

THE WIND IN THE PYLONS.

Gareth Lovett Jones

As always it took the Mole a good half minute to adjust to the sudden brilliance - although the day was cloudy, so that he did not need to screw up his eyes quite so tightly as if the sun had been out. But even before he could look about him easily, he knew for certain that something was wrong. He sniffed the air, wrinkling up his nose in instant distaste. There was a smell about - several smells, in fact, but one in particular that stood out: acrid, sharp, almost like that of a salt wind blowing off a sea weedy sea, yet seeming to the Mole's sensitive nose not of Nature at all. Straight away his eyes began to itch. And there was too a strange, awesome sound, such as he had never heard before nor could possibly have imagined. It was like a great continuous exhalation, or rumbling, or combination of the two, in which pulses of whining also grew and then dimmed, grew and then dimmed. Somehow it seemed far away and close by, all at the same time.

"O, but where am I?" he thought to himself, half out loud. "What can have happened?"

As his vision adjusted, so he began to look about him more keenly. And the first thing that struck him, like a hammer blow, was how little there was to see, and how utterly, utterly strange what he could see was. Through his own front door he would come straight up into a grassy meadow, close by a hedge whose neat rounded shape was always, by late March, dazzlingly patterned over with the tiny white blooms of the blackthorn. There was a great old oak - not in the hedge, but standing by it - whose arm-like twisted roots had been gnawed and then polished by the oily wool of resting sheep. Yet no such landmarks existed here. Instead, next to him, he found an odd, ugly little short grey post. It had a broad head bearing a door of some kind, embossed with the letters LIOO192PX. It made a low, slow and continuous ticking, like a grandfather clock in the very last moments before it runs down. A few yards behind this object stood a series of broken fragments of hawthorn and elder, growing in a line along a very low bank with wide gaps between them. Far away to the south, in the direction of what ought to have been his everyday entrance, there stood a big dead tree.

The ground itself was mossed, with blackened stumps of some crop of long ago sticking up from it as if it might once have been plough-land, then abandoned. A line of tall posts made of crude looking grey-white material ran across it as far as an unmade road. Beyond this, to the Mole's left, stretched a ploughed field so huge that anything that lay beyond it might as well have been in the next county. On this vast space, made toy-like by distance, a strange yellow machine was slowly moving. Behind it, what looked like a white mist swirled out, impossibly, in a row of Catherine-wheeling shapes. The wind was blowing from just this direction.

The Mole hugged himself in anxiety, so startled by the sense of invisible danger all about him that he could not even move back towards the tunnel exit. "Something terrible - O, terrible - has happened here!" he whispered. Yet where was "here"? And how had he arrived in it?

"I must go back," he said, summoning the courage to make a move.

But just as he was about to take a step he saw a great grey vehicle with immensely fat, ridged tyres bouncing towards him over the rough ground. It was loaded with rolls of what looked like wire, and its engine made a monstrous grating-whining growl of such a violence as he had never before heard nor imagined. Seeing this great beast come on directly at him, or so it seemed, what

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could any mole have done but turn and run from it? He ran in the direction of the unmade road, and within seconds the thing stood between him and the tunnel exit.

When he reached the track, still in a panic, the Mole hurried on along it. The animals that jumped down from the vehicle - a very rough-looking rabbit and, bizarrely, a couple of stoats - showed not the slightest interest in him, but the Mole was not about to go back and have a chat with them. Instead, puffing nervously, he trotted on towards a distant point where there was at least some hopeful sign of over-hanging vegetation.

"This is not the adventure I wanted!" he whispered. A hundred yards further on, negotiating a large pothole filled with a crumbling black material and pieces of old brick, he said the same thing again, a little louder and rather more petulantly. Here isolated hawthorns stood a hundred yards apart from one another, trimmed flat across their tops as if at the hand of some lunatic of tidiness. These gradually increased in number until a quarter of a mile later the track was lined continuously along one side with blackthorn bushes - as the Mole might have expected - but grown out, and in curiously full bloom. Beyond and above the foam of tiny flowerets the Mole could also see the rearing grey-green tops of a series of shed-like things, once again inconceivably immense. They were built of deeply ridged materials, wholly unfamiliar to him, and had about them the look and feel of structures thrown up in preparation for a war.

Words were written in towering letters across each of these great null artificial cliff-faces: one, in lemon-yellow, read BRAWSCHE. The one next to it - and it took the Mole nearly a minute to reach it - was made in letters that seemed, astoundingly, to be illuminated from the inside. This said KANSAS HOMEKARE. Underneath, a flatter, unlit sign read KATCH OUR KRAZY PRICES!!! Beyond this was a very high fence made of some super-heavy-duty criss-cross wire and here, on another sign, were the words UNIVERSAL BREAKDOWN.

"Dear me," said the Mole. "O! Dear, dear me! I seem to have come up in Kansas." he noticed that the sinister breathing-roar, or roaring-breath, ever present in the atmosphere, was much louder here than it had sounded at the tunnel exit. It reached towards him through the leafless branches of a thicket to his right almost as if it were part of them.

The Mole went on along the track, which by now had a deep screen of hazels and thorns on either side. Under them lay discarded objects: a rusted child's bicycle of an odd design, its frame bent into a sad banana-shape, a rotting mattress in which seedlings had taken root, and ahead, where a bollard bisected the path, a scattering of strange little metal cylinders covered in garishly coloured letters. JILT, read one, ZUPP another, and there, and there, and then again there, were the words POKE-A-POLAR.