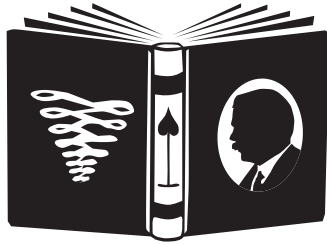

H.G. WELLS
~ FESTIVAL ~



FOLKESTONE
19 & 20 SEPTEMBER 2009

Winner

The Invaders from Within

by William Jarret

Age 13, Harvey Grammar School, Folkestone

In a universe so infinitely vast as our own, we can be sure that somewhere, deep in the heart of this inky void, there is another with an intellect far beyond our own. Yet how many could even contemplate that there was such a being, cold and pitiless, beneath our very feet; observing our every movement with vigilance unparalleled by man or beast, surreptitiously absorbing every development of our own, inferior race. Certainly not I that is, until the time came that it determined to strike...

* * *

I shall begin my recollection about two years before the fateful incident, in early 2007. An earthquake struck Folkestone, an unpredicted and exciting event that captured the imaginations of all the townsfolk, including myself. T-shirts with the words "*I survived the Folkestone Earthquake*" appeared briefly at the seafront, and, with minimal damage, soon no more than a fond memory of the quake remained. If only a more thorough investigation went into the cause of the blasted tremor, the crisis that followed might have been averted.

Once again, little more than eighteen months since the first, a second quake struck. Only 2.8 on the Richter scale, this quake was noticeably smaller, but in almost precisely the same area as the first. Yet despite this, the tremor was dismissed as a coincidence. Once again, no investigation was made truly, this foolish mistake cost us dearly. Still, who could have possibly known what was to occur?

By this time, I had established myself on Cheriton High Street, in a business that had sprung out of a hobby of mine collecting antique radios. To many, the appeal of such a hobby is somewhat veiled; yet to me, finding a wireless that for decades has been untouched and returning it to its former glory is the most rewarding feeling that could ever be known. Nowadays, technology is advancing at such a fantastic rate new, amazing inventions such as the iPod and touch screen phones are constantly being improved, reinvented, moved forward. This world that we live in, although incredible, can, at times, be a touch tiring; I think it's good to have something through which you can step into the past. After years of monotonous office work, it was almost a dream come true to have saved enough money to open *The Radio Yesteryear*.

That was where I sat, behind my desk, my concentration focused entirely on the wireless before me, when a distant rumble, almost like a clap of thunder or a far off stampede, shook the earth. The rumble became a roar and my shop began to tremble, the old radios shaken out of their brackets to come crashing to the floor. Yet at that moment, I cared little for my prized possessions I was seized by an almost primeval urge, to escape, to hide, anything to escape this world of confusion.

And then, as suddenly as it had started, it stopped.

I let out a breath I hadn't realised I was holding, and looked about my shop, heart pounding. It soon became apparent that, despite the disarray caused by the tremor, nothing was broken. I let out a whoop of joy for a heart stopping moment; I had thought my collection gone. How ironic, that just before they came, I felt such wild relief for these few contraptions. Soon I was to know what I really valued.

I glanced out into the street, to see if any damage had been caused, I saw a boy of about fourteen, hurtling through the road. Mindless of the traffic, he ran at full pelt, provoking angry exclamations from the drivers. Yet it was not this that held my attention. It was his eyes. His eyes were filled with naught but the cruellest of emotions terror. I simply cannot describe it any other way. At first, I had thought he was getting help maybe a building had collapsed? But one look into his panic-stricken eyes told me otherwise. It was a look that chilled the bone, told of unspeakable evils, and revealed the blood curdling fear that doubtless coursed through his veins.

I saw a man stepping towards him, to try and help I suppose, but it was as if the poor youth could not see him. He sped past the church and along the main road, not looking back for an instant. He couldn't have run faster if the hounds of hell pursued him. Soon he was lost from sight.

Cold dread seized my heart as I stepped out of my shop and stared down the road the boy had come from. It led down the main road, past the Harvey Grammar School and through to Morrisons, a supermarket near the crossroads. People from either side of the street slowly stepped into the road, deaf to the shouts of the enraged motorists leaning on their horns. I couldn't blame the pedestrians. Indeed, I was among them. Something from down there had scared him out of his mind. And of one thing I was sure, although of course it was impossible to know.

Whatever it was, it was coming.

At first, like the earthquake, I felt a dull tremor, slowly rising into an awful crescendo of beating. The earth began to tremble violently. And then I saw them.

It was horrific. A writhing sea of creatures were seething up the street, invincible in their numbers. A sickening cross between an ant and a spider, they seemed coated in a black, glistening armour, and moved with chilling agility. At least a foot in size, these armoured giants struck out like chain lightning, swarming their helpless victims and ripping them apart with serrated jaws. I saw a man in the bus stop, waving a cricket bat; one leapt at him and he swung, meeting the creature with a sickening crunch. Green flesh flew as he struck out again, but to no avail; he was swamped, and soon lost under the unstoppable, black tide.

His dying screams brought me to my senses. There was no chance of outrunning them, and even less of fighting them. I turned and fled for my shop it was all I could think of. I heard myself shouting, "Get inside!" and a few people in the road turned and hurtled towards me. Others made a beeline for the church. I hadn't thought many people were still religious; I suppose in crisis we're not so picky about what we believe. I counted two men going through my door, and was about to slam it shut when I heard a panicked voice.

"Wait!"

A woman, heavily pregnant, was stumbling towards the shop, desperation in her eyes. I didn't hesitate for a second. It occurred to me later that maybe the most logical thing to do would have been to close the door immediately. After all, the black, glistening horde was moments away. But I couldn't leave her out there. Not a chance. After all, if we started to desert those who needed us now, how could we possibly hope to survive?

She crashed through the door and I threw it closed. My heart missed a beat. Black pincers were gnashing at the edge of the door, dead eyes gleaming with malice. I threw my weight at it, but the door slowly crept open, the crack widening. Suddenly, time seemed to slow. I knew that I couldn't hold them back; the crushing power of the horde was simply too strong. I felt my feet sliding back and knew it was the end. I may have uttered a prayer.

Then, without warning, the unstoppable pressure seemed to ease. Not a lot, but enough. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the two chaps who'd come through the door, teeth gritted in pain, as they heaved on the door with me. I felt a surge of hope. With a final push, it crashed back into its frame and I slid the lock into place. Quickly, I pulled the grille down in front of the shop and then collapsed, trembling. I know what I'm meant to say now; that I thought it was all a dream, that it wasn't happening, but it wasn't like that. I knew, somehow it seemed obvious; this was no dream. This was no nightmare.

This was real. And that made it much, much worse.

I slowly gathered myself up and had a look at the people who'd managed to get into the shop. The pregnant woman, breathing heavily, but otherwise ok; a guy in a suit, slumped against the door, eyes fluttering; a man with close-cropped hair and steely eyes, looking keenly around the room; and a school boy, wearing a sports kit marked with the Harvey Grammar emblem. His face looked deathly pale and his eyes stared into the middle distance, unseeing. I approached him, and he looked up, startled.

"Hi," I said, coming to sit by him. His blue, intelligent eyes stared back.

"Um... Are you ok?" It was out of my mouth before I could stop it. Only after I said it did I realise what a stupid thing it was to say.

He managed a weak grin, then turned back and stared towards the door. He stayed like that for a few minutes, just staring. Hardly surprising, really. The chap with the close-cropped hair continued to pace, examining the cracks of the door and windows. Suddenly, out of the blue, the schoolboy spoke up.

"I saw it start, you know," he remarked. He could have been talking about the weather. "Just ten minutes ago, I reckon. First the trembling, but of course, that was just an adventure. We'd seen it all before. Huh. I dunno who spotted it first. The crack. In the direct centre of the playground, it was. No one knew what to think. We weren't allowed to go near it, of course. That was for the head. He was the first to go. He didn't stand a chance. None of them did..."

He broke down crying, head in his hands. When he was ready to go on, I realised I wasn't the only one listening; the others were peering over intently. He continued.

"Those creatures... Like ants, I think, only bigger... *Much* bigger. Swarming over the rim, swamping everything. I didn't get a good look. I was a lucky one. I was in the playing field. PE. We all ran for it, the teacher included. Huh. We were gonna be doing to be doing athletics next. He'd have had to been a pretty special teacher to get that much out of us... I didn't really see what happened after that... Um... I think the others managed to barricade themselves in the school..."

He was looking up at me, willing it to be true. I could guess what the real likelihood was, but I gave a gentle nod. I prompted him on.

"So what did you do?"

"Well, I ran, of course," He continued, "I ran down to here, but I was sure it was hopeless. Did you see how fast those things could move? And then I heard you. I knew it was my only hope, so I came through here. Oh, and I'm James, by the way."

He gave another weak grin, then slumped back onto the floor.

"I'm Alan," The man in the suit murmured, then looked down at his feet self-consciously. I nodded towards him. Alan had just been going out to the One-Stop down the road for a few bits and pieces. Just fifteen minutes ago. Another world.

We went around the group. The woman was called Anne, and was eight months pregnant. She taught biology at the Harvey and was on leave. She'd been out trying to find her husband when he hadn't answered the phone; she had been furious at him rushing off to play football with his mates when she was in such need. Now she feared for his life.

The chap with the grey, steely eyes was Keith. He didn't say much, but I got the feeling he was ex-military. His greying hair and loose fitting clothes couldn't disguise that - his keen eyes were constantly darting about the room, always vigilant.

We talked for a while, but soon the reality of our situation dampened our spirits. Alan stood and walked over to the wireless I'd been tinkering with. He looked back at me and shrugged. "We may as well try and get some news..." I nodded and went over to help. After a few twists the radio crackled into life.

"- *Is Invicta FM. Horror has descended on the... not yet sure if other areas are experiencing... in your homes, I repeat, stay in your homes... is as of yet unknown... sent to deal with the situation... windows and doors; leave no entrance to your homes open... soon as more is known...*"

The radio suddenly deteriorated into static.

We sat in grim silence for a few minutes, each consumed by our own thoughts, when the street suddenly came alive with sharp cracks. Gunfire. As one, we jumped up to the window and tried to peer through the metal grille that secured the front of the shop. A group of around twenty Ghurkhas were advancing through the streets, automatic rifles raised and firing, cutting through the black tide of writhing beasts. Hope surged through my veins. These soldiers were some of the finest in the world, and here they were, coming to our aid from the Folkestone barracks. Green flesh flew as the creatures were ripped apart by expertly aimed bursts. None of them could get close; the Ghurkhas were winning!

Cheers erupted from either side of the street, and I saw that more people had made it to safety than I had previously realised. Maybe they really could defeat this hideous foe, which had caught us so off guard.

It was then of course, that it happened, so quickly that no one could have warned them. For from down below the low slope from which those brave soldiers had come, a swarm of the wretched creatures spewed forth, jaws thrashing. In their thousands, those armoured giants filled the road and pounced, with incredible speed, upon the unprotected back of the Ghurkha line. Several dropped at once; the others turned and, discarding their guns, pulled their *Kukris* out of their boots. In a frenzy of slashing cuts, they managed to hold them back, but there was no mistaking it; they were surrounded. So, self-preservation now top priority, they desperately cut a path to one of the houses, and retreated inside.

Bitter defeat. If those highly trained, elite soldiers could not stop them, I didn't know what could. I collapsed back from the window, heart filled with despair. I'm sure the others felt the same. I saw Alan turn from the window, angry tears in his eyes. "They should never have tried it," he said, struggling to keep control, "they should have known..."

"So that's it then," I said, voice hollow, "If they can't fight them, what chance have we got. It's over. They've won."

"No!"

Keith strode over to me and, looking straight into my eyes, slapped me, hard. His eyes were full of fury. "No!" he exclaimed, "We will not be taken this easily! We will fight, and what is more, we will win. For the love of God, this only began an hour ago, if that! Everything has a weakness! Do *not* give up hope, for when that is gone, and only then, will they have won!"

He straightened up, brow creased furiously. He was right, of course, and I berated myself for thinking such foolish thoughts. We were still alive, weren't we? And whilst we were alive, we had hope. And whilst there was hope, there is always a chance.

"Sorry, Keith," I began, "I just-"

"Extraordinary..." It was Anne, still standing over by the window. "Look at this," she beckoned me over, "look at the other buildings. What do you see?" She stared at me, a faint smile playing on her lips.

"I don't know," I replied. I didn't know what to look for. The walls were covered in the swarming, black creatures, moving together as one. The very sight made me sick.

Anne tutted. "The creatures are all over the buildings, aren't they? Well? But are there any on *this building*?"

The truth suddenly dawned on me. She was correct. Every inch we could see outside the window was covered with the black, glistening swarm, but not us. In fact, there were a few feet in front of the building where none of them stood. They were going straight past us. I couldn't believe we'd missed it before.

I asked the most obvious question. I saw that the others were listening in too. "Why?"

Anne began to slowly pace the room. "Do you know what it's called when a group of creatures, of virtually no intelligence, come together to perform incredible feats, all working as one? Hive intelligence. How do you think ants manage to create such amazing nests, and lift objects thousands of times their size? They work as one, guided by pheromones that they give off to communicate with one another. And what does every ant colony have, to co-ordinate these movements?" She paused. "A Queen."

"But these things can't use pheromones," she continued, "No, that would be too confused. They wouldn't be able to communicate anything but the simplest commands. And did you see the way they attacked those Ghurkhas? They were like a military unit! No, they would need something a lot more intricate. Subtle."

"Radio waves..." breathed James. "They communicate through *radio waves*..."

Anne was positively beaming. "Exactly. They're not able to come near this place since Alan switched on that radio. If they did, *their* radio signals would be interfered with. And with the right radio frequency, they'd be completely cut off, powerless. Gentlemen I think we have found our weakness."

My spirits soared; I found myself punching the air. We were no longer hiding, like rats, from an unstoppable force. We were secure, more than that; we could take the fight to them! We had a weapon, and we were going to use it.

"But what should we do?" Alan queried, looking around with concern, "I mean, sure, we can keep them away, stop them communicating, but there are hardly enough radios in here to stop them all, are there? What will we actually *do*?"

Keith laughed. "Haven't you been listening, lad? The thing that every ant colony needs to co-ordinate their movements is a Queen. We can be pretty sure these things won't be any different. We cut off the head, the body dies too."

I reached down and picked up the wireless. Moving to the window, I pushed it up against the glass to see how the creatures reacted. I couldn't help smiling. We watched as the hoard began to walk around the waves in a loose semi-circle, pushing to get away. Despite my satisfaction of the plan falling into place, I felt a certain dread settle upon me. I knew what this meant. We were going to have to find the Queen. It was a tense moment for us all, preparing to open the door to the outside world. These creatures, did they possess a cunning that went beyond hive intelligence? Could they be concealing their true purpose, pretending to be affected by the waves in order to lure us into the open? Yet such doubts were irrelevant; after all, what else could have been done?

We stood together, Alan, James, Keith, Anne and I, shared a nod, and on the count of three, opened the door. No response. The black, armoured creatures continued on their path, ignoring our presence. I don't know if anyone saw us then; I suppose they would have thought us mad if they had. I know I would have.

We stepped out into the street and, as we did, the glistening sea parted, forming a ring around us as we huddled around the wireless, our one lifeline. If something was to happen to it well, that didn't bear thinking about. Slowly, ever so slowly, we stepped along the road, heading for the place it all started the Harvey Grammar School. I didn't think it possible, but as we got nearer, their intensity of numbers increased - tens of thousands, crawling upon one another. I fought back a wave of nausea and continued. We pasted the barbers, the sweet shops and mini-markets. All unrecognisable under the writhing, black horde that covered them.

In the space of fifteen minutes, we arrived. The once proud school building was enveloped in the black swarm. We had reached the nest.

There were so many of the vile creatures now, they streamed over our feet, jaws gnashing wildly. Their incredible numbers were pushing them into the radio waves. I stumbled as one crashed into my leg, the wireless almost slipping beyond my grasp. I managed to keep a hold of it, but I was severely shaken to come so close, and to lose everything, was unthinkable...

And then, we were there. The great split in the earth, where it had all started. I nearly lost all sense and ran there and then, for in that gaping chasm, I saw giant, thrashing jaws, strong as steel, reaching up through the ground. We had found the Queen.

With a sickening lurch, a viciously pointed claw rose from the split and stabbed with incredible force into the concrete. Another followed, then another. Slowly, agonisingly slowly, the Queen pulled its heaving, bloated body from the ground, and turned its head, at least two feet wide, to our group. Whereas the other creatures seemed to have glistening armour, the Queens flesh was a dull, dead grey. A pair of eyes, black as pitch, glinted with cruelty. With a malevolent hiss, the vile creature began a stumbling run, thrashing its jaws wildly.

It had seen us.

Anne took control. "It must be using a different frequency!" She exclaimed, terror almost consuming her, "Change the frequency! Hurry!"

I nodded frantically and sharply twisted the dial, causing the radio to erupt with noise. The Queen was almost upon us; we had seconds left...

"-Steal the night, Kill the lights, Feel it-"

"It's not working," Keith yelled, "Change it!"

I desperately sped through the stations, but to no avail. It was going to be too late... *"-You informed as news comes in... Rooney on the wing, a good chance for a cross here... are now predicting that the effects of the credit crunch will be seen for another... effect of climate change is now evident... Swine Flu having claimed twenty-nine lives. To prevent... now that Michael Jackson's funeral is over his many fans will continue to ..."*

The Queens loathsome jaws began to close. This truly was the end. I gave the dial a final, desperate turn.

"...ith thanks to Paul Merton, Stephen Fry, Sue Perkins, Steve Frost and your chairman, Nicholas Parsons! You've been listening to Just A Minute!"

The Queen reeled, and let out a terrible, piercing scream. She reared up on her back legs, front claws desperately scrabbling at her head. The bloated body crashed to earth, leaving the Queen on her back writhing and thrashing. It let out another horrendous, shuddering scream, then finally became still.

And all around us, we watched in awe as, slowly, the black tide began to break up. No more were they one, unstoppable force, united against us now, they were separate. Cut-off. Powerless. One after another they fell, limbs curling. Within minutes, the deathly plague of creatures had become a repulsive carpet of black, glistening corpses. A deathly hush fell upon the town.

It was over. We had won.

“This is Invicta FM. Two weeks after the attack of the “Formicium giganteum”, as they have become known, business as usual has returned to Folkestone. Still furious speculation as to the cause of the event is underway. Some scientists suggest that they are a throwback from the prehistoric era, trapped beneath ground until the earth movements allowed them a means of escape. Others say that rising heat or CO₂ levels produced the creature's ideal habitat, and so they broke free. Still more are convinced that the Formicium giganteum were extra terrestrials. Maybe the truth will never be fully realised.

“The people of Folkestone are all contributing to the clearing up operation that is currently in progress. Private companies from around the area are all pitching in to repair the damage caused by the creatures, and it is expected that the Harvey Grammar School will open within the week. In the face of adversity, the people have pulled together for the common good. In the words of H. G. Wells, 'Our true nationality is mankind.'”