

ADDITIONAL WEB RESOURCES

You might read this book and find that afterwards you have more questions than answers.

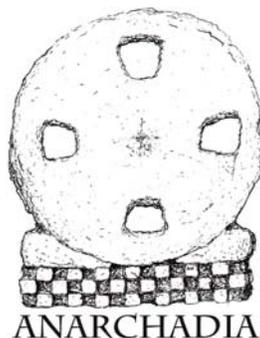
In that case, I cordially invite you to explore the Anarchadia website.

Its additional multi-media features include blogs, links, news, interviews, glossaries, readers' questions and additional artwork.

It may reassure you, confirm a funny feeling, help you recollect a distant memory, make new connections or allow something that has piqued your interest to metaphorically emerge from the shadows of obscurity.

It may also serve as a warning to the curious.

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BOOKS WITH GO FASTER STRIPES

CHAPTER 1

The man who was about to sell his soul pulled off the road, got out of his Hillman Imp and trod in something disgusting. It was always the same. Wherever he stopped, something nasty was waiting for him. The Wold was spattered with foul-smelling fallout from the local experiments in animal husbandry, and production organisms, instead of being managed efficiently in a pen somewhere, were free to roam around.

He squelched over to the roadside, selected the cleanest section of dry stone walling he could find and leant on it to scrape his feet in the long grass. Billy Brockhouse found potential fertiliser easily, but since it seemed to be everywhere this was not such an achievement.

“God, I hate this place!” he said aloud.

Angrily, he smeared his shoe on the uneven verge, lost his balance and steadied himself by treading in the mess he’d just scraped off.

“Oh, hell!”

Now he had two dirty shoes.

“God, damn this country!”

The dry stone walling hadn’t been as dry as he’d hoped. The sleeve of his purple velvet jacket was damp and smeared with green.

Billy usually used stronger language but lately he’d noticed that it had lost its potency, probably through overuse. Feeling cursed by being allotted the Wold as his sales territory, he found himself resorting to good old-fashioned blasphemy, delivered as forcefully as he could manage, and it felt strangely gratifying.

He began to scrape his feet more vigorously. The ground was soft, and as if by capillary action mud worked its way up his inside trouser legs.

“God damn the whole wide Wold to kingdom come!”

It was then that he noticed the big black motorcycle.

He’d been sure that the lay-by had been empty when he’d pulled up.

Billy didn’t like motorbikes.

This one was an engine on wheels, long and low and not very wide. It was either black or chrome or polished aluminium. The petrol tank had an oily spectrum of colours to it, like the feathers of a raven, and *Nosferatu* was written in Gothic script on the tank.

Billy turned his back on it and applied himself to cleaning his shoes.

Nosferatu ticked as it cooled.

“God! I hate it here!” he declared. “I’d give anything to get out of this place!”

“Anything?”

Billy span around.

A stranger stood by *Nosferatu* as if he’d just popped out of the ground. His black leather jacket was badly scuffed and his jeans were faded. He wore a plaid shirt and a black open-faced helmet with a peak. His eyes were covered by a wrap-around visor that swirled in the same way that *Nosferatu*’s tank might swirl when reflecting the clouds passing overhead.

“Anything,” replied Billy, although, even as he said it, he had the uncomfortable feeling that it might not be wise to say such things in the presence of some people.

“Why?”

“Everything’s . . . covered in crap!” exclaimed Billy, wiping his shoes in the grass, like a dog marking its territory.

“You travel in fertiliser.”

Billy stopped wiping his shoes. “You taking the piss?”

“You seek to cleanse your sole.”

“What?”

“You seek to cleanse your sole, your foot sole. Of crap.” The next moment, the stranger stood beside him. “You’re Billy Brockhouse, aren’t you?”

“How do you know my name?”

“I know many things. Your bosses have given you the Wold as your sales territory.”

“Who *are* you?”

The stranger reached inside his leather jacket. “My card.”

Billy stared at the business card. “There’s no name on this,” he said.

“Modesty forbids it,” replied the other.

Billy turned the card over.

“And no address, either!”

The stranger smiled and shrugged. “I’m never at home.”

And then something made Billy turn the card over again and, on what had been blank, there were now words. “‘Nicholas Eldritch Hob’,” he read out. “‘Soul Trader and Holder of Soul Rites.’ What odd spelling. ‘Horsepower Whispering a speciality.’ What sort of business is that?”

“I . . . facilitate self-fulfilment.”

“Really?”

“I can grant you your heart’s desire.”

“My heart’s desire?”

“Yes.”

Hob leant on the dry stone wall beside Billy and stared out over the

valley below.

Although the cloud base was low and visibility not good, a mixture of open moorland and apparently random enclosures stretched out before them. Here and there, the vivid green hills were punctuated by small earthbound clouds of wool.

Billy felt much more comfortable out of Hob's line of sight.

"I can grant you your heart's desire and sate the hunger in your soul," said Hob, as they gazed at the Wold. "Shall I tell you what your heart's desire is?"

"Go on then."

"You want to be BiggaBeast's number one salesman." Hob turned to look at Billy again. "Don't you?"

"How the hell did you know that?"

"Call it intuition. Or telepathy. Or a good guess."

There was a pregnant silence.

Billy could see his chubby features reflected in Hob's visor. Beneath this reflection, the fathomless swirling continued.

"So ... do you know how to break into the Wold market for growth hormones? If there is one here in this godforsaken place?"

"Oh, there's always a market." Hob laughed. "I should know that."

"But if you do know, and you tell me, you want something in return. Right?"

"Correct."

"Like what?"

Hob paused.

"Your soul."

"My soul?"

"Mm-hm."

Billy laughed.

"Do I have a soul?"

"At the moment, yes. Not a bad little soul, actually. It just needs to ... live a little, have a couple of good breaks, learn how to enjoy itself, as it were. Then it could be quite something."

"I've got potential, then?"

"Your soul has. I can't say much for the rest of you."

"Hmm. So. What's the deal? I give you my soul and you let me into the secret of how to break into the Wold market for growth hormones. Is that it?"

"That's right."

"That's some exchange."

"I'm feeling generous," said the Soul Trader, although that wasn't quite what Billy had meant.

"What would you do with my soul if you had it?"

"I would treasure it."

“Is that all?”

Hob nodded. “Or I might swap it for another one.”

“You’re mad!”

“Possibly. But you are intrigued. And what do you have to lose?”

“My soul, it would seem!”

“You didn’t even know you had one until I told you.”

“Why did you tell me, then? Why didn’t you just take it?”

“Souls that are exchanged by their own volition are worth much more than those that are simply taken. The transaction does things to them.”

“How would you make me BiggaBeast’s greatest salesman, then?”

“You don’t get to be a Soul Trader without knowing how to sell.” Hob picked a piece of grass and chewed it thoughtfully. “Or how to buy,” he added quietly.

He jiggled his eyebrows at Billy, which is quite a trick whilst wearing a crash helmet and dark glasses.

“The choice is yours,” said Hob, in a way that made Billy think that the choice was anything but his.

Just then, the sun almost came out. It was suddenly warmer and brighter, and Billy’s eyes smarted from the unexpected glare.

“If I agree, what exactly do I get?” he asked, squinting.

“The power to persuade.”

“I might have that already.”

Hob gave him a penetrating stare. “How much have you sold since arriving in the Wold?”

Billy winced. “Okay. Keep talking.”

“That is all I have to say,” replied Hob. “I can make you the greatest salesman there ever was and ever will be. But I wouldn’t want your soul straight away. I’d let you keep it for a while. You see, Billy, when a soul is finally granted that which it craves the most, interesting things happen to it. Over time, and with guidance, it develops and becomes far more precious.”

“So how long would I have my soul to keep?”

“That depends. No two souls are alike. They develop at different rates.”

The depths of the purple-black visor tugged at part of Billy.

“And you’d look after my soul?”

“Believe me. I would. Some might even say that it would be in better hands.”

Billy glanced at Hob’s hands. They were grubby and covered in oily sticking plasters. “I’m not sure I believe you,” he said.

Hob sighed. “I can understand that. It’s not every day you’re faced with realising your heart’s desire. What have you got to lose? Only your soul. Will you ever have the opportunity again? Probably not. My sanity may be seriously in question or I really am a Soul Trader. Either you become a great salesman or you don’t. Either you take me up on my offer or you walk away.”

“There might not be a Wold market for growth hormones.”

“You,” said Hob, pointing at him with one of his grubby fingers, “might be just the fellow to create one. Consider it! A market nobody thought existed before, all to yourself. Think of the potential there is here!” He gestured to the moors around them. “Plenty of space for growth!”

“I’d be starting from a long way back.”

“Just as ye sow, ye shall reap. I know what you’re thinking. I’m not of this Wold – but then, neither are you. I like you, Billy, so I’m going to make a proposition to you, okay? I’ll give you what you want, the success you desire, on a trial basis.”

“A trial? A free trial?”

“That’s right, and with no obligation. If after 30 years you’re not totally satisfied with your newly acquired, irresistible sales skills, you can return them and owe me nothing.”

“Er, sorry, Mr ... er ... Hob, but did you say 30 years?”

“I did.”

“So I get to try them out for the rest of my working life?”

“Only if you really want to keep working that long. I would have thought that you’d be able to retire in a few years. Unless, of course, Bigga-Beast make you their chief executive.”

“It’s very tempting.”

“It is, isn’t it?”

“Okay,” said Billy, and after Hob spat on his palm they shook on the deal. “So what’s the secret?”

“Let me see your samples.”

Billy led Hob to his car and from it produced a small but beautifully made suitcase. He undid the combination locks and opened it. Inside were hundreds of little glass phials.

Hob reached out to touch the phials with his oily fingers and tapped out a little tune upon them.

“Science,” he said. “You believe in science?”

“Of course.”

“You don’t need to understand it to believe it,” Hob told him. “Now we have science, whereas once we had only magic. You must learn to use them both together.”

“Magic? You mean tricks?”

Hob made a glass phial vanish. Then he produced it from behind Billy’s ear. He turned another into a dove and it flew away.

“Hey, those are my samples!”

Hob took another phial from behind Billy’s other ear and gave it back to him. “Tricks, *legerdemain*, sleight of hand. Call them what you will. Nothing in life is really what it seems. And there are tricks to every trade.”

“Tell me. I want to know.”

“Mix magic and science.” Hob shook the box of Billy’s phials. “Make magience. With your next customer, daemonstrate.”

“Demonstrate?”

“No. Daemonstrate.” Hob emphasised the daemon in daemonstrate. “Show them. Show them these in action. Don’t just tell them. Convince them! Sell them!”

“Is that it?”

“It’s all you need,” said Hob, and he turned and strode back to *Nosferatu*.

“Hey! Wait a minute! There must be more to it than that!”

“No, it really is that simple. Try it and you’ll see. I must go. Just think on what I’ve said and put it into practice. And if it doesn’t work, then you’ll never hear from me again. Trouble’s going!”

He kicked his bike into life.

The bark of *Nosferatu*’s engine nearly bowled Billy over and echoed off the valley sides.

“Goodbye, Billy! Until the next time! Trouble’s gone!” and with that and a roar from his engine and a scream from his supercharger he was gone.

CHAPTER 2

Mrs Osmotherly burst into the study of her cottage.

“A supercharged Vincent!” she announced to her cat.

Rain lashed against the windows. The heavy curtains shrank away from her in the draught from the hall.

She grabbed a dog-eared copy of *The Observer’s Book of Motorcycles* and thumbed through it.

“In an Egli frame and with disc brakes!”

Her old grey tomcat lay asleep in an armchair by the fire. He made no response. None had realistically been expected.

Candles and an oil lamp provided light, but the ticking coals on the fire gave the room a red glow. Even the clock sounded comfortably tired.

Mrs Osmotherly pulled one arm out of her waxed cotton cape and grabbed a small black box with a winding-handle and an aerial. She breezed back out of the room and the curtains set sail after her, brushing the old grey cat who flicked an ear. In the hall, she shucked off her boots, flung her sou’wester over a hat stand, wriggled her cape onto a coat rack and re-entered the study in another sweep of curtains as she closed the door behind her, still brandishing *The Observer’s Book of Motorcycles*. She wound up her clockwork two-way radiophone and dialled a number on it before stoking up the fire and warming herself in front of it.

“Another busy day for you as well, Greymalkin?”

Mrs Osmotherly thought Greymalkin was a good name for her cat. He was old and enigmatic and his grey fur might once have been black.

But he did not recognise Greymalkin as his name. He only answered to Indoors or Food although Mrs Osmotherly never seemed to notice. And, on a night like this, he was definitely Indoors.

He opened an eye and then closed it again. Mrs Osmotherly was standing in the way of the warmth but she wouldn’t be still for long.

Just as he was working himself up for another bout of unconsciousness, Mrs Osmotherly suddenly said, “Dorinda!”

“Who’s that?” muttered a sleepy voice on the other end of the phone.

“It’s me, Hepsibah Osmotherly. I’m sorry to call you so late ...”

“It’s so late it’s early,” grunted Dorinda Prevoyance.

“I’m sorry, but this can’t wait. I’ve just come off the moors and I’ve made a significant observation in the traffic movements.”

“On the moors? At this time of night?”

Mrs Osmotherly began to pace. Indoors Food fitted his tail more snugly around his feet and nose.

“It was on the other side of Wormton towards Mithering. I’ve only just got back. I tried to track him for as long as I could, but I couldn’t keep up with a motorbike.”

“What’s so significant about that?”

“First of all, I must tell you about my earlier observations. This morning, there was a Hillman Imp in Bedlam-le-Beans.”

Indoors Food opened his eyes.

“A Hillman Imp?”

“Yes. You know what an imp is! It’s a child of the devil!”

Over the years, Mrs Osmotherly’s cat had absorbed a great deal from the wisest woman in the Vale of Wormton. He knew all about Hillman Imps. They were rear-engined so their boots were warmer than their bonnets to sit on and he preferred their flatter contours to those of Volkswagen Beetles. Beetles had just an awkwardly shaped shelf over their rear number plate, which was totally inadequate for a cat of his torpidity.

He also knew that in certain road conjunctions at certain times, certain cars could be bad news.

“And look at this!” continued Mrs Osmotherly, forgetting Dorinda wasn’t there and stabbing a finger at the latest edition of *The Piston Wheel*. “A Dodge Demon is for sale in Mithering!”

Indoors knew all about Dodge Demons, too. They had nice, big, V8 engines in the proper place at the front under a comfortable expanse of bonnet.

“So you are flanked by an Imp and a Demon,” Dorinda summarised.

Indoors had met Dorinda Prevoyance. She was editor of the well-known wise woman’s magazine, *Wise Woman’s Own*, and visited occasionally to interview Mrs Osmotherly about her pioneering work on a new system of fortune telling.

“And,” went on Mrs Osmotherly, “the motorbike I saw today, travelling along the Mithering road as if it were possessed, was a supercharged Vincent.”

“Ooooh,” said Dorinda Prevoyance, now wide awake, “I don’t like the sound of that!”

“Some strange agency is abroad, tonight,” said Mrs Osmotherly. “I can feel ... something.” She picked up her *Bumper Book of American Automobiles* and leafed through it. “Of course, I could be wrong.”

“Frankly, I doubt it,” said Dorinda, “not with your reputation.”

“It might not have been an Imp at all. It might have been a distant Chevrolet Corvair. Or the vendors of the Demon could be mistaken. It might be a Plymouth Duster. They both use the same body shell.”

“Hah!” snorted Dorinda. “A pox on thee, Logo, deceitful god of badge engineering! How are we to divine the future with such a masquerade?”

“A big, bad, blown Vincent,” muttered Mrs Osmotherly. The cogs in the fruit machine of her memory were turning. They just needed a little nudge to help them.

Unsure of what she was remembering, she went over to her bound collection of magazine back issues.

“What are you doing?” asked Dorinda.

“There was something about a blown Vincent a few years ago. I don’t think it was in *Wise Woman’s Own*. Maybe *Wise Woman’s Realm*? Or *Cognopolitan*?”

“Oh no, surely not!” cried Dorinda.

Mrs Osmotherly rummaged away feverishly.

The smell of pages that had lain close together since nearly new wafted across the room and provoked a strange dream for the slumbering Indoors.

“Aha! Here it is! *Harbinger’s & Queen*.”

Mrs Osmotherly went back to her desk and sat down. Dorinda waited patiently. There was a pause in the storm outside, as if it, too, was desperate to know what a big, bad, blown Vincent with an Egli frame and disc brakes really meant.

“Of course!” said Mrs Osmotherly. “That’s it! It’s him. It has to be him. The Horsepower Whisperer rides in the Wold tonight!”

The wind gasped and hailstones rattled on the tiles and windowpanes as if the storm had dropped them in horror.

“The Soul Trader?” queried Dorinda.

“Yes! Old Weird Wheels himself. The Metal Guru, the Repossession Man, the Crypto-Engineer, His Malign Weirdness, the Grand Whizz-Herd and Master of The Engine Henge, the Lord High Prince of Rock’n’Roll, the Horsepower Whisperer and Soul Trader! None other than that infamous libertine and free radical, Nicholas Eldritch Hob!”

Some rain found its way down the chimney and fell into the fire, creating a great fizzing and hissing.

Indoors woke up. To him, it sounded like a cat swearing. He looked around to see an old woman dancing with glee at solving the conundrum of the motorscope but then she stopped in mid-hop.

“But this is terrible!” Dorinda was saying. “What in the Wold does he want?”

Mrs Osmotherly swallowed hard. “And from whom?” She shook her head. “Answers only make more questions.”

She walked slowly over to the wall and pulled off what looked like a calendar. It was, in fact, *Old Maureen’s Almanac*. She studied Old Maureen and grunted. “Of course, he would come now during Dark Time. The Horsepower Whisperer always picks his moments well!”

“Whose soul could he possibly be after?” wondered Dorinda, fearing for her friend and contributor.

But Mrs Osmotherly was thinking hard again. Back to the fire she went.

Indoors pretended to be asleep. He was so good at pretending to be asleep, sometimes he found himself waking up.

Mrs Osmotherly had overlooked a notebook that had fallen to the floor. She snatched it up and examined it closely. Slowly, she began to understand.

“A wolf? No! It’s a cub! A wolf cub! A giant wolf cub!”

She snorted in disbelief.

“Can this really be true?” she asked Indoors as much as Dorinda. “A giant wolf cub?”

Indoors opened his eyes and winked at her with a sort of half smile.

“Unless,” said Mrs Osmotherly, “I’ve missed something.”

CHAPTER 3

“Mr Heckmondwike!”

A thickset, craggy individual looked up. As he did so, the food on his fork fell into the gravy and splashed the napkin tucked into his collar.

“Slake?”

Slake grinned back. He was a gawky youth with long, dark hair who looked as if he'd been grown in a cupboard without any sunlight. He wore a leather jacket and jeans that started off as very tight at the hips but at the knees they spread out into flares so big they were still entering the snug of *The Golden Fleece* as he stood there. He wore a tee shirt under his leather jacket that bore the legend *Too fast to live, too young to die*.

“Ah thought tha were int Petropolis,” said Mr Heckmondwike.

“Not any more,” replied Slake.

“Ah can see that.”

“I came back.”

“Appen?”

“Sfunny,” mused Slake. “After a while, all I could think of was coming home.”

“Ah thought tha hated it here,” said Mr Heckmondwike, and he trapped and ate the elusive piece of shepherd's pie.

“I did,” admitted Slake, “but I began to miss Wormton all the same.”

Mr Heckmondwike, who never spoke with his mouth full, nodded sagely and, as he chewed, pointed with his knife to his empty glass of Old Sawe's Irascible Anorak.

“Thanks,” said Slake, misinterpreting the gesture on purpose. “I'll have a pint of The Usual, please Betty, if it's still on.”

“It's still on,” said Betty. “Would you be wanting a bacon and potato fritter, too?”

“Ooh, yes, please!” Slake turned to Mr Heckmondwike. “Can I have mushy peas, as well?”

“If he's treating you, you can have the lot,” said Betty.

Slake grinned at his unwitting benefactor and began to study the blackboard with the menu on it.

Betty smiled as well. This was good sport.

Mr Heckmondwike became a little restless. It wasn't that Woldspeople were stingy. They were just sensitive – sensitive about legal tender.

“No, better not be greedy,” Slake replied, turning back to Betty. “Just bacon, potato and mushy peas.”

“In a fritter. Be with you in two shakes of a lamb's tail.”

“That's what I like about being at home!” Slake said, gleefully. “I'm known here!”

“Knawn to t'authorities,” pointed out Mr Heckmondwike.

“Ah. Yes. The anonymity of the crowd can be useful, sometimes.”

“Tha's not anonymous here, lad.”

Slake laughed. “True but I can still do my speed testing out there in the Woldernesse.”

“Speed testing,” said Mr Heckmondwike. He tried to add a dismissive snort, but his happiness at seeing Slake again with his infectious enthusiasm, got the better of him and it sounded as if he wanted to go speed testing, too.

“Don't worry,” said Slake, “I'll keep clear of Wormton. Well clear.”

“And Diggle Cottage, lad. Mrs Osmotherly needs 'er peace and quiet to do 'er reckonin'.”

“That's a point. I've got to speak to her about the next phases of Dark Time. I don't want to find myself in a DT like the last one.” He sat down next to Mr Heckmondwike. “How's the flock, by the way?”

“Nobbut graidly, tha knaws. Lambing's nearly ower and we've just come out of Dark Time. Could be a lot wuss.”

“How's the Mudlark going?”

“Heck as owt! Tha did a grand job there, lad, and nay mistake. It must be t'fastest Mudlark this side of Bedlam.”

“My dear fellow, you are too kind!”

“But tha can stop that Petropolitan talk now you're back in Wormton. Right away.”

“It's going to be expected of me. How many horsepower whispering Woldsmen do you know?”

“Well there's Loncaster.”

“Yeah ...”

“Mickleness. And Dobson.”

“Obviously.”

“And our very own Mr Macklefract. Point is, Slake, ah can think of a few.”

“The point is there's not so many.”

“Ah've given thee four already, lad, and ah'm just getting' warmed up to t'task.”

“Okay, but if I admit you're right and I'm wrong it doesn't mean to say I haven't lost the argument, okay?”

“Now that's a Woldsmen talking.”

“Yeah and don’t you forget it.”

“And don’t thee forget it, nayther. Anyroad, ah suppose tha’ll be looking for summat like Riddaw Lodge to live in.”

“Not for me. I need to be near my customers, inside the town’s walls. Riddaw’s fine for you because you can commune with your flock. I’ll find some nice big old sheds here in Wormton. There’s plenty of ’em around.”

“Ah heard tell tha rode int Wild Hunt,” said Mr Heckmondwike, in a lowered voice.

Slake leaned forward. “What if I did?” he whispered.

“Is tha gonna ride in it again?”

“Of course. It’ll come to Wormton before too long.”

“That was a lifetime ago.”

“My lifetime, certainly,” replied Slake.

“It came through here before tha were even a twinkle,” said Mr Heckmondwike, “a twinkle in t’ milkman’s eye.”

“The Wild Hunt’s long overdue here,” Slake told him. “Once I’ve sold my engines to the young farmers and the miners, we’ll soon have our own one.”

“What? Mudlarks included?”

“Of course! Yours, Mr Heckmondwike, could be the leader of the pack!”

“Aye, it’s a good un and nay mistake.”

“Thank you.”

“Ah would’ve thought that it would make better sense to have stayed int Petropolis if tha was serious about engine tuning.”

“I enjoyed it to begin with,” Slake admitted. “The pace of life, the freedom and the opportunities it offered were all brilliant. But it took too long to get known. You can’t approach city people to ask them if they’ll help you bleed your brakes. Nobody starts a chat. They don’t get to know you well enough to commission some exquisite piece of engineering from you. You’d never get the service from someone like Betty here, either.”

“So did tha feel a bit of a small ram in a big flock?”

“Yeah but not so tired. In The Petropolis there were simply too many people to get known by. And then the novelty of the big city wore off after a bit.”

“What novelty?”

Slake looked at him hard. “I didn’t suppose you’d understand,” he said.

Mr Heckmondwike took another mouthful, munched it, swallowed it, and said, “Lonely places, cities,” just to show that he did understand, although he had no personal experience of them himself.

Slake was so surprised by this, he was speechless until Betty came over with two pints and his fritter, and then he had to deal with the serious business of eating it. Just before he began, he asked, “So. What’s new?”

Mr Heckmondwike supped from his fresh pint of Old Sawe's Irascible Anorak. "Tha'd be surprised," he said, at length.

"I would?"

"See? Ah told thee tha'd be surprised."

"Nothing's new. That's the surprise, right?"

"Wrong."

"Go on, then. Astound me."

"Well, ah've got a new tractor."

"A Wolseley?"

"Aye! Of course!"

"Wow!"

"Ah'll show it thee, later."

"You do that and I'll take you for a run in my trike!"

Mr Heckmondwike dropped his knife and Slake laughed out loud. It bounced onto the bare flagstones and the sound echoed around the snug, making the other customers look around. Mr Heckmondwike cursed under his breath and reached down with a groan to retrieve his knife from under the settle where they sat.

"It's not still going is it?" he muttered.

"Of course!" replied Slake.

"Is that a promise or a threat?"

"For you, it'll be a treat. A taste of life in the fast lane."

"Oh, aye?"

"I'd charge anyone else for the privilege. Just think of all those beers they'll stand you down at *The Young Farmers* as you regale them with your astonishing account of how you cheated death on the highway as passenger in my trike!"

"Ah'm not convinced that all experience is valuable. And just by way of an experiment, ah'm prepared to forego t'adventure to explore ma theory."

"I'm sure you'll reconsider. It's a once-in-a-lifetime experience."

"Sounds more like t'end-of-a-lifetime experience from where ah'm sittin'. So, Slake. What's thine plan, lad? Eh?"

Slake looked suddenly serious. "I'm not sure. 'The Wold is my hamster.'"

"Aye. Well. Don't let it get out of its cage and run it ower wi' settee tryin' to find it agin."

"I thought I might get a spannering job somewhere. You know, a bit of servicing, some accident repair, neutralize a few gremlins, that sort of thing."

Mr Heckmondwike looked at him very hard.

Slake began to fidget.

"Nay, tha doesn't," said Mr Heckmondwike. "Tha doesn't want to do that. Tha wants to open up thine own engine tuning shop. That's what tha wants to do."

Slake was a little red in the face.

“Okay. So I want to open up my own engine tuning shop. What’s wrong with a bit of ambition?”

“Nowt’s wrong with it, lad. If tha doesn’t have a dream, how’s tha gonna have a dream come true?”

“Exactly!”

“Just don’t expect it to come true in Wormton, that’s all.”

“That,” said Slake, with some feeling, “was just why I left in the first instance.”

“Meaning, tha could leave int next?”

“Mebbe,” mused Slake. “I don’t know. For the moment, it’s good to be back.”

“And now ah suppose everyone with a doorstep for an engine will beat a path to thine door?”

“Something like that. A door with *Slakespeed Engine Emporium* over it in red neon letters.”

Mr Heckmondwike chuckled as Betty delivered Slake’s fritter.

“What?” Slake wanted to know. “What is it?”

“Red neon letters? The parish council would never approve that!”

“Oh, oh. Look who’s just come in.”

“Ow canna? Ah’m not a bloody owl!”

“It’s ...”

“Slake!” boomed a foghorn voice.

Slake stood up. “Mr Grandlythorpe!”

Slake and Mr Grandlythorpe went back a long, long way, beyond the genesis of Slake’s infamous trike, beyond when time trials were spontaneously held on the ring road within the town walls – right back, in fact, to that first and rather ill-advised attempt to supercharge an electric milk float, which saw the whole of Wormton being plunged into darkness for a week.

Since Slake had been in The Petropolis, Mr Grandlythorpe’s life had been almost tranquil. Mr Heckmondwike couldn’t help but feel as if the Town Clerk was being loud on purpose, as if he were warning the whole of Wormton that Slake was back in town.

“Ow ta fettlin, lad?”

“I’m fettling very well, thank you, Mr Grandlythorpe. And you?”

“Heck as owt!”

They shook, or rather pressed palms, their arms rigid, knuckles white, squeezing each other’s hand from the shoulder in a typical Woldsman’s greeting. They let go of each other and Mr Grandlythorpe surreptitiously clenched and unclenched his knuckles. Slake had come of age.

“Ow do, Mr Grandlythorpe,” said Mr Heckmondwike, standing up and quickly pressing his own vicelike grip on the Town Clerk.

“Mr Heckmondwike. Fettlin’ well thysen?”

“Aye, nobbut graidly, tha knaws.”

“Appen? Those hoggs o’thine look reet fair to middlin’ these days.”

“Aye. Heck as likely as happen as mebbe tha’s reet. Not too scabby e’en tho it’s me that says so as shouldn’t.”

“If tha will excuse me, Mr Heckmondwike, ah just wanted to have a word wi’ young Slake here. It won’t take long.”

Slake was pulling a face behind Mr Grandlythorpe’s back. Mr Heckmondwike pretended not to notice.

Mr Grandlythorpe frowned slightly and turned to a suddenly attentive Slake. “Y’see, Slake, the parish council ’ave a problem wi’ some of our vehicles.”

“Oh, yes?” said Slake.

Mr Heckmondwike grunted. A true Woldsman would have said “Oh, aye?” That was what life in The Petropolis did to you.

Mr Grandlythorpe pulled up a chair. It grated loudly across the flagstones. They all sat down together and formed a conspiratorial huddle.

“As a young engineer, fresh from T’Petropolis, ah was wonderin’ if tha could see thine way to looking at our fire engine and t’ambulances over at t’cottage hospital.”

“I’m sure I could, at the very least, have a look.”

“By t’powers invested in me as Town Clerk, ah am empowered to appoint, on behalf and for t’benefit of t’people of Wormton, in furtherance of our municipal services, a professional engineer – a professional engineer that knaws his stuff, mind – to enhance t’performance of our emergency vehicles. We’ll pay professional rates, ’n all, mark me and mark me well. We need summan who knaws what they’re about.”

“But tha heard Slake was in town,” put in Mr Heckmondwike, “and thought tha’d have a talk wi’ him fust.”

“Aye, ah did at that.”

“So what exactly is wrong with them, Mr Grandlythorpe?”

“Well, it’s like this, lad. They’re just not bloody fast enough.”

“I see.” Slake winked at Mr Heckmondwike.

“We can’t ’ave leisurely ambulances or dawdlin’ fire engines.”

“Of course not,” agreed Slake.

“Wormton Parish Council would be t’laughing stock of t’whole Vale. It’s said that Mithering District Council have some ambulances that can do nowt to sixty in under fifteen seconds!”

“That’s not fast!”

“That’s just what ah was hoping tha’d say, lad!” and Mr Grandlythorpe slapped Slake on the back so enthusiastically he nearly pitched the young engine-tuner into his fritter.

“Y’see, Mr Grandlythorpe,” said Slake, who’d had to brace himself with his hands on the table, “speed is simply a function of how much money you are

prepared to spend.”

Mr Heckmondwike thought Slake had blown it there and then, but Mr Grandlythorpe replied, “Ah shall report back to t’parish council that, with thine expertise, Wormton’ll be able to show them Mitherers a thing or two.”

“It’s a matter of civic pride, isn’t it?”

“Aye. The honour of Wormton is at stake here, lad. Ah want thee to turn our fire engine and ambulances into t’epytummy of alacrity.”

Out of Mr Grandlythorpe’s line of sight, Mr Heckmondwike shook his head.

Mr Grandlythorpe continued. “We’ll pay thee good rates.”

“Really?” replied Slake, hoping he didn’t sound too surprised. It wasn’t like Mr Grandlythorpe to say such things.

“Almost as good as they’d pay summan to do a proper job,” put in Mr Heckmondwike, but the others ignored him.

“What make are they?” asked Slake.

“Wolseleys, all of ’em.”

“Naturally. I’ll have a look at them,” he told Mr Grandlythorpe, “and let you know what can be done. Once we have negotiated my rates.”

Mr Heckmondwike pursed his lips in a soundless whistle.

“Aye,” said Mr Grandlythorpe, with barely a twitch of an eyelid. “And we can establish thine terms o’ contract. For let’s be clear abowt summat before we begin. Ah don’t want thee getting carried away.”

“How d’you mean?”

“They’ve got to be reliable. If they keep breakin’ down, that’d be wuss than having bloody doorstops for motors! And none of this Horsepower Wars nonsense, nayther.”

So far, Wormton had remained largely untouched by the Horsepower Wars. The Wild Hunt had roared through the Vale of Wormton only once. The force that powered the economy of the rest of Anarchadia had yet to make an impact on the town. Mr Grandlythorpe was determined to see that the Wild Hunt never again got any closer than Bedlam-le-Beans.

That he had, so far, largely succeeded had been the main reason why Slake had left.

“I promise I’ll be very careful,” Slake assured him.

“Aye, tha’d better be. They’re not thine to race. And ah don’t want to see thee racin’ that trike o’ thine ont parish roads, ayther.”

“Who have I got to race against here in Wormton?” Slake asked him, all innocence.

Mr Grandlythorpe couldn’t help eying him with suspicion. “Ah dunnaw. Reckon tha could allus find summan daft enough. Besides. Ah reckon a lad like thee has demons of his own to chase.”

“As you will, Mr Grandlythorpe, as you will. But I give you my word. I will have to test your vehicles extensively, though, as part of the development

process. I hope you understand.”

Mr Grandlythorpe narrowed his already small eyes even further, but Slake kept on smiling and said that subject to the conclusion of mutually agreeable terms he could probably be around the fire station the day after tomorrow. “I’ve already got a couple of jobs lined up with Heptonstall’s Garage,” he explained.

“Now then, that’s graidly. Ah’ll meet thee at t’fire station at nine if that’s convenient.” Mr Grandlythorpe rose from his seat and the others mirrored his actions, either knees or chairs creaking. “Ah’ll sithee, then. Mr Heckmondwike. Slake.”

“Did ah just hear thee promising the unpromissable?” Mr Heckmondwike asked Slake as they sat down again and resumed their meals.

“Not quite. I started by assuring him that I would be very careful.”

“Aye. Careful tha won’t get caught.”

“He then went on to say that he didn’t want to see me racing my trike on his roads, and I simply promised that he wouldn’t.” Slake swigged some Usual and gave Mr Heckmondwike a sideways glance. “Wouldn’t see me.”

Mr Heckmondwike grinned.

“Mr Grandlythorpe knows me. We have an understanding. I think.”

“Reckon tha’ll get away with it, lad?”

Slake nodded. “So long as I don’t rub his face in it. The odd little burn-up is as nothing compared to the hideous excesses that I’ve seen in The Petropolis or the Horsepower Wars. And, even if I had promised him not to do it on the parish roads – which I do not believe I did – then it would still be worth doing it for all the good business I shall get from souping up these ambulances and that old fire engine.”

“He seems to have forgiven thee since the last time tha set fire to t’road.”

“That was his own fault for authorising the use of an asphalt with too low a flash point,” retorted Slake.

“Oh aye? Anyway. Summat of a challenge, int it?”

“They’ll need a service for a start, then I’ll probably junk the air filters, improve the carbs and exhaust and flow the heads. Once I’ve checked the bottom ends, of course.”

“Eck as like?” said Mr Heckmondwike but Slake’s eyes had glazed over.

“This could be the first step towards those neon letters over my own workshop.”

“Neon letters!” Mr Heckmondwike toasted him with his pint of Old Sawe’s Irascible Anorak. “Welcome back, lad,” he said. “Welcome back!”