

CHAPTER ONE

Hal Backford pushed open a trapdoor and climbed through onto the open roof of the watchtower. He was followed, more slowly, by Gordon Jay, a gnome-like oldster who was his clerk of works and general dogsbody on the building site.

The tower stood at one corner of an oblong, flat-roofed hall which, in turn, stood in one corner of an acre of cleared ground. This new structure was to serve as community centre for the Battery Point commune. It was the labour of their own hands. All that remained was to take the money in gold coin of the Federation and get back to base.

In the afternoon sunshine, Backford could see the whole extent of the commune from Battery Point to the old dock basin. A rough quadrant of rubble had been pushed out and piled to form a boundary earthwork with one opening for a massive roll-away gate which closed off the one road that led down the peninsula and finally to Chester. The tail end of a slow moving train of trailers, pulled by a single, labouring steam waggon was just visible in its personal cloud of dust and smoke. Gordon Jay, barely clearing the parapet with his balding head, pointed a gnarled finger. 'There they go, Craftsman. They'll be well back afore dark.' 'Six months never went faster.' 'Still an' all, it were six month too long!'

' I know you didn't like it.'

' I liked the work well enough. I reckon we never did a better job. No labour trouble. Supplies good. Equipment good. But the crew'll be right pleased to see Chester an' so shall I. There's a bad feelin' in this place. They're a close, secret lot an' that's a fact.'

' They're paying a good price.'

' Aye, it were a fine contract for Dutton's Yard. '

There was silence as they looked round the set. No two could be more different, but they worked well together as a management team. The oldster, small enough when in full flower, was now stooped and bent with years and labour. The Craftsman stood two metres in his socks. He had a Nordic look, horse face, blond hair, short-trimmed beard. A cow horn helmet and an axe would have suited him better than a builder's bowler and a theodolite. But he had been trained in practical engineering from being a boy in Dutton's Yard and liked the work. Craftsman status had given him the right to read in the Guild Library and he had gotten himself a wide, though patchy education. That and U.P.D. filled his time. Skill in Unarmed Personal Defence had given him a certain local fame. Few who had seen him operate in the regional contests would want to tangle with him.

Gordon still had the local people on his mind. He started again, ' I've seen more o' these folk nor you, Craftsman. You bein' billeted with their headman, like. I've heard talk. There's trouble ahead, mark me. There's some only lookin' for half a chance to pull Tom Fitton down. Does he know that, would you say?'

'The Chairman's a shrew^d man. Not much gets past him.'

'Maybe too shrewd for his own good! '

'You know something that he doesn't ? '

'Knowin' may be a shade strong. But I can add together.'

'Where does it lead ? '

'To a little sideline as goes on. Wreckin' as might be said. '

'Wrecking? ' Backford turned to face his foreman. There was no doubt, he was wholly serious.

'Aye. Wreckin! There's a ship now out in that bay. You can see a spar or two at low tide.'

'She's The Madre de Dios . She ran aground last winter.

Fitton told me that. It was not long before we started here. '

'She ran aground all right, but not where she lies now. She come ashore closer in. She were stripped out afore she were helped to drift farther on. As I hear it, every manjack in Battery Point took a share.'

'What about the crew? '

'Aye. What indeed? I'd say they was out o' luck'

'Drowned ?'

'Drowned.. killed..It makes a reason for keepin' close.'

Both men looked out to sea. Backford recognised that it could be so. The coast was no stranger to wrecking parties. It would explain some of the atmosphere of the place. Shared guilt was a powerful bond. But from what he knew of Tom Fitton it seemed out of character. He said, ' I'd be surprised if the Chairman had a part in it. He doesn't come over as a murderer or a thief.'

'Maybe he come on the scene late an' had to fall in with what were already done. However it fell out, there's some as thinks he took away the lion's share. Our comin' held them back. They mean to twist his arm as soon as they can see a clear way.'

'How do you know all this? '

'Well, Craftsman, I've been billeted with they two sherrifs, as they style themselves- Ainsley an' Royle. I turn in early most nights. They sit around for a drink an' a talk. I've got very good hearin'. It's too good for comfort at times and that's a fact. '

'So Tom Fitton took a share from the wreck? '

'As they tell it, he took the prize. It were known, don't ask me how, that the Madre carried some Federation money. Nobody admits to having got it. They think Tom Fitton got lucky an' salted it away.'

Backford shrugged. It was a sordid tale he could have done without. He was sorry to know that Fitton was implicated, because he liked the Battery Point Chairman. He turned for the stairhead. There was still a little bookwork to be done before he could present the final account. He was part way down the hatch with his head level with his foreman's, when Gordon spoke again. It seemed that now the work was done and he was off load, he wanted to clear his mind of all the accumulated debris.

'There's a thing, Craftsman, that mayhap Fitton ought to know.

When you settle up, you could tell him, like.'

'About the loose talk?'

'He has a daughter.'

'So? '

'They're out to get to him through her.'

'Can they do that? '

'She's been on a barter mission over to Formby Commune. The word is that she's signed a paper for some goods that's on the veto list. She'd no right to do it without a special Council. They can go for a right nasty penalty. Fitton thinks the world of that girl. They reckon he'd try to buy them off. '

Returned to his pad, Backford settled to the paper work. He was a neat hand at records and there was not much to do. Even this part of the work was a pleasure to him. A final statement wrapping up the package was satisfying in itself. The bottom line revealed that he had beaten the estimate and saved the commune a little money. There was also a reasonable profit in it which would please George Dutton. Everybody was a winner.

The Fitton family had an official suite with its own entrance at the back of the jumble of community offices. There was a porch, a panelled door of dark oak and a knocker in the shape of a tawny owl. Backford thumped it on its striker with a resonant clunk. There was a stage wait, then footsteps and the door opened a crack. He was looking down on a woman in a dark brown caftan, hair held back in a white band, possessor of a smooth oval face of the kind which hardly ages between twenty and forty. The door opened widely. She had recognised the caller.

'You are the Craftsman who has built the new hall. I

suppose you want to see my husband? '

'If it isn't an awkward time. '

'Not at all. Come in. '

There was a square reception area panelled in light wood. There was a settle with a plain red cushion, a vine growing in a tub, a large mirror and a framed map. The map looked ancient and its caption said, 'Speed's Map of Cheshire 1611'

'Sit down, Craftsman, I'll tell him you're here.'

The mirror proved to be sited on the back of a door. She went through it like a latter day Alice. Backford was left to consider his own reflection in the glass. Seeing himself unexpectedly was like meeting a stranger and he turned away abruptly to look at Speed's map. It showed the DEE FLUMEN, wide and navigable as far as SHotwick Church.

He became engrossed in it, leaning close with a hand on either side of the frame. Over the years, the estuary had been abandoned to salt marshes, reclaimed, abandoned again, reopened now to sailing vessels as the region made slow steps to restart the urban experiment. There had been no sound of movement, when a sharp prod in the centre of his back brought him round in a reflex action. Triggered by the touch, he went into a smooth defensive ploy which brought Barbara Fitton between himself and the wall with her head grinding into a decorative cherub on Speed's map and a large hand shoved under her chin.

It was a rough reception for the Chairman's daughter. She had come with a civil invitation for him to take a meal with the family, but she could only say 'Eek.' But that small sound was enough. The message was reinforced by the texture of the skin under his hand and the pressure of neat breasts against his forearm. This was no assassin. He released his hold and in simple courtesy tried to smooth down her rucked up tunic.. Eyes which had been startled turned indignant. Her mouth opened to complain, but he got there first-

'There you are then. Sorry about that. My mind was on something else. It was just a reaction.'

Seen close, there was a family likeness. Face was a broad oval. Skin was delicately tanned. Hair was light brown, short, falling in elastic wings to a smooth jaw line. Lips were full and everted. There was an ID tag on the moving breast pocket flap and he read it off. 'Barbara Fitton- You must be the daughter of the house?'

She had been about to get a word in, but was foiled again. As she opened her mouth for a third shot at it, another voice joined in from behind the mirror door.

'Bring him through, Barbara. Don't keep a guest all to yourself.'

She stepped away warily and moved towards the door.

He had a picture in the round for his computer. Trim back going away, full face in the mirror. It all added up. The Chairman's daughter was the prettiest girl in the parish. The voice completed the good deal. It was on the low side with a pleasing timbre.

'That's my father. I believe this is your last day here. Will you join us for a meal?'

It was the first time Backford had been inside the family pad. His host was not immediately visible. He was half hidden by a wing of dark wood in an angle beside an open hearth. There was a fire of black, petrified timber which burned with green and yellow flames. It was all very settled and domesticated.

Tom Fitton stood up. He was not as tall as his elegant daughter. His leonine head would have matched better with a bigger trunk.

'Come in, Craftsman. There's not been time for much talk with you. But we're in your debt. That's a good piece of building you've done there. I reckon it'll serve this commune well for many years to come. All we have to do is to pay up and look pleasant.'

When he had the final account, he gave a long whistle. 'You've kept within the figure, then. And a bit beside. That was well done. I'll get you the money before you go. I have it ready. Meantime sit you down by the fire. You'll join me in a drink? Bring in that sloe gin, Barbara. It's the house specialty, Craftsman.'

The atmosphere was end-of-the-day tranquil. Backford hesitated about bringing in a note of aggro, but he liked what he had seen of the whole family group and he judged that a warning would be taken at its value. When he was seated and sipping

his gin, he said, ' I don't suppose this is news to you, Chairman, but one of my men picked up some loose talk of opposition moves that might cause you a problem.'

'Ainsley and Royle?'

'The two lawmen, yes.'

'They haven't half a brain to share.'

'They were on about some wreck and a share out they didn't like.'

'I can handle those two. But thank you, anyway.'

'There's something more. They seem to think that they have a lever against you. By their account, your daughter has gone outside some regulation. They think they can haul her up before a people's court.'

This time, there was a reaction from all hands. Amanda Fitton, who had joined the group seemed to think it was all more than likely. She said, 'What have you got yourself into now, Barbara? Was it something at Formby?.'

Tom said, 'Steady now. We don't know yet that there's anything in it. Does it mean anything to you, Barbara?'

No answer was given. A pounding on the owl knocker made a period. Amanda Fitton was first on her feet. Instinct made her sense a threat to the family. She said, 'I'll go. If this is anything to do with what we've just heard, you keep quiet, Barbara. Let your father do the talking.'

Voices in the hall were bad news. It was Ainsley and Royle come in a body. They guessed that payment for the building work was due and they wanted to put in a claim of their own whilst the clink of coin was still sounding in the air. Tom Fitton said urgently, 'I can't operate unless I have the facts. What is it Barbara? Do they have a case?'

Backford was ignored. Father and daughter were on a

one-to-one link. Clearly there had been clashes of will in the past, but bonds of affection and respect were stronger than any differences of opinion. This family set up was new and interesting to the craftsman. Brought up in a boystown unit, he had no experience of the system from the inside. He sensed that a family might rate its bonds to each other higher than any other bonds whatever. That could be seen as a threat to an authoritarian regime.

Amanda Fitton was back. There was an exchange of glances. The Chairman said, 'I'll talk to them. Bring them through. The two women looked at Backford. He stood up. 'I'll go. You wont want a stranger sitting in.'

Fitton waved him back into his seat. 'Don't disturb yourself. There's nothing to hide. Talking in front of you, should make that even more plain.'

Ainsley and Royle wore brown shirts with round, stand-up collars. Badges on the breast pocket had a yellow wheel on a blue shield. The same logos was on the peak of the forage caps which they still wore to show that their office put them above politeness. Royle was small, thick set, melancholy. His partner was tall, stringy, sullen. They could have been morticians. Between them, they organised the rule of law in Battery Point Commune. They were independent of the Chairman's office and could call up ten citizens at any time to do service as a posse. In practice, to save confusion, they had a regular team of ten labourers who liked the extra money and held themselves ready for duty as a semi-permanent force. Ainsley was the mouthpiece and Royle was the nodder. When they were seated in the ingle with a glass of rum apiece, Ainsley said, 'You'll understand, Chairman, there's nothing personal in this. It's a matter of principle.'

Tom Fitton said, without rancour, 'There's a well-worn phrase, Bert ! Whenever anybody says it's a matter of principle, you can bet good money that somebody else is about to suffer from sharp practice. What have you in mind? '

Ainsley smiled a false smile and turned to Royle for a nod as he said, ' There now, Vick. Tom Fitton always gives things a humorous twist. Isn't that right? However, this is a serious matter.' He turned back to Fitton. 'Your girl now, Chairman. She's been over to Formby Commune on a barter mission.'

In spite of her mother's warning, Barbara said quickly, 'That's right. It's my job. I'm in the QM section. We handle supplies and distribution. It was authorised by the Council.'

Ignoring her, Ainsley continued to address her father. 'As I understand it, Chairman, it was a routine negotiation to renew our annual deal with Formby. They trade fruit and veg. We trade fish and timber. '

'That's the arrangement.'

'That's the arrangement--as you say. But this time round, your girl has signed up for some tools that'll upset our lads here. She's agreed to take power saws. I don't have to tell you that there's a breach of the Jenner Code. What happens to Jack Brant and his crew, if we bring in power saws? They'll be out of business. That's what happens. I'm here to tell you that I've got twelve names on a paper calling for a special council tonight at eight oclock to look at it. '

Vick Royle had nodded all the way and raised a gnarled thumb as an extra. Bert Ainsley took a long slurp from his glass and then said, approvingly, 'Now there's a good tippie. It'll be some of that liquor that come from that wreck, I shouldn't wonder. You did well there, Chairman. '

Tom Fitton said slowly, 'What was the rush, Bert? It's a small matter. You knew I'd make it right at the next Council if there'd been a breach of the rules. '

Backford would never have believed that he might live to see anybody tap the side of his nose with a knowing leer and a wink; but Bert Ainsley did it with no sweat. The lawman also said, 'Ah now. But do we know that? There was that little matter of the wreck. There's them that think you didn't go by the book that time.'

There was an energetic nod from Vick Royle. They finished their drinks in a concerted swallow and stood up. When they had gone, there was silence as the family gathered again in the ingle. Finally, Barabara said slowly, 'I didn't go into details when they were here, but they're going to look fools at this meeting. Formby offered some power tools in barter, sure. I didn't take them. I know the code. I signed a paper to give us an option next trip. That would have come up for discussion at the next regular Council. It would be a community decision.'

Amanda Fitton looked pleased. The Chairman asked, 'Who has the paper now?'

'Joe Brandon.'

'He'll be the one who alerted Ainsley. He's working with that creep Jack Peters who fancies himself as Chairman Elect. It all begins to smell. I'm not blaming you, Barbara. But we could have a problem. We'll think about it over supper. Meantime, I'll settle this account for the Craftsman. We'll join you in a couple of minutes.'

Chapter Two

Backford's new community hall proved its worth as a setting for the emergency meeting. The hoi polloi sensed drama and packed in. When the top brass took their seats on a raised platform at the watchtower end, there was a full house. Only those with pressing engagements had stayed away. Before the session had been under way for a couple of minutes, it was clear that the crowd's instinct was right. The pack was going for a kill.

There was a motion from the floor to take Tom Fitton out of the chair. As in all good revolutions, the activists had gotten themselves better organised than the government. Ralf Peters held his fire, but he was clearly directing the moves. He was a large faced, pale man, softly spoken with eyes that showed no emotion. He had a hard core following of a dozen malcontents to spearhead the cause and knew ~~for a~~ truth that simple greed would swing the average voter once he had the show on the road.

Mover of the motion against Barbara was an argumentative Welshman with a barrack-room lawyer style. Jones-the-Gas or Jones-the-Shit according to friend or foe, ran the sewage processing plant which lit the commune's streets with lurid fish-tail flares through the hours of darkness. He had a sure touch as a rabble rouser. Without being specific, he could convince a mob that all were being cheated of some benefit that they ^{all} ~~unfairly~~ deserved.

Sitting with Amanda and Barbara Fitton in the body of the hall, Backford could feel the tension rise and knew for a truth that Tom Fitton was on a loser.

With a well-briefed group rushing it along, it was an open and shut case. Peters himself was voted into the chair. What he said would have hit a resonance in any democratic assembly down the ages where a fixer was using the weakness of a fair system to serve a power group. When he had praised those present for their public spirit and fearless characters, he got down to cases. He called Joe Brandon to the bar. 'Now Joe. without fear or favour. What have you to report to this Council?'

Honest Joe Brandon, thick set with an upstanding quiff of carrot red hair, made a bluff, heart warming job of it. He told how he had struggled with his feelings, because he was, by nature, a loyal man. He did not want to cause any trouble for Tom Fitton who had done well in the past. Then he went on, 'But there's been some slacking off of late times. We need to look again at the Jenner Codex. It wasn't drawn up without good reason. The price of a good life all round is vigilance.'

He paused for applause and got an enthusiastic clatter from his faction. He shifted into high gear and pointed an accusing finger at Barbara Fitton. 'The QM rep on the party at Formby signed an agreement to take machinery that can only do harm. We've managed without it. If we have it, it can only take work away from our forestry team. It's a direct breach of the Jenner Code. An example must be made of the official who made the contract. It's a matter of principle. I move that the paper be torn up and the guilty party stand in the public square for a day and a night to make it plain that this commune holds to Federation Law.'

Interest sharpened. It was some years since the old statute had been used. There was a pillory in the square, set on a stepped platform. It was a general meeting place for barter and chat. People sat on the steps in fair weather. Anybody stuck up on exhibition would add flavour to the day.

Tom Fitton was on his feet, shouting. His daughter hauled him down. 'It's no good! Don't you see? They mean to do this to get you involved. Don't play their game.'

Peters pounded the table with a gavel. When he had silence, he said, 'Do you have proof?'

'A copy of the document.'

'Can we see it?'

Brandon held it up. Barbara Fitton spoke into the hush. 'If he knows so much about it, he must know that what he has there is an option. This Council would have been asked whether it wanted to go ahead or not. There is no agreement. There is no case to answer.'

Peters said, 'You are talking out of turn. Read it to us, Joe. Slow and easy, so that we can all follow it.'

As it unfolded, it was clear that the prosecution had a case. There was no reasonable doubt. Chapter and verse made it plain that an undertaking had been given to exchange so much salvaged timber and glass for two solar powered saws in prime working order. Barbara Fitton said earnestly to her father, 'That's not the document I signed. They've altered it. But it just shows that they mean business. Don't react. I can stand there for twenty four hours. Don't give them the chance to trap you into supporting an illegal act.'

It was a struggle. Tom Fitton's knuckles showed white as he gripped the top rail of the chair in front of him. What convinced him was the thought that he was better placed to see that she came to no harm if he was free to come and go. He had been caught wrong-footed and needed time to organise his own supporters. Even if it is wrong, the majority is always right.

It was a matter of ~~practical politics~~ simple arithmetic