



THEY CAME. ALL of them. Fliss came last, clutching her pebble.

‘Have we all got our stuff?’ she whispered. They showed her. ‘Right.’ She looked at her watch. Twenty to twelve. ‘Soon be over now.’

‘Aye,’ growled Gary. ‘One way or the other.’

Fliss looked at him. ‘We’re going to succeed, right?’

He shrugged. ‘If you say so. But if somebody had told me last week I’d be risking my life for Ellie-May Sunderland I’d have told him he was nuts. I don’t even like her, for Pete’s sake.’

‘Who does, but it’s not just for Ellie-May, Gary. Old Sal says it’s for all the others.’

‘Yeah, well, like I said before, she’s crackers.’

They waited. Fliss kept looking at her watch. When it said five to twelve she whispered, ‘Right. Time to get into position.’

They’d worked it all out beforehand. Trot was first. He opened the bathroom door and stood on the threshold, holding his kite. He’d stripped away the tattered polythene. All that remained was a stiff, white plastic cross. As soon as the number appeared on the cupboard door, he was to cross the landing, open the door quietly and walk in, holding up the cross. That was in case the vampire was awake and out

of his coffin. If he was, then they wouldn’t be able to carry out their plan, but the cross might keep the creature at bay till they could get out and slam the door.

Behind Trot stood Lisa with the torch. She would follow him in, and shine the torch around to see if the vampire was loose. If he was, she’d try to dazzle him while they retreated. If he was in the coffin, she was to shine it on his chest, right where Gary had to place the stick of rock.

Gary was third. He would follow the other two in, and if everything was all right, he’d grip his rock with both hands and place the point directly over the vampire’s heart.

Fliss would be last. If the vampire was out of the coffin, her job

would be to get out fast and that was all. If he was in the coffin, she would raise the pebble and bring it down on the rock, driving the point into the vampire. She was to hammer the rock again and again till the vampire was dead.

It would all have to be done very quickly. Fliss wished they'd been able to practise a couple of times, but they hadn't. So. They had to get it right first time, or else –

The town clock began to chime. 'Stand by,' whispered Fliss from the rear. Her mouth was bone-dry. Her left hand was resting on Gary's shoulder and she could feel him trembling. In front of him, Lisa switched on her torch and trained it on the door.

The pale stain appeared. Four pairs of eyes watched it form the number thirteen. As the figures grew clear, Fliss hissed, 'Go!'

Swiftly, silently, they padded in line across the landing. Trot twisted the doorknob, pushed, and walked into the darkness, holding the cross up high and with Lisa at his heels. The torch beam made a quick sweep of the room and steadied on the long, pale box. Gary strode forward and leaned over the open coffin, grasping the rock in both hands. Fliss stood poised, the great pebble raised high above her head. The torch beam slid over the rim of the box.

He lay with his hands crossed on this breast and his eyes closed. He was thin, and small, and dirty.

His face was dead white, except for a dark smudge on the forehead and a brown crust about the bluish lips. A fleece of pale, tangled hair, grey with dust, covered the skull, falling on to the bed of earth which covered the bottom of the coffin. His fingernails were split and blackened, and a disgusting smell rose from the single, filthy garment he wore, which looked like a nightshirt or shroud.

'Ugh!' Gary's stomach heaved and he twisted his face aside.

'Quick!' hissed Lisa. 'His eyes are moving – look!'

As she spoke, the vampire's eyelids fluttered. Gary sucked in some air, turned back and planted the spike he'd made in the vee between the creature's hands. The vampire's eyes flew open, red-rimmed, filled

with fear. Grabbing the coffin-rim with one hand and scrabbling in the earth with the other, he began to rise. His lips parted. Chipped, yellow fangs glistened in the torch-light and the breath hissed stinking through his teeth. Trot dashed forward and thrust his cross at the contorted face. The vampire let go of the coffin-rim to strike at it, and as he did so Gary threw all this weight forward, bore down on the spike and yelled, 'Now, Fliss – now!'

Fliss aimed, screwed up her eyes and brought the pebble down with all the force she could muster. There was a wet thud and the vampire began to scream, bucking and thrashing so violently that the coffin slid about. Gary fell forward across the table, clinging desperately to the

spike. 'Again!' he gasped. 'For Pete's sake hit it again, Fliss!'

Fliss, sickened, raised the pebble and brought it down again, driving the spike clear through the writhing body into the bloody earth beneath, where it broke off. The vampire screamed again, clutching at the coffin-rim with both hands, flailing its naked legs and arching its back so violently that Gary's grip was broken and he crashed to the floor.

At once the others closed in. Lisa's beam lanced into the creature's fear-crazed eyes. Trot lowered the cross till it almost touched the coffin-rim, and Fliss lifted the pebble, ready to split the vampire's skull.

She didn't have to. As they watched the creature's struggles

began to subside. Its screams became ghastly, bubbling cries as it twisted this way and that, clutching at the impaling spike, striving to draw it out. Soon, weakening, it ceased to kick.

Its hands lost their grip on the spike and slid down the curve of the heaving chest on the glistening earth. It lay, mouth open, gulping at the air, rolling its head and screwing up its eyes as it strove to avoid the light. Gradually its movements became sluggish and its breathing shallow. Then, quite suddenly it seemed, the breathing stopped. The head rolled over to one side. All movement ceased.

Fliss lowered her arms, dropped the pebble on the table and turned away. Trot let his cross fall to

the floor and stood, gazing into the coffin. Gary had picked himself up and was leaning against the wall with his eyes closed, breathing hard, whispering, 'We did it. Wow, we did it,' over and over. Lisa aimed her torch beam at the floor and very slowly followed the puddle of light towards the open door. As she did so there were footfalls on the stair, and voices, and the landing light triggered the shift, so that three frowsy teachers saw four dishevelled children and a cupboard which was locked.