

# Tell it to the Bees

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**Tindal  
Street  
Press**

## 4

Charlie hadn't meant to walk so far. It was only that he'd been intent on following things and they'd taken him on and on. It never started like that. But then one thing became something else and now, here he was, looking up at last to find himself on a broad road he didn't know, where the town seemed about to give out on itself altogether.

He could see a couple of houses ahead and then beyond only fields, black and featureless in the darkening of the afternoon.

'The first field, just touch a gate,' he told himself. 'And then go back.'

So he walked on, past a cat in a lit window looking out, pert and unimpressed, and then in the next house a mother's voice calling a girl's name, a tinny, small sound in the freezing air. There was the mother, too – her head moving across the window, a yellow scarf like his mother's, and wild eyes to the boy outside as she called again in this tired afternoon hour.

Charlie hurried. He must be quick.

The grass at the roadside was long and wet, limp with the weariness of the old year. His shoes glistened as he stepped up to the gate, and he felt the cool damp of it through to his skin.

'Touch,' he said, and he put his hand out to the wooden bar. It was icy cold and his fingers made trails on the wood.

‘Frosty Jack’ll be here soon,’ he said, and he gave the smile his mother gave, of a secret known.

Charlie found the river on his way home. He crossed over on the blue bridge and walked the other side from the factory, along the towpath, being careful with his feet as best he could in the half-dark, because you got a pile of broken glass and dog dirt along here. He ran past the dark barges lying low against the bank – they had dogs that hated boys – and was almost beyond the factory when the hooter went off.

‘Dead trouble now, Charlie,’ he said, which was a phrase he liked, because now he knew what time it must be.

But he stopped, there on the other side, and stood watching. Everything was quiet, really quiet, and Charlie almost held his breath. Then doors opened in the walls, making drifts of light, and the girls came out, like a flood. So many of them. Somewhere in there was his mother. Their voices crossed the water, tumbling, released. He pictured her, head down and leaning forward as if walking in a wind, tying on her scarf as she went, her bag banging against her side. She’d be heading for her bike, rushing, he’d guess, because she was always rushing, to be home and on with the tea.

The street lights were on by the time Charlie reached the marketplace, dropping small pools of light through the darkness. Cats skulked round the edges and every now and then one would flit across a pool with a fish-head or some tattered wrapper, then disappear again into the dark.

He liked the market when it was empty like this, the tarpaulins sagged and flapping. The air was acrid with new fires lit, and he took shallow, short breaths to keep it out as best he could. He was thinking hard, looking for an excuse for where he’d been. It wasn’t that his mother

wanted him indoors all the time, but she always seemed to know when he hadn't just been playing out.

He'd pushed the sounds a long way off now. The whispers that snatched at his skin; the singsong voices that ran up the back of his neck, calling after him, the jeer that winded him, beating up his fear, till he had run and run, and finally come to the sombre fields and the cold gate.

You've been to another boy's house. There's a boy with new Meccano, or he's got some insects. Collected them. He shook his head. He didn't know any boys that collected insects. Cigarette cards, marbles, matchboxes. But not insects. Anyway, he didn't collect those things so his mum wouldn't believe him.

Down the high street and they were locking the doors and pulling the shutters across, snapping the light from the windows. Charlie's feet were sore, chafing with the wet from the grass. He was tired now, and very hungry.

His mother would be angry with him and rough like she was when she was angry, pulling his jacket off and putting his shoes by the fire. She'd point to the footprints on the lino and tell him to change his socks for dry. Then she'd ask him what he'd eaten since school and maybe make him bread and jam, or bread and dripping if he was lucky, stand over him while he ate it.

He hurried on, his thoughts striding ahead of his feet, and for now, all worry of how to account for himself was put away.

'Tide you over,' she'd say, giving him the bread and jam, and she'd put her hand through his hair. Which he'd half wriggle from, but part of him loved it when she did that. 'Tide you over till your father's back.'

Charlie stopped. His skin prickled. Words came back to him. He didn't know where to go. He stared at his shoes. A leaf was stuck to one heel.

An old man in a brown coat was sweeping the pave-

ment with a broom as wide as a table. Charlie looked at him unseeing. The man swept his day away in long, straight strokes, down towards the road and into the gutter. Twice he swept to the gutter and Charlie still stood. Then the man leaned on his broom and looked at the boy. When Charlie lifted his head, he wagged his finger.

‘Out of my way,’ he said. ‘Won’t be as bad when you get there.’

And Charlie nodded, though he hadn’t heard, and walked home.

The wireless was on when Charlie let himself in and his father was home already, his coat and hat on the hook, his shoes in the hall. His father was back, so no bread and jam. Charlie headed for the stairs and his satchel caught the hung coat and he smelled his father’s smells of smoke and sweat and something else.

Kicking off his shoes, he lay on his bed for a bit, his tummy rumbling, picking at the ridges in the counterpane, rolling the cotton fray between his fingers. It was Christmas in another month and he wanted the earth. That’s what he’d told Bobby for a joke. The earth. It was what he meant. But he wouldn’t get the earth, so he was hoping for a fish tank.

He’d taken Bobby to see an ants’ nest once, a really good one he’d found down the side of the allotments. Lifted these slabs and shown him.

‘Look there, and there. See the tunnels and chambers? For food, and there’s the egg chambers, see, and they’re going berserk because we’ve lifted their roof off.’

The two boys had watched the ants rushing with the white oval eggs in their jaws, tugging them below and into the earth, out of sight, away from the terrible light and the threat.

‘They’re gossiping,’ Bobby had said. ‘Heads together, just like my ma and my aunts, heads together.’

‘D’you see it now?’ Charlie had said.

‘They’re a bit like us, then. Humans. With the gossip and the bother and them all worked up, getting fierce over the eggs.’

But it wasn’t that at all for Charlie. It was just exactly not that. It was because they were so far from him that he watched them. Because they lived in another world from his. But Bobby was his best friend, so Charlie didn’t answer him.

It was cold on his bed and he was nearly tempted to climb in under, feel the slow warming through and the slip towards sleep. But that would bother his mum, and his dad might clip him. He didn’t like it when you did things out of turn. Charlie stared at the wall, eyes wide as they’d go, willed himself to see the wallpaper, the line where the roses didn’t meet, petals flying into stems.

‘Why’ve you got roses in your room if you’re a boy?’ Bobby had said when he saw it. Charlie didn’t know, but he liked them.

He couldn’t smell the fish on, which was odd, but he could see it on its plate, done over in flour, ready. He’d go downstairs now. His mum would be glad to see him, and he’d like that, even without the bread and jam. Fish would be a halfway house. Fish would do for now.

Pushing open the door to the living room, Charlie saw his mother and his father. His father sat at the table, fingertips resting on the evening paper, a beer bottle running rings around the headlines. He’d have been in the pub already. He didn’t look up when Charlie came in, and this was just the same as always. His mother was there too, hands wedged into the small of her back against the length of day. Her apron strings made a butterfly at her waist and there was a dark patch on her left calf where she’d darned the stocking. She didn’t hear Charlie there and this was not the same as always.

He wondered if they had been speaking before he opened the door, because after a moment with him still saying nothing and his father picking up the beer bottle and drinking from it, his mother crossed the room to the kitchen.

'Hello,' Charlie said, because otherwise she'd be gone into the kitchen and she still wouldn't know he was there, and she turned and gave him a bright, bright smile, like he didn't know what.

He waited for her to ask him where he'd been, to be cross, to put her hands on his cheeks to feel for the outdoors on him and then put a hand through his hair; to tell him that supper was all but ready and didn't he know how worried she got, and who had he been with out so late, and was it that Bobby again, she'd have to talk to his mother, and his supper nearly ruined, and would he go and wash, please, look at his nails. But she only walked to him, dropped a peck on his cheek and then went into the kitchen so quickly, to her cooking and the jolly wireless sounds, and pushed the kitchen door to so hard that he turned to his father to see if he'd noticed.

But his father sat with his eyes on the newspaper, his finger tracking a story. Charlie saw the strong line of his shoulders, the shove of flesh against his collar and the dark bristle of hair that threaded down his neck.

The bowl of cockles on the table made Charlie's mouth water. The wince of vinegar on his tongue. He watched as his father's fingers made delicate work of them, lifting each one clear with a slight shake before slipping it between his lips. Charlie wondered why his father ate them one by one, such little things.

Friday night food, they were his mother's treat for her husband, and Charlie knew better than to ask for one for himself. Anyway, he could smell the beer on his father.

'You up to much, then, Charlie?' his father said without raising his eyes from the paper.

Charlie wasn't sure what his father wanted, so he muttered something, and then waited. His father looked up at his son, rubbed his brow as if to clear it of something.

'Getting out, are you? Like boys ought to.' He picked another cockle from the bowl and Charlie watched a drip of vinegar darken the football news.

'Maybe there'll be snow soon, and we can take trays out,' Charlie said, remembering, pleased to have thought of something to say.

'Snow,' his father said, as though considering the word, and he shook his head. 'We'd have fun Charlie, wouldn't we? But not on trays.'

'But on the hill, like before, with Annie? You remember, so fast and off at the end into it, all over, down your sleeves and everything? And Annie got laughing so hard, she couldn't stand up and you put her back on the tray and gave her a push . . .'

'Your mother doesn't like it,' his father said.

'But it was Auntie Pam who wasn't pleased,' Charlie said, frowning. 'Because Annie brought the tray.'

Through the kitchen door Charlie could hear his mother moving pans about. He thought about her not liking it, and he wasn't sure. It didn't seem the kind of thing she minded. He looked at his dad. He had his head down with the football again, and then Charlie remembered something he really wanted.

'Dad,' he said, and Robert looked up.

'*The Gunfighter's* on at the Regent,' Charlie said. 'Bobby said so at school. We could go. Bobby's going to the four-thirty with his dad.'

Bobby had been to a Western before with his father and Charlie thought it sounded like the best.

'Why don't you ask your father?' Bobby said, and Charlie didn't reply. But he had now, and he waited to see what his father would say.



Robert took a swig of beer and set the bottle down on the same ring mark.

‘School,’ his father said at last. ‘You behaving?’

Charlie looked down at the floor and blinked hard. His dad got angry if Charlie showed he minded things. After a moment, he answered.

‘Miss Phelps says it’ll be a world war any minute, if we’re not careful,’ he said.

‘If we’re not careful?’

‘Yes, and then it’ll all be over, with the bomb.’

‘How are we going to be careful then? For Miss Phelps?’

‘Don’t know. Because it got Lizzie Ashton so worked up, we had to get out our sums then.’

His father laughed, but it hadn’t been funny. Lizzie Ashton screaming hadn’t been funny.

‘We all need to do our sums,’ his father said. ‘Get them wrong, and then where are we?’

Charlie put Lizzie Ashton’s screams out of his mind.

‘Miss Phelps is good at showing us. She’s good at doing sums.’

‘Miss Phelps is good at doing sums?’

‘But she took Lizzie to the corridor because of the noise, and Miss Withers stood at the front. Everyone thinks she’s pretty, but she’s not as good at sums.’

‘Aha, but that’s it, Charlie,’ said his father, his tapping finger making a nubby sound on the table.

‘That’s the thing about girls. There’s the ones that are good at sums and the ones that are pretty. You marry the first, and they get your dinner on the table and your children scrubbed and brought up. And you don’t marry the second.’

‘But how do you know which are which?’ Charlie said.

His father gave a hard laugh. ‘Oh, you’ll know that when the time comes.’ He gave him a wink. ‘Only your mother doesn’t agree.’

‘So what happens to the ones you don’t marry? Don’t they get to? Don’t they get to have some children?’

His father tweaked a cockle clear, gave it a little squeeze.

‘They’re fine and dandy, Charlie. Fine and dandy. You’ll see. Works out best for everyone.’

‘And is Mum . . .’

‘Is what?’

Something in his father’s voice made Charlie flinch. He shrugged. ‘She’s not so good at sums,’ he said. ‘She’s pretty too.’

Charlie didn’t know what it was he’d done, but, pushing his chair back, his father stood up and turned an angry face towards his son.

‘Did I say she wasn’t? Ever? It’s her who’s done the saying. Did I say she wasn’t?’

Charlie took a step towards the kitchen. ‘I have to help with the vegetables. Mum asks me to,’ he said, his voice soft with anxiety. His father walked to the living-room door.

‘Tell her not to bother waiting up,’ he said.

Charlie heard his coat fetched from its hook and the scuff as he pulled on his shoes. Then the frill of cold shuffling the newspaper pages, chilling his knees, and the door slam and the quiet. He was gone.

Lydia had her book propped open with the two-pound weight. On the hob, the potatoes boiled. Charlie looked down at the floury water. He warmed his hands in the steam, though they were cold again afterwards. Next to the hob was a plate with three pieces of steak.

‘It’s Friday, Mum.’

‘Treat.’

‘What for?’

Lydia chopped at the potatoes. Charlie went and stood beside her, leaning in against her waist. He felt her apron ticklish against his shin.

She nudged him with her elbow and swept the potato pieces into a saucepan.

‘Hungry?’

He shrugged.

‘School all right?’

‘Dad said could you keep his supper over till later.’

Lydia didn’t reply. Charlie looked at the book. ‘I could read to you,’ he said, picking it up. ‘From where you got to. Page ninety.’

Lydia closed her eyes. Then she smiled. ‘Go on then.’

He hefted the book in his hand, as if its worth could be felt in its weight, and started to read:

*Slowly the world returned, black and cold. But where was he? No voices, no motor cars. Not a bird’s cry, not a dog’s bark. He tried moving his hands. Pain shot through him and he lay still again.*

*They came so quietly, he didn’t hear until their whispered voices were just above him like snatches of a bad dream.*

*‘He’s alive.’*

*‘Get him up and hold him.’*

*Someone lifted and he screamed in agony.*

*‘Where’s the Rigger, Georgie?’*

*The question came again and again, different voices speaking into the icy quiet, till the pain felled him and everything was still against the soil.*

Charlie read carefully. He stumbled occasionally, but Lydia didn’t interrupt. She carried on with what she was doing, taking care to be quiet. So she scrubbed the carrots more tenderly than she might. And laying them out on the chopping board, end-to-end like so many bodies, she was gentle with the knife.

But an action is an action, however it is performed, and

in the end Lydia's carrots were as sliced in one way as they would have been in another. After a short time she put a soft hand on the book.

'I might not make gravy,' she said.

Charlie lifted his eyes. He smiled and nodded his understanding. It was what his father liked, and his father had gone out. Sometimes his mother would put the wireless on and dance a little, but she wouldn't do that tonight either. She didn't dance very much any more.

'But read me some more,' she said.

'What's a rigger?' he said.

Lydia crunched up her forehead, thinking.

'We don't know yet. But I'd hazard a guess that it's a nickname.'

So Charlie read on a while longer, leaned back against the counter, as his mother got the supper ready. He read slowly and sometimes, if he asked, Lydia helped him out on a word. He didn't know what they were up to, but soon his head was full of figures monstrous in the London smog, and the plight of Georgie, who sounded like a gentleman and who was worried about catching the 6.48 boat train for Boulogne.

Lost with his mother in this strange, half-lit world, he forgot for a time that his father had gone out and that his mother had been crying when he came in.