A TV Writer's Recce (Notes from the diary of Anne Christie)

(N.B. This chapter has been very kindly written by Anne Christie, wife of scriptwriter Jack Ronder, to whom this book is dedicated. The following original account should give the reader an interesting insight into what is was like going on recce for Survivors. The words used are those from Anne's diary of September 1975. Names of individuals have been changed in the interests of discretion. As the reader will discover, going on recce could be every bit as unusual as any story-line.)

My husband had been commissioned to write several episodes for a television series about a tiny community of people who survive an AIDS type epidemic which has killed off most of the world's population. The location had been more or less settled on and we were advised to go and have a look at it. It was sunny September weather when we drove out of a small West Country market town and turned into a remote country lane which wound its way seemingly forever up a steep wooded hill to an extraordinary series of dilapidated farmhouses, sheds, outhouses and a couple of wooden weekend follies built on stilts, all of which surrounded a large tumbledown white house. A decaying sign confirmed that this farm was the place we were looking for.

From here on I quote from my diary at the time:

We are met by a beautiful young man, tall and dark, with bubbling curly hair. "We've just arrived from France," he said. "Come in. I'll show you round."

He looked like a Renaissance nobleman and wore a knitted jacket patterned in greens and browns with huge cuffed sleeves, with a sort of knitted brown doublet. Very fetching. He told us he was a picture restorer and his dimpled red-haired pregnant wife mended tapestries and embroideries for Swiss museums and the V and A.

When they heard that we intended to camp they invited us in to stay and offered us supper. Their house which was one of the original farm buildings, was organised and spacious, also it was clean, a fact which struck us especially when our host commenced to show us the other places on the estate. We saw a large shack in the woods where a jeweller lived with her three children and a dog called Spot. Then we looked at the extraordinary white rotting building ("No one bothers about planning permission up here..." murmured our guide) built by A., one of five brothers who lived there. It looked as though only rats had ever inhabited it, but in fact he and his wife and five children plus his mistress and two children had only just vacated the place about six weeks ago. Utter squalor. Tattered William Morris wallpaper, the occasional lovely grandfather clock with painted moon face, or a piece of stripped pine furniture set askew on crumbling boards against peeling walls of jumbled colour.

Unbelievable that these people (who are upper class, and he a professional landscape architect) could have tolerated such squalor.

The father of the five brothers was an Admiral who died intestate ten years earlier; (we were shown his overgrown grave, complete with heeling rusty cross and neglected sculpture), and since then the brothers have lived in a state of feud. They fight over each other's wives and living-spaces and build walls to keep each other out. All five siblings have five or six children who play blissfully together and each one of them is delightful, good looking and lively. It is of course a paradise for youngsters - all grass, trees, fields, dramatic hills - with ducks, geese, kittens, cows, pigs and horses everywhere.

A. did a major coup against his older brother R. when he moved out of his home-made wooden house. He waited till R., his wife and six kids were on holiday in France, and moved into the 'big house where their father the admiral used to live. The big house is within a hundred yards of all the other dwellings and has been utterly neglected since the patriarch died; so all the furnishings remain where they were, only now they are undusted and filthy. I found it very creepy, and we were assured that there was a ghost; there were marvelous pieces in many of the rooms - Dutch marquetry desks and cabinets worth perhaps £10,000 (in 1975) sitting on grotty Persian rugs, surrounded by decaying flowers and broken pictures. There were photographs of the Admiral in his prime and as a corpse, surrounded by awful paintings of saints and children by one of the brothers (sort of Bratby-come-Tretchnikoff). Holes in the wall like 'Desperate Dan' doorways with jagged brick edges, and the most squalid kitchen I have ever seen, with smells of animal and human pee everywhere. Children all over the house, giggling and offering us Smarties.

None of the brothers were there. They were at a family meeting in Bath, summoned by their dying sister to try and sort out the feud.

We wandered incredulously from building to building, gasping at our guide's tales of the amazing family: "Ardent Catholics. A. was actually a priest until his father died - Mass held in the big house twice a day and automatically attended by all..."

Notwithstanding the strain of bringing up their own six children, the Admiral and his wife proceeded to adopt NINE orphans from the East End, and several of these orphans still live somewhere on the 40 acre estate. There is one man (originally rescued from the roadside) who gets riotously drunk every Social Security day and regularly tries to commit himself during his ensuing bouts of alcoholic remorse. He lives with a woman who has had fourteen children. The fecundity of the location is indisputable. There were various other people who we glimpsed through the windows - orphans, strays. Anybody who had taken the family's fancy.

At night after good food and wine we sleep in our sleeping bags by a large log fire, aware of kittens in the next room. In the morning early a cat has caught a mouse and squeaks to tell us. We sleepily make love and fall asleep in the morning light.

Later, as we breakfast, a woman of about thirty-five, very pretty, welly-booted and be-jeaned, enters. This is C., mother of six, wife of R., the oldest of the five brothers. She feels she ought to milk the cow; is a little vague as to when it was last milked - perhaps two days ago. "I'll take you to meet R.," she volunteers. Later, as we breakfast, a woman of about thirty-five, very pretty, welly-booted and be-jeaned, enters. This is C., mother of six, wife of R., the oldest of the five brothers. She feels she ought to milk the cow; is a little vague as to when it was last milked - perhaps two days ago. "I'll take you to meet R.," she volunteers.

She leads us past an empty duck pond. "White rabbits live on the island in winter - foxes can't swim across - it's lovely."

We wonder uneasily what happened to the rabbits since the water disappeared as C. shows us to a muddled group of wooden shacks with many large dirty windows. One of these is open and we climb over the sill, jump down several feet and find ourselves in an enormous room containing a vast four-poster bed minus curtains with a naked mustachioed man lying back on it. He flashes a huge smile of welcome, exuding animal charm. I look at the gun leaning by the bed. "I like the rifle," I say feebly.

"That's not a rifle. It's a shot-gun for my brother's cats."

We presume it to be loaded. R. urges us to admire their new stone fireplace at the far end of the thirty-foot room. It looks splendid, but as yet lacks a chimney.

"It's to roast Piggy' Wig on, only we haven't told him yet."

He and C. giggle. She is sitting on the bed gazing adoringly at her handsome man. Piggy Wig is standing obliviously outside the window wearing a leather harness on a chain. Hens cluck in the high window we entered by and beside them a plump blond child of four stares gloomily down at us and moans for a lost ear-ring. We realise later that the odd form of entry to the room is precarious enough to protect the parents from the younger children. There are bare floorboards and several bottles of gin and tonic strewn round the room; I find it all very fetching.

Later, after C. has shown us her baby pigs, we are issued into the large kitchen where an Irish orphan, a woman of about forty, with black frizzy hair, rolls herself a cigarette and a blond child burns bacon. R. dressed by now, makes a dramatic entrance. He wears cowboy boots, a bandana round his head, and a huge leather belt. He guffaws as he describes beating up his brother who made advances to C. With equal glee he tells us he has bought up all the land and property surrounding his brother A.'s house. The latter, R., assures us, will soon tumble down around his ears. As he does this, he finds the Russian cook's hidden knife, which is extremely long and sharp and with it carves us slices of four-year old salt bacon from a leg hanging on a hook. We eat it admiringly. R. Makes us coffee, almost cooks the supper-chops for breakfast, but C. glares at him. Coffee made, we discover there is no milk. The kitchen is now swarming with children of assorted sizes. The cat-dish is brimming with milk. Unabashed, R. tips it into a jug and we enjoy an excellent cup of coffee.

The door opens suddenly just as C. shouts at a hen, and brother A., gold-toothed and as handsome and flashy-eyed as R., enters. He carries a lethal-looking stick about eighteen inches long, but he stutters awkwardly and cringes before R., in between introductions to us.

"Sorry about yesterday, R. May we talk alone, later?"

He is obsequious, more so with his speech impediment. R. struts, and as his brother exits backwards, rolls his eyes to heaven. "I think it's easier when he shouts."

We left reluctantly and excitedly discussed story-lines and specific settings all the way home. The place was extraordinary and we wondered what real-life explosions of social chemistry could occur when

the circus caravanserai of television crew and actors arrived and mingled with the exotic and isolated inhabitants of the neglected hilltop farm...