

Good Night, Mr. Tom

Michelle Magorian

Meeting

"Yes," said Tom bluntly, on opening the front door. "What d'you want?"

A harassed middle-aged woman in a green coat and felt hat stood on his step. He glanced at the armband on her sleeve. She gave him an awkward smile.

"I'm the Billeting Officer for this area," she began.

"Oh yes, and what's that got to do wi' me?"

She flushed slightly. "Well, Mr., Mr. . . ."

"Oakley. Thomas Oakley."

"Ah, thank you, Mr. Oakley." She paused and took a deep breath. "Mr. Oakley, with the declaration of war imminent . . ."

Tom waved his hand. "I knows all that. Git to the point. What d'you want?" He noticed a small boy at her side.

"It's him I've come about," she said. "I'm on my way to your village hall with the others."

"What others?"

She stepped to one side. Behind the large iron gate that stood at the end of the graveyard was a small group of children. Many of them were filthy and very poorly clad. Only a handful had a blazer or coat. They all looked bewildered and exhausted.

The woman touched the boy at her side and pushed him forward.

"There's no need to tell me," said Tom. "It's obligatory and it's for the war effort."

"You are entitled to choose your child, I know," began the woman apologetically.

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"But," she continued, "his mother wants him to be with someone who's religious or near a church. She was quite adamant. Said she would only let him be evacuated if he was."

"Was what?" asked Tom impatiently.

"Near a church."

Tom took a second look at the child. The boy was thin and sickly looking, pale with limp sandy hair and dull gray eyes.

"His name's Willie," said the woman.

Willie, who had been staring at the ground, looked up. Round his neck, hanging from a piece of string, was a cardboard label. It read "William Beech."

Tom was well into his sixties, a healthy, robust, stockily built man with a head of thick white hair. Although he was of average height, in Willie's eyes he was a towering giant with skin like coarse wrinkled brown paper and a voice like thunder.

He glared at Willie. "You'd best come in," he said abruptly.

The woman gave a relieved smile. "Thank you so much," she said, and she backed quickly away and hurried down the tiny path towards the other children. Willie watched her go.

"Come on in," repeated Tom harshly. "I ent got all day."

Nervously, Willie followed him into a dark hallway. It took a few seconds for his eyes to adjust from the brilliant sunshine he had left to the comparative darkness of the cottage. He could just make out the shapes of a few coats hanging on some wooden pegs and two pairs of boots standing below.

and then down at Willie. He scratched his head. "Bit 'igh fer you. I'd best put in a low peg." "S'pos you'd best know where to put yer things," muttered Tom, looking up at the coat rack

He opened a door on his left and walked into the front room, leaving Willie in the hallway still clutching his brown carrier bag. Through the half-open door he could see a large black cooking stove with a fire in it and an old threadbare armchair nearby. He shivered. Presently Tom came out with a pencil.

"You can put that ole bag down," he said gruffly. "You ent goin' no place else."

Tom handed him the pencil. He stared blankly up at him.

"Go on," said Tom. "I told you before, I ent got all day. Now make a mark so's I know where to put yer bag, see." Willie made a faint dot on the wall beside the hem of one of the large coats. "Make a nice big un so's I can see it clear, like." Willie drew a small circle and filled it in. Tom leaned down and peered at it. "Neat little chap, ent you? Gimme yer mackintosh and I'll put it on top o' mine fer now."

With shaking fingers Willie undid his belt and buttons, peeled off the mackintosh and held it in his arms. Tom took it from him and hung it on top of his greatcoat. He walked back into the front room. "Come on," he said. Willie followed him in.

It was a small, comfortable room with two windows. The front one looked out onto the graveyard, the other onto a little garden at the side. The large black stove stood solidly in an alcove in the back wall, a thick dark pipe curving its way upward through the ceiling. Stretched out beneath the side window were a few shelves filled with books, old newspapers and odds and ends, and by the front window stood a heavy wooden table and two chairs. The flagstoned floor was covered with a faded crimson, green and brown rug. Willie glanced at the armchair by the stove and the objects that lay on top of the small wooden table beside it: a pipe, a book and a tobacco jar.

"Pull that stool up by the fire and I'll give you somethin' to eat." Willie made no movement.

"Go on, sit down, boy," he repeated. "You got wax in your ears?"

Willie pulled a small wooden stool from a corner and sat down in front of the fire.

Tom cooked two rashers of bacon and placed a slab of bread, with the fresh bacon drippings beside it, on a plate. He put it on the table with a mug of hot tea. Willie watched him silently, his bones, elbows and knees jutting out angularly beneath his thin gray jersey and shorts. He tugged nervously at the tops of his woolen socks and a faint smell of warm rubber drifted upwards from his white sneakers.

"Eat that up," said Tom.

Willie dragged himself reluctantly from the warmth of the fire and sat at the table. "You can put yer own sugar in," Tom grunted.

Willie politely took a spoonful, dunked it into the large white mug of tea and stirred it. He bit into the bread, but a large lump in his throat made swallowing difficult. He didn't feel at all hungry, but remembered apprehensively what his mum had said about doing as he was told. He stared out at the graveyard. The sun shone brilliantly, yet he felt cold. He gazed at the few trees around the graves. Their leaves were all different colors—pale greens, amber, yellow . . .

"Em you 'ungry?" asked Tom from his armchair.

Willie looked up startled. "Yes, mister," he whispered.

"Jest a slow chewer, that it?"

He nodded timidly and stared miserably at the plate. Bacon was a luxury. Only lodgers or visitors had bacon, and here he was not eating it.

"Mebbe you can chew it more easy later." Tom beckoned him over to the stool. "Put another spoon of that sugar in, boy, and bring that tea over 'ere."

Willie did so and returned to the stool. He held the warm mug tightly in his icy hands and shivered. Tom leaned towards him.

"What you got in yer bag, then?"

"I dunno," mumbled Willie. "Mum packed it. She said I weren't to look in." One of his socks slipped halfway down his leg, revealing a large multicolored bruise on his shin and a swollen red sore beside it.

"That's a nasty ole thing," Tom said, pointing to it. "What give you that?" Willie pulled the sock up quickly.

"Best drink that afore it gits cold," said Tom, sensing that the subject needed to be changed.

Willie looked intently at the fire and slowly drank the tea.

Tom stood up. "I gotta go out for a spell. Then I'll fix your room, see. Up there," he pointed to the ceiling. "You ent afraid of heights, are you?" Willie shook his head. "That's good, or you'd have had to sleep under the table." He bent over the stove and shoveled some fresh coke into the fire.

" 'Ere's an ole scarf of mine," he muttered, and he threw a khaki object over Willie's knees. He noticed another bruise on the boy's thigh, but said nothing. " 'Ave a wander round the graveyard. Don't be scared of the dead. Least they can't drop an ole bomb on yer head."

"No, mister," agreed Willie politely.

"And close the front door behind you, else Sammy'll be eatin' yer bacon."

"Yes, mister."

Willie heard him slam the front door and listened to the sound of his footsteps gradually fading. He hugged himself tightly and rocked backwards and forwards on the stool. "I must be good," he whispered urgently, "I must be good," and he rubbed a sore spot on his arm. He was such a bad boy. Mum said she was kinder to him than most mothers. She only gave him soft beatings. He shuddered. He was dreading the moment when Mr. Oakley would discover how wicked he was. He was stronger

looking than Mum.

The flames in the stove flickered and danced before his eyes. He turned to look for something that was missing. He stood up and moved towards the shelves under the side window. There, he was being bad again, putting his nose in where it didn't belong. He looked up quickly to make sure Mr. Oakley wasn't spying at him through the window.

Mum said war was a punishment from God for people's sins, so he'd better watch out. She didn't tell him what to watch out for, though. It could be in this room, he thought, or maybe the graveyard. He knelt on one of the chairs at the front window and peered out. Graves didn't look so scary as she had made out, even though he knew that he was surrounded by dead bodies. But what was it that was missing? A bird chirruped in the garden. Of course, that was it. He couldn't hear traffic and banging and shouting. He looked around at the room again. His eyes rested on the stool where the woolen scarf lay. He'd go outside. He picked it up, and wrapping it around his neck, he went into the hall and closed the front door carefully behind him.

Between him and the graveyard lay a small flat garden. Along the edge of it were little clusters of flowers. Willie stepped forward to the edge where the garden ended and the graveyard began. He plunged his hands deep into his pockets and stood still for a moment.

The graveyard and cottage with its garden were surrounded by a rough stone wall, except for where the back of the church stood. Green moss and wild flowers sprang through the gray stonework. Between the graves lay a small, neat flagstoned pathway down the center. It broke off in two directions—one towards a large gate on the left where the other children had waited, and one leading to the back entrance of a small church to his right. A poplar tree stood

in the far corner of the graveyard near the wall with the gate, and another near Mr. Oakley's cottage by the edge of the front garden. A third grew by the exit of the church; but the tree that caught Willie's attention was a large oak tree. It stood in the center of the graveyard by the path, its large well-clad branches curving and hanging over part of it.

He glanced down at a small stone angel near his feet and began to walk round the gravestones. Some were so faded that he could barely see the shapes of the letters. Each grave had a character of its own. Some were well tended, with little vases of flowers; some were covered with large stone slabs, while others had weeds growing higgledy-piggledy over them. The ones Willie liked best were the gentle mounds covered with grass, with the odd surviving summer flower peeping through the colorful leaves. As he walked around, he noticed that some of the very old ones were tiny. Children's graves, probably.

He was sitting on one Elizabeth Thatcher when he heard voices. A young man and woman over the wall. Her long fair hair hung in a single plait scraped back from a round, pink-rose face. They were talking and laughing. They stopped and the young woman leaned her cheeked face. Pretty, he thought.

"You're from London, ent you?" she said.

He stood up and removed his hands from his pockets. "Yes, miss."

"You're a regular wild bunch, so I've heard," and she smiled.

The young man was in uniform. He stood with his arm around her shoulder.

"How old are you, then?" she asked.

"Eight, miss."

"Polite little lad, ent you? What's your name?"

"William Beech, miss."

"You can stop calling me miss. I'm Mrs.—Mrs. Hartridge." The young man beamed. "I'll see you on Monday at school. I expect you'll be in my class. Good-bye, William."

" 'Bye, miss, Mrs.," he whispered.

He watched them walk away. When they were out of sight he sat back down on Elizabeth Thatche tugged at a handful of grass and pulled it from the earth. He'd forgotten all about school. He thought of Mr. Barrett, his form master in London. He spent all day yelling and shouting at everyone and rapping knuckles. He dreaded school normally. Mrs. Hartridge didn't seem like him at all. He gave a sigh of relief and rubbed his chest. That was one ordeal he didn't think would be too terrifying to face. He glanced at the oak tree. It seemed a sheltered, secluded sort of place. He'd go and sit beneath its branches.

As he walked towards it he tripped over a hard object. It was a tiny gravestone hidden by a clump of grass. He knelt down and pushed the grass to one side to look at it. He pulled away at the grass plucking it out in great handfuls from the soil. He wanted to make it so that people could see the stone again. It looked forgotten and lost. It wasn't fair that it should be hidden. He became quite absorbed in this task until he heard a scrabbling noise. He turned.

Sniffing and scratching among the leaves at the foot of the tree was a squirrel. Willie recognized its shape from pictures he had seen, but he wasn't prepared for one that moved. He froze, terrified. The squirrel seemed quite unperturbed and went on scuffling about in the leaves, picking up nuts and titbits in its tiny paws. Willie stayed motionless, hardly breathing. The squirrel's black eyes darted in a lively manner from place to place. It was tiny, light gray in color, with a bushy tail that stuck wildly in the air as it poked its paws and head into the russet and gold leaves.

After a while Willie's shoulders relaxed. He wriggled his toes gingerly inside his sneakers. It seemed as though he had been crouching for hours, although it couldn't have been more than ten minutes.

The little gray fellow didn't seem to scare him as much, and he began to enjoy watching the squirrel. A loud sharp barking suddenly disturbed the silence. The squirrel leaped and disappeared. Willie sprang to his feet, hopping on one leg and gasping at the mixture of numbness and pins and needles in the other. A small black-and-white collie ran around the tree and into the leaves. It stopped in front of him and jumped up into the air. Willie was more petrified of the dog than he had been of the squirrel.

"Them poisonous dogs," he heard his mother's voice saying inside him. "One bite from them mutts and you're dead. They got 'orrible diseases in 'em." He remembered the tiny children's graves and quickly picked up a thick branch from the ground.

"You go away," he said, feebly, gripping it firmly in his hand. "You go away."

Willie let out a shriek and drew back. The dog came nearer. The dog sprang into the air again and barked and yapped at him, tossing leaves by his legs.

"I'll kill you."

"I wouldn't do that," said a deep voice behind him. He turned to find Tom standing by the

outer branches. "He ent goin' to do you no 'arm, so I should jes' drop that if I was you."

Willie froze with the branch still held high in his hand. Sweat broke out under his armpits and across his forehead. Now he was in for it. He was bound to get a beating now. Tom came toward him, took the branch firmly from his hand and lifted it up. Willie automatically flung his arm across his face and gave a cry, but the blow he was expecting never came. Tom had merely thrown the branch to the other end of the graveyard, and the dog had gone dashing after it.

"You can take yer arm down now, boy," he said quietly. "I think you and I 'ad better go inside and sort a few things out. Come on." And with that he stepped aside for Willie to go in front of him along the path.

Willie walked shakily towards the cottage, his head lowered. Through blurred eyes he saw the tufts of grass spilling up between the small flat stones. The sweat trickled down the sides of his face and chest. His armpits stung savagely and a sharp pain stabbed at his stomach. He went through the front door and stood in the hallway, feeling the perspiration turn cold and clammy. Tom walked into the front room and stood waiting for him to enter.

"Don't dither out there," he said. "Come on in."

Willie did so, but his body felt as if it no longer belonged to him. It seemed to move of its own accord. Tom's voice grew more distant. It reverberated as if it was being thrown back at him from the walls of a cave. He sat down on the stool feeling numb.

Tom picked up a poker and walked across to the fire. Now I'm going to get it, Willie thought, and he clutched the seat of the stool tightly. Tom looked down at him.

"About Sammy," Willie heard him say. He watched him poke the fire and then he didn't hear any more. He knew that Tom was speaking to him, but he couldn't take his eyes off the poker. It sent the hot coals tumbling in all directions. He saw Tom's brown, wrinkled hand lift it out of the fire. The tip was red, almost white in places. He was certain that he was going to be branded with it. The room seemed to swim and he heard Tom's voice echoing. He watched the tip of the poker spin and come closer to him and then the floor came towards him and it was his knees until the carpet came into focus and he heard himself gasping. He went dark. He felt two large hands grip him from behind and push his head in between his

Tom opened the front window and lifted him out through it.

"Breathe in deep," Willie heard him say. "Take in a good sniff."

He took in a gulp of air. "I'll be sick," he mumbled.

"That's right, go on, I'm holding you. Take in a good sniff. Let yer throat open."

Willie drank in some more air. A wave of nausea swept through him and he vomited.

"Go on," he heard Tom say, "breathe in some more," and he was sick again and again until there was no more left inside him and he hung limply in Tom's arms.

Tom wiped his mouth and face with the scarf. The pain in Willie's stomach had gone, but he felt drained like a rag doll. Tom lifted him back into the cottage and placed him in his armchair. His small body sank comfortably into the old soft expanse of chair. His feet barely reached the edge of the seat. Tom tucked a blanket round him, drew up a chair by the fire and watched Willie fall asleep.

The tales he had heard about evacuees didn't seem to fit Willie. "Ungrateful" and "wild" were the

adjectives he had heard used, or just plain "homesick." He was quite unprepared for this timid, sickly little specimen. He looked at the poker leaning against the stove.

"'E never thought ... No ... surely not!" he murmured. "Oh, Thomas Oakley, where 'ave you landed yourself?" There was a sound of scratching at the front door. "More trouble," he muttered. He crept quietly out through the hallway and opened the door. Sammy bounded in and jumped around his legs panting and yelping.

"Now you jes' shut that ole mouth," Tom whispered firmly. "There's someone asleep." He knelt down and Sammy leaped into his arms lathering his face with his tongue. "I don't need to 'ave a bath when you're around, do I?" Sammy continued to lick him until he was satisfied just to pant and allow his tail to flop from side to side. Tom lifted him up and carried him into the front room. As soon as the dog saw Willie asleep in the chair, he began barking again. Tom put his finger firmly on his nose and looked directly into his eyes.

"Now you jes' take a rest and stop that." He picked up his pipe and tobacco jar from the little table and sat by the stove again. Sammy flopped down beside him and rested his head on one of Tom's feet.

"Well, Sam," Tom whispered, "I don't know nothin' about children, but I do know enough not to beat 'em and make 'em that scared." And he grunted and puffed at his pipe. Sammy stood up and wriggled in between Tom's legs and placed his paws on his stomach.

"You understand every blimmin' word I say, don't you? Least he ent goin' to bury bones in my sweet peas," he remarked, ruffling Sammy's fur. "That's one thing to be thankful about." He sighed. "S'pose I'd best see what's what." He rose and went into the hallway with Sammy padding after him. He took some steps and placed them under a small square trapdoor above him. He climbed up and pushed the trapdoor open and pulled down a long wooden ladder.

The ladder was of thick pine wood. It was a little over forty years old, but since his young wife Rachel, had died soon after it was made, it had hardly been used. A thick cloud of dust enveloped his head as he blew on one of the wide wooden rungs. He coughed and sneezed.

"Like taking snuff," he muttered. "S'pose we'd best keep that ole ladder down fer a bit, eh, Sammy?"

He climbed down and opened the door opposite the front room. It led into his bedroom. Inside, a small chest of drawers with a mirror stood by the corner of the front window. Leaning up against the back wall was a four-poster bed covered with a thick quilt. At the foot of the bed, on the floor, lay a round basket with an old blanket inside. It was Sammy's bed, bits of matting added by the window and bed. when he used it, which was seldom. A blue threadbare carpet was spread across the floor with

Beside the bed was a fitted cupboard. Tom opened it. On the top two shelves, neatly stacked, were blankets and sheets, and on the third various belongings of Rachel's that he had decided to keep. He glanced swiftly at them. A black wooden paint box, brushes, a christening robe she had embroidered, some old photographs, letters and recipes. The christening robe had never been worn by his baby son for he had died soon after his mother.

He picked up some blankets and sheets and carried them into the hall. "I'll be down for you in a minute, Sammy," he said as he climbed up the ladder. "You jes' hang on there a bit," and with that Sammy was left to watch his master slowly disappear through the strange new hole in the ceiling.

Willie gave a short start and opened his eyes. In a chair opposite sat Tom, who was drinking tea and looking at a book. Sammy, who had been watching Willie sleep, now stood up.

Tom looked up. "You feelin' better?" he asked. "You's lookin' better." He poured a mug of hot, sweet tea and handed it to him. "'Ere, you git that down you."

Willie looked apprehensively at Sammy, who was sniffing his feet.

"'E won't harm you," said Tom. "'E's a spry ole thing, but he's as soft as butter, ent you, ole boy? And he knelt down and ruffled his fur. Sammy snuggled up between his knees and licked his face. "See," said Tom, "'e's very friendly." Willie tried to smile. "You want to learn somethin' wot'll make him happy?" Willie nodded. "Hold one of yer hands out, palm up, like that." Willie copied him. "That's so he knows you ent going to harm him, see. Now, hold it out towards him and tickle his chest." Willie leaned nervously forward and touched Sammy's fur. "That's the idea. You jes' keep doin' that."

Willie stroked him. His fur felt silky and soft. Sammy gave his fingers a long lick.

"'E likes you, see. When he licks you, that's his way of sayin', 'I likes you and you makes me happy.'"

"Why does he sniff?" he asked, as Sammy crawled under the blanket to get to his legs.

"'E likes to know what everythin' smells like so's he knows who to say hello to and who not."

"Stop it!" said Willie as Sammy put his nose into his crotch. "Naughty dog." Immediately Tom dragged him from under the blanket, and he began barking and chasing his tail. "You'm gettin' overexcited, Sam. 'E needs a good romp in the fields"—and he looked at Willie—and I reckon you do an' all, he thought.

Willie pushed the blanket to one side and slid onto the floor.

"Smells like rain," said Tom, leaning out of the front window. "You got boots?"

Willie shook his head. "No, mister."

"Best put yer mackintosh on, anyways."

The three of them trooped out into the hallway. Willie stared at the ladder.

"That's your room up there. Sort of attic."

"Mine?" He didn't understand. Did Mr. Oakley mean he was going to have a room to himself?

Tom nodded. Sammy leaped up excitedly.

"Hang on a minute, Sam. We's jes' goin'."

Tom looked at Willie's mac on the way out and noticed how thin it was.

They walked down the pathway and out the gate, Sammy leading, Tom striding after him and above the trees. A mild breeze shook the leaves and a few dark clouds scudded across the sky. Willie running to keep up with them. It was late afternoon now. The sun hung in a fiery ball Sammy ran backwards and forwards barking ecstatically.

"That dog's half mad," Tom said to Willie, but found that he was talking to the air, for Willie was several yards behind, still trying to keep up, his cheeks flushed with the effort.

"You're a quiet 'un. Why didn't you tell me I was goin' too fast?" But Willie could not answer and only gasped incoherently.

Tom slowed down and Willie walked beside him. He stared up at the gruff old man who was so kind to him. It was all very bewildering. He looked down at Tom's heavy brown ankle boots, his thick navy overcoat and the green corduroy cap with the tufts of white hair sticking out at either side. A small empty haversack dangled over his shoulder.

"Mister," he panted. "Mister!" Tom looked down. "Can I carry your bag, mister?"

Tom mumbled something to himself and handed it to him. Willie hung on to it tightly with both hands.

The narrow road sloped gently upwards. Willie could just make out, in all the speed of the muddled dream. When they reached the top of the hill Willie saw a row of small thatched walking the wild hedgerows flashing in low green lines beside him. It felt very unreal, like a cottages standing on either side of the road ahead. He tugged at Tom's sleeve.

"Mister," he gasped, "they got straw roofs."

"That's thatch," said Tom.

"Wot's . . ." But he bit his lip and kept silent.

Tom glanced down. "I got some pictures of them at home. We'll have a look at them tonight."

Across the road a plump, middle-aged woman with graying auburn hair was peering out of window. She disappeared for an instant and opened her front door.

"'Ello, Tom," she said, looking with curiosity at Willie.

He grunted. "Evening, Mrs. Fletcher. How are the boys, then?"

"Boys are doin' nicely."

"William," said Tom, "go and keep an eye on Sam. I'll be with you in a minute."

Willie nodded shyly and went after Sammy.

"Skinny ole scrap, ent he?" said the woman.

Tom gave another grunt.

"I didn't believe it was true when I heard," she continued. "I ent got room meself, but Mrs. Butcher got two to contend with. Girls, mind you, but they're regular tearaways, and Mrs.

Henley, she had three last week and they keep runnin' away. Homesick, like."

"How's the knittin' coming on?" said Tom, changing the subject.

"What you talkin' about?" she said, leaning back and looking at him. "Since when have you been interested in my knittin'?"

"Since now," he replied shortly. He pushed his hands into his pockets and scraped one of his boots against a piece of stone. "Busy, are you?" he asked.

"No more 'n usual."

"Could do with a thick jersey. Not fer me, mind," and he looked at Willie trundling on ahead.

"You ent gotta clothe 'em, you know. They shoulda brought that with them."

"Well, he haven't," said Tom gruffly. "Can you knit me a jersey or can you not, that's what I'm askin'?"

"If that's what you want."

"And," he continued, "you don't know where I can get some good stout boots, small-like, and I don't want no commentary, jes' want to know."

"I'll ask around."

He mumbled his thanks and strode on up the road.

Mrs. Fletcher stood quite motionless and stared after him, until she was sure he was out of . . ." earshot. "Madge," she cried, running into the next cottage, "Madge, you'll die when I tell you.

The road leading through the row of cottages extended into a long stretch of open country with lanes leading off it. Inside the last cottage at the corner there was a small shop.

"Won't be long," said Tom, and he took the haversack from Willie and left him and Sammy sitting on the stone steps. Willie stared in amazement at the fields, his thin woolen socks heaped around his ankles. As Tom came out he became conscious of them again and quickly pulled them up. Sammy sniffed at the food in the bag and Tom tapped him tenderly on the nose.

"If I start gettin' me stride up agin," he said to Willie, "you jes' call out."

It was a long, quiet road, the silence broken only by the whirring of a tractor in the distance.

They turned to the right and walked down a tiny lane.

Willie's attention was drawn to a small brown bird in one of the hedgerows. Tom stopped and put his finger to his lips and they stood and watched it hopping in and out among the changing leaves.

flew away. "And shy." "That's a hedge sparrow," he whispered. "See its beak? Very dainty." The bird looked up and

They continued down the lane towards a farm. Sammy was already sitting waiting for them, his tail thumping the ground impatiently from side to side. They pushed open the long wooden gate where he sat. It squeaked and jingled on its hinges as they swung it behind them. Tom led Willie round the back of a large, cream-colored stone house towards a wooden shed. A middle-aged man with corn-colored hair and the bluest eyes Willie had ever seen was sitting on a stool milking one of several cows. Willie gazed at the gentle way he fingered the teats and at the warm white liquid spurting down into a bucket underneath.

"Mister," he said, tugging at Tom's coat sleeve. "Mister, what's that?"

Tom was astounded. "Ent you never seen a cow?" But Willie didn't answer. He was too absorbed in watching the swollen udder decrease in size.

"I'll be wantin' extra milk from now on, Ivor," he said. Ivor nodded and glanced at Willie.

"One of them London lot?" he asked. Tom grunted. "You'd best take a jug with you. Roe's inside."

Tom tramped across the yard to the back of the house. He carried Sammy in his arms, as he had habit of yapping at cows. Willie stayed to watch the milking.

A fresh-faced brunette woman in her thirties, wearing a flowery apron, opened the back door.

"Come in," she said. "You'll be wantin' extra milk."

"How d'you know?" said Tom.

"Lucy saw you comin' up the yard with him."

A chubby six-year-old with brown curly hair, earth smudged over two enormous pink cheeks, was standing at her side holding on to her skirt.

"Don't be so daft, girl," she said. "Go on, say hello to him. I got things to do."

She clomped down the steps and stood shyly beside Willie, twisting the hem of her dress in her hands till her knickers came into view.

"There ent much difference in size between them two," said Tom, observing them together. "I dunno what they do with little 'uns in that ole city." And he disappeared into the warmth of the kitchen.

After calling Willie several times and getting no response, he eventually gave up and tapped him on the shoulder.

"'Ere, dreamer, you carry that," he said handing him a tin jug. "You can take a look if you've a mind."

Willie lifted the lid and peered in. Fresh milk. Lucy stared at him. She'd never seen a boy so thin and pale-looking. She still hadn't spoken and had only just, so she thought, heard his name.

"'Bye, Dreema," she said suddenly, and turned and fled into the house.

"Where's that ole thing?" said Tom, looking round for Sammy. He caught sight of his black and white fur at the gate. He was sitting waiting for them with a bone in his mouth.

Willie looked at the front of the house. The woman called Roe was putting up some black material inside the front window.

"What's she doin'?" Willie asked.

"Puttin' her blackouts up, boy. We all got to do it from tonight."

Willie was about to ask why—but he knew that was rude, so he kept silent.

"It's so planes don't see where to bomb," continued Tom, as if he had read his thoughts. "Waste o' time if you asks me. Reckon it'll all be over by Christmas, and anyways who'd want to bomb Little Weirwold. That's the name of this village," he added. "Little Weirwold." He looked up at the sky. It had suddenly become darker. "Best be movin'," he said, and set off at a jaunty pace back up the lane.

towards the main road. They had walked past the cottages and were halfway down the hill when the first drop of rain fell. As they neared the foot of the hill, the sky opened and a heavy torrent fell mercilessly down. It blinded Willie and trickled down inside the collar of his mackintosh. Tom buttoned his overcoat up to his neck and raised his collar. He looked down at the drenched figures of the boy and dog. Willie had to run to keep already wet from his soaked mackintosh. up with them. His sneakers were now caked with heavy clods of wet earth, and his jersey was

Willie and Tom ran up the pathway towards the cottage, through the graves and under the oak tree. They ran into the hall, Tom's boots clattering on the tiles. He shook the rain from his overcoat and cap and proceeded to undo his boots. Sammy stood on the mat shaking his fur by the open door. Willie struggled with his mackintosh. His fingers were mauve with the cold.

"You're soaked through," said Tom. He pointed to Willie's bespattered sneakers. "Take them ole canvas things off. Stay here while I put some newspapers down."

Willie pulled off the sneakers and stood in the dark hallway shivering helplessly, his teeth door. He had laid newspaper in front of the range and was putting up blackouts at the rattling inside his clamped jaw. After much shuffling from the living room Tom opened the windows. But for the glow of embers in the fire, there was almost total darkness. He lit a gas lamp that hung from the ceiling and an oil lamp on the table.

"Stay on them newspapers. You too," he said to Sammy, who was sending out a constant spray of water with his tail.

He added some coke to the fire and left the room. Willie hopped on one leg and then on the other in front of it. Steam began to rise from his jersey and shorts. He heard the front door being closed, and Tom returned with his brown carrier bag. He placed it on the table and took out the contents.

There was one small towel, a piece of soap, a toothbrush, an old Bible and an envelope with "To whom it may concern" written on it. He looked under the towel for some nightclothes but there were none. He opened the envelope. Willie heard the paper being torn and turned to watch him. He knew the letter was from his mum. He checked that his wet socks were pulled up and stood very still.

"Dear Sir or Madam," the note read, "I asked if Willie could go and stay with God-fearing people so I hope he is. Like most boys he's full of sin but he's promised to be good. I can't visit him. I'm a widow and I haven't got the money. The war and that. I've put the belt in for when he's bad and I've sewn him in for the winter. I usually keep him in when I wash his clothes and I got them special for the cold weather so he should be alright. Tell him his Mum said he'd better be good. Mrs. Beech."

Tom folded the letter and put it into his pocket. He found the belt at the bottom of the bag. It was a brown leather one with a steel buckle. He put it back in the bag and took out the towel, soap and toothbrush. Willie stood with his back to the fire and stared uneasily up at him.

Tom was angry.

"While you're in my house," he said in a choked voice, "you'll live by my rules. I ent ever hit a child and if I ever do it'll be with the skin of me hand. You got that?"

Willie nodded.

"So we can forget the ole belt." And he lifted the bag from the table and took it out of the room. Willie turned to face the fire, his head bowed over the stove.

His shoulders felt tense, and the top of the stove hissed as a tear fell from his eye. He heard the door close behind him and hurriedly wiped his cheeks.

Tom put a bundle on the armchair. "Best get out of them wet things," he said, kneeling down beside Willie, "so's I can dry them for tomorrow."

Willie sniffed. Tom peeled off his wet jersey and shorts.

"And them socks," he said as Willie clung to the tops of them. He pulled them off. Tom said nothing. There was no need. Willie's arms and legs were covered with bruises, weals and sores. Tom went to pull off his undershirt. Willie flinched and touched the top of his arm. "New one, eh?" he asked quietly. Willie nodded and blushed.

"Best be careful then," and Tom tugged gently at the undershirt.

"It won't come off, mister," said Willie, and then Tom understood what his mother had written in the letter. His undershirt had been sewn to the waist of his under-shorts.

"Soon settle that," said Tom, picking up a pair of scissors from the bookcase. Willie shrank backwards. "I'll sew them back when you goes home. I promise." Still Willie didn't move. "I promise," he repeated.

Willie stepped forward and allowed him to snip away at the stitching.

He dried Willie's thin, bruised body, wrapped him up in a towel and sat him in the armchair. Taking an old flannel nightshirt from the bundle, he cut the bottom halves off the body and sleeves. He stood Willie on the armchair, took the towel away and placed the nightshirt over his head, cutting more until Willie's toes and hands came into view. He handed him a thick pair of woolen socks. The heels almost reached the back of Willie's knees. Willie gave a small, tense smile and watched Tom hang his clothes over a horse near the fire.

"You can dry Sammy with that ole towel," said Tom, indicating one lying on the armchair. Willie knelt down on the newspapers and began to dry him. Sammy stuck his nose in the air, delighted at such attention.

Tom unpacked the haversack and wandered round the room putting the groceries away. He put on potatoes, and after a while he cracked some eggs into a saucepan, adding milk and butter. Slicing a few large pieces of bread, he put one on the end of a long fork.

"You toasted bread afore?" he asked. Willie looked up at him and shook his head. "'Ere, have a go," said Tom, handing him the fork.

Willie sat on the stool holding the fork in front of the fire, his long socks trailing across the floor. Beside his feet Tom placed a bowl filled with scraps of meat and biscuits for Sammy, who had already started chewing the end of one of the socks.

Willie placed the toasted bread on plates while Tom spooned a large quantity of steaming scramble eggs onto them. A bowl of hot, buttered boiled potatoes stood in the middle of the table.

"You can sit down now," said Tom.

Willie picked up a potato in his hands, gasped and dropped it onto his plate. Feverishly he attacked the meal. His small elbows stuck out at the sides as he cut and ate food in a frenzy. When the meal was eaten, Tom unwrapped a small brown package that contained four pieces of dark, homemade

ginger cake.

"One fer tonight; one fer tomorrow," said Tom, handing him a piece.

Willie had never eaten cake before. When he had finished it, he leaned back in his chair and, resting his hands on his stomach, he watched Sammy eat.

Tom heated some water on the stove for the dirty dishes.

"You can look through them books if you like," he said, indicating the shelves under the side window.

Willie got up from the table excitedly and moved towards them. Then he stopped and frowned. "I can't get to read the Bible," he said miserably.

Tom gave a grunt. "I'll tell you a Bible story meself. In me own way. That do you?"

"Yeh, thanks, mister."

"Pull out that pouffe to sit on."

"Pouffe?" said Willie.

Tom pointed to a low, round, cushiony type of seat next to the armchair.

Willie squatted down in front of the shelves and chose three books. He pulled out the pouffe and sat on it with them propped on his knees.

"Ent you goin' to open one then?" asked Tom.

"After me Bible."

Tom sat down in the armchair, and lit his pipe. He leaned back puffing at it, wondering which one to tell. Willie watched him and pulled his strange sacklike garment over his feet.

"'Noah's Ark,'" exclaimed Tom. "That's a good un." He looked at the books Willie had chosen and picked some others from the bookcase with animal pictures in them. "Once, long ago," began Tom and Willie leaned forwards to listen until finally he stood up and leaned on the arm of the armchair to get a closer look at the pictures. Tom mumbled on in his own way, a little flattered at the rapid attention he was receiving. The gas lamp hissed gently above them and the coke stirred softly in the stove. Even the rain outside seemed to cease falling so heavily.

When Tom had finished, he found Willie gazing at him with adoration. Feeling a little embarrassed he quickly cleared his throat and glanced up at the clock.

He made Willie cocoa and left him with Sammy to look at the "straw roofs" while he went picture. He blew over his cocoa and gave Sammy some of the skin. Tom appeared at the upstairs to put up more blackouts. Willie sat back on the pouffe and traced his finger over the door with a lamp and Sammy began to crawl between his legs.

"Thought you was being too good for it to last," Tom said as Sammy tugged at his trouser leg.

"Give me the cocoa, William, and you carry the book."

Willie climbed up the ladder, but the enormous socks kept making him slip. After much balancing and juggling with cocoa, book and dog, they all three eventually reached the attic.

It was a tiny room, shaped rather like a ridge tent. The ceiling sloped downwards at both sides with a straight piece in the center. The wooden floor was covered by two mats. A small bed lay under one of the rafters, and blackouts were pinned on the slanting window beside it. Tom had swept the room clean and had fixed a lamp to a hook on the white plaster ceiling.

Beside the bed was a low wooden table. "For yer books and such," said Tom. He pointed to a chamber pot on the floor at the end of the bed. "That's so's you don't have to go outside if you want to go to the toilet," he explained.

The heat from the front room rose up through the floorboards, so that the room was warm.

Willie crawled under the bed and curled up into a ball.

"What you doin'?" asked Tom. "You gets into it, not under it."

"Wot, right inside?" exclaimed Willie.

Tom drew back the sheets and Willie climbed in between them. He stroked the blankets with his hands.

Sammy, meanwhile, was standing impatiently at Tom's side, wagging his tail in lunatic fashion. "Gon, you daft dog," said Tom, and Sammy leaped onto the bed between Willie's arms and licked his face. Slowly Willie put his arms around him, gave a small cry and burst into tears.

"Sorry, mister," he blurted out, and he buried his head in the dog's fur.

Tom sat on the edge of the bed until the crying had subsided a little.

"'Ere," he said, handing him a large white handkerchief. "'Ave a blow in that."

Willie looked up shamefacedly. "I ain't ungrateful, mister, honest. I'm happy." And with that he gave another sob.

Tom nodded and Sammy licked his face.

"You can have the lamp lit for ten minutes," he said, patting the dog, "but mind you behave yerself, Samuel."

He made his way downstairs to the front room and turned Willie's damp clothes around. His pipe was on the table. He picked it up and tapped the old tobacco out onto the stove.

"Best not get fond of the boy, Thomas," he muttered to himself. He sat back in the armchair and watched the smoke drifting upwards from his pipe towards the gas lamp. He glanced at Willie's thin gray clothes. S'pose another pair of socks and one of them balaclava hat things wouldn't come amiss, he thought. There were sounds of scrabbling from upstairs.

He climbed up the steps, pipe in mouth, grunted out a few words as he entered the attic and blew the lamp out, plunging them all into total darkness.

"Take them blacks down now," he mumbled, removing them from the window. "You warm enough?"

Willie raised his head. "Yeh," he answered, and he sank happily back into the soft white pillow. Tom stared out of the window and chewed the end of his pipe. He gave a little tap on the floor with his foot and then moved towards the bed and gently ruffled Willie's hair.

He was halfway down the hatch with Sammy in his arms when he remembered something.

"Don't forget them ole prayers."

"No, mister," said Willie.

Tom paused for an instant. "And you'd best call me Tom. Good night and God bless." And with that he descended from view, closing the trapdoor behind him.

"Good night, Mister Tom," Willie whispered. He listened to the door downstairs close and slipped out of bed to look through the window. A crack of lightning lit up the whole sky.

"Not much use, these blackouts," Tom had said earlier in the evening. Still, it was fine, thought Willie, standing in the moonlight. He could just make out the two rows of cottages and the fields beyond them. A dog howled in the distance.

Underneath the attic, Tom sat in his armchair with Sammy collapsed across his feet. He held a large black wooden paint box on his lap. He raised the lid, gazed for an instant at the contents and quietly blew away the dust from the tops of the brightly colored pots.

Saturday Morning

When Willie awoke it was still very dark. The pain that had brought him sharply back to consciousness seared through his stomach. He held his breath and pushed his hand down the bed to touch his nightgown. It was soaking. It was then that he became aware that he was lying in between sheets. That's what they did to people after they had died, they laid them out in a bed. He sat up quickly and hit his head on the rafter. Crawling out of bed, doubled over with the pain in his gut, he hobbled over to the window and let out a frightened cry. He was in a graveyard. He was going to be buried alive! The pain grew in intensity. He gave a loud moan and vomited all over the floor.

In the morning Tom found him huddled under the bed. The sheets were drenched in urine. He stripped them off the mattress and carried Willie down to the living room.

It was a hot, sultry day. The windows were wide open but no breeze entered the cottage. An underwear hanging on a small washing line outside. Tom pulled the voluminous Willie stood in front of the stove. Through the side window he could see his gray garments nightshirt over his head and threw it into a copper tub with the sheets. He sluiced Willie's body tenderly with cold water and soap. The weals stuck out mauve against his protruding ribs and swollen stomach. He could hardly stand.

"Sorry, mister," he kept repeating, fearfully, "sorry, Mister Tom."

Tom just grunted in his usual manner.

He pulled Willie's clothes off the line and handed them to him. "Too hot for socks," he muttered. "Leave them off."

"I can't go aht wivout me socks," cried Willie in alarm. "Please, Mister Tom, I can't."

"Why?" Tom snorted.

"Me legs," he whispered. He didn't want everyone to see the marks of his sins. Tom sighed and threw the socks on the table. They had breakfast by the open window. Tom sat with his shirt sleeve rolled up, the beads of sweat trickling down the sides of his ruddy face, while Willie continued to shiver, managing to drink only half a cup of tea and eat a small piece of bread.

"Blimmin' blue," muttered Tom to himself as he observed Willie's face. He cleared the

table with to write a message on for his mother. Willie sat dejectedly at the table and watched Tom eat breakfast things and left him with the small addressed postcard that he had been provided drag his small mattress past the window. He could hear him scrubbing away at it. He lowered his head. He was so ashamed. Everyone who came near the church would see it and realize how wicked he had been. He hadn't meant to wet himself. He didn't even remember doing it.

He stared at the small postcard in front of him. Claspings a pencil between his fingers, he clenched his free hand into a fist and dug his knuckles into the table so that he wouldn't cry.

"How you gettin' on?" asked Tom.

Willie jumped and flushed hotly.

"Can't think of what to say, that it?" He took the pencil from Willie's hand and turned the postcard towards himself. "Not much room, eh?"

Willie tugged at his hair in embarrassment.

"Lost yer voice?"

"No, Mister Tom," he answered quietly.

"What d'you want to say, then?"

He shrugged his shoulders and looked dumbly at the grain on the wooden table.

"Are you happy here?"

He looked up quickly and nodded. "Yeh."

"Arrived safely, is happy and . . ."

"Mister, Mister Tom," said Willie, interrupting him. "You goin' to tell her I was bad?"

"No," Tom said, and went on writing. "Here, listen to this. 'Dear Mrs. Beech, William . .

"She don't call me that. She calls me Willie."

He altered the word. "'Willie,' " he continued, "'has arrived safely, is happy and good. Yours sincerely, Mr. Thomas Oakley.' There." He handed the postcard and pencil back to him. "Now write yer name."

Willie paled. "I can't."

"Didn't they have school in London?"

"Yeh, but . . ." and he trailed off.

"How about readin'?" asked Tom. "You can read, can't you?"

"No."

"But you was lookin' at them books last night."

"I was lookin' at the pitchers."

Tom scratched his head. The village children were reading at least some words by the time they were six. This boy was eight, so he said. He glanced down at the label on the table to check. "William Beech. Born Sept. 7th, 1930."

"Nine on Thursdee," he remarked. "Your birthday's in five days' time." Willie didn't understand what was so particularly special about that.

"You're nine on Thursdee," Tom repeated, but Willie couldn't think of anything to say.

"Anyways," he continued, "about this here schoolin', didn't yer teacher help you?"

"Yeh, but . . ." he hesitated. "'E didn't like me. The others all called me Sillie Sissie Willie."

"What others?"

"At school."

"What about yer friends?"

He whispered something.

"I can't hear you, boy."

Willie cleared his throat. "I ain't got no friends."

Tom gave a snort. He noticed Willie looking at the black box on the stool.

"Blimmin' heat," he grumbled, wiping his forehead with a handkerchief. "Pick up that box, William, and bring it over here."

Willie did so and placed it carefully on the table. "Lift the lid, then." Willie stared at it. "Go on, take out the cloth ears, open it."

He raised the lid and gazed at the brightly colored pots. "Paints?" he inquired.

Tom grunted in the affirmative. "Bit old, but the pots'll do. You paint?"

Willie's face fell. He longed to paint. "Nah, 'cos I can't read. . . ."

"The ones that can read and write gits the paint, that it?"

"Yeh." Willie touched one of the pots gently with his hand and then hastily took it away. "I

done drawin' with bits of chalk and crayon, on me own."

Tom straightened himself. "We'd best post yer letter. Mustn't worry yer mum. Climb out.

Where's that ole thing?" he mumbled. "Sammy," he shouted, "Sammy."

Willie shaded his eyes and looked around for him. He caught sight of a mound of black-and-white fur slumped under the oak tree.

"Mister Tom," he said, pointing to the dog, "look." Sammy lifted his head. Heaving his body up to his feet, he left his cool sanctuary and ambled over towards them.

They walked round to the back garden of the cottage, past the little wooden outhouse that was the toilet. On top of its roof lay Willie's mattress.

"Don't worry, boy," said Tom, "it'll be dry by tonight."

They went on to the end of the garden, where there was a small neat wooden gate with a hedgerow on either side.

They turned left down a road, and after a few paces Tom opened a gate into the field next to the graveyard. A large cart horse stood drowsily eating grass. Willie hung back.

"Come on," said Tom impatiently.

Sammy bounded on ahead and gave a loud bark at the nag. She lifted her eyes for an instant, shook her head and resumed eating.

"She won't hurt you," said Tom. "You walk alongside of me," and he gave him a gentle push into the field and swung the gate behind him. Willie hung on to Tom's left trouser leg and peered gingerly round at the mare as they walked past her.

"She won't hurt you," Tom repeated, but he could feel Willie trembling so he decided not to pursue the matter.

Tom unhitched it and Willie darted through into a small lane. To Willie's relief, they eventually reached the safety of the gate at the other end of the field.

"Sam," called Tom. "Here, boy." Sammy had been flopped over on one of Dobbs's hooves, enjoying the shade of her large head. He rose obediently and lolloped towards them.

"Let's see you shut it now, William. You must always remember to shut every gate." Willie hurriedly closed it with a crash. "Put the bolt through." He did so. "Good." Willie stood stunned for a moment, for he had never been praised by anyone ever.

The lane they were standing in was bordered by two rows of trees. Their overhanging branches formed a tunnel and, although their leaves were already falling, there was still enough clothe archway to cool them. Willie had never walked through so many leaves. They clustered around his ankles, hiding his sneakers entirely from view.

They walked by a large gate and an enormous, neatly kept garden. A middle-aged man was bending over one of the beds, sadly digging up clusters of gold and russet dahlias.

Sammy had already bounded on ahead and was now sitting lazily by an old wooden gate, waiting for them.

"Blimmin' mind reader," exclaimed Tom to himself.

The tangled hedgerows that grew on either side had almost strangled it into being. He pushed at the gate, and after a struggle it creaked and groaned open on its one rusty hinge. The unkempt garden. The grass reached Willie's knees. The gate permanently closed. Willie closed it carefully behind them and they walked into a wild and

Tom knocked at the front door but there was no reply.

He could hear the sound of a wireless, so he knew someone must be in. After several attempts at attracting attention with the knocker, he walked round the side of the cottage to the back garden.

Leaning back in a wicker chair sat Dr. Oswald Little, a plump, red-faced man who was attempting vainly to wipe the steam from his spectacles. His wife, Nancy, a tall, thin, freckled woman with closely cropped iron-gray hair, was digging a trench in the garden. A cigarette dangled in her mouth. The wireless was blaring out light organ music through the kitchen window.

"Dr. Little!" said Tom. The doctor looked up and put on his spectacles, which immediately slid down his nose.

"Hello, Tom. This is a surprise. You can't be ill."

"No."

He glanced briefly down at Willie, who was now retreating rapidly on hearing the tubby man being called "Doctor." Nancy, noticing how scared he was, sat down at the side of the trench and took the cigarette out of her mouth.

"I'm Mrs. Little," she said hoarsely. "I expect you'd like an orange juice while Mr. Oakley and the doctor have a chat. Yes?"

Willie nodded and followed her through the back door into the kitchen.

Tom sat down.

"What's the problem?" asked the doctor. "The boy, is it?"

"Been sick twice already. He had a good tuck in last night but brung it up."

"Malnutrition," the doctor remarked. "Probably used to chips. All that good food might have been too much of an assault on his stomach. Clear broth, rest, exercise and milk to begin with, and maybe a tonic. Try some Virol and cod-liver oil. I expect he's bed-wetting too," he added.

Tom looked surprised.

"It's quite common," the doctor continued. "Especially if they're small. Give him a month or two to settle. How old is he? Five, six?"

"Eight, goin' on nine."

It was the doctor's turn to look surprised.

"Like a frightened rabbit he is," said Tom.

"Yes," said Dr. Little thoughtfully. "He's obviously been brought up to look on the doctor as the bogey man."

"There's somethin' else. The boy's had a bit of a whippin', like. He got bruises and sores all over him. Done with a belt buckle mostly. He's too ashamed to let folks see. If you could manage to have a look."

"This," croaked a voice from behind, "and warm salt water." It was Mrs. Little. She was standing with a tray of cool drinks. She placed a bottle of witch hazel by his feet.

"We exchanged battle scars," she explained. "I noticed his before we went indoors. I've given him a couple of garters for his socks. You'd think I'd given him the moon."

"The children in Little Weirwold have been quite spoiled, it seems," commented the doctor. "I was up at the Grange last night treating ingrowing toenails. There are two large families up there, nineteen children in all. Nancy and the maid had to delouse half of them. Bags of bones, aren't they dear?" Nancy nodded.

"Thank you for yer advice," said Tom, standing up. "I won't keep you from yer work any longer."

Mrs. Little gave a loud laugh, which deteriorated into a spasm of coughing. She took another drag of her cigarette.

"I'm the one that's doing the work!" she exclaimed.

"Well, I am supposed to be semiretired," protested the doctor lightly. "Anyway, it's too damned hot to be digging."

Nancy shrugged helplessly at Tom.

"Is it fer an air-raid shelter?" he inquired.

"Yes. And when those bombs start falling he'll be the first to dive into it."

"If there are any, I shall remain in bed," retorted the doctor. "I might as well die in comfort. Don't you agree, Tom?"

Tom had until now pooh-poohed the whole idea of building a shelter. After all, they were in the country. But with the extra responsibilities of Willie living with him . . .

"There's the boy to think of," he said. He picked up the witch hazel. "How much do I owe you?"

"On the house," said Nancy.

Tom called Willie and Sam. After another battle with the gate they walked to the end of the lane and on to the road into the sunlight.

Willie was perspiring heavily. Tom touched his cheek and found it was cold. They passed a small red-brick house with a tiled roof. It had a playground and was backed by a field.

"That's your school, William."

Willie glanced at the row of potted plants on the windowsills. The school was quite unlike the dark gray building he had attended in London.

The road brought them to the center of the two rows of thatched cottages. Mrs. Fletcher and her neighbor were standing outside one with a huge sunflower growing in front of it. It was one of the few

cottages that housed a wireless. A small crowd was gathered in and around the garden listening to it.

"You go and post yer card," said Tom. "The post office is near the shop. I'll meet you there."

And he left Willie and headed towards the group of listeners, with Sammy at his heels.

Willie walked slowly past the cottages. All the windows had been flung open.

"Mornin', William," chorused two voices behind him. An elderly couple were leaning over their garden gate. Their cottage stood immediately opposite where Willie was standing.

"We knows yer name from Mrs. Fletcher," said the old man. He wore a crisp white collarless shirt with the sleeves well rolled up, and his baggy gray trousers were held up with a piece of string. His wife was in a flowery cotton dress with a lilac-colored apron over it. Their skin was as wrinkled and brown as an old football, and on their heads were perched steel helmets. Both carried gas-mask boxes over their shoulders.

"Lookin' fer the post office, dear?" said the old lady. "You be standin' right at it."

"You go in, boy. Be all right," added the old man.

"We hope you'll be very happy here," chimed in the old lady, "don't we, Walter?"

"Yes," he agreed. "We do."

"We're the Birds," she said.

"You go on in," he said. "Go on."

Willie knocked on the door.

"Go on in, dear," they chorused.

Willie opened the door and stepped in. He found himself in a room at the end of which was a small counter with a piece of netting above it. To his right were stacked stationery and pens, jigsaws and wool, needles, scissors and assorted oddments, and to his left candy and bottles of pop.

Standing next to the netting was a young boy. He was leaning on a wooden sill, writing intently. A young man in his twenties, with short-cropped hair and glasses, was sitting behind the netting talking to him.

"They'll never read that," he said.

"Yes, they will," the boy replied.

Willie edged forward to see what was happening. The boy was holding a magnifying glass over a postcard and writing on it.

"Mother's got one of these, too," he said, waving the glass vaguely in the direction of the postmaster. It was the boy's appearance that attracted Willie's attention. He was taller than Willie but at a guess about nine years old. His body was wiry and tanned and he had a thick crop of black curly hair, which looked badly in need of cutting. All he wore was a baggy pair of red corduroy shorts held up by braces, and a pair of battered leather sandals. Several colored patches were sewed neatly round the seat of his pants. Willie could not take his eyes off him.

"Can I help you, son?" said the postmaster.

Willie blushed and slid his card across the counter. The man glanced down at it.

"Stayin' with Mr. Oakley, eh? You'll have to watch yer p's and q's there."

Did everyone know that he couldn't read? He glanced across at the strange boy again. His nose was practically touching the card, he was so close to it. He smacked his lips. With a flourish he drew a line at the bottom, screwed on the top of his fountain pen and hooked it into a buckle on his braces.

"Have you a blotter, sir?"

The postmaster slid a piece over to him. "Anything else?" he remarked wryly.

The boy gave a small frown.

"No, I don't think so, thank you." He blotted the card and slid them both under the counter.

"When will it arrive, do you think?"

"Tuesdee, mebbe."

"That's ages," the boy moaned.

"Shoulda sent it sooner, then," said the postmaster.

The boy looked aside at Willie. His white teeth and brown oval eyes stood out in stark contrast against his dark tanned skin. He smiled, taking in Willie's crumpled gray shorts and jersey. Willie turned quickly away and walked out the door, his ears smarting. Tom was standing on the stone step of the shop at the corner, waiting for him.

"There you are," he said. "Comin' in or not?"

He nodded and walked towards the shop, past three women who were talking outside.

He looked inside the door and stepped in. Boxes, sacks and colored packets were piled along the right side of the store. On the left was a long wooden counter with scales at one end and a large wicker basket filled with loaves of bread. Crates of fruit and vegetables were stacked at saucepan bowls, nails and an assortment of colored tins on them. Willie peered outside to the other end. Above the boxes and sacks on the right were shelves with cups, plates, see if he could catch a glimpse of the strange boy from the post office.

"Thanks, Mrs. M," said Tom, talking to a middle-aged couple behind the counter. "I'll drop in the tobacco for you tonight, Mr. Miller. Tea, sugar, flashlight batteries and elastic, you reckon?"

"Sure as eggs is eggs," said the man. He caught sight of Willie standing by a sack of flour. "

'Ere, wot you want?" he cried angrily. "Eh?"

"Don't be too 'arsh," said his wife.

"Be soft with this London lot and they take you for a ride. I had cigarettes, chocolate, fruit, all sorts stolen when that last batch of kids come in."

Willie blushed and backed into the sack.

"Boy's with me," said Tom.

"Oh," said Mr. Miller, taken aback. "Oh, sorry, Mr. Oakley. That's different then."

"William, come over here and meet Mr. and Mrs. Miller."

"Pleased to meet you, dear," said Mrs. Miller, who was endowed with so many rolls of fat that he

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