and then the water would be disturbed and we would see great shapes pass underneath. In the gardens on the opposite side there were signs of human sacrifice; bodies hung in the water, tied up at the arms, their lower halves missing.

Up ahead was moored a houseboat. Steam rose from the chimney. The lights were on, and somebody was home. I motioned with my eyes at the General, who acknowledged. As we approached there was a strange kind of hacking sound; metal into flesh. The General and I tensed, unsure of what we would find. Some savage eating the remains of his family, perhaps? Or a predatory bird thrusting its beak into the gut of some unfortunate boat dweller?

On deck there was a figure, and the General and I both sprang into action, weapons drawn. The figure looked up from his work, somewhat startled to see two gentlemen pointing guns at his face. He had a big, bushy ginger beard, and fuzzy, braided ginger hair. His bright Hawaiian shirt was intermittently stained with blood from the enormous alligator head he was hacking into with a kitchen knife. Tied up next to his boat was the body of a giant alligator, now headless, spilling its blood back into the canal.

“Whoa! Alright fellas, alright!”

The General and I lowered our weapons cautiously, still unsure about this new individual. Seemingly bored with hacking into the alligator’s head, he tossed it with some difficulty back into the canal where it bobbed a while, then slowly sank.

“Sorry” I said at last, “we thought you might be a maniac.”

“That’s alright!” The stranger smiled a broad, antipodean smile. “Most folks do, on account of the fact I’m killing giant alligators and cutting into their heads.”

I saw sense in this. I gestured at the next houseboat along.

“Don’t the neighbours mind?”

“Nah. They just think I’m a bit mad.”

“Well, someone’s got to do it, I suppose. Isn’t it a bit dangerous living here?”

“Oh the alligators don’t really bother us. The Chinese folk up the road keep ‘em happy.”

“So why do you kill them, then?”

I heard the cocking of a weapon, and the foetid sound of the General’s sweaty breathing behind me. Without turning round, I said:

“General. I don’t know what’s going through your head right now, but whatever it is, this isn’t the answer.”

“Mad” came the reply. “Mad. It’s all mad.”

“Of course it is.”

“This is your fault, Brompton!”

“And yours, General.”

“I wanted you to help me!”

“I am helping you, General. I’ve always been helping you.”

“I didn’t want this!”

“You think this is mad, General? It’s always been mad. It was mad before. But you and me. We’re going to make it better.”

I turned around to face him. Sweat was dripping down his face, and it was all I could do not to bust some mad skills and chop him in the neck before he could shoot me, then Chinese Burn him for at least thirty seconds. But that wouldn’t solve anything, really. I still needed the General at my side, although I longed for the day when I could finally be rid of this irritating parasite. I smiled at him.

“C’mon, General. You and me. We’re going to sort it all out. Of course, things will get worse before they get better, but things were getting worse anyway. Far more humane, surely, to hasten the effect? Burn the disease out?”

His hands were shaking and I thought the bloody idiot’s trembling might set off the trigger.

“Oh come on! What, you meet one guy who kills giant alligators and chops into their heads for no apparent reason and that sends you over the edge? Get a grip mate, we’re going to Camden. You’re going to need a stronger fucking stomach than that!”

He seemed to be coming round now. I relaxed slightly, even mopping my brow of the sweat that had formed. My suit and coat were clinging to me and I couldn’t wait to sink a nice Guinness when I got to the pub.

“Actually, why do you kill alligators and chop into their heads?”

The weirdo looked coy and sheepish as he fingered the blade of his knife, like a naughty child caught doing something he shouldn’t. He picked his nose.

“Well, you might think it’s a dumb reason...”

“No, go on...”

“Only, these crocs here, they’re only babies, right? Tiddlers? See, now I wanna kill the big mama. The queen. The mega croc!”

“I see...”

“And I figure if I kill enough of her babies, she’s gonna get real pissed, right? And then

she'll come down here and I can rip her fucking throat out and cut into her head like a madman!"

"Okay..."

I glanced again at the General. I kind of understood him now, but he still repulsed me.

"Now, General, I'm going to give you something to help you..."

The ground shook. The General's face was a complete blank. The ground shook again and I knew what it was; the mama was coming!

I fished into my pocket and produced a small pill. I offered it gingerly towards the General.

"We don't have much time. Take it."

"Wha-what is it?"

He reached forward nervously and plucked the pill from my hands. He put it into his mouth and with some difficulty generated some spit with which to wash it down. His face contorted into a series of interesting shapes as he gauged the taste, and finally settled.

"Ecstasy. Now come on, we've got a giant, pissed-off Queen Alligator to fight!"

A loud crash echoed out from where we had just come from. There was the sound of bricks cracking and toppling as the mighty behemoth emerged from the tropical mists and squeezed its mighty bulk beneath the tunnel, half of it trailing in the water. Defeated by the tunnel, it toppled into the water silently and swam underneath.

The three of us retreated as far back as the tow path would allow us and I raised my weapons in anticipation of the beast's attack.

"Are you ready, General. No quarter, remember. That thing will tear us apart, and then how will we succeed? We need to get to Camden!"

He seemed not to have heard me, but then turned and nodded. His pupils were starting to look really, really big.

Suddenly, the houseboat was launched thirty feet up into the air, broken clean in two; in its place was the enormous, armoured belly of the Queen Alligator, exposed as it reared up on its massive hind legs, its snout raised to the fire in the sky, its mouth open, roaring victory and revenge to the scorched heavens. The cry shook our bones and I heard the

lunatic whine slightly at the prospect of finally fighting the abomination he had unleashed. The man disgusted me almost as much as the General with his cowardice and uncertainty. He'd made his bed, and I sincerely hope he didn't expect us to lie in it with him.

The front of the mighty beast crashed down to the tow path, its nostrils mere inches from our face. Fear paralysed our reactions; we should have shot but instead we simply stared in awe at the majesty. The nostrils flared and flexed; the massive black eyes stared at us with a malicious intelligence and it would have been impossible to miss the ragged stack of teeth that would not so much chew us as grate us before our trip to its room-sized gullet. Spines ran the length of its snout, and atop the head, strapped into some kind of leather saddle was...

"Mother!"

"Mrs Rhodes!"

The General had a dreamlike expression on his face. He opened his arms in a hugging gesture, despite the teeth still racked in front of us.

"It's so nice to see you!"

Mother, as usual, did not look impressed.

"Brompton, what are you doing here?"

"I could ask you the same thing, mother!"

"I'm Queen of the Alligators now, Brompton. And this man..."

She pointed an accusing finger at the Australian madman.

"...has been killing my subjects! My children!"

"Aren't the alligators eating human children being chucked out of the Chinese restaurant back that way?"

"Shut up, Brompton. I'm your mother. I know best."

"Fair enough. Oh well, we'd best be off to Camden. I need to set in motion Phase Two of the plan, plus I really need a pint."

Suddenly, the madman burst loose, making a break for it down the tow path, arms flailing in desperation.

"You'll never take me alive, croc-queen! I live to fight another day! I'll kill all yer crocs! All of 'em!"

Mother didn't miss a beat. The gigantic creature swung its hind quarters out of the water, taking with it the all the houseboats parked alongside, and whipped its tail into the Aussie's path. His gangly form was impaled through the middle and he shrieked in pain and terror. The tail swung towards the beast's mouth, which opened to accept the agonised morsel. The jaw closed completely over the man, a squelch being the last thing we heard, and the tail emerged from between a row of teeth clean and sparkling.

As the beast contentedly chewed, I began to back off, pulling the dazed General with me.

"Well, nice to see you, mother. We'll be off now. You take care!"

Mother waved back at me, happy in her work.

"You take care too, Brompton! Don't drink too much!"

Music filled our ears as we neared Camden Lock. On the steep approach to the market we could see people lining the walls, collapsed, their legs no longer working. Ket monkeys, monged out like nobody's business. The punks would be along soon to steal their money, or chop their limbs off and sell them to the foodstalls.

The market was heaving with people. I could hear at least fifteen different types of music and around thirty two languages, not to mention sixty-two Amy Winehouses and ten enclaves of baby Goths. The smell of food and ganja filled the air and I accepted a toke on a spliff from a passing cyborg with a pair of fake plastic breasts hung around his neck and a 'kiss-me-quick' cap on his head. The fire in the sky was obscured by the market's own effervescent glow, a translucent nebula wrought of light and smoke and music. If this was the end of the world, I thought, it ain't half bad.

The General was swaying all over the shop. His eyes were as wide as saucers and he kept rubbing his own ample girth. He was seriously cramping my style. Mind you, I thought, looking at my own rumpled clothing, I'm not exactly doing too well myself. I put my shades back on and decided to head for the nearest safe pub, to drink and wash my face. I pulled the General through the throng to the nearest set of stairs and ascended to a nearby bar. People sitting on the stairs made it difficult, especially with a dundering, pilled-up idiot like the General with me. What was I thinking, giving him a bean when I was bringing him here? Mind you, it seemed to have cured his self-doubt about the mission. The only problem was, it had got into me.

Maybe I had been wrong with the Machine? A mis-calculation? Maybe the General was right and all this madness wasn't supposed to happen? I cursed myself for letting that idiot drag me down. Even if I was wrong, even if it had all gone to shit and the General's

precious plan was no more, so what? It was my Machine. I made it. Yeah, I agreed to help the General, but I gave no guarantees. He came to me. He can pick up the pieces, if he wanted to. Or he could just enjoy the ride like the rest of us.

I placed the General in a seat away from the bar and went over to order, poking in my wallet past old lottery tickets for some paper currency. Happily, the smoking ban was being cheerfully ignored, which proved my Machine wasn't all bad, and everyone was smoking pretty much everything, from weed to crack to shisha to Silk Cut Lights. The bartender was attentive.

"A Guinness and a Foster's, please."

"Guinness is off, mate."

As I drew my weapon, I realised that the end of the world was not going to be so easy.

Alexander Hayden James Smith, 2008