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## *The Search*

The cottage seemed very quiet without William. Tom missed the sound of his boots clattering along the tiled hallway and his chatter at night. In the days that followed his departure he found himself glancing at the table to share something he had read, only to realize that the chair where he usually sat was unoccupied. He felt the old familiar emptiness that he had experienced after the sudden loss of Rachel. At least he could console himself that William was alive. He listened to the news on the wireless with extra attentiveness, particularly when there were reports of bombing near London.

Hitler had by now invaded Norway and Denmark, and heavy units of the British Fleet had been sent to help the invaded countries but the war still left Little Weirwold unruffled except for those few who missed William. It was sad that he wasn't around to witness early spring. Already buttercups were appearing in the fields and, in the woods, wet primroses and violets had burst through the soggy dark earth.

Tom waited patiently for a letter. After the first week when there was still no word from him he thought William was probably too busy to write for he would probably have his hands full doing chores for his mother. He thought the same the second week but by the third week he began to feel anxious. He himself had written four letters. He knew that Zach had sent several also but there was no reply to any of them.

One night he awoke violently from a nightmare. In the dream, he had been locked into a tiny space with no air inside. It was as though he was being buried alive. But it was the voice that had woken him. He thought he had heard William calling out to him for help. He woke with a jerk only to find Sammy standing by his bedside, panting. He staggered out of bed and fumbled his way towards the bedroom window. Carefully easing the blackout curtains to one side he peered out. It was still dark. He opened the door, walked across the hallway to the living room and looked at the clock. It was three a.m. Almost time for his fire duty anyway. He'd go and relieve Hubert Pullett early. He pulled his corduroys, thick jersey and boots on over his pyjamas, and stepped outside into the damp night slinging his trench-coat, cap and gas-mask on as he walked. Sammy followed him dragging a bit of old blanket in his teeth.

The fire post was a makeshift platform on top of the village hall. A ridiculous piece of extravagance, Tom had thought, when it was being built. He climbed up the ladder which leaned on to it. Mr Pullett was sitting with a blanket wrapped round him and was in the process of falling asleep in a chair. He woke up, pleased to see Tom so early. They chatted for a while until Mr Pullett decided to leave for the warmth of his bed. Tom made himself as comfortable and as warm as was possible and Sammy snuggled in between his legs.

As he stared at the sky he couldn't rid himself of the dream he had just had. If William was in need of help surely he would write to him. He gazed out at the galaxy of stars and brooded. Two hours later the dawn injected its colours into the sky and Mrs Butcher came and took his place.

On the way home he caught sight of Miss Thorne's sister, May, on her ancient bicycle. She was delivering the mail. He ran after her.

‘Nothing for you, I’m afraid,’ she said. ‘I’m sorry.’

She hesitated before moving off again.

‘Mr Oakley,’ she added anxiously. ‘I’m afraid I have a telegram. It’s for Annie Hartridge.’

He looked up startled. The last telegram had brought the news of Michael Fletcher’s death.

‘I’m a little worried,’ she went on, ‘what with her baby due so soon. I’d like to wait till the midwife is visitin’ before delivering it but it’s against regulations.’

Tom frowned thoughtfully.

‘You seen Mrs Fletcher?’ She shook her head.

‘Didn’t like to disturb her.’

‘I’ll go and see her now, suggest she might pop in to see her.’

‘Thanks.’

He watched her wobble off and head towards the farming area on the south side of the village. Turning sharply back he walked in the direction of the Fletchers’ cottage.

Mrs Fletcher had just seen her husband and Edward off to work. The kitchen door was still open and the light from it was casting a pale glow on to the still glistening garden. She was standing at the doorway.

‘You ent on dooty, is you?’ she asked, glancing guiltily at the light.

‘No, I ent,’ said Tom. ‘I jest wanted to have a private word, like.’

‘George and David are asleep. They won’t be botherin’ us. Come on in and have some tea. You’s lookin’ a little on the pale side.’

He stepped into the cosy warmth of the kitchen. Sam padded after him and curled up on the floor in front of her range.

She sat down at the table and poured out two cups of tea.

‘Sit down,’ she said, sliding a cup across to him. ‘What can I do for you?’

Tom looked surprised.

‘There is somethin’ you wants me to do, ent there? Is it Will?’

Tom shook his head.

‘Annie Hartridge has got a telegram.’

Mrs Fletcher put down her cup slowly.

‘David?’ she asked.

‘I don’t know. I jest thought with you havin’ lost Michael and with her about to have her baby, she might need someone who could help, like.’

‘Of course,’ she said, and she stood up and hurriedly untied her apron.

‘She ent got it yet,’ he added.

She rolled down her sleeves.

‘I’d like to be there as soon as possible. In her state she might pass out or somethin’. I’ll think of an excuse, like extra eggs from the Padfields, booties for the baby, that sort of thing.’

Tom nodded. It sounded for the best. He watched her put her coat on.

‘Them trains to London,’ he murmured.

‘Yes?’ she said puzzled. ‘What about them?’

'They run on Fridees, don't they?'

'Yes. That's right.'

'It's Fridee today, ent it?'

'Yis.'

He stood up abruptly.

'I'm goin' to get on that train, Mrs Fletcher, and what's more I'm goin' to get on it today.'

Tom's journey to London was as bumpy and intermittent as William's had been. Dim blue lights lit the tightly-packed carriages and the air was stifling. It was frustrating, too, not to be able to see the stations that they passed, but once it was evening it was too dangerous to attempt to peep through the blacks in spite of the faintness of the blue lights. Sammy, who had not only smuggled himself into the cart but had also jumped off it and followed Tom to the station, was now squashed on to his lap. A makeshift lead, made of rope, hung from between his teeth.

Tom, who had originally refused to allow Sammy to come with him, was now glad of his company. It was going to be a lonely task searching for William.

It was nine o'clock when the train pulled into London. He clambered out with Sammy and stood on the platform feeling totally dazed. The noise was deafening. Hundreds of uniformed figures swirled about him shouting to each other. Another train pulled out and a voice over a Tannoy system was calling out platform numbers and destinations. It was a while before Tom could orientate himself enough to hand his ticket in. He must have looked a strange sight, with his thick white hair and weather-beaten face, clad in an old cord cap, overcoat and country boots with Sammy barking nervously at his ankles. Peering through the hordes of young men he finally spotted the ticket man. He slung the haversack that he had borrowed on to his back. It was filled with clothes and food for William, from people in the village.

He handed his ticket in. The man looked down at Sammy.

'Should 'ave a muzzle, that dog,' he exclaimed.

Tom nodded, having no intention of ever getting one.

'Where you from?' he continued. 'You ain't a Londoner, that I know. On 'olidee, are yah?' and he gave a loud chuckle at the absurdity of his remark.

Tom looked at him blankly.

'Only a joke,' muttered the man. 'Ain't yah got no sense uv 'umour.'

'Where's Deptford?' asked Tom.

'Deppeteforrard?' imitated the man. 'Never 'eard uv it. Say it agen!'

Tom repeated it and the man shrugged.

'Ern,' he yelled to an A.R.P. Warden who was passing. 'You know where Deppeteforrard is?'

'Not 'eard uv it,' said Ern. 'And I knows most places rahnd London. Used to be a cabby. You got it writ dahn?'

Tom handed them the piece of paper with the address written on it.

'Oh, you mean Deptford!' they chorused.

Tom repeated their pronunciation of it.

'Detferd,' he said quietly to himself.

They waved their arms over to the left towards an archway and directed him towards a bus station. Tom thanked them and headed in the direction they had suggested. The two men watched him and Sammy walk away.

'You don't 'arf meet some queer 'uns 'ere,' said the ticket man. 'I 'ope 'e ain't a German spy!' and they gave a loud laugh.

Tom held on to Sammy's lead firmly, for in the unlit street he kept colliding into people. He finally got on to a bus that would take him part of the way to Deptford, but it was a painfully slow journey. He stared in amazement at the conductress in her manly uniform. She was a little irritated at first and then realized that he was a stranger to the City.

'You one of 'em refugees?' she asked kindly.

'Noo,' he replied. 'I don't think so.'

'Where you from, then?'

'Little Weirwold.'

She didn't understand him. His accent was too thick for her.

'In the country, is it?' she shouted, thinking he might understand her better if she raised her voice.

He nodded.

'What brings you to London?'

'Come to see a little boy.'

'Oh. Grandson, is 'e?'

Tom nodded. He knew it was a lie, but he didn't want to go into complicated explanations. Sammy sat obediently on his lap.

By the time Tom had changed buses and been directed and misdirected it was midnight before he reached the area where Willie lived. Accustomed now to the darkness, he could make out only too clearly the awful living conditions. Small dilapidated tenements stood huddled together, all in desperate need of care and attention. So this was William's background, he thought.

Suddenly a loud siren wailed across the sky. He froze. What was he supposed to do? He had read about communal shelters in the newspapers and he knew that people often crowded into the tubes but he had no idea where the nearest tube station was.

'Come on. Move on there,' said a loud brusque voice. 'Move on to the shelter.'

A group of people brushed past him, grumbling and cursing.

"Oo's got the cards?" yelled a woman in the darkness. 'Alf, have you got me bleedin' cards?'

A young girl bumped into him.

"Ere, mind where yer goin', Mister,' she rebuked sharply.

'Sorry,' he muttered. He shouted after her. 'Where's you goin'?' but she had run away.

He felt a hand on his arm. It was a warden, a breezy man not more than ten years younger than him.

'You seem a little lost, sir. Come wiv me.'

Tom picked Sammy up in his arms and ran after him towards a long brick building with a large grey 'S' painted above the door.

The warden, Tom discovered, was the caretaker of the local school. He and several other men had been elected to be wardens by the people in the area. He sat down by Tom.

'You know, dogs ain't allowed in shelters, sir.'

Tom stood up to leave but the warden touched him gently on the arm. 'I think we can overlook that, though.'

He gazed at Tom, puzzled.

'Where you from then? You look like a country man.'

'I am,' he answered. 'I've come lookin' for a boy what stayed with me, like. Evacuee he was.'

The warden looked astounded.

'I think you'd best head back home. We've hundreds of the blighters runnin' away. We send them back. Makes no difference. They just come runnin' back again. You're the first person I've met who's come lookin' for one.'

A young girl peered cautiously over the edge of one of the hammocks that were slung from the ceiling. The warden caught her eye and she lay back quickly, and disappeared from sight.

'That's one,' he said, indicating her swinging sleeping quarters. 'Fifteen times she's run back here. She ses she'd rather be at home even if bombs do drop here, than be miserable and safe in the country.'

'He didn't run away,' said Tom.

'Oh?'

'No. I had a letter from his Mother sayin' she was ill, like, and could he come back for a while to help out. I ent heard nothin' since.'

'How long has he bin gone?'

'Near a month.'

'How long was he with you?'

'Near six months.'

'Six months!'

Tom nodded.

'And he didn't run away!'

'No. We was... he was happy.'

The warden rubbed his chin with his fingers and sighed. 'Look 'ere,' he said. 'There's nothin' you can do, I don't think. Could be when he got home he forgot about you.'

'P'raps. It's jest that I'd like to see that the boy's well. Then I can rest peaceful, like.'

'Blimey. I never met anyone who cared that much for them. I hear such stories about you country folk, not nice 'uns neither. No offence,' he added, 'but I can see some of you are a kind-'earted lot. And,' he went on, raising his voice, 'some people, Helen Ford and brothers, is dahnright ungrateful.'

The hammocks jiggled violently at this last remark.

'Maybe I can help you find this boy. What was yer name nah? Mister...?'

'Oakley. Tom Oakley.'

'Well, Mr Oakley, you say he's from this area?'

Tom nodded and brought out the piece of paper from his pocket. The warden glanced briefly at it and looked up startled.

'Why, it's in this very road. I know number twelve. Willie Beech. That the boy?'

Tom's heart leapt.

'You seen him then?'

'Not since last September. Saw a large party from the school leave for the station. That's the last I saw of him. Quiet boy. Didn't mix. No friends as such. Bullied and ragged a lot by the kids. Sittin' target really. Sickly-lookin' boy. His mother thinks she's a cut above everyone. Don't fit in here at all. Never have. Over-religious type, bible-thumpin', you know what I mean?'

Tom nodded.

'Still, it's part of me job to check who's here and who's not here, in case of bombin' and havin' to identify and I ain't bin notified of him being back. I ain't seen much of her either.' He glanced across the crowded shelter and waved to someone at the far end of it.

'Glad might know somethin'. Glad!' he yelled. 'Glad!'

A fat woman who was sitting playing cards looked up. She smiled, exposing three teeth in a large expanse of grinning gums.

'Yeth, love,' she lisped. 'Wot ith it?'

'Is Mrs Beech on night shift this week. She ain't 'ere.'

'Is she ever!' retorted Glad. 'Wot you wanna know fer?'

'Man here looking for little Willie.'

'Run away, has he? Didn't think he had it in him.'

'No. Man ses Mrs Beech wrote for him to cum home.'

At this Glad climbed over several sleeping bodies and lumbered towards them.

'Wot you on abaht. She told me he wuth stayin'. Said he wath wicked and wuth bein' sent to an 'ome fer bad boys.'

'Boy was never bad with me. That I can vouch for,' said Tom.

'Oo are you then, sir?' Glad asked.

'Tom Oakley.'

'Willie stayed wiv him for nearly six months.'

Glad shrugged.

'I 'aint theen him thinth September.'

'What about Mrs Beech?' began Tom.

'She keeps herself to herself. Bit of a madam. Thinks she's a bleedin' saint if you'll excooth me languidge. She does night shifts so I don't never see her. I live next door yer see. Mind you,' she whispered, 'I don't arfhear some funny noises. Very funny.'

'Ow do you mean?' queried the warden.

'Bumps and whimpers.'

'Bumps?'

'Yeh, like furnicher bein' moved arahnd.'

'What's funny abaht that?'

'At free in the bleedin' morning?! That's what's funny. She's probably dustin' her bible.'

The warden turned wearily.

'Looks like a dead end, don't it, Mr Oakley?'

'I'd still like to see where he lives,' said Tom.

'You cum wiv me, luv,' said Glad. 'You fond of that Willie, then?'

Tom nodded.

'Queer that. You're the first person I know who is. I don't think his own Muvver is even fond of him.'

'Mebbe she'll see me,' said Tom.

'Blimey, I forgot. She's gawn away. To the coast. For a Bible meetin' or somethin'. She told me last week. Dunno why. She don't usually condescend to even look at me.'

'Why warn't I informed,' commented the warden.

'It's up to her, ain't it?'

The warden gave a despairing sigh. 'Do you still want to see the place, Mr Oakley?'

He nodded.

They had to wait a good two hours before they could leave. The small building grew foggy with tobacco smoke. A W.V.S. lady in green uniform visited them with tea and sticky buns and a man called Jack unclipped a rather battered accordion and started playing it. The small group that Glad was part of were in the middle of singing 'We're going to hang out the washing on the Siegfried Line' when the All Clear was sounded, and they left it unfinished in their scramble to get out.

Tom was relieved to be outside again. His clothes smelt of stale tobacco and sweat. He breathed in the night air as if it was nectar. Glad was waiting for him. Together she and the warden accompanied him to Willie's home.

'She fancies 'erself, duth ahr Misses Beech,' lisped Glad. 'Sheeth got the downstairs and the upstairs room. She thumtimes rents her bedroom and thleeps downstairs – well so she seth,' and she winked and gave Tom a nudge.

They stood outside Number Twelve and peered in at the window. One of the newspapers had slid to one side. The interior seemed dark and uninhabited. The window still had brown sticky tape on it to protect the room from the blast of falling glass.

'Deserted,' remarked the warden.

Meanwhile Tom's attention was drawn to Sammy who had started to move in an agitated manner outside the window.

'What's up, boy?' he asked. 'You smell somethin'?' He crouched down and stroked him. 'What is it?'

Sammy began to whine and scratch frantically at the front door. He ran to Tom and, clinging to his trouser leg, he pulled him towards it.

'No one in there, Rover,' said the warden.

'Mebbe,' said Tom. 'But it ent like him to fuss over nothin'!' He jiggled the door knob.

'You can't do that, sir. That's agin' the lor.'

'I think there's someone in there,' said Tom urgently.

A policeman who had been attracted by the commotion joined them.

‘This man reckons there might be someone in there,’ explained the warden. ‘I’ve looked inside, far as I can, and it looks empty to me.’

The policeman pushed back his tin helmet.

‘What evidence do you have, sir?’

Tom pointed to Sammy who had grown quite frantic. He began to bark loudly, still scratching feverishly at the locked door.

They all glanced at each other.

‘I’d like to enter,’ suggested the warden anxiously. ‘I’m worried about the mother and boy who live in there.’

They knocked on the door loudly but there was no answer. Sammy leapt up and hurled himself at it.

‘He can smell somethin’, by all accounts,’ said the policeman.

After much deliberation they decided to break the door down. Between them, Tom, the policeman and the warden broke the wood round the lock after only two attempts.

The door crashed open and they were greeted with a stench so vile as to almost set them reeling. It was as if an animal had died and was rotting somewhere. Sammy ran immediately to a tiny door below the stairway and barked loudly scrabbling at it with his paws. The odour was at its strongest there. The warden lifted aside the latch and swung the door open. The smell was rank, so much so that the warden turned his face away quickly for a moment as if to retch. The policeman pulled his torch out of his pocket and shone it into the hole.