

“Where have the planes gone, Dad?” asked Jill.

“Back to base,” he said. “Come on, now, time to tuck down for bed.”

It kept his wife occupied, undressing the children before the fire, seeing to the bedding, one thing and another, while he went round the cottage again, making sure that nothing had worked loose. There was no further drone of aircraft, and the naval guns had ceased. “Waste of life and effort,” Nat said to himself. “We can’t destroy enough of them that way. Cost too heavy. There’s always gas. Maybe they’ll try spraying with gas, mustard gas. We’ll be warned first, of course, if they do. There’s one thing, the best brains of the country will be onto it tonight.”

Somehow the thought reassured him. He had a picture of scientists, naturalists, technicians, and all those chaps they called the back-room boys, summoned to a council; they’d be working on the problem now. This was not a job for the government, for the chiefs of staff—they would merely carry out the orders of the scientists.

“They’ll have to be ruthless,” he thought. “Where the trouble’s worst they’ll have to risk more lives if they use gas. All the livestock, too, and the soil—all contaminated. As long as everyone doesn’t panic. That’s the trouble. People panicking, losing their heads. The BBC was right to warn us of that.”

Daphne Du Maurier