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Wild Wood

Written by Jan Needle

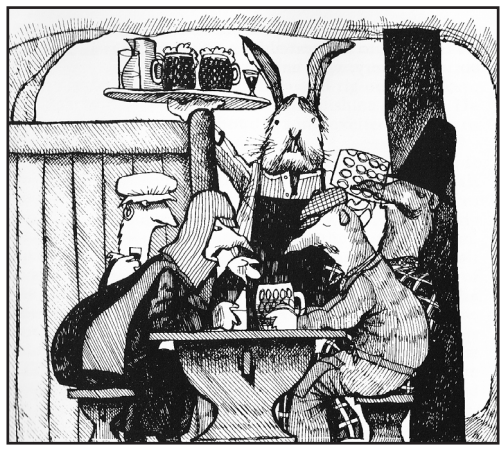
Illustrated by Willie Rushton

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Wild Wood



'And so a gallant band was formed, to bring about the downfall of the rich uncaring few. They were the Wild Wood Volunteers, and theirs is a saga of poverty and desperation, loyalty and treachery, strange love and great despair.'

From the notes of Cedric Willoughby,
Chronicler and Historian

For Viv

And for Matti and Wilf

Wild Wood

JAN NEEDLE

ILLUSTRATED BY
WILLIE RUSHTON



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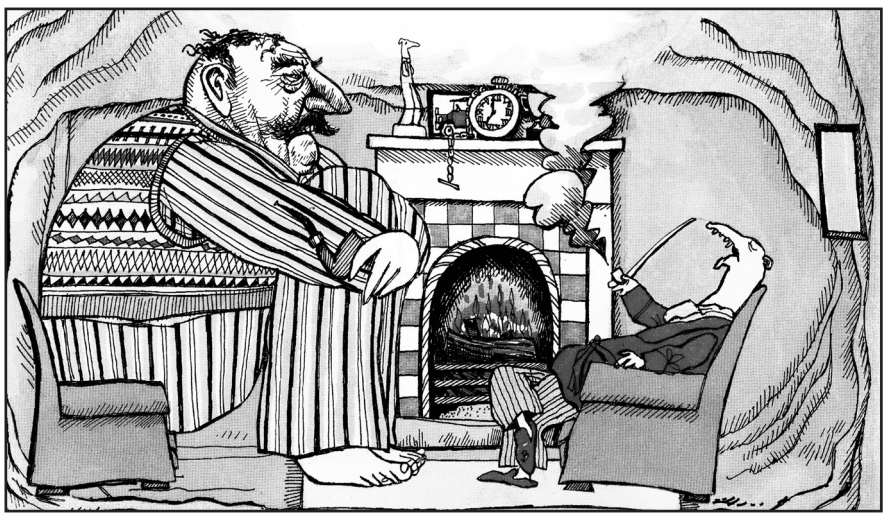
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WILD WOOD was first published in 1981, with original illustrations by the late great satirist Willie Rushton. Willie's son Toby was in on the earliest discussion of the pictures – he and his father were dressed in tennis whites and enacting Wimbledon on the table tennis table in their living room the day Jan Needle met them – and thanks are due both to Toby and to André Deutsch for permission to base this edition on the much-loved original.

Rapidly a cult bestseller, Wild Wood was broadcast on BBC Radio 4, and has been variously dramatised. It has been translated into several languages, including Japanese.

Intended for both adults and children, it numbers among its admirers former deputy Labour party leader Roy Hattersley (Mail on Sunday), Joanna Carey of the Guardian ('a brilliant retelling'), academic critic Ann Wright ('Truly comic descriptions of political realities'), and writer and critic Jan Mark ('I honestly wish I had written this book').

Jan Needle lives in the North of England, and has written more than forty books, as well as TV, stage plays, animations and radio. His novels include thrillers, historical sea books, criticism, humour and contemporary fiction. Many of them are also available as E-books on Amazon. He has five children, five boats, and even more musical instruments.



How it all began



Chapter One

TROUBLE BREWING

There's been so much stuff and garbage talked about the 'time of troubles' down the years, that I think the actual facts should see the light of day at last. I'm only a common or garden nobody name of Baxter, maybe, but the mad old gent who ran me over at the crossroads, for instance, said it was bigger than the Peasants' Revolt, whatever that was. He was a journalist so shouldn't be believed, that's obvious – but who's he calling peasants, eh? It's a blind disgrace.

Fact of the matter is, that tales of mayhem, articles in the papers, even the odd book or two, has done us not a bit of good at all. It's made folks look down their noses on us, more than they even did before, it's made us into criminals and ne'er-do-wells.

Even worse, while the Wood's been painted as a sink hole full of scroungers and low-life, the ones who started it, the ones who'd still be locked in prison if they weren't so blessed rich, got off scot-free. Oh, there's two sides to every story, let me tell you – and our side ain't even never seen the light of day.

Not that I'm complaining, like, because I'm not that sort of feller, when it comes to it. I'm a Wild Wooder born and bred, and my ma, gawd bless her cotton socks, brung me up to make the best of what was flung at me, good or bad. And truth to tell, I think she's right. It was a wild time, fair enough. A rough time and a riotous, that cost me some friends and the young female I loved above all others in the world. But it was the best of times an'all, like the man once said. The best times and the worst.

We're rough down in the Wild Wood, and my talk's a wee bit makeshift, but to try and help you understand, I'll tell a thing they used to say about us, like a sort of joke, or riddle. No one can remember who said it first, but it caught on quick, and became a kind of proverb: *'A weasel's easily distinguished, ferret's stoatily different.'*

Well it gets a laugh all right, but it's true an'all, a hundred and ten per cent as they say nowadays. Which sounds a lot, but no more than the difference between chalk and cheese, eh? We're different, whatever anyone outside might think. And it's the differences that matter in this story.

Another thing that tends to get overlooked, is that back at the turn of the last century, when all this happened, things

wasn't quite like they are today. I'm old now – ancient even – but I can remember them times. My grandad didn't get a pension like I do. And when there was a real cruel winter, like there was in '06 and '07, there was no Meals on Wheels for the old 'uns or government hand-outs for them with families. When times was hard and the Soup Kitchen didn't turn up, we went hungry. Bread and dripping was a luxury sometimes, I can tell you.

Anyway, looking back on it, I reckon it was them two hard winters, coupled with a mite of bad feeling that had been growing up for some time over the goings on of a certain well-known individual and his friends, that led to the blow-up. The thing was, when times were cruel and appeared to be getting worse, the few animals that were well provided for stood out starker. There wasn't many, true enough; and there was a lot of us. That only seemed to make it worse.

I was very young at the time, but I was big for my age and as bright as a button. My old man had passed on some years before, so I'd had to work from pretty early on to help eke out the money. The farmer who'd gave me a start was a modern-minded chap for them days, and went in for machinery,which he let me tinker with, as much as I liked. It didn't do much good in terms of advancement, but it gave me something not many other animals had. I had knowledge. I could take down and rebuild engines and machinery. I could do steam, farm gear, and the even more new-fangled stuff; the type of vehicle that my old mother called 'infernal combustion'. What's more, I could drive.

This was because the gaffer was what used to be called a 'gentleman farmer'. He didn't do it because he needed the money, but because he wanted to. He liked the noise of sheep baaing, he liked to see the rosy-cheeked country girls milking

the cows, and he liked to breed great muscular horses to pull the waggons about. He liked motor vehicles, too, which was funny in a way, because most of the farmers who'd even heard of them saw them at the very best as new-fangled contraptions designed to make lazy animals lazier, which would no doubt be a nine-days wonder before they faded from memory along with other silly inventions, like the phonograph, say, or the aeroplane. But although he liked the new things, the gaffer wasn't the sort to get his hands dirty. When he bought his first petrol wagon, and the men that delivered it had left, he called me over to lift the bonnet open for him.

We stood there looking in. It was a rare and lovely sight, let me tell you. She was a Throgmorton Squeezer, with coil ignition and hand-polished journals. Six cylinders, each big enough to brew cider in. And powerful! She could carry four ton, and would have made near thirty miles an hour, given her head. God help the fellow walking in front with the red flag, though!

In them days, of course, they built them different. None of your mass produced cast-iron blocks with a die-cast serial number. The engine was all gleaming brass tubes and finger knobs. There was a little face carved on the bleeder nipple, and the fan blades were painted different colours so as they made a pattern when you revved the engine.

The gaffer stared in for a while, and I positively drooled.

'Well, young feller,' he said. 'Think you could drive her, then?'

I didn't realise for a while that he meant me. When it sunk in I rubbed my eyes and jumped up and down. Cut quite a caper. Until he said: 'Well if you *don't* think—' And I leapt in the cab as though I'd been shot.

'Drive it?' I says – for I was a cocky young fellow enough, and quite willing to have a crack at absolutely anything once, not to mention most things twice and some things more times than was good for my health – 'Why, I'll drive it, your honour. Where do you want to go?'

'Forty Acre field,' he said. Very wise too, for it was wide, flat and empty.

So I advanced the ignition, wiggled the toggle springs – wound the handle. Retarded the ignition, jiggled the priming sleeve – wound the handle. Lifted the bonnet, scowled at the little grinning face on the bleeder nipple, thought better of it and chucked it under the chin – wound the handle. Billy Bingo! She caught with a hiss and a roar. The whole Throgmorton jounced and shook on its bright yellow, solid-tyred, wooden-spoked wheels.

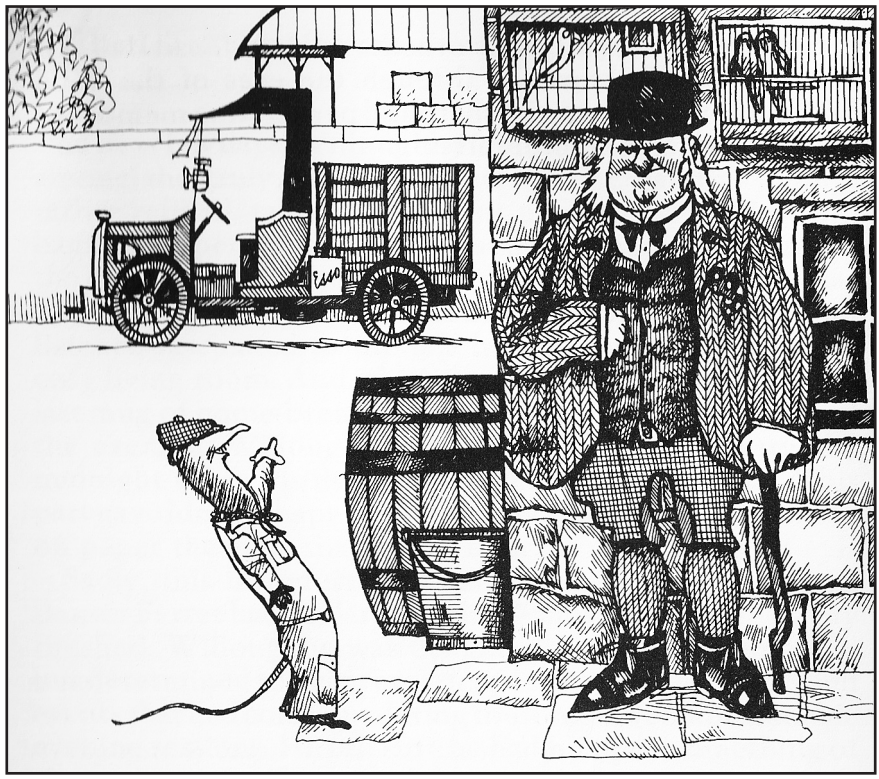
The gaffer gave a great shout of 'Come on, Baxter, damn you!' and I leapt into the cab and seized the gear stick. I was blind with excitement and drunk with power. I pressed a pedal here, pushed the lever forward with total confidence, pulled a handle there, pressed a knob there and threw a switch here. The truck howled in a loud and rather anguished way, rose several inches into the air, settled back on its springs – and raced off. How we bounced and shouted! I pushed and pulled at the wheel, banged at the pedals with both feet, crashed the gears. When we reached Forty Acre I shot round and round, Gaffer grabbed the klaxon, and we chased and terrorised everything in sight. We was transported!

One way and another it was quite a costly do. Three hens took the unusual step of flying away and finding a quieter farm, one of the older milkmaids came all over queer and had to be pensioned off into her own tied cottage, and all but three of the cows refused to give milk for six days. But as the farmer

said when we ran out of petrol at long last, and came to an eerie and silent stop among the settling dust: It was worth it. It was *well* worth it.

Of course, the differ between being rich and being poor is a big one. After that one first mad fling, sobriety had to come. For despite the fact he'd been with me, I'd forgotten myself quite enough for a long, long time to come, and no mistake. Gaffer never referred to the incident again, and neither did anyone else. But I did notice sixpence had been docked from my pay that Friday, and I didn't need it spelling out that it was for the time I was gadding about in the old Squeezer. I'm only grateful he didn't see fit to charge me for the petrol, as some would have done in them good old days.

But it did teach me something that meant quite a lot in view of events that started later that year or early the next. I'm not saying I'm better than anyone else, and I'll admit that I got a mite carried away one way and another over motor vehicles. But I reckon that was the single time in my whole long experience that I actually did anything that could have been condemned by anyone. And as I've said, Gaffer was with me, and he was an accessory before, during and after the fact.



Chapter Two

BEAST AND THE BEAUTY

My fault or not, though, the lesson had been learned, not just by me but by the farmer, too. I don't how much that waggon might've cost – I can't begin to dare to imagine – but the Throgmorton Squeezer was a big beast, and main hard to handle. But she was designed to work and so, as I had been brought up to believe, was I. So I settled down to learn how to handle her, before he changed his mind and sent me down the road.

First I had to get the hang of just looking after the thing. Every day I got to the farm at half past five, after a breakfast of a cup of tea and porridge with a slice of Mother's bread. At this time we was quite well off, although there were six other children besides me, so I was usually able to have a smudge of jam with it. When I got there, I was meant to begin by checking the animals in my charge, but more and more this went to someone else while I tended the machines. Naturally, it was a case of starting from scratch. Every inch of the Throgmorton had to be polished till it gleamed. Of course, it was hand-painted and every inch a beauty, so it was no labour. Under the bonnet, likewise. Well, I've told you about the brasswork. I used to rub away until my arm near broke. That little face I mentioned positively smiled at me. And from the first time till the last, I used to chuck it under the chin before I swung the starting handle. Never failed. A pity that some other people never learn how to treat a motor vehicle; the world would be a pleasanter place.

After the polishing came the checks. Farm work's dusty, naturally. So the air filters needed a daily clean, the oil filter had to be changed once a week, and the oil itself needed a careful looking-at morning and night for traces of dirt, metal shavings, or water. Fan belts to tension, mountings to run a spanner over, radiator to top up. Three quarters of an hour every single morning, Sundays included, in the freezing barn with a hurricane lantern. I used to bless me old mother for that hot strong tea and crusty bread.

Unfortunately I couldn't devote all my time to the Squeezer. I had to give a hand to old Tetley, the chap in charge of the traction engines, for a start. He was getting on a bit, and wasn't so hot at humping coal any more. I used to like steam work, but I'd sort of outgrown it when the petrol-jobs came along.

It was such a tedious business. Old Betsy, the biggest engine, took what seemed ages to get up a head of steam. Then for all her glowing, hissing and clanking, she could only make five or six miles an hour, and got bogged down if you took her off the path onto a softish field. Nowadays people hanker after steam, and it's not surprising, looking at the apologies for cars you see flying around, but shifting several hundredweight of coal every morning, rain or shine, hail or snow; well, when the petrol came along it was like a new dawning, for me at any rate.

So. By nine o'clock I was generally clear, unless one of the ploughs, or the harrows, or the seeders or some other piece of boring implementary needed smithing. I could go back to the Squeezer's barn and get her out. This was the big moment. I'll say this for Gaffer, when he got something new and interesting he didn't rush at it like a bull at a gate. He wanted me to learn about that vehicle, and he wanted me to learn proper. At first he used to get the spare hands to push the truck into the open. Except when it was raining, when he'd not allow her to see the light of day at all, for a while. So I'd reach up and open the door, climb into the cab with one foot on the front mudguard, then slide sideways into the seat. Every time I sat there I felt grand; that big leather seat was like a throne. It was off with the handbrake, check that my wings were clear, and a rousing shout of 'Righto, boys! Start shoving!' The Throgmorton Squeezer would roll silently and sedately into the wintry sunshine and stand there gleaming.

Master often climbed into the passenger side then, to sit and watch while I checked the controls and got the hang of everything. It was a complicated business, I can tell you; not just a case of putting in a key and turning it till the thing started. There was a funny old choke lever, all pulleys and wire, the

ignition spark timer, that slid up and down the column, and a lot more besides. You really needed three hands, all in all. But it was possible to drive the lorry with only two. Just.

It was three weeks after our mad high-jink in the Forty Acre that the gaffer let me start her up again. I went pale with the responsibility, and said: 'Do you think I'm ready yet, master? She's a big one to handle, and no mistake.'

'No mistake is the word, Baxter,' he said. 'This here waggon cost me hundreds and hundreds of pound. One scratch and I'll have your tail off.'

I swallowed, although my mouth was as dry as a moth's wing. He may just have not been joking, seeing as how things were around about this time.

Well, to cut down a long story, I hopped out, trying to put a brave face on it, chucked the little chin, wiggled this and woggled that, and swung the handle. *Broom!* Off first time. I put it ever so gently into gear and inched forward. Oh my, but we *was* being serious and high-minded! The master looked straight ahead and said not a word, and I behaved the same. We trundled across the yard like a funeral carriage, and when Cecilia, the deaf old goose, looked as though she'd walk in front of us, I didn't even *reach* for the klaxon. I drew up, applied the handbrake, stepped down, and helped her out of the path. Back into my nice warm seat, twice round the main buildings, and back to the barn. I felt as if I'd been to the South Pole single-handed!

But the gaffer was very pleased. 'Baxter,' he said, 'you've done exceedingly well, boy. You shall finish half an hour early tonight.'

And so I left the farmyard to trudge the half-mile to the family hole at only a quarter past eight.