

## Rover's return

A short story by Bob Forster

**B**ANK HOLIDAYS WERE NEVER supposed to be like this. Three days of warmth and sunshine with not even the afternoon's high cloud to break the spell. Gardens were revived and memories of the long, damp winter began to recede. As night fell there was no hint of the threat that lay ahead.

The bluebells in the wood gave off their heady perfume, replacing the magic carpet of daytime. Down at the crossing, the barriers lowered into place so that only the floodlights and the red warning lights brought the outside world into this secluded corner of the Cotswolds. There was no sound as the late evening train to Oxford lay in the distance. Then with little warning it arrived, a bright and rushing tube of civilisation, heedless of its surroundings, concerned only with its destination. Within seconds, the crossing was clear.

Except for the large, black dog. It sat in the middle of the crossing, nose tasting the air. Then, almost in slow motion, it tipped back its head and howled at the night. Its flanks quivered and its eyes seemed to pierce the skies. As the barriers rose, it too rose, shook itself and ambled across the tracks before disappearing down the banking towards the silent river. Silent dog, silent crossing, silent river; the banks of the Evenlode returned to its dreams.

Each night the same thing happened, at exactly the same moment. And each time, the Hound of Hell, as it came to be christened in the hamlet, returned towards the river bank, in among the felled trees and rushes, there to howl into the

air.

Despite searches, it was never seen in daylight, no trace of it was found, and only its melancholic intrusion into the night air betrayed its existence. No damage was done, no sightings were made, yet everyone felt uneasy. The dog was waiting, but waiting for what?

Marriage had been the most perfect of awakenings for Annabel Trewick. After years of learning her trade in the retail sector, monotony was broken in the shape of Alex, a mildly good looking man of comparable age whose job at the building society in Witney promised both comfort and prospects. A wedding at St. Mary's, followed by photos on the village green and, for both of them, the world seemed little short of enchantment.

But that was eighteen months ago and much of the period in between was filled with unrealised longing for a child. Early joy was replaced by frustration and days of sadness at home in Crab Apple Cottage while Alex left for work each morning tight-lipped and despondent.

Until Christmas. Then Annabel's hopes were realised, the pregnancy confirmed. And so it was, on Bank Holiday Monday, early in the evening, that the child arrived, Thomas. Eight pounds of warm dampness and fulfilled hopes. That same night, the railway dog appeared.

Of course it was a coincidence but in the days ahead, links were drawn. The child was silent. It made no sounds. It never smiled. It betrayed feelings neither of pain nor of

pleasure.

Thomas was a child without character or response. Nobody knew why. But everyone could see the blow caused to the young couple. Hopes, once raised, were dashed. All their efforts, all their giving, all their affection was in vain. Their hearts were an echo of the hound's cry.

As spring turned into summer, the child lay in its own world, the dog in his. Each night, the dog's cry hurt the stillness and the child's stillness cut the couple to the core. It was a warm morning in early July when Alex left home early and Annabel, searching as usual for response from Thomas, carried him out in the back garden and laid him in his pen. Toys were everywhere; toys were untouched. He just lay there. Annabel watched from the back door but still he stared upwards, her child, their child, and yet hardly a child at all. Hardly even an existence, much less the joy for which they had hoped. Boiling a kettle, she made herself a coffee, picked up her Joanna Trollope and walked listlessly back into the garden.

The pen was empty. There was simply nothing to betray Thomas's presence. No broken bars, no strewn clothes and, perhaps most appropriately of all, no sound. He might never have existed. Yet amid the turmoil which filled the rest of that day, one element remained constant: the dog. But even there the villagers noted one change. As the train thundered past that evening, the dog appeared but its message had changed: the howl was replaced by a thin, keening whine, a haunting yet beautiful sound more reminiscent of the savannah than the Cotswolds.

Over the next days, despite

frantic searching and widespread publicity, there was no sign of the baby.

Hopes faded and Annabel sank into a despair from which recovery seemed impossible.

The pen lay untouched in the garden, whether from superstition, nostalgia or neglect. Always it was empty. And each night the dog keened.

July 18th dawned bright, brighter than of late, as if the firmament were trying to atone for tragedy. Alex stirred but Annabel lay still, arms across the crumpled duvet. There was a new sound in the air. Not the birds, whose spring chorus had dimmed from its strident mating calls to a calmer acceptance, and not the trains. Not even the breeze in summer's lushness. Just a sort of bubbling.

Padding downstairs he opened the back door. Sunlight from the front of the house flooded in a wide channel across the garden. The pen was in nature's spotlight. Something was in the pen. Curious and bleary-eyed, Alex edged out of the door. Now the source of the bubbling was revealed. Kneeling in wonder beside the bars, his eyes fell upon the child, his child, and yet his child as he had never seen him before, face wreathed in smiles and chuckling constantly. No words came, no instant shout of triumph, just a wave of silent tears.

It was only as he clutched his child, burying that contented face under his own chin, that he noticed the bone gripped tightly in Thomas's fist.

Then the veil lifted from his eyes. And there, just beyond the pen, its head resting on its paws and its eyes squinting into the rising sun,