

The Book of Sods

Excerpt:

Sherry and Steve were alone in the Purple Heart. The Sods and Clem had left them behind, S3 saying they could operate more effectively without them.

Surprisingly, Steve had objected. Surprisingly, because he had always been an armchair adventurer free of physical limitations. His safaris had taken him through the labyrinthine Internet jungles, the vast and sprawling empires of the unseen electronic universe. His adrenalin shots had come from soaring through icon-accessed circuits, cautiously creeping down code-locked corridors, sneaking past suspicious security sentinels, picking binary code locks, searching out silicon secrets.

Sherry, however, hadn't minded being left behind at all; the rain forests might be one of Earth's mightiest lungs (the other being the algae in the oceans), but nothing was ever going to induce her to enter even its fringes. Sherry feared neither wild beasts nor snakes, but she was terrified of what she called 'creepy-crawlies'. Besides, as she pointed out to Steve, unlike the Sods and Clem, neither of them had mastered the art of displacing their molecules and so they couldn't walk through trees. They'd need machetes and would have to chop their way through, and that would take ... er, well, days where the others would only need an hour, er, space or two.

Sitting in S3's seat in the control room, Steve was gazing intently at the interfaces monitoring the activities of the surfer crew. Other interfaces were emitting holograms and *Arachnea* projections of various parts of the forest, projections so real that one could smell the hot foetid breath of the jungle,

"Yuk! Smells like rotting plums!" Sherry rumped her nose.

Other VDUs (visual display units) again were throwing out quaternions (four-dimensional pictures) that Steve had not yet been able to interpret. They seemed to be scenes viewed through the eyes of various people. . . strangers. . .

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Eyes closed, Armin Schweiger leaned back against the side of the truck. Engine labouring, wheels spinning, the convoy slithered and slid through the ooze and ruts made by the bulldozers and heavy lorries over the previous days and weeks. Armin was tired. Tired and bored and depressed. The clammy, clinging heat pressed in on all sides, a tangible physical force, oppressive and debilitating. He hated his monthly trip to the 'Backwoods of Brazil' as he liked to call them. Armin preferred directing operations from his air-conditioned penthouse suite in Ríó; Ríó, with its unending supply of the most beautiful of beautiful young girls. . .

Jesus-Antonio Ruiz was also tired, and even more depressed. His head was thumping like a steam-hammer and every jolt and jerk a dentist's drill hitting the nerve. He'd drunk too much again, he and Neil, the tall, raw-boned young Scot sitting opposite - two bottles of Glenfiddich they'd seen off between them. But, Madre de Díos, what else was there to do in this sweltering green hell-hole! But, he would be rich! Yes, when he returned to São Carlos he would be rich! Six months and they would have cleared the slopes of this mountain and he'd be rich. Pía-Juanita would be pleased! He would do anything, everything, to please Pía ... Pía, who had

such expensive tastes, such extravagant habits. Pfa, who might possibly leave him should he ever fail to satisfy those tastes, finance those habits. . .

Neil McIntyre was neither tired nor depressed. Nor was he bored. Nor was he in the least hung-over. Oblivious to the jolts and jars, Neil was peacefully asleep, dreaming of mist-swathed peaks and cool mountain glens. . .

Next to him the Swede Ove Jonsson slumped down on the bench, square chin of square face sunk onto his chest, his breathing heavy, laborious. The climate affected Ove 'the new boy' most. With his first week in camp behind him he was convinced he would not live through another. . .

In the middle of the truck the supervising foremen Jimenez Guerão and Guillermo Villariño and the chief mechanics Pierre Chevaldonne and Herbert Lignot were smoking and discussing their imminent four-day leave and a trip downriver to Belém; not exactly a wildly exciting spot Belém, but the only place with women in reasonable reach and condition. . .

The two Americans Jay Hooker and Melvin Murray were seated opposite each other at the back of the truck, leaning confidentially forward and discussing markets and turnover and profits and golf, in that order. After the present project (of which this camp comprised but a very minor part) had been brought to a successful financial close, there were new Russian and Finnish prospects in sight. . .

Behind them a long drawn-out line of trucks and lorries skidded and jolted up the steep rutted incline, wheels fighting for traction on the slippery ground, engine notes high and complaining. Most were filled with the usual crowd of skilled lumberjacks and non-skilled labourers and their tools. The largest vehicles strained under the burden of heavier machines. Bringing up the rear was a truck filled with 'Guardia'; a similar truck preceded the column of vehicles.

There had been a warning, an anonymous tip-off, in the e-mail of the company's upper echelons, that unless they ceased deforestation there would be trouble today. It was probably just that bunch of pea-brained alarmist environmentalists again, but one never knew; and with the American bigwigs paying a visit (not to mention *himself*), the Alemán-Americano Armin was taking no chances. A quick telephone call to the Guardia had sufficed; costing of every South American project automatically includes a generous provision for bribes.

Ahead of them, hidden in the jungle at the edge of the clearing towards which the crawling cavalcade was headed, a dripping group of Greenpeace activists crouched in the equally dripping undergrowth, waiting. It was only a small group, hastily called together and as hastily organised and set in motion. A spur-of-the-moment action in response to a last-minute anonymous tip-off in the e-mail of the local Greenpeace office, that the lumber company planned something extra big today, something worthwhile catching on camera. The youngsters had been there all night, anxious to miss nothing; huddled in their Land Rovers hidden a couple of miles below. Driven off the track through an enlarged gap in the jungle and covered with undergrowth, they were completely hidden from the road. The tell-tale tyre marks from track to trees had carefully been obliterated from the soft wet mud.

For some city dwellers amongst them it had been their first night in a tropical rain forest, and they'd been unnerved by the unseen, unspecific, feral menace of the restless jungle night and

nauseated by its sickly, putrid smell. It was an experience they would not hurry to repeat. Now, still edgy, scratching at insect bites, drooping in the strength-sapping heat and humidity, longing for cool sweet air, they crouched and waited and hated the jungle and wanted out - quick. But stronger than their loathing was their resolution. They would stay here for months if necessary.

They raised their heads as the sound of grinding gears came up the track. At a signal from their leader, a scrawny, long-haired, bespectacled youth with the air of a bashful bookworm and the sensitivity and reticence of a sergeant-major, they began pulling on the special protective clothing the tip-off had insisted they'd need. Bulky clothing it was. Strange clothing for an action aimed at uncovering further depredations on the resources of a rain forest. They sweated freely under this extra, encumbering gear; but these were no daredevil young hotheads out for adventure and careless of risk. Young as they were, these were professional activists bent on attaining their goals with exactly calculated minimum risks ('live to demonstrate another day...'). Experienced campaigners take no chances. If their anonymous informer said special protective clothing was what they needed, then special protective clothing was what they donned, however bizarre it might be. There was probably a good reason and, if not, well, inconvenience aside there was no harm in playing it safe.

Alain, the French cameraman, was some years older than the rest of the group; a hard-bitten professional whose camera had flashed its way through every sort and scale of national and international war, civilian skirmish and ethnic clean-up, until, sick of recording Man's love of his neighbour, he had turned from the human battlefields and enlisted himself and his camera into the fighting ranks of an international unarmed force dedicated to combating industrial greed and the grasping short-sighted stupidity of political power. He checked up on the two backup cameras, one operated by a youth the other by a girl, both of whom he'd carefully trained himself. Campaigners' cameras had been known to get deliberately smashed, and cameramen to succumb to the occupational hazard of a broken nose, so stand-bys for both were always advisable. The heavy protective gloves they wore made handling the cameras an awkward, fumbling business; and the heavy veils were not only irritating but also partially obstructed their sight. Alain hesitated ... but the tip-off had been so very insistent on every item of this strange protective clothing ... he decided they'd keep them on.

The small group now fanned out silently, settling soundlessly down in predetermined places, merging and losing shape and form in the sheltering jungle, their dun-coloured clothing melding with the surroundings. The clearing itself was a rough oblong, with a long front of about six thousand feet and a present depth of some two thousand feet.

The first truck ground to a squealing halt and the Guardia poured out, jumping smartly down, unshouldering rifles, snapping back safety catches, spreading out with the stealthy crouching movements they'd seen in TV movies, looking dangerous enough to deal with the most menacing, unarmed, passive resistance.

Then the truck carrying Armin and the Americans skidded up and gradually, one after the other, truck after truck, lorry after lorry arrived and deposited its load of men or machinery before turning down a winding track to the left and eventually coming to a halt on a huge plateau, cleared of forest, bulldozed flat, and serving as parking place for transport vehicles and bulldozers alike.

Armin and the two Americans strolled around the clearing inspecting the progress made so far, and the supervising foremen and chief mechanics separated to go about their various tasks. Grabbing a couple of machetes, Neil and Jesus-Antonio strode up to the top of the clearing followed by a reluctant, foot-dragging Ove. Their job was to select and mark the most valuable, best-marketable wood. This would be removed first, with especial care and handling. They stopped to mark one or two trees at the immediate edge and then, swinging their machetes with practised strokes, began to work their way through the tangled undergrowth...

The bulldozers were moving up from the parking place as a couple of lumberjacks approached the first of the white-marked trees with a powerful motor-saw. They switched it on and brought the blade up to the bark.

A shriek shivered the sultry air, a terrible, harrowing scream of sheer agony, filling the glade, splitting the sky. A dreadful, ghastly sound, the like of which none present had ever heard. A shriek of abysmal anguish, of utter torment; a cry to freeze the very marrow in the bones. The earth itself seemed to tremble. Appalled, scalps crawling with fear, the scattered groups of men froze in their tracks, shocked faces turned to the forest edge. Earmuffs were no protection against this; the men with the saw dropped it and fled.

Stunned silence followed.

Hair on end, a suddenly energetic Ove burst out of the undergrowth, closely followed by Neil and Jesus-Antonio.

A chalk-faced Armin was the first to recover.

"Gott im Himmel, what was *that*?" he demanded.

Finally one of the supervising foremen, Jimenez Guerão, cleared his throat,

"Indios!" he muttered hoarsely, sounding but half-convinced, "Indios up to their tricks again, trying to fool us into packing up work, giving up the site."

Despite the fact that Guerão was peering nervously round the clearing and looked as if he'd take to his heels and run at the slightest snap of a twig, the men took heart and let out an audible sigh of relief. The colour gradually returned to their faces. The Indios! Of course! Those crazy Indios, tricky and crafty as a cartload of monkeys! A babble of voices and laughter erupted, the timeless reaction of Man provided with the cause he requires for every effect.

"We will soon deal with those, Señor!" Turning to the rest of the frightened Guardia, Sargento Miguel Iglesias drew himself up to his full, short, pot-bellied height, stick pointed towards the forest, mouth opening to bark a command.

Jesus laid a restraining hand on his arm.

"No point, amigo. No man born of woman could find a native of this jungle who does not wish to be found, and just as assuredly would some of your men be lost."

Sargento Iglesias considered for a moment and then nodded, much to the relief of his men,

who hadn't the slightest intention of setting a single foot inside this bedevilled jungle. Not if they were *ordered*, not if the Sargento were to have them *shot*!

"Well, what are you all standing round waiting for?" demanded the other foreman, Villariño.

"Get on with it! Move it! Entertainment over for today! Back to work the lot of you! Look lively!"

Hurriedly the workers went about their business.

Hesitantly, the two lumberjacks (hard-nosed, unimaginative Aussies) returned to the marked tree, nervously picked up the heavy saw, and gingerly approached the blade to the tree . . .

A low moan swept through the sky-speckled green of the jungle roof, a sobbing sigh brushed through its branches, a long-drawn groan of despair stirred the humid, stagnant air. A plaintive whimper rose from the forest floor and, gathering strength, rose to a high keening wail, echoing through the woods, glancing back from tree to tree, summoning up echoes, increasing in volume and intensity. A haunting, desolate, piteous sound, chilling the blood with the depth of its grief and distress.

The branches of the marked tree began to creak and sway as if moved by a mighty wind. Whipping downwards, a branch caught at the saw and whisked it out of the hands of the petrified lumberjacks, sweeping it up in a soaring arc to crash in the midst of the heaving jungle - for the forest itself was now an *animate, sentient* thing. No creature was to be seen or heard; the birds had ceased to call, the monkeys to scold. Through the wailing, the thrashing of the motor-saw could be heard; then the blade got tangled in undergrowth and the motor whined to a crescendo and abruptly cut off.

The Aussies turned tail and ran.

Seized by dread, men threw themselves down on their knees in prayer or backed away with arms upraised, warding off unseen horror. Some clung together, shaking with fear; some stood like stone mouthing silent screams; some scurried to and fro uttering shapeless infantile sounds. Some lucky ones fainted.

Then, gradually, slowly, came a deep grinding grumble followed by a rending, ripping sound, a harsh tearing. The floor of the jungle shifted, lurched, glistening wet earth broke its surface and... and the trees took up their roots and *walked*.

Swaying, staggering, tottering, like monstrous toddlers learning the use of legs, the leafy giants began to move in an uneven side-to-side rocking motion; gaining confidence, gathering momentum, finding a grim and awful rhythm . They began to march.

Brief staccato bursts of machine-gunfire mingled with the splintering creak of straining timber and yells of alarm, and then petered out. One by one, the Guardia threw down their weapons and fled.

Immobile with shock, Armin stood and watched as the forest broke into a shambling run. Then he heard, ludicrous, improbable, but quite unmistakable, *music!* *Ear-bashing* music! In the last

split-second before he too turned and fled he recognised it... Wagner's 'Twilight of the Gods' with thunder and lightning thrown in!

Then Armin ran for his life.

Still crouched out of sight, the activists were paralysed with horror. Already in among the trees themselves, they didn't know where to turn or flee or run to. But the thicket where they hid did not move! They *alone* among that crashing, thundering, horrendous nightmare, they *alone* seemed marooned on a small green island of stillness and safety.

Alain had automatically started his camera the moment the saw was switched on, more to adjust the focus and to check it was working properly than anything else, for his organisation already had reels of tree-felling shots galore in its film archives. At that first unexpected, awful scream he'd been as terrified as the rest, but his finger had stayed on the button and he'd been instinctively going through the motions of filming ever since, concentrating on angles and light and focal lengths and zoom, immune to the fearful sights and sounds of the incredible events around him, eyes glued to the viewfinder, hands rock-steady, years of filming bloodshed and horror now paying off.

Beside him, the two back-up cameras had fallen from nerveless hands. The girl was standing like Lot's wife, the youth had buried his face in his hands. Alain snarled at them, cursing and swearing, eye never wandering an instant from the reflected image of the happenings in the glade. At last his berating had some effect and they both bent down and picked up their cameras, whose fall had been halted and cushioned by the thick underbrush. They turned them over in their hands for a second or two as if not knowing what to do with them and then, moving in little jerks like automatons, they squinted into the viewfinders, checking range and light, pressing buttons. Gradually the fever that grasps every cameraman with an exclusive scoop took over, overriding fear, blotting out compassion, reducing the world to zooms and lenses, light and shadow, frames and forms.

In the glade, dungarees and expensive safari-outfits stampeded in a frenzied scramble to escape. At first they all rushed towards the track leading to the trucks and lorries, but two giants of the forest lurched across their path and, panic-stricken, the leading men turned back. Fighting for and failing to keep their balance as the rush of the following crowd overwhelmed them, they stumbled, fell, were trampled underfoot, crawled and struggled to their feet, to fall again as the crowd too turned back on its tracks.. The milling mob frantically sorted itself out and then the rush was for the main track up which they had come. There was no reasoning or logic or sense in their movements, just blind instinctive flight before the line of trees implacably advancing along a six thousand foot front. The trees lower down the clearing were not yet moving, but the two thousand feet to the end of the jungle enclave seemed to lengthen and lengthen as they looked, and though they ran and ran they did not seem to be getting any nearer to the end of the clearing. It was a nightmare come true. Panting, streaming with sweat, they were near to collapse and still almost as far away from the end of the clearing as when they'd begun, when a fresh horror descended upon them and lent wings to their failing feet.

Beginning as a slight murmur barely discernible through Wagner's harsh clamour, welling to an indistinct mumble, swelling to a busy hum, and finally bursting into an angry buzzing climax of sound, wave after hurtling wave of multitudinous shapes swept down on the clearing, sending ominous black shadows racing along the ground, drowning music and marching, robbing ears

of hearing and eyes of sight, as a thousand swarms of gigantic bees descended on the luckless crowd.

Howls of pain rose from the exhausted, half-demented men running with flailing arms and labouring breath. Many Greenpeacers closed their eyes, sickened; others stood staring, hypnotised, unable to look away. The cameras kept turning.

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Steve too felt slightly sick. He stole a sidelong look at his mother. His soft-hearted mother, so quick to sympathise with the woes of others. But Sherry was sitting calmly back in her chair, watching with apparent unconcern. She caught his incredulous look and read what was in his mind. She pointed to one of the VDUs that showed Clem perched precariously astride a lower branch of a tree.

"Clem's antennae act as amplifying equipment for both vision and sound. There's only *one* hive of bees really - it's enough, as you can see. Clem just makes them seem a thousand times more."

"But *how*? And how did he get the trees to walk and, well, to make those *awful* sounds!?"

"The sounds are easy, there's an instrument called an ergoplantaphone that makes it possible for us to communicate with plants and plants with us."

Steve raised sceptical eyebrows, so she added

"Like the optophone, Steve!"

He looked thoughtful and nodded uncertainly. Another of his mother's weird, hare-brained theories would seem to be true. He could remember her talking to plants when he was a kid, maintaining they could understand her, and he and Mike giggling about it when she'd left the room and giving the plants a pinch or two to see if they would squeal. He was suddenly uncomfortable at the memory.

"And as for the rest, it's mainly TeleFERENCE - reflected and subsequently manifested suggestive telepathy. The lumbermen, the Greenpeacers *and we too* are all seeing what the Sods and Clem are *imagining*. As you see, telepathic materialisation is even visible as VDUs, but the trees aren't moving at all really, and the bees are just buzzing about in a force field that Clem set up around them and that runs straight down the clearing.

"The swarm keeps rushing back and forth, up and down the clearing, trying frantically to get out of the field, but it can't - that's why the bees are so terribly angry and kicking up such a fuss, which Clem is magnifying to make them sound even louder and angrier. Clem is also magnifying their size and multiplying their numbers by gravitational lensing; in other words, by manipulating gravity forces. Gravity bends light and magnifies and refocuses it just like a spectacle lens, and if the object doing the lensing (that's Clem) is exactly half-way between the image source it is bending (the bees) and the object receiving the image (the men), then the men see not only *multiple* images of the source, but also *magnified* images. That's why Clem chose that particular branch!

As for the rest, the men *think* the bees are diving down on them, crawling all over them and stinging them, but in fact the force field ends an inch or two above their heads, and the crawling stinging bits are telepathic embroidery and auto-suggestion. Not but what the bees *would* sting them, mind, if they could get at them – they're hopping mad by now. But when the men get over the shock and recover, they'll find they haven't a single sting between the lot of them.

"And as the Greenpeacers are all wearing apiarist veils and suits and gloves, just as S1 told them, they won't even be *scared* of the bees turning off and attacking *them*. Clem could have worked the whole thing itself really, but S1 went along because he can't bear not to have things under his own control, and S2 and 3 went primarily for the ride but also to provide any impromptu supplements that might occur to them. For instance the saw being plucked out of the hands of those two men was *pure* S2 – he's very 'Welshy', enjoys the theatrical.

"And then, you see, at least *one* of the Sods has to be around in case there are any gas canisters lying around, or petrol tanks in which fumes could have gathered, or even *glue*... Clem isn't fussy."

"Petrol? Glue? Gas?"

"Yes, Clem's got a drug problem, I'm afraid."

"A *drug* problem? A *drug* problem!? A *robot* with a *drug* problem?

... ..[The following paragraphs are for those few worthy and tender-hearted citizens who are worried and anxious about the ultimate fate of the unfortunate saw – which had always led a most blameless existence, punctiliously performing its sawing duties with the utmost promptness and reliability, and was consequently much aggrieved at this cavalier treatment:

As mentioned, it landed in the undergrowth, and there it was pounced upon a few hours later by a member of that insatiably inquisitive tribe *The Monkey-Folk*. These, blessed with less imagination than Man, had seen and heard naught of walking trees, but had sat hunched in the treetops wondering mightily at the antics of the hairless, apelike creatures below, who suddenly threw their teeth away and then ran to and fro yelling and screaming for no reason whatsoever; and at the no less peculiar behaviour of a small swarm of bees dashing up and down the clearing in furious buzzing frenzy above the hairless apes but not attacking them (which was, as the monkeys had good cause to know, not the usual behaviour of angry bees). When both bees and apelike creatures had at last gone their separate ways, the monkeys waited cautiously to see if either would return, but when their tribe leader finally gave the all-clear they all made a rush for the saw (which they had not for an instant forgotten).

They all knew what the dreaded bright-yellow object with the sharp dull-grey teeth was, of course, and for a long time they circled round and round it, throwing an occasional stick or stone, waiting for it to move; and when it didn't, they crowded in nearer, slinking and scuttling round and round in a smaller circle. And when it still didn't move, they crowded in nearer still. Ever smaller grew the circle, ever bolder grew the tribe, until finally one bold young blade darted forward and, with a frightful grimace, touched the object and immediately darted back to the safety of the circle – which promptly scattered in panic as if denying the least connection with the offender.

But still the object did not move. And then it was every monkey for himself and the Devil take the hindmost! Chattering and screeching excitedly, they tore away the undergrowth and grabbed and clutched at the tempting yellow casing, each pushing and shoving its neighbour impatiently aside like women round the

bargain counter of an end-of-whatever sale.

Then the bold young blade discovered something even more enticing, a bright red handle-like thing on a length of cord. Clutching eagerly at this, he gave a mighty yank – And the end of the world came upon them.

Shrieking in terror, the tribe leapt for the treetops as the motor jolted into roaring life. The bucking machine jerked about among the brush that had broken its fall, the saw-blade biting indiscriminately into the thick undergrowth, sending showers of twigs and leaves spraying in all directions. Finally cutting its way down to the forest floor, it lay helpless, blade sawing ineffectively at the air till its fuel ran out and it ran down.

But the monkeys did not approach it again. Indeed they never approached that part of the jungle again. The tribe leader declared it 'taboo' and the word was spread to all other simian jungle tribes. Future generations would listen in awe as their grandmothers told them of the 'apes-that-have-but-hair-on-their-heads-and-faces-and-throw-away-their-teeth' ('Great grey teeth they are, my dears; thin teeth they are, but able to bite through the fattest tree!'), and of how these selfsame thrown-away teeth had snapped at their bravest forefather ('the bold Pah-pooh'), and now lay in the 'taboo zone' waiting to pounce on any unwary monkeyman foolish enough to venture near (monkeywomen being too sensible to even dream of doing any such thing).

And the poor motor-saw's blade rusted away to a dull brown clump in the steamy air, and its bright yellow casing and its bright red handle-like thing on its length of cord disappeared under thick green moss . . . and the jungle crept over it, and made it its own.]