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'Chamberlain Announces'

'Mornin',' said Tom, appearing at the trap-door.

Willie opened his eyes and looked around. The sun was gliding in long flickering beams across the wooden floor.

'Mornin',' he answered.

'So you slept *in* the bed last night. Good.'

Willie gave a tight smile which faded rapidly when he realized that the trousers of his new striped suit were soaking.

Tom strode across the room. 'Come and take a good sniff of this day,' he said, pushing open the window. Willie blushed and clung on to the top of the blankets. 'Never mind about them sheets and jarmers. I got a tub of hot water waitin' for them downstairs.' Willie climbed out of bed and joined him at the window.

'Reckon that storm's washed a few cobwebs away.'

They rested their elbows on the sill and leaned out. It was a tight squeeze.

Beyond the little road at the end of the graveyard stretched green and yellow fields and on the horizon stood a clump of woods. Tom pointed to some trees to the right of it.

'The big Grange is over there. Nope, can't see it. When the leaves fall from the trees you'll jest be able to make it out. And over there,' he said pointing to the left of the fields to where a small road wound its way up a hill, 'is where one of yer teachers lives. Mrs Hartridge's her name.'

'Mister Tom, how many teachers is there?' asked Willie.

'Two. Mrs Hartridge teaches the young 'uns and Mr Bush the old 'uns.'

'How old's old?'

'Eleven, twelve up to fourteen. Sometimes a clever one goes to the Grammar in the town. See them woods,' he said. 'There's a small river flows through there to where the Grange is. 'Tis popular with the children round here.'

They stared silently out at the gentle panorama until their reveries were interrupted by loud barking from the graveyard. Sammy was running up and down the pathway and yelping up at them.

'Wants attention, he does,' murmured Tom, drawing himself away from the window. 'We'se got another busy day, William. Got to start diggin' a trench fer the Anderson this afternoon. That'll put muscles on you.'

They stripped the bed between them and carried the sheets downstairs. Tom gently washed Willie's body again and smoothed witch-hazel onto the sore spots.

An assortment of clothes were lying on the table. Mrs Fletcher had brought them round the previous night. David, her youngest, had grown out of them and although he was younger than Willie he was a head taller. Tom handed him a white shirt from the pile and tied one of his own ties, a brown tweedy affair, around his neck. Willie's grey trousers seemed more crumpled than ever, but with the braces attached to them they at

least felt comfortable. He tucked the long tie into them. Tom handed him a new pair of grey woollen socks and Willie pulled the garters over them.

'I put some oil on them boots last night,' he said as Willie stood, his feet encased in them. 'Yous'll have to do them yerself tonight.'

Tom had to be in the church early, to see Mr Peters, the vicar. He went on ahead while Willie staggered on after him. It was difficult for him to move in his new boots. They cut into his ankles and he couldn't bend his feet to walk in them, but apart from the slight discomfort, he felt very protected and supported in them. They clattered on the flagstoned pathway and it pleased him to hear himself so clearly. His bony legs, which usually felt as if they would collapse beneath him, felt firmer, stronger.

He found the back door of the church already open and Mister Tom talking to a tall, lanky man with piebald black and grey hair.

'Ah, William,' he exclaimed, turning towards him. 'Mr Oakley tells me that you're going to give us a hand. Those are the hymn books,' he continued, indicating a pile of red books on a table by the main door. 'Put four on each bench and if there are any over, spread them across the rows of chairs at the front and at the back. Do you

think you can do that?' Willie nodded. 'Good.' He turned back to Tom. 'Now, where's the best place acoustically for this wireless of mine?'

Willie walked over to the table and picked up some books, feeling totally bewildered. Mum had said red was an evil colour but the vicar had told him to put them out so it couldn't be a sin. He had also said that he was good. Mum had told him that whenever he was good she liked him but that when he was bad, she didn't. Neither did God or anyone else for that matter. It was very lonely being bad. He touched the worn, shiny wood at the back of one of the pews. It smelled comfortable. He glanced at the main door. Like the back door, it was flung open revealing a tiny arched porch outside. Sunlight streamed into the church and through the stained glass windows, and a smell of grass and flowers permeated the air. A bird chirruped intermittently outside. P'raps heaven is like this, thought Willie to himself.

He laid each book out neatly on the benches, his new boots echoing and reverberating noisily around him, but the vicar made no comment and carried on talking quite loudly, for someone who was in a church.

He was arranging the books in the back row so that they were exactly parallel to each other, when two boys entered. They were both three or four years older than him. They sat on the second row of choir benches to the left of the altar.

Suddenly it occurred to Willie that the church would soon be filled with people. He hated crowds and dreaded the Sunday service and its aftermath, which was usually a good whipping. He felt a hand on his shoulder. It was Mister Tom.

'Stay with me, boy,' he said in a low voice and Willie gratefully followed him into one of the pews.

Within minutes, the tiny church was flooded with men, women and children. Four more boys sat by the altar. On the right of the altar were three men. Willie recognized Mr Miller from the corner shop and the young man behind the mesh in the Post Office.

In the pew opposite Willie were two ginger-haired girls trying to smother their giggles. Their long carrot-coloured hair had been fought into plaits while the remainder stuck out in frizzy uncontrollable waves. They wore pale lemon and green summer dresses with short puffed sleeves and a cross stitching of embroidery round their

chests. Their faces and arms were covered with the biggest freckles Willie had ever seen. Like him, they too carried their gas-masks over their shoulders. A lady at their side glared down at them. She must be their mother, Willie thought. Sitting next to her was a tall man with bright red hair and a young, dark-haired girl.

Mr Peters and his wife stood by the main entrance greeting the congregation as they entered. Their three teenage daughters, cook and assortment of evacuees filled two of the pews in the front.

A hacking cough from the porch heralded the arrival of Nancy Little and the Doctor. Willie gave a short gasp. She was wearing trousers to church! He watched the vicar's face waiting for the thunderous 'thou shalt be cast into the eternal fires' glare but he only smiled and shook her hand. He was surprised to see Miss Thorne behind them.

'Mister Tom,' he whispered urgently, tugging at his sleeve. 'Does that book lady live here?'

Tom nodded.

A short dumpy woman in her forties accompanied her. 'That's her sister, Miss May,' he said in a low voice. 'They lives in one of them cottages with the straw rooves. Thatched, that is. They got a wireless.'

Willie turned to find the Fletchers with two of their sons moving into their pew. Mrs Fletcher leaned towards them.

'Mr Oakley,' she whispered. 'I begun the balaclava.'

Tom frowned her into silence. It was Willie's birthday on Thursday and he wanted it to be a surprise.

The wireless stood on a small table below the pulpit. The vicar fiddled with one of the knobs and the church was deafened with 'How to make the most of Tinned Foods', before it was hurriedly turned off. The twins had caught the eye of one of the boys sitting in the front row of the choir. He was a stocky boy of about eleven with thick straight brown hair. With heads bent and shaking shoulders the three of them buried their laughter in their hands.

Mrs Hartridge and her uniformed husband entered. Willie gazed at her, quite spellbound. She was beautiful, he thought, so plump and fair, standing in the sunlight, her eyes creased with laughter.

'Them be the Barnes family,' whispered Tom as a group of men and women came on in behind them. 'They own Hillbrook Farm. Biggest round here fer miles.'

Mr Fred Barnes was a brick-faced, middle-aged man whose starched white collar seemed to be causing him an obstruction in breathing. Three healthy-looking youths and two red-cheeked young women were with him. His wife, a short, stocky woman, was accompanying two evacuees, a boy and a girl.

'Trust ole Barnes to pick a strong-lookin' pair,' muttered Tom to himself.

Lucy and her parents sat in front of Tom and Willie. She turned and smiled at them but Willie was staring at the colours in the stained glass windows and didn't notice her.

When everyone was reasonably settled Mr Peters stood in front of the congregation and clasped his hands.

'Good morning,' he began. 'Now I know we have several denominations gathered here today, especially amongst our new visitors who I hope will be happy and safe inside our homes. If anyone of you is troubled or needs help please don't hesitate to contact me or

my wife. And now if you would all open your hymn books at number eighty-five we shall sing "Lead thou me on".'

Mr Bush, the young headmaster of the village school, was seated behind the pulpit at the organ. He gave an introductory chord. Willie didn't know the tune and as he couldn't read he couldn't even follow the words. He glanced aside at the ginger-haired twins. They were sharing a hymn book and singing. He envied them.

'Lah it,' he heard Tom whisper. 'Go on, lah it.'

Willie did so and soon picked up the melody until he almost began to enjoy it. The hymn was followed by a passage from the New Testament, another hymn from the choir and some simple prayers. The vicar looked at his watch and walked towards the wireless. All eyes were riveted on him, and anyone who had seating space sat down quietly.

The wireless crackled for a few moments until, after much jiggling with the knobs, the voice of Mr Chamberlain became clear.

'I am speaking to you,' he said, 'from the Cabinet Room at 10 Downing Street. This morning the British Ambassador in Berlin handed the German Government a final note stating that unless we heard from them by eleven o'clock that they were prepared at once to withdraw their troops from Poland, a state of war would exist between us.

'I have to tell you now that no such undertaking has been received and that consequently this country is at war with Germany.'

A few people gave a cry. The rest remained frozen into silence, while others took out their handkerchieves. A loud whisper was heard from the brown-haired choirboy, 'Does that mean no school?'

He was silenced very quickly by a frown from Mr Bush, and Mr Chamberlain's message was allowed to continue undisturbed.

'I know that you will all play your part with calmness and courage,' he said. '... Report for duty in accordance with the instructions you have received... It is of vital importance that you should carry on with your jobs. Now may God bless you all. May He defend the right. It is the evil things that we shall be fighting against – brute force, bad faith, injustice, oppression and persecution – and against them I am certain that the right will prevail.'

Mr Peters turned the wireless off. After what seemed an interminable silence he spoke, 'Let us pray.'

Everyone sank to their knees. Willie peered over his clasped hands in the direction of the choir. The brown-haired boy had caught the eyes of the twins again and was desperately attempting to relay some kind of message to them.

After prayers, various announcements were made from the pulpit. Volunteers and those already involved with the A.R.P. or Civil Defence work were asked to meet at the village hall. Women and children were to report at the school in the morning to make arrangements for the care and education of the evacuees.

After the service, when everyone had filed outside, Willie looked around for the strange curly-haired boy that he had seen at the Post Office. The brown-haired choirboy was already in deep discussion with the twins. He was joined by several other children, but there was no sign of the Post Office boy anywhere. He felt a hand tugging at his shirt-sleeve. It was Lucy. She gazed shyly at him, her large red cheeks and wide bulging lips spreading out beneath two round blue eyes.

'Ulloo,' she said.

Willie shuffled in his boots and dug a toe into the grass.

'Hello,' he said in return.

An awkward silence came between them and he was more than grateful when Mister Tom called out to him.

'Go and put the kettle on,' he yelled. 'I got to see the vicar.'

Willie turned quickly and stumbled hurriedly down the path leaving Lucy to stare silently after him until he had disappeared into the cottage.

The lid of the kettle rattled continuously, causing the living room to be enveloped in clouds of dense steam. Willie had tried vainly to lift the kettle from off the range and, having only succeeded in burning his hand, he waited anxiously for Mister Tom's return. Tom didn't bat an eyelid at the warm fog. He strode into the room and picking up the kettle with an old cloth he proceeded to make a pot of tea. It wasn't till he had put three mugs on the table that Willie realized that there was a third person in the room. A short, stocky middle-aged man with thinning brown hair, a ruddy face and a twinkle in his eyes was standing at the doorway eyeing him. He blushed.

'Come on in, Mr Fletcher,' said Tom brusquely. He and Mr Fletcher sat at the table and Willie took one of the mugs and perched himself on the stool in front of the range. He felt very self-conscious and stayed gazing at the fire while the two men talked about widths of trenches. He pricked up his ears at one point for he knew that they were talking about him.

'Oh yes, he'll manage all right,' he heard Tom say. 'Have to muck in like the rest of us.' He glanced in his direction. 'William,' he said, 'yous'll have to get yer hands dirty today. You don't mind a bit of muck and earth, I don't s'pose?'

'No, Mister Tom,' said Willie.

This was a different world altogether. For a start his mother had always taught him that it was a sin to work or play on the Sabbath. Sundays were for sitting silently with a bible in front of you. And, for another thing, if he got any dirt on his clothes he'd get a beating. His classmates had called him a sissie because he had never dared to dirty himself by climbing a wall or joining in any of their rough-and-tumble games. And, in addition to having to keep his clothes clean, his body was often too bruised and painful to play apart from the fact that he didn't know how to.

'Mister Tom?' he asked after Mr Fletcher had left. 'Wot about me clothes gettin' dirty?'

'You can take yer shirt off. 'Tis a good hot day.'

Willie shuffled nervously on the stool. 'What's up now?' he said curtly. 'Them bruises is it?' He nodded. 'Wear yer grey jersey then. Mind,' he added, 'you'll be drippin'. And put yer old socks on.'

After a meal of meat and potato stew of which Willie only managed a few mouthfuls, Mr Fletcher returned accompanied by his two teenage sons. They were carrying spades and measuring sticks.

Tom pointed sadly to a patch of grass in the back garden. 'Best start there,' he said. "'Tis a reasonable distance from the latrine.'

They cut and stripped the turf away in small neat squares and then after measuring the ground they slowly and laboriously began to dig. Willie was given a small spade and after an hour of removing a tiny section of earth he began to forget that he was

surrounded by strangers and gradually became absorbed in his digging. Mister Tom had told him not to be afraid of the earth, but it was still wet from the previous night's rain and occasionally he let out an involuntary squeal when his spade contacted a worm. This made the others laugh and yell 'townee', but they carried on digging and Willie realized that there was no malice in their laughter.

In the middle of digging they all sat down for a mug of tea. Willie helped hand the mugs around. The two youths, he had learned, were called Michael and Edward. Michael was the elder. He was dark-haired with a few strands of hair on his upper lip. Edward, the younger, was stockier. He had brown wavy hair and a hoarse voice that was in the process of breaking.

Willie sat at the edge of the shallow trench and clung tightly to his mug. The inside of his hands smarted under the heat of it. Suddenly he gave a start. Footsteps and the sound of a boy's voice were approaching the hedge. Maybe it was the Post Office boy. He turned sharply to look. Two boys leaned over the small gate. They were Michael and Edward's younger brothers. One of them was the brown-haired choirboy and his younger brother was a smaller dark-haired version of him. Tom gave his usual frown at the appearance of uninvited intrusion.

'May I has yer worms, Mr Oakley?' inquired the choirboy.

Tom grunted and the smallest fled immediately. 'Dare say you can, George. Come on in.'

'Thanks, Mr Oakley,' he said enthusiastically and he swung the gate open.

In his hands was a large tin. He walked over to the trench and began scrutinizing the piles of earth. Willie watched him in horror as he picked up the wriggling worms and put them inside the tin. Within minutes he was helping with the digging. He turned shortly to discover Willie staring at him. 'You'se one of them townees, ent you?' he said. Willie nodded. 'Ent you hot in that jersey?'

He had stripped off his shirt as soon as he had joined in. Willie shook his head, but the tell-tale beads of sweat that ran down his flushed face belied him. His jersey clung to his chest in large damp patches.

'You looks hot, why don't you peel off?'

Willie grew more reticent and mumbled out something that George couldn't hear.

'What?' he said. 'What did you say?'

'Boy's got a temperature,' interrupted Tom curtly. 'Best to sweat it off.'

Willie didn't look at George any more after that, but carried on digging with extra fervour. Later in the afternoon, Mrs Fletcher appeared with lemonade and cakes for everyone, and George left, soon after, with a bulging tin of worms.

Sammy watched them digging from a corner of the garden. He was miserable at being left out. He had tried to help earlier but was only yelled at angrily for filling the hole with earth.

When the trench was completed Willie sat on the grass to watch the others fix the Anderson shelter inside it. Sammy lay by his feet. The six steel sheets were inserted into the two widest sides of the trench and bolted together at the top, forming a curved tunnel. Michael and Edward placed one of the flat pieces of steel at one end and Tom and Mr Fletcher fixed it into place. This was the back of the shelter. It had an emergency exit which they all had a go at unbolting.

Willie was so absorbed that he didn't notice that his knees were being licked and unconsciously he rested his hand on the back of Sammy's neck.

Tom and Mr Fletcher fixed the next flat piece onto the front of the shelter. Cut inside it was a hole which was at ground level. This acted as a doorway.

'William,' said Tom turning, and being surprised to see him sitting with Sammy in a fairly relaxed manner, 'like to have a try out of this doorway?'

Willie rose and wandered over towards the entrance. He put his head cautiously through the hole and stepped gingerly inside. It was dark and smelt of damp earth. Tom joined him. The shelter curved well above his head so that they could both stand quite comfortably inside. Tom crawled back out into the sun and pulled Willie out after him. He thanked Mr Fletcher and his sons for their help and shook their hands.

'Pleasure,' said Mr Fletcher. 'We must all help one another now.'

'William,' said Tom after the Fletchers had left. 'I'm afraid we ent quite finished yet. We jest got to cover this with earth. Got any strength left?'

Willie felt exhausted but he was determined to keep going. He nodded.

Between them they started to cover the shelter until it was time for Tom to leave for a meeting in the village hall.

'Don't carry on fer long,' he said as he swung the back gate behind him, but Willie continued to pile the earth on, levelling it down with his hands. It was exciting to see the glinting steel slowly disappear under its damp camouflage. He was so absorbed in his task that he didn't notice dusk approaching. His hands and fingernails were filthy, his face and legs were covered in muck, his clothes were sodden and he was glorying in the wetness of it all. He was in the middle of smoothing one piece of earth when a shadow fell across his hands. He looked up quickly and there, half silhouetted in the twilight, stood the wiry, curly-haired boy he had seen at the Post Office.