

Number 1, Gallows Gate Road

1940s Britain and a waking Doctor has lost memory in this short story by Rupert Laight. Illustrations by Brian Williamson.



The first thing the Doctor heard when he woke was the sound of something tapping at a window.

He sat up in bed, ran a hand through his tangled hair and stared around him. Where am I, he thought. This isn't the TARDIS. It's a bed. A very uncomfortable bed. What am I doing in bed? I haven't got time for bed. This is madness.

The Doctor tested his memory. The last thing he remembered was... well, what was it? The TARDIS. He remembered the TARDIS. He'd been at the console when an alarm sounded. An alarm to indicate what? After that, everything was blank.

Thoroughly confused, the Doctor looked around him. It was dark, apart

from a line of light that seemed to edge the bottom of a door.

The Doctor rolled out of bed - surprised to find himself wearing pyjamas - and, squinting through the gloom, could just make out the room's sole window. It was covered with black material, pinned around the frame.

'Blackout,' he murmured to himself, and detached a corner, allowing bright morning light to flood the room.

The Doctor was standing in a small attic bedroom with a low, sloped ceiling and peeling, yellowed wallpaper. It was furnished simply with a narrow single bed and a chest of drawers, on top of which were his clothes, neatly folded.

He turned back to the dust-covered window and saw what had been making the tapping sound. The uppermost branches of a tall oak tree were scratching against the pane.

Got to find out what's going on, thought the Doctor, and he pulled on his clothes and flung open the bedroom door.

'Hello, Doctor,' said a voice on the brink of breaking. 'Did you sleep well?'

The Doctor looked down. A boy of about thirteen with ruddy cheeks and close-cropped ginger hair smiled up at him.

'How do you know my name?'

'You told us last night.'

'Us?' asked the Doctor, confused. 'Who's us?'

'Me and mother,' said the boy. 'Don't you remember?'

'Of course I do.' The Doctor thought hard but, for some reason, couldn't recall. 'Jog my memory.'

'Must be the cold, it's frozen your brain,' said the boy, and he held out his hand. 'I'm Robert. Robert Mann.'

'Nice to meet you, Robert Mann,' replied the Doctor, shaking the boy's

hand enthusiastically. 'Or meet you again, I should say.' The Doctor paused a moment at the top of a staircase, still baffled as to how he'd got here.

'Come on then, or we'll be late for breakfast.'

As they descended, Robert reminded the Doctor of how he had rung the doorbell the previous evening, unable to tell them why but, as it was late, Robert's mother had offered him a bed for the night in their boarding house.

'I wonder what I wanted,' mused the Doctor. 'Oh well, who cares?' He paused. 'Hold on, that's not like me.' Then the worry vanished from his mind again. 'It's nice here,' he said. 'Maybe I'll stay.'

By now they had reached the bottom of three flights of stairs and were standing in the house's entrance hall.

'Needs a bit of a dust, doesn't it?' said the Doctor, running his finger along a picture rail.

'Can't get the staff,' said Robert. 'There is a war on.'

'A war? Is there? Which one?'

The boy chuckled. 'Are you pulling my leg?'

'Never pulled a leg in my life. And I don't joke about time. What year is this?'

Robert stared at him. 'It's 1940, of course.'

'I travel a lot,' said the Doctor. 'I get confused.'

'I wish I could travel,' replied Robert. 'I want to be an explorer when I grow up. Just like Marco Polo. He discovered spaghetti.'

'And pinched my caravan!'

'You're very strange.'

The Doctor grinned. 'It has been mentioned.'

The dining room was at the back of the house, with glass-panelled doors leading to the garden.

Seated around the oval table were five people. A young lady, a young man, an elderly lady, a stout, middle-aged gentleman and, at the head of the table, a skinny woman in her late thirties.

Robert quickly took his place, whilst the Doctor stood about awkwardly, unsure what to do.

'Please be seated,' said the thin woman brusquely.

From her red hair, the Doctor guessed her to be Robert's mother. But she lacked her son's jolly demeanour. Her features were sharp, her nose turned up as if permanently troubled by an unpleasant odour.

The Doctor sat down. 'I'm famished!'

'You can introduce yourself to the other guests,' said Mrs Mann. 'You've met Robert already.'

'He's going to be an explorer when he grows up,' said the Doctor. 'Aren't you, Rob?'

Mrs Mann snorted in derision. 'Robert changes his mind every five minutes.'

'No, I don't!' protested her son. 'I'm going to be an explorer.' He paused, then added, 'Or an engine driver.'

After the guests had helped themselves to modest portions of watery scrambled egg, the apologetic clatter of cutlery on china began.

'I'm Major Woolly,' said the stout man sat across from the Doctor. He had a blotchy complexion and a moustache that drooped over his mouth. 'So, you're a doctor, Mrs Mann tells us. Doctor what?'

'Do you know, I can't seem to remember right now,' said the Doctor.

'Shellshock is it?' said the Major. 'Terrible business, I'm sure. I knew a chap got it in the last war.' He paused to ruminate. 'That was a war all right. Not like this one. Fought it with our bare hands.'

'Must have been uncomfortable,' said the Doctor.

'Don't mind the Major,' said Mrs Mann. 'He'd love to teach Mr Hitler a thing or two. Wouldn't you, Major?'

The Major gave an unintelligible grunt and carried on with his breakfast.

Sat to his right was an elderly woman wearing a large feathered hat. She introduced herself as Miss Sillington, and gave the Doctor a warm smile.

'Welcome to our humble little guest house,' she said. 'I always call it a guest house, though strictly speaking it's a boarding house. I've lived in Sydenham since I was five years old. Then I lost all my money in the big crash. Moved in here in '33. Oldest resident.'

The Doctor's gaze was involuntarily drawn to her hat. It was a startling sight to see someone wearing something so vast and inappropriate to breakfast.

'I'm 74, you know,' added Miss Sillington, as if to explain her eccentric headgear.

Along the table, Robert giggled.

'Eat your egg,' said his mother, fixing him with a steely stare.

The Doctor caught the lad's eye and gave him an encouraging wink.

Robert then introduced the remaining two guests. Each greeted the Doctor a polite nod, but remained silent.

Miss Gibbs was probably in her early twenties. Timid-looking, she had fair hair and wore an Argyle sweater. At her side, and appearing equally bashful, sat Clive Plympton. About the same age as Miss Gibbs, he kept his head down throughout the meal, fixing his plate with a worried frown. Every once in a while, when she was sure no one was looking, Miss Gibbs would throw Mr Plympton a shy glance.

Just then, the dining room door swung open and a hefty woman of about fifty barged in, wearing a food-stained apron and carrying a tray.

'You lot finished yet?' she asked in a gravelly voice.

'Very nearly, Mrs Baxter,' replied the landlady curtly.

Mrs Baxter ignored her and began collecting plates, whether the food on them was finished or not. 'Oh, and we've no gammon for lunch,' she said. 'All out of ration coupons. It'll be luncheon meat again.' And with a dismissive grunt she was gone.

'That woman,' hissed Mrs Mann, after a suitable pause. 'It's long past time I dismissed her. The food. The attitude. One of these days I'll get round to it. And that's not the only thing. The house needs a good spring clean, too. And as for Lofty... He certainly needs cutting down to size.'

'Who's Lofty?' asked the Doctor. 'Your husband?'

'Mr Mann is deceased,' replied the landlady quietly.

'Lofty is the oak tree in the garden,' explained Robert. 'Mother's been meaning to cut it down for years. It blocks out all the light to the back bedrooms.'

'Why don't you then?' asked the Doctor.

'No one ever does anything here,' said Robert.

'That will do.' His mother frowned at him.

'It's true though,' he added sulkily. 'Nothing ever happens in this house!'

Something about Robert's woeful tone struck the Doctor. Yes, there was an odd air to this place, he thought. A feeling of stagnation, of immobility.

'Leave the table at once!' ordered Mrs Mann.

Robert laid down his napkin, vacated his seat and sulkily slipped from the room.

Just then, the clock on the mantelpiece struck ten.



Robert dawdled in the hallway, waiting for the Doctor to leave the dining room. This newcomer was the most exciting thing to happen at Gallows Gate Road since... well, forever. And there was something very odd about him, thought Robert, as the Major, Miss Sillington and the rest of them filed past.

Finally, the Doctor sauntered out into the hallway, gazing distractedly about.

'Where are you from, Doctor?' asked Robert.

'What?' The Doctor was clearly miles away. 'Oh, nowhere you'll have heard of.' He stuffed his hands in his pocket and shut his eyes. 'I can't even remember what I'm doing here.' Then he turned to Robert. 'What is it about this place?'

'I don't know,' Robert replied.

'Yes, you do,' insisted the Doctor.

'I do?' said Robert, confused. And he thought very hard as to what the newcomer meant.

This house was all he had ever known. He'd been born here. He'd grown up here. Father had died when he was six years old, and after that his mother had taken in paying guests. But the Doctor was right. There was something strange about the place.

'Yes... I think I know what you mean. All the residents are hopeless, aren't they? I want to be an architect, but they don't want to do anything.'

'Exactly!' The Doctor took Robert by the shoulders. 'And it means we have a lot of work to do, Robby-boy. So let's get to it!' And he bounded off up the stairs.

'Get to what?' Robert called after him.

'Questioning the guests, of course,' replied the Doctor. 'You take the Major and Miss Gibbs. I'll speak to Miss Sillington and Mr Plympton.' He paused, frowning. 'One of them is not what they seem.'

Miss Sillington had taken off her hat. Sitting in her small, sparsely furnished room was clearly not occasion enough for the dilapidated headgear.

'These are amazing,' said the Doctor, studying the collection of colourful paintings that covered one wall. The Doctor thought he recognised her style. Yes, he did. There was a picture just like them in the National Portrait Gallery in London - of a famous writer. And he was sure that was painted in 1940 by an M. Sillington. 'Have you ever met T.S. Eliot?' he asked.

'T.S. who?' murmured the elderly lady.

But the Doctor barely heard her. He was drawn to one painting in particular. It was quite unlike the rest - a study of a tree, rendered in total realism. He squinted at the date in the corner. 1933. 'This is the most recent one,' he said. 'But that was seven years ago.'

'Just after I took lodgings here.'

'Why did you stop? You're a brilliant painter!'

'Well...' she began. But then there was a long pause. 'I don't really know,' she said at last. 'I just... lost my confidence. Who'd be interested in my little daubs? I'm hardly going to be a famous artist now. I'm 74, you know.'

'Doesn't matter if you're 104. Never too late to be brilliant.' The Doctor beamed. 'I should know.'

'When I was your age I lived just two streets from here,' mused Miss Sillington, clearly caught up in her own thoughts. 'There was a lot of talk about this house back then.'

'What kind of talk?'

'No one would go near the place. They said the house was cursed. All nonsense, of course. Merely rumours.' Miss Sillington frowned, as if trying to remember something.

'Rumours usually start for a reason,' said the Doctor.

'You can't seriously believe...!' Miss Sillington's frail voice trailed off.

'It is a very strange house,' she admitted finally.

One flight of stairs further up No.1 Gallows Gate Road, Robert had slipped into the empty bedroom of Major Woolly. He was examining the lapel of an Army dress jacket hanging on a peg beside the bed. It was adorned with medals from the First World War.

'What are you doing in here, boy?' barked the Major, who'd slipped quietly into the room behind him. But his frown immediately shifted into a proud beam when he spotted what his intruder was looking at. 'Admiring the brass, eh?'

'You must have been quite a soldier,' said Robert. 'Why aren't you out there now? You can't be too old for it.'

'No, of course not. But you see, it's, er...' The Major shuffled

awkwardly from one foot to the other. 'I'm no coward, if that's what you're getting at.'

'Obviously not. So what's stopping you?' asked Robert in his best detective tone.

Major Woolly's face twisted into a pained pout. To Robert, it looked as if, for the first time in years, the man was really searching his soul.

'I don't know,' stammered the Major after a long, strained silence. 'I just... can't.' As the clock over the hearth struck noon, the Doctor and Robert were standing in the chilly drawing room swapping notes.

Robert told the Doctor everything he'd learned about the Major, and then he moved on to Miss Gibbs.

Every weekday she took the train into the offices of a small publishing house, to make notes on unsolicited manuscripts. The rest of the time, however, it was clear her only occupation was the study of Mr Plympton.

The Doctor then explained that Clive Plympton's income came from writing articles about historical events for monthly periodicals. But, it transpired, he really wanted to pen a passionate historical novel.

'Is that everyone?' asked the Doctor.

'Yes,' said Robert. 'Apart from Mrs Baxter.'

'Did I hear my name?' Mrs Baxter stood in the doorway, hands on hips. 'I suppose you'll be wanting tea.'

'Actually, it was you we wanted,' said the Doctor. 'How long have you worked here, Mrs Baxter?'

'Since 1934,' replied the cook. 'For my sins.'

'Happy?' The Doctor stared at her.

'Don't be daft,' she replied.

'Why not leave then?'

'Well, if truth be told, I would like to retire.' She stared out of the window with a faraway expression. 'To Dorset maybe. I've a sister there. I could keep a pig. Trouble is, they'd never cope here without me.'

'I reckon they'd manage,' said the Doctor. 'Don't you, Rob?'

Robert nodded.

'Charmed, I'm sure,' huffed Mrs Baxter. 'Now, if that's all the silly questions, I'll get back to my kitchen. It's lunch in half an hour, and them tins of meat won't open themselves.'

The Doctor stared into the space newly vacated by Mrs Baxter, his expression dark. 'Someone here is sapping every last drop of ambition from these people. And I'm going to find out who it is.' With that, he sprang towards the door.

'Where are you going?' asked Robert.

'To the TARDIS. Er, my motor car.'

'Spaceship, you mean!'

The Doctor froze in the doorway.

'Only an alien would keep something like this in his pocket.'

Robert held up the Doctor's sonic screwdriver.

'That's my... Where did you get that?'

'I went through your pockets last night.'

A smile lit up the Doctor's face. 'You're a cheeky monkey, aren't you? I like that. Just what I'd do. Now give it here!'

He snatched the sonic screwdriver from Robert's hand and left the room.

Robert congratulated himself. He knew he'd been right.

Out in the hall, the Doctor was thinking hard. He had to remember why

he'd come here, where he'd been going before the TARDIS was dragged off-course. Had it been dragged off-course? Surely this house wasn't affecting him too? He'd faced tougher competition than the residents of a scruffy semidetached in Sydenham.

He looked down at the sonic screwdriver in his hand. I'm the Doctor, he thought defiantly. I'm a Time Lord. I can travel from one side of the Universe to the other in the blink of an eye. That must be something to be proud of?

He shook himself, turned towards the front door and gripped the handle. Just then, the world began to spin.

'Doctor?' he heard Robert calling urgently. 'Doctor! Are you all right?'

But dark clouds filled the Doctor's mind, and though he tugged at the door, he couldn't open it. He knew it wasn't locked or jammed - it was he who didn't have the strength, the determination, to leave this place.

And then he forgot even that, as No.1 Gallows Gate Road seemed to slip further and further away and total blackness engulfed everything.

The last thing he heard was a boy's voice screaming his name.

'Doctor! Doctooooor!'

TO BE CONTINUED...



The Doctor heard a distant voice. A young woman. 'Is he all right?'
'He still looks very pale,' said another voice. 'Hold on, I think he's coming round.'

The Doctor sat up, and reality span into focus. 'I'm fine now,' he said, still on the floor by the front door. 'I think I won the battle.' And he began to recognise the residents of Gallows Gate Road - Miss Gibbs, the Major and the rest - as they looked down. 'One of you is an alien!'

A few seconds of deathly hush followed before the hall echoed with worried chatter.

'He must still be woozy,' said Miss Sillington.

'Barking mad!' said the Major.

The Doctor scrambled to his feet and looked out of the window. 'It's getting dark. How long was I out?'

'A couple of hours,' said Mrs Mann. 'What happened?'

'Bit hard to explain. But never mind that, there's work to do!' The Doctor pushed through the small crowd and took hold of Robert's arm.

'Come on, Robby-boy, we're searching this house from attic to basement!'

'No you are not!' insisted Mrs Mann. 'My house does not need searching!'

'It certainly does,' said the Doctor firmly, finding his sonic screwdriver still in his hand and shaking it at Mrs Mann. And he started up the stairs.

'Well I never,' said Major Woolly. Upstairs, the Doctor slammed into the Major's bedroom.

'What are we looking for?' panted Robert, struggling to keep up.

'There's an alien intelligence hiding in this house, and it's very powerful. When I tried to leave, it almost consumed me. Took all my mental reserves to beat it back.'

Robert watched in amazement as the Doctor activated his sonic screwdriver and swept its beam across each wall in turn.

'And if I know my alien intelligences, which I do,' continued the Doctor, 'there's a more than fair chance it's hiding inside another life form.'

'You mean... one of us? Like the Major? Or Mother?' He paused. 'Or me?'

'I'm sorry, Rob, but anything's possible,' said the Doctor, putting on his glasses. 'Still, I'm here to help. Whatever happens next.' He stared around him. 'Now, help me search. We're looking for anything that seems out of place.'

'Or out of time,' said Robert.

'You're catching on,' beamed the Doctor, as he flung open the doors of Major Woolly's wardrobe. 'I knew you'd understand.'

Over the next few hours, Robert helped his friend explore every inch of

every bedroom. The Doctor cheerily dismissed complaints from Mrs Mann and her guests with the wave of what appeared to be a warrant from the Ministry of War.

After the bedrooms, they checked the dining room and the drawing room. Still the Doctor seemed to find no clues. Then they went downstairs to the basement, the domain of Mrs Baxter, which she ruled like a dictator.

'What you doing in here?' boomed the cook, as soon the Doctor and Robert entered the kitchen. 'I'm trying to make a jam roly-poly.'

'We won't get in the way of your roly-poly,' said the Doctor.

Robert eyed Mrs Baxter accusingly. 'We're searching for aliens.'

'Germans, you mean?'

'No. The ones from outer space.'

Mrs Baxter rolled her eyes and went back to work, while Robert explored the kitchen.

'I think I'd like to be a chef when I grow up,' he muttered, eyeing Mrs Baxter's collection of knives. 'Head chef at The Ritz, in fact.'

But the Doctor seemed not to be listening. He was on his hands and knees. 'Look!' he shouted.

Robert bent down to see what the Doctor was staring at.

Just above the skirting board, the plaster was cracked and crumbling. The Doctor crawled further along the length of the wall. 'It's here too,' he said. 'And here!'

'What's so strange?' asked Robert. 'The back wall of the house is full of cracks like that.'

The Doctor stood up. 'I've been blind,' he said. 'Let's go! It's time to end this!'

Major Woolly tapped his watch. 'This is insufferable, Doctor,' he said. 'First you accuse one of us of being a spy, then you ransack our rooms, and now you're encroaching on dinner!'

'Never mind all that,' said the Doctor, turning to address a full dining room. He'd summoned every member of the household to a meeting, Robert at his side. 'You're all in deadly danger. A force in this house is sucking away your potential, like a sponge absorbs water, and not one of you is capable of the teensiest hint of motivation or -'

'How dare you!' interrupted the Major. 'I could walk out that front door this very minute and achieve anything I put my mind to. We all could.'

'Go on then!' urged the Doctor.

'It's after six,' said Miss Sillington quietly. 'Everything will be shut.'

'Major, you should be back in the Army. I know that's where your heart is. Why else keep your uniform so neatly pressed? Miss Sillington, you're a fantastic painter, so why not paint? And you, Clive, could write that novel. You wouldn't be alone if Miss Gibbs finally found the willpower to express her true feelings. And even Mrs Baxter could have her pig in the country.'

Six shocked faces gaped back at him, but the Doctor continued, lowering his voice slightly.

'And as for you, Mrs Mann, you can't even have that tree in the back garden cut down. A tree that steals your light and makes you miserable every time you look at it.' He stared at them sternly. 'You're all brilliant, wonderful people, but not one of you has the strength to follow your dreams. And there's a reason for that.'

'More talk of dark forces?' sighed Mrs Mann.

'Not just talk. It's here amongst you.'

The room erupted into confused chatter.

'If I'm correct,' the Doctor continued, 'this force is stealing your ambition and using it. I've felt it myself.'

'You haven't said anything about me, Doctor,' ventured Robert. 'What about me?'

'You're different to everyone else here,' replied the Doctor.

Miss Sillington gasped. 'You don't mean that Robert is... the alien?'

'Of course not. What's important about Robert is that he's completely unaffected. And that's why he's been such a help to me.' He turned to the lad. 'It hasn't touched you because you're young. You haven't made up your mind about what you want to be in life. There's no specific ambition to hone in on.'

'Yes there is,' protested the lad. 'I want to be an escapologist.'

'You wanted to be a chef half an hour ago,' said the Doctor. 'But that's great. There's no reason you should make up your mind. You've got years ahead - and a trillion possibilities to choose from.' The Doctor ruffled Robert's hair. 'Though I must say I'm glad you've dropped the chef idea. Hard work and terrible money.'

'Then if it's someone here,' said Mrs Baxter, 'who is it?'

The residents of No.1 Gallows Gate Road eyed one another suspiciously.

'It's not any of you,' said the Doctor, marching over to the doors that led into the garden. He pushed them open and stepped outside. An icy gust of wind blew through the room.

'Where's he going now?' said Mrs Mann.

'Deuced if I know,' replied the Major.

In the garden, the Doctor stared up at the enormous oak. It was dark, but a full moon illuminated everything. There was silence, bar a steady tap-tap-tap on the bedroom windows as the highest branches of the tree swayed in the chill wind.

Robert appeared at the Doctor's elbow. 'Those cracks in the basement wall,' he said. 'They're caused by the tree.'

'Exactly! Its roots are digging into the foundations, spreading further every day, and claiming the house.'

'You're saying our villain is a tree?' The Major was standing behind them with the other residents.

'It's a nuisance, keeping me awake at night,' said Miss Sillington, 'but I wouldn't call it villainous.'

'It was the subject of your last painting,' said the Doctor. 'You'd produced amazing stuff for years, then you moved in here, managed one picture and gave up.'

The Doctor took a step deeper into the garden, then winced and put a hand to his head. 'Can't you feel it? An intelligent parasite. It needs the energy of others to live. And this is a particularly vicious example. I've seen something like it before. On Esto, in the Lagoon Nebula.' He pointed into the sky. 'Somewhere over there.'

Robert gazed toward the stars as the Doctor continued.

'These parasites inhabit the longest-lived life form on any world they visit. They don't have a physical shape of their own, so they need an anchor. They're really just squiggly waves of psychic force.' The Doctor took another step forward and clutched his head again, clearly in pain. 'Fetch an axe, Robert.'

'Don't you dare!' cried Mrs Mann.

'Ignore her, Rob.' The Doctor stared at the landlady. 'If it's so harmless, then what are you afraid of? You've already said how much you want it cut down.'

Mrs Mann stomped over to the vast oak tree and stood in front of it, arms outstretched. 'You are not touching poor old Lofty!'

'This tree is home to an alien parasite,' protested the Doctor. 'And I reckon it has been for hundreds of years. Miss Sillington told me there have always been stories about this house. I should have realised then it hadn't possessed a human. That tree has been here far longer than any of you, any of these buildings even. And think of the name of the

street.'

'Gallows Gate Road,' said Clive. 'In the Eighteenth Century, criminals convicted by the Kent magistrates were executed somewhere near here.'

'Near here?' repeated the Doctor. 'Where do you think the hangman slung his rope? This place has always been home to misery and loss. The force inhabiting that tree has been feeding off human potential for centuries.'

Robert emerged from the garden shed, carrying an axe. He held it out to the Doctor.

'I don't think it'll let me any closer,' said the Doctor. 'You're a big boy now, Rob. You can handle it, can't you?'

'I suppose so,' said Robert nervously.

'Don't!' bellowed his mother.

'It's n-not a good idea,' stammered Miss Sillington.

'I wouldn't if I were you, my boy,' said the Major.

The residents edged towards Robert, but the Doctor strode between them. 'It's for your own good!' he cried. Then he turned to Robert. 'Chop it down! You're the only one who can!'

Robert hefted the axe high into the air.

'Nooooo!' wailed the others.

It crashed down, cutting deep into the trunk.

The Doctor and the rest staggered, struggling to remain on their feet. Then they stared up in horror.

'What's that?' cried Mrs Baxter.



From the tree came a vast, luminous green imprint of itself - a ghostly silhouette that hovered above the small crowd and let out a deafening shriek.

'It's the entity leaving,' cried the Doctor over the din. 'Keep going, Rob!'

Robert let the axe fall again and again into the trunk's open wound.

The terrifying shape was twisting into a swirling vortex, which sent a vicious wind whipping about the house. It was so strong the residents could hardly keep their footing.

Miss Sillington gripped onto the Major. 'I feel strange,' she said.

'Here, let me have a go,' said Mr Plympton, and he waded forward and grabbed the axe from Robert.

He was followed by the Major, who took his turn enthusiastically chopping, the strange green energy whipping about him all the while.

Blow after blow rained down and the tree creaked and splintered.

It was then that the whirlwind began to lose its strength, and with a final piercing howl it was sucked in upon itself, until just a single ball

of light hovered over the Doctor, and then disappeared.

The Doctor collapsed.

The Major passed the axe to Mrs Mann. 'All yours, dear lady. Finish him off!'

Laughing, the landlady delivered the final chop, and with a deafening crack, the tree fell, crashing down across the garden and two more besides.

Then there was silence.

Eventually, the residents began chattering amongst themselves, in a way they hadn't done the whole time the Doctor had been with them. It was as if a light had been turned on and they saw one another - and themselves - for the first time.

The Doctor staggered to his feet and rubbed his head.

'The thing in the tree - is it dead?' asked Miss Sillington.

'I don't think it can be killed. It's just fled to another host. As I said, it inhabits the oldest life form around. And right here, right now... that's me.'

Miss Sillington looked at the Doctor, clearly confused.

'I'm 904, you know,' he said.

Later that night, the guests of No.1 Gallows Gate Road were once again gathered around the dining table. A crackling fire blazed in the hearth.

'Let us raise a glass to the Doctor,' said Mrs Mann.

Everyone lifted their glasses. 'To the Doctor,' they said with one voice.

'I'm not sure if I can accept everything you told us, Doctor,' said Major Woolly. 'But I must say I haven't felt this much get-up-and-go in years.'

'I'll second that,' said Miss Sillington. She wore her hat, now decorated with leaves from the fallen oak tree.

'I can't believe all this stuff about aliens either,' said Mrs Mann, 'and goodness knows how I'll explain that mess outside to the neighbours, but I finally feel able to make some changes around here.'

'And I'm signing up on Monday,' said the Major. 'Even a duffer like me might be of some use. If only to the Home Guard.'

'Good for you,' said the Doctor.

'I'm already making notes for my novel,' said Clive, tapping a notebook in his jacket pocket.

'And I'm going to get back to my painting,' said Miss Sillington. 'I fancy doing a portrait. Maybe someone famous even. I could do one of you, Doctor.'

The Doctor smiled warmly, but remained silent.

'You are staying on, aren't you?' asked the elderly woman nervously.

At that moment, Mrs Baxter burst in carrying a huge bowl of stew.

'And don't ask what I had to do to get this little lot,' she said, placing the dish proudly on the table.

'It looks lovely, Bertha,' said Mrs Mann.

'Now, it's not that I don't like it here,' said the cook. 'but come January I've fixed to move down to my sister's in Bridport.'

'You're leaving us?' asked Miss Gibbs.

'Now don't try talking me out of it because when I make up my mind...'
She trailed off as if waiting for someone to protest. But no one did. 'I'll fetch the bread and butter then,' said Mrs Baxter, sighing and shuffling out.

And whilst most of the guests were busy helping themselves to portions of stew, the Doctor noticed Clive Plympton give Miss Gibbs a coy smile. Her face lit up with happiness.

The Doctor chuckled quietly to himself and glanced around the table. Robert was shovelling forkfuls of food into his mouth.

'I definitely know now what I want to be when I'm older,' he said.

The Doctor couldn't help but smile proudly. 'It's not all fun being a time traveller,' he said. 'But I'm very flattered, Robby-boy.'

Robert frowned. 'I don't want to be like you, silly!' He flicked a glance towards the garden. 'I want to be a lumberjack.'

The Doctor closed the front door of No.1 Gallows Gate Road behind him, having slipped away when nobody was looking.

Across the street stood the TARDIS.

As he unlocked the door and went in, the Doctor wondered, and not for the first time, if his ship had somehow sensed the alien parasite. One thing he knew for sure though was that he couldn't keep it locked up in his mind forever. The TARDIS's telepathic circuits would help flush it out into the Time Vortex. That was one place where it couldn't do any more harm.

In the moonlit street, a battered blue box let out a wheezing and groaning sound, and then slowly vanished into the night.

THE END