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## *An Encounter over Blackberries*

They slung the rubber sheet and pyjamas over the washing line and peered into the shelter.

'Water,' murmured Tom, 'I might have known. We'll have to keep a stirrup pump close by.' He patted the side of the strange earthy mound. 'I'll put some more earth on today and then we can plant a few turnips and such in it. Ever growed anything afore?' he said, turning to Willie.

He shook his head.

'Always a first time. Come with me. I'll show you somethin'.'

Willie followed him out of the back gate and across the tiny road, Sam scampering after them. Instead of turning left towards the village they carried on to the right. They hadn't walked very far when they came to a tiny dirt track off the road.

The aching that Willie had first felt on waking was beginning to ease up, apart from his ankles, which were still a little sore from his boots. A sudden burst of energy rose up inside him. It excited and frightened him. He had always been good at keeping still. It was wicked not to, he knew that, but now he felt a desperate desire to leap and jump. He pressed his lips together and, clenching his fists and frowning, he tried to numb the strange new feelings away.

Tom caught sight of the flush of excitement burning in his cheeks.

'Race Sammy to the gate,' he said, pointing to one a hundred yards ahead of them. 'I'll hold him to give you a head start.'

'Run, d'you mean?'

'Well, I don't mean fly. Now when I ses go, you jest go.'

He whistled for Sam and held him squirming and wriggling in his arms.

'You got rabbit and bone fever, ent you, my boy?' he said, as he struggled to hold him.

Willie fixed his eyes on to the gate and held his breath.

'Right,' said Tom. 'On yer marks, get set, go!!'

Willie shot forth, half running, half stumbling. He clenched his fists even tighter. Bang! He fell with a hard thud on to his knees. Pushing himself up, he staggered on, feeling angry and desperate inside. In his heart he wanted to run properly but his stupid legs were letting him down. He heard Sam barking behind him.

'Go it,' shouted Tom. 'Go on, William!' and, before he realized what he was doing, he was running too.

Willie propped himself up against the gate gasping for breath while Sam sat nonchalantly by his feet, an easy winner.

'Cheer up, boy,' said Tom. 'It ent the end of the world.'

But to Willie it was. He was a sissie after all. It was true what his classmates called him. He was a Willie Weakling. A huge lump of misery welled up into his throat and he stiffened his jaw so that he wouldn't disgrace himself by crying.

'What's up then?' asked Tom. 'Miserable because Sam beat you, eh?'

Willie nodded and stared at the ground.

'Can't expect to be good first time. Takes practice. Sam's had more'n you. Anyways, you beat me, didn't you?'

Willie looked up and gave a brief smile.

'Yeh, yeh, I did!'

'You needn't look so pleased about it,' said Tom in a disgruntled manner. He swung the gate open. 'Well, what do you think?'

Willie found himself standing in a large field. On one side were rows and rows of furrowed earth with tufts of green leaves sticking out of them and on the other, far side, stood a large cluster of trees dripping with apples and pears.

'There's taters, cabbage, beans, peas, sprouts, turnips, all sorts! We'll have to pick them all pretty sharpish. You can help me when it's time.'

He closed the gate and they set off back down the dirt track towards the cottage.

They were leaning over the shelter putting more earth round the walls when Zach arrived.

'You walk through Dobbs's field?' asked Tom sharply.

'Yes, and I shut both gates.'

Tom gave a grunt.

'Can Will come out and play?'

'He's out already, ent he?'

'Yes, I s'pose he is,' said Zach thoughtfully. 'It's a figurative expression that I haven't really given a lot of thought to.'

'Where'd you git all yer queer words from?'

'Are they queer?'

'Well, they ent normal.'

'So I've been told often and oft,' and he gave a sigh. 'I say, Will, what on earth have you done to your hair?'

Willie looked blankly back at him, and pushed his fingers through it. His scalp didn't itch any more. It tingled.

'Wot's wrong wiv it?'

'Nothing. It's just a different colour, that's all. I didn't realize you were so fair.'

It was true. The lank look had disappeared and it did look lighter.

'Go and play, William,' said Tom.

'Play?'

'Yes, play.'

'Excuse me, Mr Oakley,' interposed Zach. 'Before we go, may I have a dekko inside the shelter. I'd like to see what it looks like in daylight.'

'Please yerself,' answered Tom, but before he could warn Zach about the waterlogged floor he had already leapt down inside. There followed a loud squelching sound and his feet sunk as if in quicksand.

'Don't you never look before you leap?'

'Occasionally. Didn't this time though, did I?'

Tom turned at the sound of the back gate opening. A rather disgruntled-looking George walked towards them, his hands stuffed into his pockets.

'Mr Oakley,' he said. 'Me and the twins is goin' blackberryin', like, and takin' a picnic.' He glanced quickly at Willie. 'Would William like to come with us? Mum ses, she's makin' enuff fer us all.'

'I say,' said Zach, poking his head out into the sunlight. 'Can I come? I'd bring some food too.'

George stared at him in horror. He sighed inwardly. These townees were queer folk, he thought. They talked different. Their ways were odd. It was bad enough having to ask the one called William to come. He was intrusion enough. Drat his mum.

'Please,' pleaded Zach earnestly.

'All right.'

What else could he say? He felt irritated. He knew the twins would be furious with him.

'There's just one small problem,' said Zach. 'I'm afraid I'm a bit like Buster Keaton at the moment.'

George looked at him blankly. He's a queer one, he thought, no doubt about that.

'Yes. Look at me.'

He pressed his arms to his side and leaned forward on a diagonal without falling over. 'I say,' he said, after having created no response. 'You do know who Buster Keaton is, don't you?'

'Are you goin' to stay down there all day?' grunted Tom.

'That's what I'm trying to tell you. I'm stuck. I need a pull.' They all grabbed hold of him and, after a lot of yelling from Zach and one almighty heave, they yanked him out and fell backwards in the grass on top of a yelping Sammy.

'Thank you,' said Zach, struggling back to his feet. He looked down at them. His sandals were encased in a large quantity of glutinous mud. He lifted one foot up and placed it heavily in front of the other, making a slow progression to the gate.

'I say,' he said, twisting his body round. 'Where shall I meet you?'

'Outside the shop,' grunted George. 'In an hour's time.'

'Right-ho!' and he slowly squelched his way through the gate and out of sight.

An hour later the twins and George were waiting on the corner with their baskets, bags and gas-masks. Willie caught sight of them as he turned the corner. He stopped for a moment and looked around for Zach. He caught sight of a dark-haired boy in a bright red shirt and green shorts coming out of the shop. He gave a sigh of relief and started walking again. Zach had seen him and was waving frantically. George and the twins turned to look at them. Willie felt painfully self-conscious. Zach ran down the road to meet him. His sandals had been scraped clean but they still looked pretty dingy.

From the moment they joined the others outside the shop, it was obvious that the twins were sulking. George mumbled incoherently to them.

'This is Will,' said Zach, introducing him to the two girls. 'I've forgotten which one of you is Carrie and which one is Ginnie.'

'I'm Carrie,' said the one in the sky blue dress.

'And I'm Ginnie,' said the one in the lemon colour.

'Hello,' said Willie huskily.

This was followed by a long and tense silence. George stood in the middle of the two pairs, feeling very awkward and uncomfortable. He had guessed right. The twins had been furious with him for inviting the two evacuees. In their opinion, from the little they had seen and heard, one of them spoke too little and the other too much. It was rotten of George to ask them.

George cleared his throat. 'Well,' he said, 's'pose we'd best get started.'

They turned and headed down the lane towards Ivor's farm.

Willie held an empty bucket and a small bag, while Zach carried a basket and satchel. They walked on behind the others.

'I say,' he said excitedly to Willie. 'You should have seen Mrs Little's face when I walked in. She threatened to plant potatoes in my feet.' He nudged Willie and glanced at George and the twins walking ahead.

'They're a bit stuffy, aren't they?' he whispered.

'Stuffy?' said Willie. 'Wot d'you mean?'

'Unfriendly.'

'But they asked us to go on a picnic wiv 'em.'

'M'm. I suppose so.'

He nudged a sore spot on Willie's arm.

'Anyway,' he confided. 'We'll have a bit of fun, eh?'

Willie was unsure about that. He wished his tongue wasn't quite so dry and that the skin round his neck didn't feel so very tight.

They came to Ivor's farm. Lucy and her friend Grace Bush were playing in front of the house. They ran up to the gate and climbed up on to it. Mrs Padfield was hanging out washing.

'Hello!' she said. 'Where are you all off to?'

'Blackberryin',' said George.

Lucy caught sight of Willie. Her eyes slowly expanded.

'Ullo,' she said shyly to him.

Willie shuffled with embarrassment and avoided her large gaze.

Stupid girls, he thought angrily to himself. Stupid, stupid girls.

'Fred and Harry are doin' a bit this afternoon. They'se helpin' their Dad at the moment seein' as there's no school fer a bit. Best not to go to your patch. Be nothin' left,' and she smiled and carried on with her work.

'We'll drop some into you,' said Carrie, 'won't we, Ginnie?'

Ginnie nodded.

'Have a good day then.'

Lucy watched them going down the lane. She would dearly have loved to have joined them but they were all older. They wouldn't want someone as little as her. She felt a tug at her dress.

'Come on,' said Grace impatiently. 'I want to play.'

The others veered round a corner and came to a large field. The girls walked off in one direction to some hedges on the far side, leaving George with Willie and Zach.

'Who's in the doghouse, then?' asked Zach. 'You or us?'

George gave a smile.

'Come with me,' he said. 'I'll find you a good spot.' He pointed to some bushes. 'See them red berries?'

'Rather,' said Zach. 'They look delumptious.'

'De-what?'

'Delumptious. That's a mixture of delicious and scrumptious.'

'Well, anyways,' continued George, undaunted by Zach's interruption, 'if you eats any of them you'll die. Them's poisonous. Don't eat nothin' till you've shown me. Look, there's a good 'un,' he said, pointing to a hedgerow dripping with blackberries. 'You pick there. I'm off to find a patch of me own.'

An hour later, after scratching their arms and legs and staining their hands and mouths with juice, they sat down in the grass and passed a bottle of lemonade around. The girls looked a little less sulky and stared at the two townees. Willie was embarrassed. Zach, however, enjoyed the attention.

'How'd you do that?' asked Carrie, pointing to Willie's leg. He paled for an instant, thinking perhaps that his socks had slid down, but they hadn't. She was referring to the graze on his knee.

'I fell,' he whispered.

'Looks nasty,' said Ginnie.

Willie glanced at her and looked hurriedly away. When they had quenched their thirst a little, they returned to the bushes to pick more berries, staying a little closer to each other. Slowly, they started to talk, except for Willie who only listened. Mum had said that if he made himself invisible people would like him and he wanted that very much.

He learnt that Carrie liked reading books, climbing trees and exploring, that Ginnie liked naming and pressing wild flowers, knitting and sewing, and that they both liked swimming. George was keen on fishing and his mother had, on three occasions, cooked fish that he had caught. If they were tiddlers he always threw them back. He liked swimming too and in the summer had built a raft, but it had disintegrated in the middle of the river while he and the twins had been sitting on it. He also played cricket, and had already earned himself a bad reputation by smashing two windows in the village.

Zach said he liked acting, and reading adventure books and poetry. He also liked swimming and cycling. He said that he wrote stories, though he had to admit that he had never got further than the first two pages.

Willie, meanwhile, not only remained silent during these conversations, but picked his berries slowly so that they might forget that he was there, but he reckoned without Zach.

'Will!' he said, suddenly entering into his silence. 'What do you like?'

He was just about to shrug off the question with 'I dunno' when he noticed that George and the twins were looking at him for an answer. He sucked a bit of juice from one of his fingers and tried to think of something to say. He couldn't read or write. He couldn't swim or ride a bicycle. He had never made anything and he couldn't tell the difference between one flower and another. He couldn't play cricket or any other game for that matter and he had never been fishing. He began to panic. The others would get

bored with waiting and go off on their own without him. He swallowed hard and looked up at their faces. They didn't look bored. He relaxed a little and then he remembered something.

'I likes drawin'.'

'I'm hopeless at it,' said George. 'All my people have tiny heads and huge arms and legs.'

'Like you,' said Carrie.

Ginnie laughed.

'Get on with you,' retorted George. 'That's not true!'

'Could you draw me?' asked Zach.

'I dunno. I could have a go.'

'I'm starvin',' said George, interrupting the conversation. 'Let's eat.'

They gathered together under a tree and spread the food out. There were scones that had been spread with butter and jam, spam sandwiches, marmalade sandwiches and egg sandwiches. After they had consumed these they each had a slab of apple-and-blackcurrant pie and some chocolate cake. This was followed by more lemonade.

For Willie it was his first taste of chocolate cake, scones and fruit pie. He couldn't manage half his share, but he was helped by the others, especially George, whose appetite was bottomless.

After they had eaten and sunbathed a little, they cleared everything away and moved to another hedge to pick more berries. Their baskets were soon full and feeling tired they made their way home.

Willie felt as if his arms would surely come out of his sockets with the weight. His bucket and bag were overflowing. He puffed and panted behind the others, gritting his teeth with the effort of trying to keep up with them.

After George had left his basket at home he gave Willie a hand. He felt so ashamed of his weakness, but George didn't ridicule him at all. He seemed pleased to help. They walked down under the archway of trees to the Littles' cottage, stood outside the gate chatting to Zach and carried on down the lane. As they came to the rectory George stopped.

'Look!' he said, gazing up through the trees. 'Look! There's a swallow.'

Willie screwed up his eyes and peered upwards. All he could see was a bird. A swallow to him was something you did when you ate food or you did to stop yourself from crying. He couldn't see how that could be in the sky.

They opened the gate into Dobbs' field. George put down the bucket and strode over to her to give her a pat. Willie hovered behind him. He took a few steps towards her and raised his hand to touch her neck, but she gave a little shake of her head and that set him stumbling backwards. He'd wait till he was with Mister Tom again.

George climbed over the gate while Willie opened and shut it neatly behind him. They walked through the garden to the back door when a voice called to them from behind. It was Tom. He was leaning out of the shelter.

'Afternoon, Mr Oakley,' said George.

'Afternoon, George.'

They came over to where he stood and peered inside. The earthen floor was covered with planks and on either side were two rough bunk beds. A tin with one side cut out of

it hung from a hook at the back. Fixed inside was a candle. Underneath it stood an orange box on top of which were two flower pots. One was placed like a lid on the other and had a hole in the base. Inside this was another candle. Above their heads over the entrance was a rolled piece of dark canvas. A potted plant hung in a near-by corner.

'Cor!' gasped Willie. 'Ain't it fine!'

'Best to be comfortable,' said Tom, and he gave a short cough to hide his pleasure.

'Proper job,' agreed George.

They took turns to walk around inside and sit on the bunks and then George left to go home for tea.

Willie spent the evening with Tom, washing and bottling the blackberries and eating some of them for supper. He sank into an even deeper sleep that night with the knowledge that he, Willie Beech, had survived a whole day with four other people of his own age and he had made jam.