

THE BORRIBLES

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A TOM DOHERTY ASSOCIATES BOOK
NEW YORK

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For Celia, Aimée, Phoebe and Rose

1

The swirling rain-clouds rushed on revealing the bright moon, and the two Borribles dodged behind the bushes and kept as quiet as they could. There was danger in the air and they could feel it. It would pay to be cautious.

‘Strewth,’ said Knocker, the chief lookout of the Battersea tribe, ‘what a bloody cheek, coming down here without so much as a by-your-leave.’

Lightfinger, Knocker’s companion, agreed. ‘Diabolical liberty I call it ... nasty bit of work, covered in fur like nylon hearthrugs ... snouts like traffic cones ... like rats, aren’t they?’

‘There’s a big one, just getting into the motor, he’s shouting at the others, he’s the boss all right. Tough-looking, do you see?’

‘Yeah,’ answered Lightfinger, ‘they do what they’re told, don’t they? Look at them move.’

Presently the two Borribles saw the large car drive away in the moonlight, passing along the shining tarmac which led between the trees to the limits of Battersea Park. The car stopped for an instant at the gates and then turned left into Albert Bridge Road and disappeared on its way southwards into the quiet streets of the outer London suburbs.

The two Borribles stood up and looked around. They weren’t too happy in parks, being much more at ease in crowded streets and broken-down houses. It was only occasionally that the Borrible lookouts checked on the green spaces, just to see they were still there and that everything was as it should be.

When Knocker was sure they were alone he said, ‘We’d better see what they were up to over there. Something’s going on and I don’t like it.’

All at once the patch of ground at his feet began to tremble and clumps of grass began to pop up and away from their roots. There was a noise too, a scraping and a scrabbling, and a muffled voice swore and mumbled to itself. The carpet of grass rose and fell violently until a squat protruberance established itself between turf and top soil. The bump hesitated, as if it didn’t know whether to continue upwards or retreat downwards. It grunted, swore again and, as if undecided, took off on a horizontal course, forcing the turf up as it wriggled along.

At the first sign of trouble Knocker and Lightfinger had taken refuge behind a bush but as the bump moved away they came from cover and followed it.

‘It’s got to be ... ’ said Knocker. ‘It can’t be anything else, and down here in Battersea, it’s bound to be double bad.’

The mound stopped and shook and struggled and became bigger, and as it grew more clods of grass fell from it. ‘Watch yourself,’ whispered Knocker. ‘It’s coming out. Get ready to jump it.’

Lightfinger and Knocker crouched, their minds racing. The turf rose higher and higher till it was as tall as the Borribles themselves, then it burst and the grass fell away like a discarded overcoat and revealed a dark and sinister shape of about their own size.

It looked like a giant rat, a huge mole or a deformed rabbit, but it was none of these for it stood on its hind legs and had a long snout and beady red eyes, like the things that had gone away in the car.

Knocker gave a shrill whistle and at the signal both he and Lightfinger leapt forward. Knocker got an armlock round the thing’s head and pulled it to the ground while Lightfinger fell onto the hairy legs and bent one over the other in a special hold that could dislocate a knee. The thing shouted so loudly that it would have woken the neighbourhood if there’d been one in Battersea Park. Knocker squeezed it round the neck and whispered, ‘Shuddup, you great fool, else I’ll smother yer.’ The creature shuddupped.

Knocker levered the prisoner into a sitting position and got behind it so he could tie its arms back.

with a length of rope he took from his waist. Lightfinger moved so that he was sitting on the thing's legs, looking into the eyes, which were like marbles rolling around at the wide end of the snout.

'All right,' said Knocker when he was ready, 'give it a duffing.'

Lightfinger grabbed the beast by the scruff of its fur and pulled its snout forward. 'Name?' he asked gruffly.

The snout moved a little and they heard a voice say in a distinguished tone, 'Timbucktoo.'

'Tim who?' asked Lightfinger again, shaking the snout good and hard.

'Timbucktoo.'

'And where are you from, you moth-eaten overcoat?' asked Knocker, in spite of the fact that he knew the answer.

Timbucktoo shook himself free of the two Borribles and, though his hands were bound, he got to his feet and glared haughtily down his snout, his red eyes blazing.

'Why, I'm from Wumbledom of course, you dirty little tykes. You'd better welease me before you get into sewious twouble.'

'I knew it,' said Knocker turning to Lightfinger with excitement. 'A Rumble from Rumbledom. Ain't it strange as how they can't pronounce their rs?'

'So that's a Rumble,' said Lightfinger with interest. 'I've often wondered what they looked like—bloody ugly.'

'It's the first time I've been this close to one,' said Knocker, 'but you can't mistake them—nasty.'

'You wevolting little stweet-awabs,' the Rumble had lost his temper, 'how dare you tweat me in this fashion?'

'Cos you're on our manor, that's how, you twat,' said Knocker angrily. 'I suppose you didn't even know.'

'I only know what you are,' said Timbucktoo, 'and what I am and that I'll go where I like and do what I like without having to ask the permission of gwubby little ignawamuses like you. Untie me, Bowwible, and I'll forget about this incident.'

'He's a real pain,' said Lightfinger. 'Let's throw him in the river.'

The moon was clear of clouds again and glinted on the nearby Thames. In spite of himself the Rumble shivered. 'That will do you no good. I can swim, you know, like an otter.'

'So you should,' said Knocker, 'you look like one.' And he cuffed the Rumble once more and told him to hold his tongue.

Knocker thought deeply, then he said, 'I s'pose the river's the best idea for getting him off our manor, but maybe we ought to take him back and find out more about him, what his mob are up to. I don't like the look of it; suspicious this is, Rumbles down here in Battersea, it's wrong. We ought to give Spiff a chance to give this thing the once over.'

'You're right,' said Lightfinger, and they hauled the Rumble to its feet and pushed it towards the park gates.

When they reached the sleeping streets they kept to the dark shadows between the lamp posts and marched rapidly in the direction of Battersea High Street.

Borribles are generally skinny and have pointed ears which give them a slightly satanic appearance. They are pretty tough-looking and always scruffy, with their arses hanging out of their trousers. Apart from that they look just like normal children, although legions of them have been Borribles for more than a lifetime—as long as a Borrible remains at liberty he or she will never age.

Most of them have sharp faces with eyes that are burning-bright, noticing everything and missing nothing. They are proud of their quickness of wit. In fact it is impossible to be dull and a Borrible because a Borrible is bright by definition. Not that they know lots of useless facts; it's just that the

minds work well and they tend to dislike anyone who is a bit slow.

~~The only people likely to get close to Borribles are ordinary children, because Borribles mix with them to escape detection by 'the authorities' who are always trying to catch them. Any child may have sat next to a Borrible or even talked to one and never noticed the ears for the simple reason that Borribles wear hats, woollen ones, pulled down over their heads, and they sometimes grow their hair long, hanging to their shoulders.~~

Normal kids are turned into Borribles very slowly, almost without being aware of it; but one day they wake up and there it is. It doesn't matter where they come from as long as they've had what is called a bad start. A child disappears and the word goes round that he was 'unmanageable'; the chances are he's off managing by himself. Sometimes it's given out that a kid down the street has been put into care: the truth is that he's been Borribled and is caring for himself someplace. One day a shout might be heard in a supermarket and a kid with the goods on him is hoisted out by a store detective. If that kid gets away he'll become a Borrible and make sure he isn't caught again. Being caught is the end of the free life for a Borrible: once in custody his ears are clipped by the police surgeon and he begins to grow into a malevolent and adventure-less adulthood, like any ordinary child.

So Borribles are outcasts, but unlike most outcasts they enjoy themselves and wouldn't be anything else. They delight in feeling independent and it is this feeling that is most important to them. Consequently they have no real leaders, though someone may rise into prominence from time to time but on the whole they manage without authority and they get on well enough together, though like everybody, they quarrel.

They don't get on with adults at all, or anyone who isn't Borrible, and they see no reason why they should. Nobody has ever tried to get on with them, quite the contrary. They are ignored and that suits them down to the ground because that way they can do what they want to do in their own quiet and crafty way.

Knocker and Lightfinger had been on night patrol in Battersea Park when they'd stumbled across the Rumbles and the discovery had made them uneasy. Borribles like to make sure that no other Borrible tribe is encroaching on their territory, that's bad enough. They live in fear of being driven away from their markets and houses, of seeing their independence destroyed; that is why scouting round the frontiers of their borough is a regular duty.

Unearthing a Rumble was a calamity. They are the real enemies of the Borribles and the Borribles hate them for their riches, their power, their haughtiness and their possessions. If the Rumbles were coming all the way down from Rumbledom to colonize the Park, what price Battersea High Street?

Knocker and Lightfinger harried Timbucktoo along in front of them. They went through Battersea Church Road, by St Mary's down by the river, and then into the High Street. They saw no one and no one saw them, it being well into the early hours of the morning. They were making for an empty house standing opposite the end of Trott Street. It was tall and wide and the bottom windows were boarded up and a sheet of corrugated iron covered the main doorway. The facade of the building was painted over in grey, and in black letters was written, 'Bunham's Patent Locks Ltd. Locksmiths to the trade.'

It was a typical Borrible hideaway, derelict and decaying, and Knocker and Lightfinger lived there. Borribles live where they can in the streets of the big cities, but they like these abandoned houses best of all.

The two Borribles halted on the pavement and glanced up and down the street. Nobody. They opened a gate in the railings and Knocker pushed Timbucktoo down some stone steps that led to a basement. The two lookouts followed, opened a door and dragged the Rumble into the house by the neck. Once the door was closed Knocker switched on the light.

The Borribles had entered a large room furnished with orange boxes for use as chairs and tables. Two doors opened from it; one into an underground larder, which served as a storeroom, the other into some stairs which led to the rest of the house. The bay window was covered with scraps of old blank paper to prevent light shining into the street and alerting the police that someone was squatting in a dwelling that was supposed to be empty.

‘What we gonna do with him, now we’ve got him here?’ wondered Lightfinger, and he pushed Timbucktoo down into a seat.

‘Yes,’ said the Rumble, looking up, his eyes glinting crimson, ‘you won’t get away with this you know, it’s iwwesponsible. You Bowwibles must be insane. I’ll see you get your ears clipped.’

‘Clip me ears, will yer?’ said Knocker tight-lipped, and he went into the store cupboard. A second later he was out again, carrying a roll of sticky tape. He went over to the Rumble, grasped its head and wound the tape round and round the animal’s snout so that it could no longer speak.

He stood back to admire his work. Lightfinger sat and cupped his face in his hands and rested his elbows on his knees.

‘There,’ said Knocker, ‘that’s the way to deal with a talking mattress.’

‘I’m glad all animals can’t speak,’ said Lightfinger. ‘We’d have meningitis within the week, or run out of sticky tape.’

‘I’ll go and get Spiff,’ said Knocker. He ran up to the ground floor of the house and tapped on the door of a large room that overlooked the back garden, a back garden that Knocker knew was a wilderness of weeds; a dangerous dump of rusting oil drums and broken bicycles.

The door opened a crack and another Borrible appeared. He was perhaps an inch taller than Knocker and his ears were very pointed. He was dressed in a bright orange dressing gown made from new war-towelling. His carpet slippers were comfortable.

‘Who are you? Ah, Knocker, what do you want then?’

‘Sorry to wake you, Spiff,’ said Knocker, ‘but me and Lightfinger found something in the park and I think you ought to have a look at it. It’s down in the basement.’

‘Oh Lor’,’ groaned Spiff, ‘can’t it wait till morning? You haven’t got the law on your trail, have you?’

‘No,’ said Knocker, ‘it’s nothing like that. What we’ve got is worse. It’s a Rumble! There was a whole lot of them in a posh car and we caught this one tunnelling. Cheek, ain’t it, coming down here without a by-er-leave and digging?’

Spiff had become more and more intent on what Knocker had been saying until finally he seemed quite beside himself.

‘A bloody Rumble, in the park? You get back downstairs, me lad, and I’ll come right away. I’ll put on me hat on.’

He closed the door and Knocker darted back down the uncarpeted stairs. He understood Spiff’s caution; no Borrible ever left his room without putting on a woollen hat to cover the tops of his ears. It wasn’t that they were ashamed of them, quite the contrary, but they liked to be prepared for an emergency. Any unforeseen circumstance could force them into the streets and it wouldn’t do to be spotted as a Borrible.

‘He’s coming,’ said Knocker as soon as he re-entered the room. ‘He’s a good bloke, you know. A bit short-tempered sometimes, but they don’t come any craftier than Spiff.’

‘You can’t get anything past him and that’s a fact,’ said Lightfinger. ‘They say he’s pulled more strokes than the Oxford and Cambridge boat race put together. And they say that he won dozens of names in fights with the Rumbles, and we’re only s’posed to have one. Nobody knows how many names, nobody ... He’s a mystery, but one thing’s for sure, he hates Rumbles.’

‘Yeah, I know,’ said Knocker. ‘There’s millions of stories about his names and some of them no

very Borrible either, but I'd rather have him for me than against me.' He sat down and looked at Timbucktoo and thought about names and the gaining of them, something that occupied his every waking hour.

A Borrible name has to be earned because that is the only way a Borrible can get one. He has to have an adventure of some sort, and the name comes out of that adventure—stealing, burglary, a journey or a trick played on someone. That was the rule and Knocker was against it; it made it difficult, if not impossible, for a Borrible to join an adventure once he was in possession of a name. The first chance was always given to those who were nameless and this infuriated Knocker for he had a secret ambition to collect more names and have more adventures than any other Borrible alive.

A noise on the stairs disturbed Knocker's reflections. He stood up and at the same moment Spiff flung open the door and strode theatrically into the room. His head was adorned with a magnificent hat of scarlet wool and he clutched the orange dressing gown tightly to his chest. Spiff had the clear face of a twelve-year-old child but his eyes were dark with wisdom: the wisdom, so it was rumoured, of a hundred years of existence. His nose was prominent; the kind of nose that smelt out trickery with ease.

He stopped short as soon as he saw the Rumble and he pushed his breath out over his teeth and made a whisper of a whistle.

'At last,' he said, like he was praying, 'at last. It's been a long while since I had my hands on one of these stinking rodents.' He turned and beamed at Knocker and Lightfinger. 'You lads have done marvellous, you've captured one alive and well, though he won't be for long, the little basket. Found him in the park, eh? With hundreds of others, digging holes! That's how it starts. Down here on our manor, taking it all for granted, think they're the lords of creation, don't they? Go anywhere, do what they like, we don't count.' He prodded and screwed the Rumble with a rigid index finger as he spoke. He turned to Knocker. 'You know what this is?'

'A Rumble.'

'Yeah, a Rumble.' Spiff was bitter. 'No better than you or me for all their la-di-da manners. Years of them I've seen, sneerin' at us down their hoity-toity snouts ... lords of creation, moving in on our space whenever they think they will.'

Knocker and Lightfinger looked at each other. They had never seen Spiff so angry.

'Oh, come on, Spiff,' said Lightfinger, 'it can't be that bad; the Rumbles have never done me any harm.'

Spiff jumped a foot from the floor. 'You don't know you're born. You know nothing about the struggles and fights we had to win free. It weren't easy to stay alive even.'

'Oh, I know about it all right but that was your time, not mine.' And Lightfinger leaned against the wall, crossed his ankles and shoved his hands into his pockets.

'Don't care was made to care,' said Spiff sententiously, 'and history repeats itself; in fact it doesn't repeat itself, it just goes on being the same.'

'Well anyway, what are we going to do with this rabbit?' asked Knocker.

'Shove it in the cupboard,' said Spiff, rubbing his chin. 'I'll call a meeting tomorrow. You two can run down the street with the message right now, before you go to bed. I know Borribles don't like meetings but this is an emergency, and we will have to act and think together for once!'

Spiff took one last look at the Rumble, then he pulled his Borrible hat further on to his head, spun on his heels and left the room. Knocker got the prisoner to his feet and locked him in the store cupboard then he and Lightfinger left by the basement door and spent the next few hours informing all High Street Borribles what was afoot. Finally the two exhausted lookouts got to their own room at the top of Spiff's house and climbed into a bundle of old blankets and sacks that formed their bed.

'Argaah,' yawned Knocker, 'what a day.'

'Goo' night,' said Lightfinger, and was immediately asleep.

A Borrible's main business is to stay alive. This is an occupation that takes up most of his time getting food from wherever he can discover it, finding things before they are lost, stealing his provisions from barrows and out of superstore warehouses: stealing because the fundamental Borrible rule, the rule that is primordial to the way they live, the mainspring and motivation of their very being—rule number one—is that they must never have dealings in money. They have been brought up without it, and they must never touch it. If they do, bad luck and loss of freedom will follow as sure as night the day. That is why Borribles steal, and why they prefer to live near shopping centres and street markets like Brixton and Petticoat Lane, where food is easy to come by.

So important is that aspect of their life that they have many sayings that deal with it and they are all gathered together in the *Borrible Book of Proverbs*. Some of these maxims are very ancient, like, 'that which falls off a lorry belongs to him who follows the lorry,' and 'That which is found has never been lost.' One of their favourites is, 'It is impossible to lose that which does not belong to you,' and Borribles use that one a lot to people who complain about their thieving.

By eight o'clock on the morning following the capture of Timbucktoo Rumble, Battersea High Street market was in full swing. There were barrows and stalls along each side of the road and so little space was left for traffic that not a car dared venture down there. The barrows had been shoved very close together and it was easy for a Borrible to crawl underneath them from one end of the street to the other, picking up fruit on the way. It was a good way to get breakfast.

The costermongers shouted at each other and at prospective customers, urging them to buy. There were barrows selling fruit, ironmongery, fish and large crabs; the shops had their doors wide open and people were drinking tea in Notarianni's cafe, talking loudly, making wild gestures with their hands. Brown's, the pie and eel shop, was doing a brisk business and the inhabitants of the buildings—Arch House, Eaton House and White House—were loafing on street corners and thinking about passing by in Ernie Swash's, the bookmaker's. The noise was so great that it rose right up the side of the house where Knocker and Lightfinger were sleeping and woke them from a deep slumber.

Knocker rolled over and woke his companion. 'Come on, breakfast.'

He stretched his arms above his head; he hadn't slept enough. The two Borribles had been out so late the night before that the costermongers had been loading their barrows as they came home; finding breakfast had been no problem and it was there beside them: one grapefruit, an orange and two large doughnuts dripping with jam.

Lightfinger rubbed his eyes and the old sacks and blankets dropped from him. He reached for the orange, bit it open and sucked hard, making a lot of noise. The orange was wonderful, fresh-tasting and chilled to ice crystals by the lorry journeys to and from Covent Garden.

'Ooaagh,' he groaned with pleasure, 'that's lovely.'

'We'd better hurry up,' said Knocker, 'or we'll miss the meeting.'

Halfway down the High Street was a disused brick-built hall. It had last been occupied by a firm of photographers called Scots of London, but they had departed long since and now the shop fell within the province of the Borribles. It was here that Spiff had asked the members of the Battersea tribe to gather; decisions had to be made and everyone was allowed a say.

Inside the hall, a kind of podium, stood Spiff in conversation with a score of his cronies. Other Borribles, ragged, dirty and inquisitive, slipped in through broken doorways, and, talking furiously, waited in groups to see what might happen.

The moment he thought enough people were present Spiff stepped to the front of the stage and held up both arms like a politician. He shouted several times and gradually the hubbub of voices became less and less until eventually a kind of excited silence hung on the air, then Spiff began to speak, relishing the occasion, for he took a delight in speechifying.

‘Brother and sister Borribles, I am pleased to see so many of you here, for today is a day of decision. Our way of life is in jeopardy and we must either act together or perish.’

The hall became quieter and the tension rose.

‘Not to beat about the bush, I’ll give you the facts, then anyone who wants a say can have a say. Right. the facts. Last night, our chief lookout and his assistant ...’

All heads turned to Knocker and Lightfinger.

‘... while on a routine inspection of the Battersea area, discovered that we had been invaded by the Rumbles.’

The crowd drew in a deep breath and then let it out again in a long explosion and Spiff looked round for effect and more silence.

‘It seems that a large force came down here, all the way from Rumbledom, and occupied the park for several hours. They were digging! Now, in my opinion, this can only be a preparation for a takeover of Battersea, an attack on our freedom, a new and subtle kind of slavery and a clipping of ears. Things have been bearable as long as the Rumbles have stayed in Rumbledom, where they belong, but this is something else.’

Murmurs of assent came from the assembly but Spiff held up his hand and went on.

‘In my opinion there is only one answer, my friends, pre-emptive defence. We must attack before we are attacked. We must destroy the Rumbles at the heart of their organization. However—’

Spiff broke off for a second and admonished the ceiling with a grubby finger.

‘—to carry out this plan we shall need to search carefully among the ranks of the nameless. From those who have not yet had their first adventure we must select the bravest, the slyest, the craftiest and the most resourceful. It is not only the enemy we have to fear, but the enormous distance between us and him, dangerous terrain. The Rumble is confident in his stronghold, blinded by his own conceit, safe, so he thinks, in the security of his own riches and comfort, but that is where we shall strike, with a handful of chosen Borribles. We shall need dedicated volunteers, but remember, those who go may never return. Blood will be spilt.’

At this there was a terrific hush in the hall and the Borribles looked at each other with trepidation. An adventure was one thing, death another.

‘We feel,’ went on Spiff, ‘that Battersea should not bear this brunt alone. All London Borribles are threatened. To this end messages will be sent out over the city and certain tribes will be asked to send their likeliest un-named champions to us for training and instruction. Likewise, from among the ranks of the Battersea nameless, we shall choose one who shows the greatest promise. We intend to approach the following groups: the Totters of Tooting, the Wendles of Wandsworth, the Stumpers of Stepney, the Whitechapel Wallopers, the Peckham Punch-uppers, the Neasden Nudgers and the Hoxton Hurnpers. Details of the raid will be worked out when all the candidates have arrived.’

Spiff stopped for breath and the hall became alive and words buzzed like bees. Who, people wondered, would be chosen as the Battersea representative on the expedition? An honour, yes, but danger too.

Knocker swore to himself. ‘Why do I have my name already? What an adventure it’s going to be.’

Spiff called for quiet again. Now he prepared for his moment of high drama. He made a sign to the side of the stage and the prisoner was brought on for all to see. There was silence. The Rumble was still taped round the snout but its beady eyes glowed a fearful red and it stood upright and unmoved.

‘This,’ shouted Spiff, ‘is the enemy, no braver than us, no more dangerous; but they are difficult to access, living underground as they do, well-protected in their burrows. They are rich and they are powerful, and think themselves superior to all Borribles by divine right. This is the enemy who wants to take Battersea into its grasp. Even now they may be digging under the streets to emerge in your very backyard, even now they may be undermining your way of life, silently; dirty and evil, moles

the underground.'

Spiff took a deep breath and shook his arms in front of his body as if he was emptying a sack of cement; the crowd stirred with emotion. Spiff raised his voice a further notch.

'This is the enemy, and we all know that they must be stopped at all costs. Yes, but more than that they must be eliminated, and who are the Borribles to do it? Why we are!'

An enormous cheer rose from the audience. 'Throw it in the river,' came a voice from the back of the hall, 'with a bicycle round its neck.'

This suggestion was so popular that it was taken up on all sides.

'Yeah,' came the shout, 'in the river, steal a bike someone.'

Spiff smiled indulgently. 'I understand your feelings,' he looked at the Rumble, 'but I have a better plan. Let me explain. The one thing that these objects fear above all others,' he touched the Rumble lightly with a disdainful finger, 'is disclosure! They would hate to be unmasked and shown for what they really are. In their mythology the greatest possible disaster is what they call the Great Rumble Hunt—an attack on their citadel of power—and we, the Borribles of Battersea, will start that Rumble hunt. But,' Spiff had to shout across the cheering, 'this is also to be a war of nerves; we want them to know that something really nasty is on the way—us! And that is where this little rodent comes in. We propose to stick a notice on to the fur of this carpet bag, and send it back to Rumbledom, living proof that we mean business. The message will say, "The Great Rumble Hunt is on. Beware the Borribles." All those in favour say, "Aye".'

Another enormous cheer rose from the assembly; Spiff's oratory had done its work, that was what he wanted. Borribles clasped each other, jumped up and down and shouted, 'We'll show 'em, we'll teach them rabbits to come down here.'

As the cheering died away Spiff and his cronies left the building with the prisoner, and the hall gradually emptied as the Borribles went back to their squats, eager to discuss the morning meeting and to wonder who would be chosen as the Battersea 'no-name' for the Great Rumble Hunt. Those who were not known for their bravery kept very quiet and decided not to call attention to themselves, for a few Borribles manage to pass through life without ever earning themselves a name. But most are of a different stamp, and they ran to the market without delay, stole paper and wrote directly to Spiff begging for the position.

But Knocker was disconsolate. He returned home alone, thwarted. He knew there was no chance of him being considered for the expedition to Rumbledom. He went into the basement of the deserted house and made his way upstairs. As he passed Spiff's door it was thrown open and the cunning face of the most cunning of Borribles appeared, beaming.

'Right, lad,' he said, 'in here. Just the bloke I want, look lively ... Want a word with you.'

Knocker stepped inside the room, and removed his woollen cap; he had good pointed ears, a sign of high intelligence and alertness. Spiff smiled and settled into an armchair that must have fallen from a very expensive furniture lorry.

'Sit down, lad,' he said. 'I wanted to thank you for your good work last night, champion that was a champion ... but now I want to ask your advice. As you know, there are eight Rumbles in the Rumble High Command. I'm sure that if we can eliminate them, the rest of the Rumble set-up will fall to pieces, they'll be too busy even to think of us any more. So that's why I thought of sending eight Borribles only, one for each High Rumble. There will be one from Tooting, Hoxton, Wandsworth ... You heard all that already. But, Knocker, who are we going to send from Battersea? The point is, you are out and about a lot, you see a lot of Borribles in action, who do you think would be a good choice?'

Knocker thought for a while. 'It's tricky,' he said at length. 'There's quite a few who are good. There's a bunch of bright lads down by the river, some others under the railway arches at Battersea Park station, but I think the brightest of the lot, out of the whole borough, is one who lives up ...'

Lavender Hill, bright as a button and smart as paint.'

'Whereabouts does he hang out?' asked Spiff.

'Underneath the nick,' said Knocker.

'Underneath the nick!' cried Spiff. 'He must be mad.'

Knocker laughed. 'Oh, no. Bright. There's a stack of rooms up there that are left empty every night. It's centrally heated, blankets galore, constant electricity. You name it, he's got it. In fact he's very friendly with some of the coppers—the Woollies.'

'Hmm,' said Spiff, 'and he's a no-name?'

'Yes.'

'Right,' Spiff went on, 'that's settled then. Send a runner up to Lavender Hill and get the wazzisname down here. As soon as the other seven come in from across London we shall have them begin a training session. As well as that, I want you to get some volunteers to do some spare-time thieving. We're going to need lots of things for this expedition: grub, weatherproof clothing, high quality catapults, watches, compasses, anything that might be useful ... so get that organized. I know you've got your own thieving to do, and so have the others, but do what you can ... We can't afford to fail.'

Knocker nodded. His heart was bursting with pride, he was being involved in the Great Rumble Hunt, which was more than he had dared to hope.

'Is there a chance of anything else, Spiff?'

'What do you mean? You can't go on the expedition, you know, that's a rule.'

'I know that. It's, well, you said they would have to be trained. I'm a good Borrible lookout, well, could train them ... couldn't I?'

Spiff gave Knocker a long look, a look that went right through him and saw everything. 'Hmm,' he said, smiling a secret smile, 'you are keen, aren't you? How many names have you got?'

'Just the one,' answered Knocker feeling uncomfortable.

Spiff chuckled. 'You know what Knocker, you reminds me of me. You didn't have to ask, I've already thought of you ... yes, you can train the team.'

Knocker got up to go, feeling proud of himself.

'Here, take this envelope,' said Spiff, 'it's instructions about the Rumble; he's downstairs in the cupboard. Send him packing. Try not to let anyone see him, they might still chuck him in the river.'

Knocker ran downstairs and opened the cupboard. Sure enough the Rumble was there, his paws tucked behind him and a notice glued on to his fur. Two other lookouts came into the room and leant against the wall to watch as Knocker read his instructions. When he had finished he removed the tape from the animal's snout and sat it on a grape barrel.

'You are being sent home, Rumble, alive. Take that message to your leaders and tell them what you have seen and heard.'

Knocker turned to the lookouts. 'You two can escort him on the first stage of the journey. The envelope has instructions from Spiff. Take him to Clapham Junction and hand him over to the nearest Borrible tribe. Then he can be taken to the Honeywell Borribles, and they can take him up to the Wendles beyond Wandsworth Common; from there the Wendles will take him to Merton Road. This letter goes with him and explains what should be done at each stage. Finally, he should be released as near Rumbledom High Street as possible and allowed to find his way home. Any questions?'

The two lookouts shook their heads.

'Right,' said Knocker, 'as soon as you've got rid of him report back to me. It is very important that he gets home in one piece, though it doesn't matter what he looks like; the rougher the better. We've got to frighten the fur off every Rumble in existence.'

Timbucktoo jumped to his feet at this. 'You don't fwighten me, Bowwible, nor your fwriends. You

don't know what you're taking on. We'll be keeping a watch out for you; you'll be skewered on our Wumble-sticks before you get a sight of Wumbledom Hill. You may be safe down here in your gwin stweets and stinking back-alleys, but Wumbledom is a wilderness with twackless paths that only we can follow. This means war.'

Knocker swiped the Rumble round the ear, almost affectionately. 'Go on,' he said, 'you old doorman before I knock that snout of yours through the back of your bonce.'

At a sign from Knocker his two assistants hauled the Rumble from the room on the first stage of his long and perilous journey, a journey on which he would be passed from hand to hand like a registered packet in the London post.

During the fortnight that followed the capture of Timbucktoo, the lookouts' room in Spiff's house became the centre for the collection of all gear that might turn out to be useful on the Great Rumble Hunt. Under the watchful eye of Knocker it was stacked and sorted: there were rucksacks and li jackets from the sports section of Arding and Hobbs, thick warm coats, sleeping bags, unbreakab nylon rope for climbing trees and the sides of houses, stout boots, oilskins, woollen underwear, sha knives, sou'westers and ski goggles.

Looking at the spoils Knocker felt pleased; his job was finished and every eventuality had been foreseen. The store cupboard was full and the lookouts' room was piled high with valuable items. The only space left clear was a small area round the desk and a kind of corridor to each of the doors. Knocker rubbed his hands together in contentment and at that moment Lightfinger appeared, sidling between the goods towering above his head.

'You look tired,' he said.

'I am that,' answered Knocker. 'But I think I've got everything now, though I suppose I'm bound to have forgotten something.'

'Well, you haven't finished yet, mate,' said Lightfinger. 'Spiff wants to see you right away upstairs.'

Knocker ran up to the ground floor landing and knocked on Spiff's door. It was opened immediately. 'Ah, there you are Knocker, come in, sit down. Good news, they're here.'

'Who?' asked Knocker, whose mind was tired and preoccupied.

'Oh, come on,' said Spiff. 'The Brightest of the Borribles, the Magnificent Eight, call 'em what you like, they're here.'

'Where?' asked Knocker.

'In the old storeroom under the gym in Rowena Crescent, other side of Prince's Head. I want you to put them through a complete lookout training. Make sure they are first-class thieves, good shoplifting and Woollie-dodging; and see they know the Borrible proverbs by heart. Then take them on a few runs in Battersea Park; I know they don't like the countryside, but they've got to get used to it; Rumbledom's rough ... I know, I've been there. I'll give you two weeks, that's all. There'll be another bloke to help you, he's from the Northcote Road tribe, was brought up in a paratrooper family before he was Borribled, he could be useful. By the way—' Spiff threw over some books and Knocker caught them in his lap '—you'd better read those from cover to cover, they're the Rumble manuals, their whole history from the word go, gives the layout of their place, the structure of the command and the way they fight with their Rumble-sticks. Nasty long lances they are, with a four inch nail at the end.'

Knocker was caught off-balance. 'Rumble manuals, Spiff, how did you get your hands on those? Mr Borrible's meant to have seen 'em.'

Spiff tapped his nose with a finger. 'Never you mind, young feller me lad. Everything you need is there. Just get on with it. I'll come and see you in two weeks. If there's anything you need, send a runner.'

Knocker gathered up the books and rose to leave, but Spiff raised a hand to stop him.

'Oh, yes, in the first volume I've made a list of the Eight High Rumbles of Rumbledom, their names. I thought it would be a good idea if you gave each of your Borribles one of those names to win, so if they ever get that far, each of your blokes will know exactly which Rumble he's got to do for. All right?'

‘How shall I give them out? Did you decide that?’

Spiff laughed to himself mysteriously. ‘You’d better put the names into a hat and your guys can draw for them, then there can be no arguments about the targets they are given.’ Spiff hesitated, and then laughed again. ‘That is except for two of them, those you’ll have to put into a separate hat. You’ll see them marked on the list. Go on, buzz off, Knocker.’

As he went down the stairs Knocker let out a long low whistle. He would have loved to have gone on the expedition, to have earned a new name and a new story to tell, but fancy going through life with the Rumble title; that would be strange. Then he reflected that it was not the name after all, but the story carried with it that mattered. He could think of some fine Borribles with the most extraordinary monikers, but when you saw them or heard their names you didn’t think of the word alone or its sound, you thought of the life and the deeds that lay beyond it—the story.

But then stories are very important to Borribles. Most of the time they can’t have a real adventure because they are too busy making sure they get enough to eat, so to compensate they read tales like westerns or spy stories or science fiction. For a Borrible the next best thing to an adventure of his own is hearing other Borribles tell how they won their names; and it doesn’t matter if they exaggerate the deeds in the telling, exaggeration is accepted as long as it makes a good story.

So in Knocker’s mind, as he made his way up the High Street, there was no doubt that the eight Borribles who were going on this adventure would have wonderful stories to tell. The Rumble names they were going to win would remind them of their targets during the expedition and, in years to come, if they were successful, everyone who heard the names would know how they had been won. ‘Yes,’ concluded Knocker as he turned into Rowena Crescent, Spiff had come up with a good idea, but then Spiff was as sharp as a cut-throat razor.

Outside the gym Knocker stopped to make sure his hat was on firmly, his ears covered. The building was long and low, looking like an empty pub and faced with green tiles. Above the door and three long windows was a sign. Knocker looked up at it, though he knew what it said: ‘Rowena Gym. Tough Guys for Stage and Screen and TV. Stunt Men. Kung Fu. Laetitia Martin, prop.’

Knocker could hear grunts and groans coming from inside: adult males trying to break into show business. In the pavement he saw the telltale grilles revealing where the basement was, where the Borribles would be. Tightening his grip on the Rumble books, Knocker went through the gym’s main entrance and down a corridor that was tiled in the same dirty colour as the front of the building. As he went forward a security guard threw open the door of his office and came to stand in Knocker’s way. He was huge, with his legs spread and his hands on his hips. He had a cauliflower ear and his breath smelt sickly-sweet of brown ale.

‘And where d’you think you’re going, mush?’

‘It’s all right,’ lied Knocker, ‘my big brother’s here and I got to give him these books. I’m late already.’

The man thought slowly, then: ‘Okay, but don’t hang about. Kids ain’t allowed in here, ‘special little squirts like you.’ With that he retreated into his office and slammed the door.

At the end of the corridor Knocker ignored the up staircase and descended a flight of dank cement steps until he was in a darkness so deep that he had to feel his way. He groped along a wall until he came up against a rough wooden door which did not give when he pushed it. He tried the Borrible knock, gently at first and then, when nothing happened, a little louder—one long, two shorts, then long—Dah ... di-di ... dah.

There was a slight noise behind the door, a bolt clanged, a lock clashed and an eye peered through a slit.

‘Borrible?’ asked the person behind the door.

‘Borrible,’ answered Knocker.

The door was opened, just wide enough for Knocker to pass through, and then it was closed and bolted behind him. He found himself in a long dusty space with exercise bars covering each wall from floor to ceiling. From central beams hung thick ropes for climbing; jute mats were piled in the corners and here and there various bits of machinery, designed to improve the efficiency of the human body, had been abandoned. The light in the room was grey and faltering; indeed it was so weak that Knocker could hardly make out the eight shapes sitting quietly on a bench at the far end of the gym.

The chief lookout turned to the Borrible next to him. 'Northcote Road?' he asked, and his companion nodded.

'Name is Dodger,' he said, and smiled.

'That sounds like a good name,' said Knocker, 'you must have had a good adventure getting it. Perhaps you'll tell me one day.'

'Everyone knows how you got your name, Knocker, that's one of the best Borrible stories ever told.'

Knocker was pleased by this tribute to his celebrity and he felt sure that he and Dodger would get on. It is usual for Borribles meeting for the first time to exchange compliments on their respective names and the winning of them. Until they have a name Borribles are known simply as 'You', 'Oi' or 'Mush', sometimes as 'Fingy', or even 'Wazzisname'. But to call a named Borrible by one of the foregoing is an unforgivable insult and will lead to fighting.

An even greater insult for a named Borrible is for him to be told that he acquired his name only because he'd found it, or someone had thrown it away. And for an un-named one it is very galling to have it suggested that he is nameless because no one has yet had the devious ingenuity to invent an epithet bad enough for him.

Knocker glanced at the beret Dodger was wearing; it was dark red in colour, and bore the badge of the Parachute Regiment, shining bright.

'Army?' observed Knocker.

'Oh yes,' said Dodger proudly. 'My family was Parachute Regiment and SAS until I became a Borrible. I wouldn't have run away at all if they hadn't wanted to pack me off to some school. Up until then I'd spent all my time watching the soldiers doing their training. That was the life.'

Knocker laughed. 'Well, we'd better get a shift on, we've only got two weeks.' They turned from the door and made their way down the long hall, their feet kicking into piles of rubbish and releasing strong smells from old cardboard cartons.

'How did you get in here?' asked Knocker.

Dodger pointed to the ceiling. 'I had the bolts off a couple of those grilles in the pavement. Easy. That way we won't have to go past "Punchie the porter" every day.'

Knocker nodded. 'I'll remember next time.'

The Eight Adventurers sat motionless on their bench. Some were leaning back against the wall with their eyes closed; some held their heads in their hands and others sat looking straight in front of them, staring at nothing.

At a sign from Knocker, Dodger switched on some electric lights and the Borribles blinked their eyes.

'Stand up. Get your hats off.'

When they had done what Knocker asked he walked down the line and inspected their ears to see if they showed signs of the intelligence he was expecting. It was a manoeuvre that gave him time to think. He would have admitted to no one, apart from Spiff perhaps, that he was flabbergasted; one of the champions was black. Of course he knew that many Borribles were black, more and more all the time. There were legions of them in Battersea and Tooting, and an even greater number in Brixton; he just hadn't thought of one on this expedition. He had no one to blame but himself for this oversight. He was, after all, a chief lookout and his mind should have been open to all possibilities, not drifting

around in preconceptions and prejudices.

~~Mentally he kicked himself for being a fool, but he hadn't finished kicking himself.~~ When he stopped at the end of the row he found that the last two Borribles were females. Here his surprise nearly got the better of him, but he pursed his lips and pretended to be thinking. One of the girls smiled and to cover his embarrassment Knocker looked closely at her ears. They indicated a high degree of intelligence and great individuality, and that could mean trouble. Now Knocker knew why Spiff had laughed and why he'd said he'd have to put the names into two different hats.

Knocker went back to where Dodger stood, handed over the Rumble books, and took the list of names from his pocket. He looked at it, making the eight champions wait. Finally he said, 'You will be here for two weeks. We are going to see how good you really are. When Dodger and I have satisfied ourselves about your basic knowledge we will move on to more specialist skills, but before that I want to be convinced that you are good: good with a catapult, good with your hands, good with your feet. I want you to be the best runners, the best fighters, and I want to see how you deal with tricky situations. You'll have to be the best if you want to go on this trip, because if I don't think you are, you ain't going.'

Knocker looked along the faces, scrutinizing them one after the other. 'Anyone hears an order from me or Dodger, jump. That's against the grain for a Borrible, I know it, but there hasn't been an adventure like this in years and if you want to be in on it you've got to do what I say. Any questions?'

There were no questions.

'Good, now to the names. It was decided to give you your names now—provisionally.'

There was a stir in the line and eyes flashed.

'This is to make it more convenient for me during training and for you all when you're out on the adventure. These names will not be confirmed until your return—if you ever make it. These names have been lent to you on trust. One false step at any time and your name will be withdrawn, and you will never be given another adventure.'

There was silence; the eight faces looked at him and waited. They were tense and excited, but the Borribles were too canny to give much away. He went on.

'These are fine names, names that have a good ring to them and will remind you, and others in the future, of this adventure: but more important, the name that each of you will be given is also the name of the Rumble that is your individual target. While you remember your own name you cannot forget the name of your enemy.'

Knocker paused. He knew that each Borrible standing before him could hardly wait for the moment when he would carry a name, the one word which would symbolize a whole life. 'All right,' went on the chief lookout, 'the names will be distributed by drawing lots, six names in one hat, and two names in another. Dodger.'

Dodger and Knocker removed their hats and Knocker tore each name separately from the sheet that Spiff had given him. He put six names into his own woollen cap and two into the red beret of the paratroops. Dodger held the beret while Knocker shook his own hat vigorously to mix the names fairly and squarely. 'I'll start at one end and move along,' he said. 'It's all the luck of the draw.'

He studied the face of the first person in line. By chance it was the one he had recommended to Spiff, the Battersea Borrible from Lavender Hill. Knocker had always liked the look of him, although they didn't know each other very well. He was slightly built, even for a Borrible; his skin was clean and his hair was dark and tightly curled, like wire wool. His eyes were sharp and blue and they moved quickly, but were never furtive. He smiled a lot and Knocker could see that it would take a lot to get him down. He glanced at Knocker, winked, then plunged his hand into the hat and pulled out a scrap of paper. He opened it, read it to himself and then smiled at the chief lookout. He rolled his tongue over it or twice, getting the feel of his name for the very first time.

‘Bingo,’ he said, ‘the name’s Bingo.’

~~‘That’s a good name,’ said Knocker, and stepped sideways. He stood in front of the black Borrible~~

‘Where you from?’ asked Knocker.

‘Tooting, man, Tooting, and you?’

Knocker raised his head sharply. ‘I’m from here.’

The Tooting Borrible, or Totter, had hair standing out in a solid uncut mass all round his head like a black halo. His teeth protruded and he seemed to be smiling all the time, an expression of cheerful slyness. Knocker liked that. He shook the hat again and the Totter took a piece of paper.

‘My name is going to be O-ro-coc-co,’ he said, splitting the word into separate syllables and pronouncing them with care.

The next person was smaller than Bingo even. He had a triangular face with a pointed chin and his mousey hair lay flat across the top of his head. He had a way of wagging his head that said there was a trick in the book he didn’t know.

Knocker stopped in front of him with the hat and the Borrible said, ‘I’m from Stepney, the best place in the world.’

Knocker nodded only and offered the hat. The Stepney Borrible looked at the name on the paper he had drawn and whistled, then he said, ‘Good, I’ve got Vulgarian, I’ve heard he’s the chief Rumbledon. Don’t reckon his chances when I catch up with him.’

‘I see, so you know why you’re here?’

‘Course, to get a name, and because they said that this was going to be the best adventure ever.’ And the Borrible glanced up and down the line and the others nodded in agreement.

‘You’ve got to convince me that you’re good enough first. Then you go,’ said Knocker.

‘Perhaps you ought to start by showing that you’re good enough to train us,’ said a brittle voice. Knocker’s right, but Knocker ignored it and moved on a step.

‘I’m from Peckham,’ said the next adventurer without being asked, and he thrust his hand into his hat and pulled out his name. Knocker watched him closely as he read the paper. He seemed strong and resourceful. He had dark heavy eyebrows and a red face with a firm jaw and enormous shoulders and arms. The kind of bloke who would not mince his words; not very witty perhaps, but dogged and persistent.

‘Well,’ said Knocker, ‘which one have you got?’

The Peckham Borrible did not even show pleasure as he said, ‘I’ve got the name I wanted, Stonk. Someone in Peckham said he was the keeper of the Great Door of Rumbtedom—the strongest one. He’ll need to be when I hit him.’

When Knocker came face to face with the next person he wrinkled his nose. There was an unmistakable smell about him and Knocker guessed immediately where he came from.

‘You’re from Wandsworth, aren’t you? A Wendle?’

‘So what, the finest Borribles in the world come from Wandsworth.’

Knocker recognized at once the brittle voice that had spoken out of turn a little earlier. ‘Is that a fact?’ he retorted, smiling a smile that had no warmth in it.

In common with most other Borribles he wasn’t over fond of the aloof Wandsworth Brotherhood. They dwelt along the banks of the River Wandle in disused sewers and in the smelly holes they had scooped out below the streets. But no one knew exactly how they lived, for they were the most suspicious and warlike of all Borribles; they did not encourage visitors and rarely spoke to anyone outside their own tribe. Most repulsive of all, their skin had a green tinge to it which came from living so much underground, and being so often in and out of the filthy Wandle water.

Once the Wandle had been a pleasant stream, but years of industrialization had turned it into a treacherous ooze of green and muddy slime, a mixture of poison waste, decomposed rubbish and

undigested lumps of plastic which rolled slowly along the river's surface as it slid like a thick jelly down to the Thames. The Wandle mud would entrap any stranger who was foolhardy enough to wade across it without guidance; no one but the Wendles knew its secret paths, and only rarely could they be prevailed upon to guide travellers through their territory.

Every Wendle carried the smell of the Wandsworth marshes with him, and that smell was the smell of treachery and decay. Knocker had seen but few Wendles; none of them had been this close and he didn't like what he saw: the green glow to the flesh, the dark eyes of an indeterminate colour, and the cold proud bearing of the born scrapper. There seemed to be no spontaneous warmth in the Wendles and warmth was normally the first thing that was noticed in a Borrible.

'Take your name, anyway,' said Knocker flatly, and he held out his hat.

The Wendle narrowed his eyes and screwed up his mouth to prove that he didn't care a damn about Knocker, or anyone else, and he pulled out his name. He nodded, then he laughed loud, pleased and hostile.

'Out with it,' said Knocker impatiently. 'What is it?'

'What a name I have.' cried the Wendle. 'I shall cover it in glory.'

'Or mud.'

The Wendle ignored Knocker and looked up and down the line of adventurers. 'Napoleon Boot,' he said loudly. 'Call me Napoleon Boot.'

'And I suppose you know why you're going to Rumbledom?' asked Knocker.

'Why am I going?' The other was angry. 'What's wrong with you? Because I hate them, that's why. I always have hated them, and if you'd always had 'em leering down at yer from Rumbledom, like I have, you'd hate 'em as much as I do. I don't need these others to come with me. I'll tear Rumbledom apart on me tod.'

Knocker shrugged. He was glad to move on to the last of the male Borribles. He looked at the face and liked it. It was square and flat, and the eyes were optimistic under the spiky brown hair. The Borrible looked like he could take a lot of knocks and still come up smiling.

'Well,' said Knocker, 'you're the last so I know the name; it's Torreycanyon.'

'Yes,' said Torreycanyon, 'that'll do nicely.'

Knocker gave the empty hat to Dodger and took the beret with the two names only in it. He stood in front of the two Borrible girls. and felt embarrassed. He was used to girls of course but he'd never heard of any being trained as lookouts. He didn't like the idea of girls on this adventure and wondered how it had happened. He looked from one to the other of them; he was forced to admit that they were tough-looking, and certainly their ears were amongst the most beautifully shaped he had ever seen denoting strong character, unbendable wills and great slyness and cunning. He couldn't fault them there. But, he wondered, would they be able to support the rigours of the trek, the dangers, the rough living out of doors, every night a different bivouac. And what effect would they have on the team as a whole? That was a worry. Borribles could quarrel and fight just as well as they could steal.

Knocker glanced back down the line and found the others watching him closely. Oroccoco was smiling, his white teeth shining against his black skin; even the Wendle, Napoleon Boot, was smirking.

'Where are you girls from?' asked Knocker.

'Whitechapel,' said the first.

'Neasden,' said the second. Knocker held out the hat to the girl from Whitechapel.

'Take one of these,' he said. The girl chose a piece of paper and read her name simply, with no comment.

'Chalotte,' she said, her voice cool and relaxed. Her green eyes flickered over Knocker's face and she smiled. Knocker didn't like to admit it but over and above her other attributes she was beautiful.

too; her fair hair fell to her shoulders, her skin shone and her legs were strong and full of running, an asset to any Borrible.

He gave the last piece of paper to the girl from Neasden.

‘Sydney,’ she said when she’d looked at it. Knocker glanced at her. Another good-looking girl; her hair was dark and shiny and her eyes were grey, her face kind.

‘Why did Whitechapel and Neasden send you two?’ he asked, disguising his shyness behind a sarcastic tone. ‘Haven’t they got any male Borribles out there?’

Chalotte said, ‘The message that came to Whitechapel specified a female Borrible.’

‘And the Neasden message?’

Sydney nodded. ‘We were told that two of the High Command are female. That’s why we were asked, I should think.’

‘Hm,’ said Knocker. He went to move away from the girls, but then turned on them suddenly, raising his voice. ‘There will be no favouritism, you will be treated just like the others, you will train like the others and sleep on the ground like the others, and you will wear the same combat clothes. When you leave you must expect the same conditions, exactly. You will march as long, eat as little and fight as much as every other member of the expeditionary force. No favours, so ask for none. You will take the same risks as the others, and maybe perish with them. Do you understand?’

If Knocker had hoped to frighten Chalotte and Sydney with this outburst he failed.

‘That is why we came,’ said Chalotte, and quoted a Borrible proverb: “‘No name earns itself.’”

‘Yes,’ said Sydney, ‘and there’s another proverb: ♠♠ Every way forward has a way back.’”

Knocker turned again and retraced his steps to the centre of the line.

‘Right,’ he began, ‘now you have your names, training will be all day and every day. I’ll give details tomorrow. First thing you must do is learn your enemy. We have Rumble books here and we have something that is better, Spiff’s notes and studies of ‘em. We will start reading right away. In his notes you will find a detailed description of each of the Rumbles of the High Command. Now you know your names you know which one is yours and you must know exactly what he or she looks like. You will have to distinguish between him and a thousand others right in the middle of a punch-up. Another thing, we shall be training with the Rumble-stick or sticker, the enemy’s weapon. For those of you who don’t know it’s a four-inch nail stuck into the end of a lance of wood. They use it like a spear or as a quarterstaff and dagger combined. The Rumble is good with it, cuts his teeth on it; you’ve got to be better. From now on we work hard. Your survival will depend on this training.’

The next two weeks were weeks of exhausting activity. The eight members of the expeditionary force never stopped working. Every morning at five Knocker had them on their feet for half an hour of physical jerks, just to get the blood circulating properly through their brains. After breakfast they had a morning training session inside the gym, the subject chosen by Dodger or Knocker. They perfected their skills with the Rumble-stick and practised stealing in pairs and in fours. Before lunch they slipped out for a quick run, just a mile or so to improve their wind—all Borribles need to be speedy runners—and to keep them in trim Knocker made them responsible for purloining their own midday meal—a meal which they ate all together in some uncomfortable spot along by the river, or in some draughty house with no windows. And all the time Knocker watched the girls closely, but they never complained and they did everything just as well as anyone else.

After the midday meal they went back to the gym for a short rest of half an hour or so and then Knocker would test them on Borrible knowledge and Rumble studies; every one of them had to have their mind as sharp and as hard and as useful as a brand new tin-opener. They learned practical information too: how to avoid capture, how to escape when caught and how to aid other Borribles when in trouble. Knocker insisted that the eight of them should have all this knowledge ready in their minds. There was no telling what they might come across on the long and dangerous journey to Rumbledom; they would

have to be prepared for anything and everything.

After the session with the books there was always more physical training. Dodger taught them how to jump from a great height and fall without hurting themselves; how to take punches rolling with the blow, how to duck and weave. He taught them the vulnerable spots of the Rumble anatomy and again how to use the Rumble-stick. Then, in the latter part of the afternoon, Knocker, who'd had a great deal of experience, more than any other known Borrible, taught them field tactics: how to climb trees, how to cross commons and parks without being seen.

Like other Borribles Knocker much preferred crowded streets, alive with markets and shops, but unlike the others he'd been obliged, because of his calling, to do an enormous amount of counting work. Somehow he had made himself overcome the basic fear that Borribles have when faced with woods and fields. They hate such things.

'Fields,' they say, 'are always windy and there is nowhere to hide, no crowds to get lost in, and there is nothing to pick up, no lorries for things to fall off ... Fields are a pain and your Borrible is not really happy when he's up to something in the street.'

But there was one thing that was more important than everything else put together. Knocker made the Eight train hour after hour with the Borribles' traditional and preferred weapon. It had been used by them for generations, and had been chosen for its simplicity, its range, its power and its deadliness. It was an ancient weapon but was as efficient as any modern invention. It could be made anywhere and, back in the days of the nineteenth century when Borribles had endured great hardships and had been hounded from place to place, it had become their favourite method of defence because of the cheapness of its manufacture. The weapon was a very dangerous one—the catapult.

Every Borrible was an expert with the catapult, but the Eight would have to surpass the usual standards and become boringly accurate, able to hit a Rumble on the snout each time they fired.

'You must never miss,' Knocker told them. 'You will have a great deal of provisions to carry, but if you each have forty stones on you that will account for three hundred and twenty of the enemy between you. If you are besieged, always choose somewhere where you can find plenty of ammunition lying about, then you will be invincible.' And so each of the Eight became a crack shot; every one of them could take a fly off a park keeper's nose at a hundred yards and he'd never even notice.

That was how the days were filled. And every evening the Eight returned to the gym to find that the High Street Borribles had provided them with a supper of food stolen from the market. They ate with huge appetites and, after talking to each other for a little while, they rolled into their sleeping bags and slept on the floor of the long dusty room. The next day they would have to wake early and do the same things again—run a little faster, shoot a little straighter.

Knocker gave them no rest. He made them rehearse the expedition route on the street map of London until they knew it by heart; and he insisted they play war games that placed them in impossible situations, obliging them to think their way clear as quickly as they could, and if Knocker was not satisfied with their efforts they would have to do their tasks again, and then again. The Eight were tired all the time.

About one o'clock on a grey afternoon towards the end of the fortnight, Spiff, with two of his cronies from the High Street, made an appearance in the storeroom of the Rowena Crescent Gym. It was the beginning of the rest period and Spiff walked around the room talking to the Borribles who were stretched out on their sleeping bags, dozing with their eyes only half open. When he'd had a short word with each, he came over to speak to Knocker and Dodger.

'Knocker,' said Spiff, nodding his head abruptly at the two Borribles by his side. 'This is Rasher and this is Ziggy.'

Knocker stood and said, 'Those are fine names, certainly, I would like to hear the stories one day.'

The two nodded but did not smile. They looked out of humour.

‘Yes,’ said Spiff, ‘that will have to wait of course. Now, Knocker, you’ve reached the end of the two weeks. How have you got on?’

Knocker reached for a large notebook on his desk. It contained a detailed description of each of the Borribles’ training, together with various comments.

Spiff waved it aside. ‘No, I can look at that later, just a verbal report will do.’

‘Keep it general, too,’ said Rasher.

‘Well,’ said Knocker, looking sideways at Dodger, ‘they are very good, all of them. Some are better at one thing than another, but they are all naturals with the catapult. They could knock a running cat over with their eyes closed, girls as well. In fact Chalotte is better than all of the others, except perhaps Oroccoco. Hand-to-hand fighting is good. climbing good, running very fast. With the Rumblestick they vary, but Bingo is fantastic. They aren’t so good at scouting work in the countryside, but that takes years of practice and it’s unnatural, but they’re first-class in the streets and markets, you hardly see their hands come up from beneath a barrow when they takes their dinner. Marvellous. And all of them are dead keen.’

Knocker hesitated and lowered his voice. ‘I’m only worried about one of them, although he’s worked as hard as anyone, harder. But I dunno, there’s something that worries me about Napoleon Boot. He always seems to be thinking about something else, there’s a slimy feel to him, it’s ... well, to tell the truth, Spiff, I dunno, it’s just a feeling.’

Dodger nodded to substantiate what Knocker had said.

Spiff looked back down the hall to where the Borribles were resting. Some were reading the Rumblestick books, others were just relaxing and looking at the ceiling. Napoleon Boot was scrutinizing the room map of Greater London and memorizing street names.

‘He never stops,’ said Knocker. ‘They all know the *Borrible Book of Proverbs* by heart, but Napoleon knows it backwards and sideways as well. He’s too good to be true.’

Spiff creased his face. ‘Well, son, there’s nothing to be done now. They have to have a Wendle with ‘em because they’ve got to cross the Wandle. You know how suspicious Wendles are of anybody who wants to cross their bloody river.’ He sniffed. ‘Wendles are so crooked they find it hard to stand up straight ... but it’ll work out, you’ll see.’

There was silence as if nobody agreed with him, not even Spiff himself. He changed the subject.

‘Well, your blokes must leave soon anyway; the longer they wait the more dangerous it is. There was a psychological advantage in letting the Rumbles know we were on to them, but the longer we take getting up there, the more time they will have to prepare their defences. Our Eight might not be able to get into the Rumble burrows. Imagine, all that way for nothing!’

Ziggy, who had been trying to interrupt Spiff’s flow, at last got a word in. ‘I’ve never liked this idea of you know, Spiff. I think we should have gone up there in force, taken them on, given them a thumping and duffed ‘em up ’

‘Out of your mind,’ said Spiff impatiently; he was always right and knew it. ‘We’d have been outnumbered ten to one and they’d have been fighting on their own ground. We stand a much better chance by sending in eight professionals like this, and eliminating their leaders, mark my words.’

‘Oh, it sounds all right,’ said Ziggy, ‘but I don’t think those Eight over there can manage it. They haven’t done anything yet. Anyone can fire a catapult at a Woollie and run, but what if it’s a Rumble with a Rumble-stick at your throat, eh?’

‘Look,’ said Knocker, ‘I’ve trained this lot. If anyone can get inside the Rumble burrows they can.’

‘Rubbish,’ said Rasher, joining in the argument, ‘they don’t stand a monkey’s.’

‘They do,’ said Knocker.

‘They don’t,’ said Ziggy.

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