## Child of Power

## John Wyndham

CHAPTER ONE

OF MICE AND MEN

It was one of those evenings more often imagined than granted in the Lake District. The stir in the air scarcely ruffled the water and it was warm enough to enjoy sitting out on the terrace after sunset. Peace had crept gradually over the valley to settle down finally with the closing of the public bar. The peak of the mountain opposite was still silhouetted against the lingering afterglow, lights occasionally wandered across its black base and the sound of a car engine came over the lake to us no louder than the buzz of a bumble bee. One sat and drank beer and smoked and chatted.

We were a chance-met group, such as any pub in the district might have held that night. A business man and his son from somewhere in Lancashire, two American college boys energetically seeing England from bicycles bought within an hour of their arrival at Southampton, a tall man in whose speech was a faint suggestion of the north Midlands, his wife, and Joan and myself. The four others in the place, two young men and young women whose notion of a holiday seemed to consist of dissipating the maximum of ergs in the minimum of time, had already left us in order that no mountain might put them to shame on the morrow.

Conversationally, we had rambled quite a way. We had considered the inhabitants and character of the neighbourhood, thence we had somehow arrived at the Spanish question and settled that, which had entailed our decision that certain social reforms were vitally necessary all over the world, and this in its turn had led us to speculation on the future in general and the future of man in particular. One of the Americans was touched into eloquence on the subject.

‘It’s such a darned muddle in most people’s minds.’ he said. ‘They know that nothing is really static, it’s all got to change, but along with that they’re convinced that modern man is God’s last word—and yet that’s contradicted again because if they were as convinced of it as they think they are they’d do something to straighten out the system and make it a decent world for this climax of evolution to live in—to settle down in permanently.’

‘As it is,’ put in his companion, ‘they just tinker away at it a bit because instinct rather than reason tells them that it’s a waste of time to make the perfect social set-up for our kind of man when he may be superseded by another kind who won’t be satisfied with that set-up at all.’

‘What do you mean by another kind of man?’ asked the Lancashire man from behind his pipe. ‘What other kind can there be?’

‘What about a type with a super brain?’ suggested his son. ‘Something like “The Hampdenshire Wonder” that Beresford wrote about, or Stapledon’s “Odd John.” Didn’t you read those books?’

‘No, I didn’t,’ his father said, bluntly. ‘I’ve something better to do with my time than readin’ tales about fancies and freaks.’

‘It’s only the form,’ said his son. ‘What they’re suggesting is that the next step will be a great brain development.’

‘Oh, aye. Chaps wi’ big ’eads, and suchlike. I don’t believe it’

‘That’s not the only possibility,’ put in Joan, beside me. ‘I think the next step will be psychic. Perhaps telepathy, or a kind of clairvoyance that can really be used; or perhaps they’ll be able to see things that we can’t see now—as some people say animals can.’

‘Sounds retrogressive to me,’ the first American told her. ‘I’d say most of those things did exist in man, and do in animals to a certain extent now, but that they’ve atrophied with the development of the brain. No, I guess brain development’s the way it goes. Though in a way I’d say you’re right about seeing things. Eyes are still improving. Maybe they’ll be able to see the infra-red or the ultra-violet, and p’raps some emanations we know nothing about. But I think the brain and the reasoning faculties will gradually develop beyond anything we can conceive at present.’

‘Why gradually?’ asked his friend. ‘There doesn’t seem to have been much change in the last five thousand years. Why not at a jump?—that’s the way with mutations.’

‘Maybe, but how do you think a sudden mutation is going to survive boneheads like us? We’d probably put it out of the way out of kindness, or lock it up in an asylum and not let it breed. I can see us defending ourselves mighty toughly against any mutations.’

‘And very right, too,’ said the Lancashire man. ‘ ’Oo wants to breed freaks or mutilations or whatever they are? Put ’em out of their misery, be ’umane, I say.’

‘But they wouldn’t be freaks, Father. If they were the natural next step in development, they’d be normal.’

‘If they ’ad big ’eads and thought different from other people they’d be freaks. A big ’ead’s a freak, same as a bearded woman. I’ve seen ’em at Blackpool. A man’s the same as the rest of us or ’e’s a freak. Stands to reason.’

The tall man from the Midlands spoke out of the darkness to the Americans.

‘I think you’re right about the jump, but what sort of a jump’s it going to be? That’s the question. It can’t be too big a physical change at one step. We, just like the wild animals, hate a variation from our norm, and I agree we’d be pretty sure to suppress it for a humane or for any other reason which happened to suit us. No, we must have survived to reach this stage by taking a series of small and not very obvious jumps in safety.’

‘But small jumps would mean pretty frequent jumps, or we’d never have had time to get from the amoeba to here,’ said one of the Americans. ‘Now, if there’s been a jump worth a nickel in the last five thousand years I’ve not heard of it. That’s surely a long time to stay put. Maybe we have come to the end or maybe nobody’s noticed it when it happened.’

‘Or,’ said the tall man, ‘maybe it’s just about to happen.’ He puffed at his cigarette so that it glowed and lit up his face. One had a feeling from his tone that he was not just speaking at random. The American asked:

‘You’ve an idea what it might be?’

‘Might be—well, yes. But, mind you, I’m laying no claim to prophecy. As far as I go is to say that I have seen a variation from the normal which does not seem to be due to any of those glandular upsets which commonly cause freaks. It is, to the best of my knowledge, unique, but, of course, there may be others. If there are, I see no reason why they should not survive and stabilise the new type.’

‘Which is?’ prompted the American.

‘An additional sense. A sixth sense.’ There was a slightly disappointed pause.

‘Well, I don’t know that there’s much in that,’ said the Lancashire man. ‘Means knowing things as nobody told you, and you ’aven’t read. There’s a word for it—oh, aye, intuition, that’s it. Young lady I once knew ’ad it. She went into the fortune reading business. Didn’t do so bad, either.’

‘That’s not what I mean.’ the tall man told him a trifle shortly. ‘I’m not talking about a mixture of guesswork, humbug and adding two and two. I mean a real sense, with organs of perception as real as your eyes and your ears and your nose and your tongue.’

‘I don’t see as you need any more. They’re enough, aren’t they?’

The rest ignored him.

‘Organs for the perception of what?’ asked the elder American curiously.

The tall man did not reply at once. He turned up the end of his cigarette and regarded it for a moment.

‘All right,’ he said. ‘I’ll tell you about it. But I warn you that all the names and places will be faked. If there is any chance of following the business up, I want to do it myself.’

CHAPTER TWO

THE STRANGE CASE OF TED FILLER

The tall man paused again as though seeking an opening.

‘It’s an odd little story, and to explain to you how I come to know so much about it, I shall have to reveal that I practise medicine. That’s a thing I keep quiet as a rule when I am away from home. It alters people’s attitude if they know it and shuts one off from them almost as much as if one were a clergyman.

‘However, that is my profession and for twenty years, until, in fact, two years ago when I moved south, I practised in Irkwell in Derbyshire. It’s a place which is typical of the kind of semi-industrialised village you find round there. Most of the men are employed in the quarries or the mills, a few work lead in the pits where there’s any left to work. The women work in the mills, too, until they marry and start having more children than they want. The place is partly cottages of local stone but mostly rows of shoddy cottages put up in the last century when the mills came. In general, it’s a kind of semi-rural slum. Not the kind of place you’d expect to produce any advance on modern humanity—and yet there’s no doubt in my mind that young Ted Filler was something more than an ordinary freak.

‘His mother, Ada, regarded his arrival more as an act of God than a personal achievement until she found out that he was a boy. It was a discovery which had the result of infusing more interest into the family life. Her three previous contributions had all been girls, and this, and the deaths of the two younger in infancy, had helped to give her an attitude of discouraged fatalism about the whole business. But with Ted’s birth she seemed to make a fresh start and he began his independent existence enviably protected by first child devotion and fourth child experience.

‘Not that he appeared to be in the least in need of special treatment. He was a healthy, well-formed child whose yells when he was washed were encouragingly lusty. I did not detect the least sign of abnormality in him, nor do I think would anyone else have done so. I was able with complete honesty to assure his father and mother that they had a remarkably fine son—and that wasn’t too common in my Irkwell practice.

‘Nevertheless, when I called on Mrs. Filler again I found satisfaction somewhat diluted.

‘ “ ‘E worries us, ’e does,” she said. “Not but what ’e ain’t a dear little chap and me proud of ’im,” she added, in the manner of one anxious not to appear ungrateful. “But ’e ain’t like the others was. ’E’s that difficult to get to sleep, you’d never believe. And then sometimes when you’ve got ’im to sleep ’e’ll wake up all of a sudden and look at you just like ’e’s ’ad the fright of ’is little life, then ’e’ll begin to ’owl. Ee, an’ ’e does ’owl. Fair frightened me and Jim first time ’e done it. We thought ’e wasn’t never going to stop. An ’e didn’t, not till ’e was fair wore out—and so was we. I’d like you to ’ave a look at ’im, Doctor, if you will. I don’t feel easy about him, an’ that’s a fact.”

‘I gave the child a careful examination. From what I knew of Ada Filler I was fairly certain she wasn’t one to get worked up unnecessarily, though of course you can never be sure. The baby was lying in its cot, blue eyes wide open, but quite quiet and peaceful. There didn’t seem to be a thing as it shouldn’t be and I said so.

‘ “I’m glad to ’ear that,” said his mother. “Still—I don’t know. ’E’ll lie quiet that way for hours when you’d think ’e’d be asleep, then all of a sudden, for no reason, off ’e’ll go like a ’ooter. An’ nowt as I can do’ll stop ’im.”

‘Well, there wasn’t anything really to worry about. Some children are like that; they take one look at the world and hate it on sight and you can’t blame them much in a place like Irkwell, but in the end they learn to put up with it, like the rest of us. Nevertheless, young Ted Filler seemed to be taking his time about settling down. Whenever I looked in during the next few weeks it was the same tale. Once or twice I heard him howling. It was a remarkable achievement. I didn’t wonder that his parents were looking worn and that the rest of the street was behaving pretty offensively to them.

‘ “ ’E don’t sleep enough, not near enough,” his father assured me. “ ’Tain’t natural. ’T’ain’t fair on a man as ’as to work, either.” ’

All I could tell them was that I’d stake my reputation there was nothing wrong with the child and that he would soon outgrow it.

‘It was two months later that something occurred which might have given me an early clue to the whole thing had I had the wit to perceive it as a clue.

‘I had called at the Fillers’ cottage about something to do with their daughter, Doreen, I think, and naturally inquired after the baby.

‘ “Oh, I found out what to do with ’im,” his mother said.

‘She showed me. The heir of the Fillers was sleeping peacefully and with an expression of blissful satisfaction. His bed was made up in an ordinary’ galvanised iron bath with a handle each end. He could have passed for an Italian cherub or a patent food advertisement.

‘ “Sleeps pretty near all the time now. Makin’ up for it, like,” she said.

‘ “How did you do it?” I asked.

‘She explained that it had happened by accident a week or two before. She had been ironing when Ted started one of his howls. She had fetched him down to the kitchen because, even if you couldn’t stop him, you could keep an eye on him, but no sooner had she got him downstairs than the insurance man had called.

‘The baby had to be put somewhere while she got the money and paid the man and the handiest place for the moment was on top of the clean linen stacked in one of the tin baths. When she came back from the door he had not only stopped crying but was fast asleep, so she left him there as long as possible. The next time he yelled she did the same again, and with the same result. It seemed to work every’ time.

‘ “So now I makes ’is bed in there regular,” she added. “Seems queer, but it suits ’im. Good as gold, ’e is, in there. Won’t sleep nowhere else.”

‘I didn’t take much notice at the time. A preference for sleeping in a tin bath just seemed one of those odd infantile idiosyncrasies which the wise accept and use gratefully.

‘Well, time went on. I used to look in at the Fillers’ occasionally, so I saw young Ted from time to time. I didn’t take a great interest in him for he was a healthy enough baby. I gathered that he persisted in his odd preference for sleeping in a tin bath, but beyond that he seemed undistinguished. And yet, when I came to think it over afterwards, there was another incident which might have given me a hint.

‘On that occasion he was lying in a dilapidated perambulator outside the back door. He did not show that he noticed me. His eyes were wide open, gazing far away, but he was not quite silent; he seemed to be humming a little tune. As I bent over him I could swear I caught that theme from the New World Symphony. You know how it goes.’

The doctor broke off and hummed a few bars.

‘That was what it seemed. Hummed by a child one year old. I was curious enough to ask Mrs. Filler whether she had heard it on the wireless and learned that the family taste fancied variety, sports news and cinema organs almost exclusively. I remember thinking that even if the child had happened to hear a version on a cinema organ he showed astonishing tonal memory, and then for one reason or another I forgot the incident until later. Probably, I very reasonably told myself that I had made just a foolish mistake.

‘I must have seen the child several times during the next two or three years, but I admit I’ve no recollection of doing so, for, as I said, he was too healthy to be really interesting, though I wish now I’d kept an eye on him. It was not until his boy was over four that Jim Filler came to see me one Monday evening and gave me an interest in the boy which I’m never likely to lose.

‘Jim had cleaned up and polished off the quarry dust for the occasion. He seemed a bit uncertain of himself.

‘ “I don’t want to waste your time, Doctor,” he said, “but I would be grateful if you’d come, casual-like, and ’ave a look at our Ted sometime when me and the missus is there.”

‘ “What’s wrong with him?” I said.

‘Jim fiddled his cap in his hands.

‘ “I don’t know as there’s owt wrong with ’im, exactly,” he said. “It’s—it’s, well, ’e’s a bit queer, some’ow, in a manner o’ speakin’. It’s got me and the missus fair worried an’ all. She don’t know as I’ve come ’ere. So if you could drop in kind of accidental like, you know——?”

‘ “But what’s wrong with him?” I asked again. “Do you think he’s backward; not up to the rest, or, something like that?”

‘ “Nay, t’lad’s bright enough that way. ’Taint nothin’ o’ that kind. Fact, some ways ’e’s a bit too bright, that’s a funny thing. ’E don’t often talk like a nipper and many’s the time I’ve ’eard ’im use words what I’m sure ’e ain’t never ’eard from me and the missus. Understands what’s said to ’im, too, better than any kid I know.”

‘I asked a few more questions, but Jim seemed to be holding back for some reason or other. If it had been another man I might have been short with him, but I knew Jim. His type is the incarnation of stubborn commonsense. In the end I got rid of him by promising to go round the next evening, though I didn’t expect to find much amiss.’

CHAPTER THREE

THE BOY WHO SAW SOUND

‘Evidently Jim Filler had changed his mind and told his wife that I was coming, for she didn’t seem surprised to see me. In honour of the occasion they took me into the front room, an apartment with a curious stage-set appearance, but I stopped Ada Filler as she was putting a match to the fire and suggested that we all went to the kitchen. We’d all feel more natural and less Sunday-best in there, as well as warmer.

‘Even so, it wasn’t easy to begin. Neither of them was anxious to come out plainly with the trouble. We had to exchange a number of ineffective sentences before Jim cut through it and became his usual forthright self again. He put on a dogged expression.

‘ “I know it’ll sound daft, Doctor, but it’s God’s truth. Me and the missus’s ready to swear to that, so if you’ll ’ear me right through——?”

‘ “Go ahead and tell me. I’ll ask questions afterwards,” I assured him.

‘ “Well, this is ’ow it was. Saturday tea time we was all in ’ere waitin’ for news on t’wireless so as I could check my coupons——” he began.

‘It certainly was an odd tale that Jim had to tell.

‘Mrs. Filler had been setting the table, while her husband and the two children waited for their tea. Jim had copies of his pool entries and a pencil ready to check them. At six o’clock he switched on to Droitwich. It meant that they’d have to listen to the weather forecast and a lot of political talk before the important stuff came along, but you could never be sure how long it would take to get the sports bulletin and it wasn’t worth risking missing any of it. Well, he switched on all right and the dial lit up, but nothing came out of the speaker. He pressed the switch on and off a bit and looked at the outside connections. They were right enough.

‘ “Eeh-h-h, there’s summat wrong wi’ t’ bastard, there is, an’ all,” he decided.

‘He turned the set round and took off the back. It looked all right, at least there was nothing obviously adrift. He scratched his head. It’s not as easy to trace trouble in a modern mains set as it was in the old battery days. The insides look alarmingly efficient.

‘It was then that young Ted took an interest.

‘ “What’s oop with it, Dad?” he asked, coming closer.

‘ “ ‘Ow should I know?” inquired Jim, with irritation.

‘Well, it was then that the strange thing happened. Jim said that young Ted had looked at him “sort of surprised like,” then the child had pushed in between him and the set. He didn’t look inside it, Jim said; he put his head down at it as if he were going to butt it, then he lifted his face again and looked at his father.

‘ “It’s in there. That’s where it stops,” he said and pointed to a black object in the cabinet.

‘ “It were a transformer,” Jim said. “An’ ’e were right, too. Chap ’ad a look at it yesterday and one of the windin’s was gone.”

‘Later, Jim had remembered another “funny thing.”

‘Several weeks previously he had been taking his son for a Sunday walk. They were on the Derby road where the grid lines run almost alongside when young Ted looked up at a pylon for no reason and said suddenly, “It’s stopped.”

‘Jim couldn’t make out what he was talking about and probably didn’t care much, but he remembered that on the way back young Ted, equally without reason, had said, “It’s going again, now.”

‘It wasn’t until he got back that he learned there had been a breakdown somewhere which had put the grid out of action for half an hour or so.

‘But he only recalled that afterwards. At the moment, he was chiefly concerned over the prospect of missing his football news.

‘ “Now I’ll ’ave to go and buy t’Football Special, when t’papers come in,” he groused.

‘Young Ted had made no immediate reply to that. He had sat silent for a while looking rather puzzled, then with the air of one who had considered the subject unsatisfactorily from all angles he said:

‘ “Why, Dad?”

‘ “Why, what?” asked Jim, whose mind had gone on.

‘ “Why’ll you ’ave to get a paper?”

‘ “Because,” explained Jim, patiently, “because we can’t ’ave t’bloody wireless, that’s why.”

‘There was a pause while young Ted took this in.

“D’you mean you can’t ’ear what the man’s sayin’ ?” he inquired.

‘ “Course that’s what I mean. ’Ow d’you think any of us is goin’ to ’ear owt now t’set’s busted? You shut up, and eat your tea.”

‘There was another pause.

‘ “I can,” said young Ted thoughtfully.

‘ “You can what?”

‘ “ ‘Ear what ’e’s sayin’.”

‘Jim transferred his gaze from his tripe to his son. He looked at him hard for some moments without speaking. He didn’t want to turn on the lad for lying if it was only some childish make-believe game.

‘ “Well, tell us what t’chap is sayin’, then,” he invited.

‘Young Ted did. “Brentford, one,” he said. “Stoke City, nought. Derby County, nought. Birmingham, one, Everton, two. . . .”

‘ “An’ ’e were right,” Jim went on, leaning forward. “I know ’e were right. I checked ’em up on my list as ’e said ’em, an’ then I went out an’ got t’paper to make sure. ’E were dead right, every time.”

‘Ada Filler went on as he stopped.

‘ “I never ’eard of nothin’ like it. It don’t seem natural. Do you think it’s dangerous, Doctor?”

‘I looked at them, feeling pretty puzzled. There was no doubt they believed what they said. Jim was in dead earnest and a bit worried. Ada was more worried; she showed all that maternal solicitude which so oddly hopes that its child will be outstanding while being absolutely normal, distinguished while being indistinguishable.

‘I was at a loss for a reply. In my mind I was searching for a set of circumstances which could possibly produce the appearance of what they believed to have happened, and I could not find one at the moment. There floated into my mind the memory of the child’s curious humming as it lay in its perambulator, over three years ago now. Curiosity prompted me to ask.

‘ “Is Ted fond of music?”

‘ “Well, ’e can’t play anything,” Mrs. Filler said, “It’s early days for that, ain’t it? But ’e’s often ’ummin’ things, all sorts of tunes I never ’eard of.”

‘Jim was looking at me.

‘ “You don’t believe it, Doctor? Not that ’e was really ’earin’ the wireless without a set, I mean?”

‘ “Well, it takes a bit of swallowing you know, Jim. Would you believe it if you were in my position? There must be some explanation.”

‘ “Oh, there’s that, all right, but it’ll be a queer one, not a trick one. I’ll get t’lad down ’ere and you’ll see.”

‘He left the room. We heard him clatter upstairs and then down again. He came in carrying young Ted in his arms and put him down in a chair. The little boy sat there, sleepy and perhaps a trifle pale, though he looked well enough otherwise.

‘ “Now, Ted, lad, tell t’doctor what’s on t’National now.”

‘ “Ain’t it mended?” said Ted, eyeing the wireless set on the dresser.

‘ “Aye, it’s all right. But you just tell ’im what’s on t’National.”

‘Young Ted appeared to think for a moment, then:

‘ “Music,” he said. “Loud music.”

‘ “ ‘Ow does it go?” his father persisted.

‘Ted began to hum a part of a march quite recognisably one of Sousa’s, I think.

‘ “That’s right, lad. Now you keep on ’ummin’,” said Jim, and switched on the radio set.

‘Nobody spoke while the set warmed up. The only sound was Ted humming his march with a fine martial air. Jim leaned over and turned the volume control. A march came flooding out of the speaker. It was the same tune exactly on the beat and in pitch with Ted’s humming.

‘I couldn’t think of anything to say. I just sat staring at the child. Jim turned the volume control right down to nothing and reset the dial.

‘ “What’s on Regional?” he asked his son.

‘ “People clappin’,” said young Ted with the briefest pause. “Now there’s two men talking.”

‘ “Sayin’ what?”

‘ “Good evening, cads,” said young Ted, in a travestied drawl.

‘Jim turned the knob. The weary-toned wit of the Western Brothers pervaded the room.

‘ “What else?” Jim asked, damping out again.

‘ “Lots of things. A man shouting very loud over there.” Ted pointed to a corner of the room. He lapsed into a gabble which sounded like a vocal cartoon of German.

‘ “Try Berlin,” I suggested to Jim.

‘ “That’s ’im,” said young Ted, between the bolts of impassioned rhetoric which leapt out at us.

‘Jim gave it a few moments and then switched off.

‘ “Well, there it is. Doctor,” he said.

‘There, indeed, it was, unmistakably. And I was supposed to make something of it.

‘I looked at the boy. He was not paying attention to us. There was an abstracted expression on his face, not vacant in the least, but preoccupied. As his father said:

“ ‘ ’Tain’t no wonder ’e seems dreamy-like sometimes if ’e’s got that goin’ on in ’is head all the while.”

‘ “Ted,” I asked him, “do you hear that all the time?”

‘He came out of his abstraction and looked at me.

‘ “Aye,” he said, “when it’s going.”

‘It occurred to me then for the first time that I had been thinking of him—and that he had behaved—as if he were quite twice his age or more.

‘ “Does it worry you?”

‘ “No,” he said, a bit uncertainly, “ ‘cept at night, and when it’s so loud I ’ave to look at it.”

‘He always used that queer hybrid of expression. He talked about “quiet” and “loud” and yet coupled them with “looking.”

‘ “At night?” I asked.

‘ “Aye, it’s loud then.”

‘ “Always puts a tin box over ’is ’ead at nights, ’e does,” his mother put in. “I’ve tried to stop ’im time and again. Doesn’t seem natural, not to sleep with yer ’ead in a tin box, it doesn’t. But ’e would ’ave it, and it does keep ’im quiet. ’Course, I didn’t know about this ’ere. ’E just said it were noises and music, and I thought it were fancies.”

‘I remembered the tin bath of his babyhood.

‘ “Does the box stop it?” I asked him.

‘ “Middlin’,” said young Ted.

‘ “Maybe,” I said cautiously, ‘we could stop it altogether at nights somehow. Would you like that?”

‘ “Aye.”

‘ “Well, come here and let me have a look at you.” ’ His mother stretched out her hand and brought him over under the light.

‘As I’ve told you there was nothing at all unusual about his appearance, it was just that of any normal little boy. With the story of the tin and the memory of Jim’s description of him as he bent at the wireless set, I put my hands on his head and began to feel the structure. It wasn’t long before I came on something decidedly unusual.

‘On either side of the vault of the skull, about two inches above the temples, I found a round, soft spot about the size of a halfpenny. Hair grew on the spots as thickly as on the rest of the skull, but there was certainly no bone beneath, and the spots were situated with exact symmetry. The child winced involuntarily as my fingers touched them.

‘ “Does that hurt?” I asked him.

‘His “no” sounded a little doubtful.

‘I told him to close his eyes and then touched the lids with the tips of my fingers. It brought exactly the same wincing reaction. I was aware of a curiously excited feeling growing inside me. I had never heard of anything at all like this. It was unique. I parted the hair over the soft spots and looked closely. The skin was continuous and unbroken. There was nothing to see. Again I cautiously explored the spots with my fingers. The child did not like it. He dodged and broke away from me.

‘I was aware of his parents looking at me expectantly, but I kept my eyes on young Ted. I was trying to control my own excitement. I think an astronomer who has found a new planet or an explorer who has discovered a new continent must have felt rather as I felt then. Unable to believe his own luck and busily cramming his imagination down with reason; seeking for a hold on the hard facts and their implications.

‘I had an automatic desire to keep the child as unaware as possible of his singularity and an instinctive impulse to belittle its importance for his parents’ benefit. The motives for that impulse were, I confess, mixed. In fact, I’ve never really been able to sort them out honestly yet. There was a professional desire not to be sensational, undoubtedly a jealous wish to keep the thing to myself for the time being until I could learn more about it, and probably a lot of others.

‘His mother took the child upstairs again and I waited for her to come back before I said anything, then I was deliberately matter of fact.

‘ “It’s unusual, most unusual,” I told them, “but it’s certainly not anything to be frightened about. It’s an extra sensitivity which, I confess, I don’t altogether understand at present, but we shall undoubtedly learn more about that from talking to him and watching him, now that we know what to look for. I’d like you to observe very closely all he does or says with reference to electricity and let me know in as much detail as you can. His general health appears to be perfectly good, but if you like I’ll go over him thoroughly tomorrow.

‘ “One thing strikes me, and that is that perhaps he’s not getting enough sleep, or not sleeping soundly when he does. We may be able to get over that by giving him a better shield than a tin box. About the rest of it, his being so forward for his age in the way he speaks and understands questions, and that kind of thing—I don’t think you need worry either. It’s rather soon to be definite about anything yet, but it does seem likely that if he has had this kind of thing going on all the time the constant stimulation may have forced his brain to develop abnormally fast. He doesn’t laugh much, does he?”

‘ “No, ’e’s a solemn one.”

‘ “Well, you know, I’d say at a guess that his brain’s pretty tired. You see, it gets no rest from this, night or day, except perhaps when he’s sleeping—we can’t tell that for certain until we know more about it—and that’s bound to tire him. Besides, although it must stimulate in one way, yet in another it deadens because it gives his mind no chance to develop along its own lines. We shall have to find a way of altering that. It may not be very difficult.

‘ “I’m very glad you called me in now because, though of course we don’t know how he actually feels it, it’s difficult to believe that it isn’t putting a considerable strain on him, and the sooner we can relieve the strain to some extent, the easier he will find things.

‘ “There’s nothing to worry about. I’ll come round tomorrow, as I said, and perhaps I shall be able to explain more about it.”

‘I left them puzzled, though considerably, if vaguely, reassured. But I myself went home with my mind revolving unrestrainedly around the most astounding discovery. The boy had a sixth sense, something I had never heard, read or dreamed of. But from that moment I had not a vestige of doubt that young Ted was—the word seemed to coin itself—electro-sentient.’

CHAPTER FOUR

STRANGE NEW WORLD

The tall man paused. His face became suddenly visible in the darkness as he lit another cigarette.

It must be difficult for a non-medical man to appreciate all that meant to me,’ he went on. ‘There were so many sides to it. The sheerly professional interest, the fact oneself and no other had the opportunity to study it, the evolutionary aspect and the question of whether such a thing would become stabilised, the developments which would ensue if it did, as well as the work to be done in determining its capacities, limitations and nature.

‘Some people would say, I’ve no doubt, that I should, in the interests of science, have announced the discovery—and so I shall one day—but you can judge the playing up and sensationalism which would have swamped us and made quiet, normal observation impossible. Imagine what would happen when the newspapers got it—it would be worse than that silly Quins business and make scientific study even more difficult than it is with them. I thought, and I still think, that the way to learn about young Ted was to study him in his natural setting and not in a three-ring circus of advertisers and publicity men. So I laid myself out to play the whole thing down and keep it as quiet as possible.

It wasn’t as difficult as you might think to work that. Ada Filler was anxious to co-operate; her fear lest the neighbours should think there was anything “queer” about him was a great help. Jim wasn’t awkward either. If he had been unemployed it would have been different, but he had a decent job and enough sense to see that, although there might be a bit of money in it, once the thing was known young Ted would become of public interest and virtually pass out of his parents’ control.

‘ “ ‘Ave to ’appen one day, I s’pose,” was his opinion, “but the later the better, both for ’im and ’is mother, I say.”

‘More of a problem was young Ted himself. The most likely source of leakage was a child’s natural desire to show off before other children. Luckily, when he did try it later, chance so arranged things that he was unconvincing and merely gained a discouraging reputation among his friends as a liar. That didn’t matter, nearly all children boast and expect it of others, sometimes they believe one another, more often and without resentment, they don’t.

‘The first necessity seemed to me to give him a more efficient means of shielding himself from electrical influences than the one he had discovered. It was clear from his behaviour that his sense organs were always open to them, as one’s ears are to sound, but with much more troublesome results. For the purpose I cut a strip of copper foil, padded it on one side and covered the other with brown cotton, with the idea that he might wear it as a kind of broad fillet. Experimentally there was a wire lead from it with a clip at the end, for it appeared likely that the screen might work better if it were earthed.

‘I took the contraption round the following evening and let him try it on. The results were as good as I hoped; with an earth connection the radio influence was almost entirely screened off. It acted, one might say, as the eyelid of his new sense.

‘Later, I developed a variation on it for daytime use. The fillet was hidden under a cap, and wires running down inside his clothes were attached to metal tips on his boots. This, he found, had considerable damping effect; if he could put his feet on a wet surface the screening was almost complete. The device became particularly useful later when he went to school. I supplied a certificate stating that, owing to a sensitive condition of the skull, it would be necessary for him to wear a cap indoors; but for this, I think he would have found concentration against the distractions which poured in on him difficult, if not impossible.

‘When I set myself to learn what I could about young Ted’s sensory experiences I very soon found myself engaged on a harder task than I had bargained for. Imagine yourself born blind and trying to understand the power of sight, or born deaf and being told about sound and music, and you’ll begin to see something of what I was up against. Add the fact that your only source of information is an infant—extremely precocious in speech and understanding, it is true, but with an infant’s wandering interest—and that no words exist to express his sensations except in terms of other senses, and progress is understandably slow.

‘Nevertheless, I made some headway and began to form some hazy conceptions of the world his sixth sense showed him. It seemed to me that the new organs were somehow interconnected with the centres of vision and hearing, not like smell and taste, but more after the fashion of touch and hearing—you know how you can both feel and hear a deep note.

‘For instance, he did not care to go very near the high-tension pylons. He complained sometimes that they were “too loud” and sometimes that they were “too bright.” The perception itself seemed to partake of the nature of both. There was no occlusory device, so that, like his ears, the new organs were always on duty, yet, like eyes, they were capable of a kind of focus.

‘The analogy which gradually built itself up in my mind was something like this. Imagine a man standing on a hilltop. Around him in every direction—and he can see in every direction at once—is a vivid, almost glaring, landscape. He can focus on any detail of the landscape and see it clearly amid the rest whenever he likes, but focused or not, he cannot help looking, for his eyes are fixed open.

‘Or sometimes I would think of a man surrounded by all the intentional and unintentional instruments of noise; the sound waves beat at him incessantly, but he can pick out certain instruments if he tries. That, however, is a poorer analogy, for the boy’s “electro-sentient” organs had a much greater power of discrimination than the human ear has.

‘I’m afraid I can only convey poorly what I very dimly perceived myself, but I hope you can catch the idea to some extent. One was so hampered by lack of words and the looseness of meaning in those that had to be used. One continually ran up against things like this. It was clear enough that whatever Ted’s system of reception of radio, his cognition made it intelligible to him as music and speech just as our auditory system does for us, but if one took him close to a transmitter, as I did experimentally, he complained that the broadcasting was “too bright.”

‘ “You mean too loud,” I suggested.

‘But no. He wouldn’t have that at all. For him it was “too bright.”

‘I don’t want to bore you with technicalities and detailed accounts of my findings. That sort of thing is for the experts; I’ve got volumes of notes at home which I shall publish one day for them to scratch their heads over. More patience went into those than I have ever put into anything. I had to grasp each little hint and be ready to return to it later as the boy grew, for it was no good trying to force description and explanation before he was sufficiently developed to understand what I asked him. That sort of treatment produces, as I expect you know from experience, only a defiant sulkiness.

‘Very often it was no good putting a question flatly. One had to set the scene and observe results. For instance, I had discovered that for him telegraph wires were alive, “lighted” he called it, with their electric messages. But it was no good putting the general question which occurred to me as a natural corollary: “Can you overhear telephone conversations?” He had probably never noticed whether he could or not—try asking the average child about overtones or the composition of a shade of colour. One had to take him close to a telephone wire and inquire the result. Actually the result was positive. He could “overhear” up to a distance of ten feet or so from the wires though he found it “faint.”

‘There were plenty of other discoveries. He knew at once whether an electric wire was “live” or not. The current he seemed to perceive perhaps as a fluid stemmed by the gap in the circuit. The radiation from cars with magnetos worried him, coil ignition bothered him only a little. He could judge voltages in wires with astonishing accuracy up to about 500 volts. Above that he found them all “bright.”

‘He had a high sensitivity, too, to static electricity, so much so that in certain weather nothing could induce him to brush or comb his hair, and, perhaps as a side issue of this, he showed a power of weather prediction some degrees more accurate than his elders’.’

CHAPTER FIVE

VOICES OF THE VOID

‘By the time young Ted was ten and a half Jim had come to accept his son’s powers as a permanent quality and not, as he had half suspected before, something which would be outgrown with childhood. He began to make plans for him. More impressed, perhaps, by the means of Ted’s first self-revelation than by any of its subsequent manifestations Jim had ambitions to get him into the best wireless shop in Irkwell when he should leave school at fourteen.

‘ “That’s the thing,” he said. “Just let ’em try ’im once, that’s all. Why ’e can tell where any set’s wrong in a jiffy—and put it right, too. There’s good money in a wireless shop, if a man knows the job, which most of ’em don’t, seemingly. The lad ought to do well—maybe get a better job in one of the big places in Derby in a year or two.”

‘He looked disappointed when I shook my head.

‘ “What’s wrong wi’ that?” he demanded.

‘“Not good enough, Jim,” I told him. “What he ought to have if it can be managed is a real training. He’d just be wasting his time in a shop.”

‘ “What, a college trainin’ like? Seems to me like that’s more like wastin’ ’is time than t’other. If t’lad can do a job and’s a chance, let ’im do it. I say. There’s plenty o’ chaps full of book learnin’ an’ unemployed with it.”

‘ “Ted wouldn’t be,” I said. “You don’t realise it, Jim. This gift makes him something altogether exceptional. There’s no telling where it may lead. Have you ever seen him examine a wireless valve? The contempt he has for it! He looks at it as you or I might look at a car without springs. I took him to a hospital once to show him the apparatus; he looked at all the radiography stuff and the rest of the electrical set-up the same way.

‘ “You see, Jim, all our most advanced electrical appliances seem quite primitive to him. Before long he’ll begin to improve them. I tell you, Jim, I’m as certain of it as I ever was of anything in my life that he’s going to revolutionise our conceptions and use of electricity. Once he gets going we’re going to learn more in a few years than we’ve learned in the hundred and fifty since Volta made his battery. I can’t see, no one can see, what changes he may bring about. Not just here, Jim, not just in England, but all over the world. It’s going to be tremendous, I know it. And it’s up to us to see that he has the best start we can give him.”

‘I think now that I made a tactical error in putting it to him like that. It might have been better if I had taken his own ideas for Ted and worked him up to broader views by degrees. Sprung on him like that, it just didn’t register properly. In his own mind he probably put it down as a crazy idea. A suggestion that the boy might become locally important would have carried more weight. He shook his head.

‘ “Tha knows there’s no money to send our Ted to college, Doctor.”

‘ “Not much difficulty in raising it for a boy like him,” I said.

‘ “What, borrow on the chance of ’is payin’ it back when ’e ’ad a job? ’Oo’s goin’ to lend like that—’e might never ’ave a job, there’s plenty as ’asn’t; then what?”

‘ “No fear of that.”

‘ “You can say so, but you can’t be sure. I don’t like it. I’ve always paid my way and owed nobody owt. It’d be a fine thing if I was to borrow for the lad and leave ’im to find t’money to pay back. Might take ‘im years. ’Amperin’ not ’elpin’, that’d be. No, ’e shall ’ave the best I can give ’im, but what I can’t, ’e shan’t ’ave; and that’s flat.’

‘And flat it remained. No amount of reasoning or argument did anything but confirm him in what to his eyes was the decent, self-respecting course. When at last I was forced to recognise the hopelessness of converting him I tried to tell myself that in the long run it would make little difference—a bit more slogging, more time wasted in beginning, but the same later on—yet at the back of my mind I knew that wasn’t the whole thing.

‘Young Ted developed well, with all his father’s sturdiness, a good share of the local commonsense outlook, and an amiable enough disposition. He held his place easily at school, not. I think, because his brain was anything but average, but because it was still in advance, though to a less extent, of his years. He got on well enough with the others and was frequently to be seen roving the town as a member of a gang of his own age or playing with them in the Irkwell Urban District Gardens. One was glad that, superficially, his interests seemed quite dully normal.

‘In his eleventh and twelfth years, when I had feared he might want to forsake my company entirely for that of his gang, I still managed to see quite a lot of him—largely because he liked to come out in my car, I fancy—and it was when he was nearly twelve that I got a hint of something which bowled my imagination over.

‘We were out late. My car had run a big-end up on the moors miles from anywhere. We had reached a main road and at last succeeded in getting a lift part of the way home, but we were left with five miles to cover and only our feet to carry us. It was a fine summer night and about as warm as it ever is on top of the hills. We had been going for some twenty minutes when Ted took off his cap and with it the copper shield which he wore concealed in the lining.

‘ “It’s stopped,” he said.

‘I knew without asking that he meant that the B.B.C. middle and long-wave stations had closed down, and most of the powerful foreigners, too.

‘ “After midnight, then,” I said.

‘ “Aye.”

‘We trudged on without speaking for a while. I knew that he was ranging about that queer electrical landscape of his, aware of things I should never know. And never had I been so—well, not so jealous, I suppose it was, of his power as I was at that moment. Just then I felt that I would have given anything that could be asked of me just for a glimpse of the world through his sixth sense—just a glimpse, no matter how brief, so that I could begin to understand.

‘He was at ease now. He complained these days that when the big stations were on, they were too loud so that they “dazzled” him unless he wore a shield, just as he complained that electric sparks hurt him like a very loud noise “only brighter-like.” I knew that was so for I had seen him wincing painfully on account of a quite distant thunderstorm. I found myself suddenly and irrationally angry with him for having this extra world open to him and being unable to convey it to me.

‘It was he who broke the silence and with it my unreasonable mood. He raised his hand and pointed upwards.

‘ “What’s out there, Doctor?”

‘I looked into the star scattered blue-black sky.

‘ “Space,” I said. “Emptiness, or nearly, with little suns and planets floating about in it.”

‘ “Aye, Mr. Pauley learned me that at school. But he didn’t say owt about what goes on out there.”

‘ “Goes on?”

‘ “Aye, goes on. ’E said as they was worlds, maybe like this, some of ’em, but nowt about t’ chaps as lives on ’em, and what they do there.”

‘ “He couldn’t very well. You see, we don’t even know that anyone does. Some people think that there may be life in some forms where conditions allow it, but others, the majority, think it unlikely.”

‘ “They’re daft.”

‘ “Which of them?”

‘ “The ones as don’t think so.”

‘I looked at him. His head was thrown back and his upturned face shone dimly white in the starlight. A rush of excitement, almost physically painful, made my heart thump.

‘It was hard to make my voice anything like normal as I asked:

‘ “Why?” and hung on his answer.

‘ “Why! Because if it ain’t chaps like us doin’ things out there, ’oo is it?”

‘I did not dare to respond for a moment. From long experience I knew that at any display of excitement he took refuge in suspicious self-protection. Young Ted couldn’t be driven, only led cautiously.

‘ “It wouldn’t be God, would it?” he suggested hopefully.

‘I told him I considered it unlikely.

‘ “What is it? Voices?” I added, as if out of a mild interest.

‘ “No. It’s like—oh, like colours or notes.”

‘ “Music?”

‘ “No, and ’tain’t like any of the ordinary things, either. I’d know as it were different even if it weren’t a long way away like it is.”

‘It took some time as usual to discover what he was meaning, but I had the impression at last that it was a thing happening at the far limits of his extra sense. As one cannot see stars in daylight, so he could perceive this disturbance only when the more powerful stations were off the air. It was something, it seemed, which happened in three tones. Tones of what? Something which was neither sound nor colour. They occurred in some deliberately arranged sequence—he was emphatic that they could not be accidental—yet they did not exactly repeat. They were faint and far away. He knew, knew without doubt, that they meant something, yet he couldn’t tell what it was.

‘ “Like a chap gabbin’ foreign,” he tried, “you know as it means summat, but you don’t know what. Like that, only different,” he added with fair lucidity.

‘And as different from accidental influences as “singin’ from a motor ’om.”

‘It left me more confused than usual. At one time I would think he implied someone signalling in a three-tone code, analogous perhaps to the dots and dashes of Morse. At another, that it was a system of communication which his intelligence could not grasp, in much the same way that we cannot grasp insects’ methods of communication.

‘But of one thing I went home that night quite certain. Here was such a possibility as I had never suspected. Beside it, all my earlier discoveries which had seemed so important, became trifling. Contact, perhaps some day communication, with the planets!’

CHAPTER SIX

THE GIFT OF AGES

I thought over it all the next day with a great desire to do nothing precipitate. A wrong move now, I felt, might have tremendous effects.

‘But the main result was that my earlier conviction grew clearer and clearer as a necessity. Young Ted must have a good education—the best we could get for him. The job of making sense of those signals, if it were possible at all, was not going to be easy.

‘To use a metaphor over again, he was in the position of a man who hears dots and dashes, realises they are rational, but has never heard of Morse and is ignorant of the language used—perhaps Ted would be up against a worse problem; a quite unsimilar, incomprehensible type of intelligence behind signs.

‘A puzzle like that is going to take all the intelligence and knowledge that can be brought to bear on it. For Ted to attempt it without all the resources one could give him would be inviting discouragement and failure. It needed a mind trained to patience and the scientific approach, perceptive and yet plodding, a mind with tenacity of purpose.

‘Perhaps you can’t give a mind those characteristics, but at least you can give it the chance to acquire them, and hope for the best. It was a chance I determined that young Ted in some way must have.

‘With my own mind fully made up I went to see Jim Filler next evening.

‘I intended to press again for Ted’s education, but not to bring out my new reason for its necessity save as a last resource. For now our positions were curiously reversed from those of eight years ago; then it was he who was afraid I would not believe him, now I was pretty certain of being unable to convince him of the further development.

‘It had been an uncertain kind of day, and there were dark clouds piling up on the horizon and a thundery feeling in the air when I arrived. Jim was working in his garden, but he stuck his fork into the ground when he saw me and led the way into the cottage.

‘It wasn’t difficult for him to guess what I’d come about. He was pretty used to my tackling him on the education issue by this time, though we never got any further, but this time the opening was easier than usual. It was, in fact, volunteered.

‘ “I’ve been thinkin’ it over about our Ted,” he said, “an’ I don’t know as it’ll do ’im any ’arm to learn a bit, even if it don’t do ’im no good.”

‘ “Good,” I said, feeling a bit taken aback at the complete volte face. “I was going to mention it.”

‘ “Y’ don’t say,” he answered drily.

‘ “I’m glad, very glad indeed,” I went on, “I’m sure you’ll never regret it, nor Ted either. Well, now we’ll have to go into the matter of raising the money.”

‘He shook his head.

‘ “No, we won’t. I said as ’ow I wasn’t borrowin’ for ’im, and I ain’t.”

‘ “But—well, it’s going to cost a bit, you know,” I told him.

‘ ‘ “I know. I’ve been into all that.”

‘I waited. Jim’s sort takes its own time.

‘ “ ’E’ll earn it ’imself. Maybe it’ll take ’im a year or two, but then ’e’ll be able to go to college an’ pay ’is own way.”

‘ “How?”

‘Jim chuckled.

‘ “Way you never thought of. Mr. Pauley’s notion, an’ a good one, too.”

‘I had known that it must come; it was surprising that I had had the field to myself for so long, yet I felt a hot resentment.

‘ “Pauley, where does he come in?” I asked, though I knew on the moment exactly where he came in. It was inevitable that someone should find out about young Ted soon, and who likelier than his schoolmaster.

‘ “Same way as thaself. ’E came ’ere sayin’ same as you, as ’ow our Ted ought to go to college. So I tells ’im just t’same as I tells you. Aye, an’ I tells ’im it’s no good ’im tryin’ to change my mind, seein’ as you been tryin’ to for t’best part of two years, and not done it. So ’e goes off. Next day ’e’s back. ’E’s been thinkin’, ’e ’as. ’E says why not let our Ted go on t’Alls and make a bit o’ money ’imself?”

‘ “The Music Halls?”

‘ “Aye. ’E says a friend of ’is could get Ted on as “The ’Uman Wireless Set.” Might make five quid a week and more.”

‘I thought of the plans I had made for the boy, a good school and then Cambridge if it could be managed—and now, “T’Alls!”

‘ “Jim,” I said earnestly. “You can’t do this. He can’t afford it, man, he’s too important. He can’t afford to spend the most impressionable years of his life in Music Halls, it’d be the ruin of him. How could he settle down to learn after that kind of life? And he must learn, he’s got to study, as hard as he can, he must.”

‘Jim removed his pipe and looked hard at me.

‘ “ ’Oo says ’e must? ’E’s my own lad, isn’t ’e? I got a right to do what I think best for ’im, ain’t I?”

‘ “But you don’t understand, Jim, this is important, tremendously important. It may mean a major turning point in history, Jim, pivoting on him. It’s like a sacred trust, we must do our best to prepare him for it.”

‘I told him of my new discovery about Ted. I put my case for all I was worth—and I might as well have shouted at the hills. I could see his face harden into the all-too-familiar lines of obstinacy as I talked. He could not, would not, see, even if he believed. The stupendousness of the possibilities, contact with life beyond the Earth, perhaps knowledge from older, wiser worlds, the coming of a stage when man gropes out from the isolation of his little planet and makes himself known in the universe beyond, the importance to science, to mankind itself; all this was wasted, blunted against his conviction that it wasn’t “right to borrow on t’lad’s future.”

‘Because I felt so deeply, and partly because the coming storm made the air sultry and fretted the nerves, I lost my temper with him. But it would take more than words and threatening thunder to move Jim. Cloddish, without imagination. the embodiment of all the stupidities that clutter and clog the world, he seemed to me then.

‘He wouldn’t get excited, he refused to argue, he just sat there behind his unassailable rectitude, beating me off with flat negatives. No lash I used could sting him out of his quiet, narrow assurance. He just waited patiently for me to finish. I did that suddenly, for I felt that in another minute I should punch his silly face if only to make him come alive.

‘ “I’m going to see Pauley,” I told him, “and I hope to Heaven that he at least has enough brains to see that this mustn’t be allowed to happen. God, to waste the gift of the ages in a Music Hall!”

‘I flung out of the place and across the pavement to my car. I was going to see the schoolmaster right away; perhaps he would believe easily, perhaps he would need convincing, but either way I could not believe that he would fail to see that Ted was going to deserve the best education possible. We might be able to raise the money as a gift, though I had my doubts whether Jim would accept it now. But somehow or other we must ensure Ted’s—not only Ted’s; the whole world’s—chance.

‘And then a rumble of thunder made me pause with my hand on the door handle. I looked up, suddenly aware that the sky was full of ominous black clouds; they looked fantastically heavy with an evil, almost green light in their caverns.

‘That was why I did not rush off to see Pauley then; afterwards it wasn’t necessary. . . .

“The threat of the thunder brought young Ted vividly into my mind. I knew how storms worried him, I knew, too, that he was not at home. I hesitated. After my exit I could scarcely go back and ask where he was; besides, Jim could hardly fail in the circumstances to misconstrue my motive, which was, in fact, merely a desire to be sure that the boy was as well protected as possible against an electrical upset. Instead, I turned from the car and spoke to the woman who stood in the doorway of the next cottage studying the sky resentfully.

‘ “Young Ted Filler?” she said. “Aye, ’e’s along t’canal with our Rosie. Fair soaked they’ll be, the pair of ’em.”

‘I remembered Rosie; she was one of those children who get themselves remembered. She was suspected, and not without reason, of being concerned in any bit of trouble for streets around.

‘Even now I don’t quite know why I changed my mind and went to look for young Ted instead of for Pauley, but I did.

‘The canal ends in Irkwell so there was only one way to go. A few minutes later I stopped the car on a hump-backed bridge just as the first big drops of rain began to fall. From there I had a view of the towpath for half a mile each way, but I didn’t need it. The path was deserted save for two small figures a hundred yards or so away; any others who may have been there had wisely left to seek shelter.

‘The children were scuffling on the cinders a yard or two from the water’s edge, much too occupied to pay attention to me, the coming storm, or anything else but their own quarrel. Rosie was no silent scrapper; her yells of protest were forceful even at that distance. Perhaps that was not to be wondered at. It must be painful to have an opponent take a good grip of one’s hair, even if one does manage to get in a hack or two on his shins. I leaned out of the car and shouted at the little brutes.

‘ “Ted,” I called, “stop it and come here.”

‘Surprised, he looked round. The victim seized her chance to pull free. Quick as a flash she snatched his cap off, flung it into the water, and tore off down the towpath with screams of derision.

‘Ted clapped both hands to his head, as if in pain.

‘ “Come here,” I shouted, getting out of the car.

‘He heard me, for he turned and began to run with his hands still pressed to his head.

‘I started off the bridge to get down to him, then I saw him stagger and stop. In the same split second came a vivid flash right above us and a crash of thunder like the end of the world. The rain fell as if a cloud had ripped right open. When I reached the towpath young Ted was lying there, pathetically asprawl and soaked through already.’

He paused.

‘That’s all,’ he said, ‘that was the silly end of it.’

We looked out over the dark lake in silence for a while.

‘He was dead?’ asked one of the Americans, at last.

‘No, he wasn’t dead. But the thing that made him different was dead. That terrific discharge of lightning had finished his sixth sense for good. In that new sense he had gone as blind as a man without eyes, as deaf as one with split eardrums. He came round again, an ordinary little Irkwell urchin, with a raging headache. Now, he’s a quarryman like his father.

‘Some day perhaps he’ll do something silly and I shall be able to have a look at his brain—if his pigheaded relatives allow it. But there’s pretty cold comfort in that when one thinks of the possibilities which were snuffed out in a second.’

No one spoke again for some minutes. Then there was a movement in the darkness from the Lancashire man’s direction.

‘Aye, it were a rum do,’ he said, ‘but ’e’ll be ’appier that way, you know. Freaks ain’t ’appy. Now, there was one as I once talked to at Blackpool. ’E wasn’t ’appy, ’e said . . .