

By Allen O'Leary

London rising

WALTHAMSTOW REDS



ORPHANS VS GERMANS
WWII ACTION ADVENTURE



London Rising: Book 1

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01 Unwanted and Useless

It was five in the morning, the bedroom window was dark, and the occupants - Mr and Mrs Finch - should be fast asleep. But Toby was taking no chances. He held up a hand to stop the four children behind him, and watched.

They were only twenty feet from the locked front gate, but the gate was right under the window. If the Finch's woke up, if they were caught trying to sneak out of the orphanage, they would get a proper lashing. Toby had been punished often enough. He knew what it felt like to have that narrow tail of leather slashed down onto his open palm. He didn't want to feel that much pain again, not if he could help it.

Toby remembered back to breakfast, to Finch's daily talk. They had to listen, even as their porridge went cold in front of them, as Finch told them all that they were *useless* and *unwanted*, that they were *parentless* and had *no chance of making anything of their short and miserable lives*. And, what's more, it was *entirely their own fault*. Finch said all of this with a great deal of pleasure, his weaselly voice rising and falling with dramatic effect as he told them off

for things they could do nothing about. Finch was a bully, pure and simple.

He was also the headmaster of the orphanage, so he could do what he wanted.

None of the children needed reminding that their situation was grim. They really were all parentless. They lived, crammed one on top of the other, in a draughty old orphanage run by Finch and his wife. They relied on the charity of the church and, in this year of 1947, there wasn't much charity left. After eight long years of war with Germany money and good will were hard to come by.

Life was tough, which was why they needed to have some fun every now and then. And if Finch wouldn't let them have any, they would have to take some for themselves.

After looking at the Finch's bedroom window for a full minute, Toby dropped his hand and the others crept ahead and joined him.

Toby looked over at the gate. In his hand was a large iron key, one end of it covered with a sticky smear of duck fat. This had better work, or they would all be locked up for a week, like the children from Dorm Two.

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It had all started as a joke. The six of them - Toby, Esme, Vera, Phillip, June and Robin - had been talking by candle light after the lights-out bell. They were discussing the big

scandal, how Dorm Two had tried to escape from the orphanage one night, just for fun.

And it probably had been fun, right until the moment they were caught trying to sneak out. Caught by Finch himself at the front gate. He docked them all privileges for a month and made them confess to Pethergrew, the parish Rector and Finch's boss. Finch put a padlock on the outside of Dorm Two's door and locked them in every night.

"Caught!" said Vera, her button nose glowing from horror at the thought, "Imagine being caught by Finch for doing something so bad."

"It wouldn't be the strap that would hurt, it would be the lecture you got afterwards that would kill you." joked Robin, bringing a chortle of knowing laughter from all the children.

Toby could see it all. "A lecture that would last longer than the eternity of Hell."

"Toby, don't!" Esme barked at her brother. She didn't like religion being mocked.

"I wouldn't mind a lecture about Hell," chipped in Robin, "so long as he gave you some Heaven to look forward to occasionally, but he doesn't see things that way, does he?"

Even Esme couldn't argue that point. Finch never seemed to get round to talking about the good points of being a Christian.

"They must have been really clumsy to get caught." said Toby.

"Bad at sneaking." agreed Phillip, who really cared about things like sneaking about, and how strong you were, and how many times you could be hit on the upper arm without showing any pain.

Robin lay back on his bed, looking straight up at the wooden beamed ceiling and the many fine cracks in the plaster. Toby could see his big toe through his worn grey sock. "Dorm two, they're all stupid." Robin said, more to himself than anyone else.

"Maybe someone tipped them off?" said Vera.

Toby thought that was very likely. "It would be just like Finch to have a child on the inside."

Esme looked at him, horrified. "What kind of child would spy for Finch?"

"One with more food than the rest." said Robin, looking at Phillip.

Phillip exploded off his bed, moving his chunky body towards Robin with a sudden and alarming strength. Robin tried to escape by dropping to the floor beside his bed and crawling under the bed, but Phillip was on him in a second, pinning him to the rough planking of the floor, his bulky knees pressing Robin's arms to the floor.

June put her hands up around her ears and shrieked.

"Quiet!" hissed Esme.

"What are you saying?!" demanded Phillip angrily.

Robin, who didn't stand a chance in a physical contest against Phillip, backed down. "Nothing.. I'm not saying anything, am I." When that didn't get any let-up from Phillip Robin tried a different tack. "You could never be the snitch in Dorm Two, could you? You don't even sleep there."

Phillip grunted at Robin's logic but kept him pinned down anyway, unsure what to do next.

Toby wondered if he would have to intervene and talk Phillip out of hurting Robin, but then June suddenly spoke. "Squeaky lock!" she said.

"What's that June?" asked Toby.

"If they were caught at the front gate is was probably the squeaky lock. The Finch's bedroom looks over the gate, they would have heard it."

"And" said Esme, "if they tried to get out at midnight then the Finch's wouldn't have been in bed very long, they go to bed at eleven."

Toby nodded, "So they went too early and got ratted out by a lock?"

Esme continued, "The best way to avoid detection would be to escape, not at midnight, but very early in the morning, say at five o'clock. Everyone would be asleep for hours by then."

Having caught their attention, she looked at the others, "Well, it's the least likely time to want to escape the orphanage isn't it?"

That was just the kind of thing that Esme was very good at. She would often sit and listen to a conversation among the children and, just when an argument was brewing and fists were being threatened, she would say something in her strong and even voice and everyone would find that what she said made perfect sense. They would stop arguing, agree with her, and feel rather stupid that they hadn't thought of her suggestion first. This habit was deeply annoying to her brother. He hated it when his sister was right.

But what she had said set everyone thinking. It was as if Esme had popped the lid on a delicious tin of sweets that belonged to someone else and what you had to do, even though you knew it was bad, was lift the lid right off and see them for yourself.

"Why we would bother trying to escape?" said Phillip, "There's nowhere to go at five in the morning is there?"

Vera answered him. "The point of getting out is not to do anything in particular, it's to prove that we have some kind of choice in our lives. Even if that isn't true, it would be nice to feel that for once, wouldn't it?"

"Why don't we," said Toby, trying to go one better than Esme, "mount an escape mission ourselves?"

Phillip, distracted, climbed off Robin, who immediately rubbed his upper arms to get some blood back into them. "What kind of mission?" Phillip said.

"Let's do a runner." said Toby, "At five. For two hours. Just to show we can."

Phillip, who always said yes to anything that sounded brave, even if it was obviously stupid, said he would do it. Robin agreed straight away. This was just the sort of tricky, sneaky thing that he liked doing. Vera and Esme - who both thought they were as brave and clever as any boy - looked at each other, and agreed it was worth a try. In the end, it was only June who said she wouldn't go out with them, though she would help by standing guard.

That didn't amount to much help at all. Everyone knew that June, despite being the cleverest child in the Orphanage by miles, was a tiny scrap of a girl who wouldn't say boo to a goose let alone guard anything. But no one said anything to make her feel bad.

"And you need some duck fat." said June.

Everyone looked at her like she was mad.

"What's that June?" asked Toby.

Looking disappointed that she was having to explain something so obvious, she said, "You need something to stop the lock squeaking, but you can't put oil on the key it will just run off, and you can't carry a can of oil around with you. But if you dipped the key in duck fat it would stick to the key and stop the lock squeaking."

*

So that was how they found themselves sneaking out the kitchen door of the Orphanage at five that morning without any real idea of what they were going to do, only knowing that they had to be back by seven for the wake-up bell.

Toby put the key into the lock, turned it gently back and forwards a couple of times to push the fat around, then carefully turned the key.

It was blissfully silent.

Moments later they were all on Shernall Street, walking away from the orphanage.

Well, thought Toby, they might be Unwanted but they had just proved that they weren't Useless. Not unless they were caught coming back into the orphanage that is.

02 The Walthamstow Reds

For a moment the five of them stood out in the road. The sky was still dark and with the blackout curtains up in the surrounding houses and the street lights turned off, it was difficult to see anything until their eyes adjusted to the dark.

It was quiet too. The trams that rumbled and clanged past the orphanage during the day didn't start until six thirty. Toby glanced back at the orphanage. He could see June's shadowy form waving at them from the attic window. He waved

back and waited for her to close the curtain before leading the rest of them up The Drive.

This was a route they knew well, it was the way to the parish Church which sat on the top of Churchill road, but it was different at night. The houses that lined the street seemed to be sleeping as deeply as their inhabitants and formed a solid line of creepy darkness. Every now and then there was a bombed-out house and smashed walls and roofing timbers stood jagged and sinister, a deeper black against the sky.

Church Hill wasn't much of a hill at all, more a gentle rise, and soon the five of them were passing the tennis courts at the top and making their way down towards the Walthamstow Market. They'd decided to go to the market because they knew something would be happening there. There wasn't much point in escaping from the Orphanage if all you did was walk around empty streets for a couple of hours.

Soon they could see the flickering glow from many kerosene lamps ahead, a warm bubble of activity in the dark. Hundreds of people were setting up stalls, pulling boxes and baskets off carts, chatting, laughing and shouting. Horses clopped their hooves and shook their heads in the damp morning air, waiting for their owners to take them to the stables in the back streets where they could feed on yesterday's old fruit and vegetables.

Leading the others Toby stepped into the circle of light and into the market itself. No one paid them any attention, there were plenty of children helping their parents, and for a while they walked slowly along, taking in the sights and sounds of people setting up their pitches for the day's trading.

It was a lively scene. Stall holders chatted to each other, horses impatiently stamped their feet and because the stalls were jammed so close together there were frequent accidents. Baskets were knocked by careless elbows and produce would spill out onto the main road. Men would shout at the culprit before picking it all up, wiping the dirt off and putting it back on display.

Toby knew that many of the stall holders had been all the way down to Covent Garden and back already this morning, or come in from Essex for a couple of days, loading up their carts with whatever fruit and vegetables they could get their hands on. Collins, the orphanage cook, endlessly complained food was scarce and subject to rationing. But Toby knew there was always a supply of things that cash - and not food coupons - could buy. Robin had told him how it worked and that it was called the 'Black Market'. You could find an orange if you asked the right people, but you'd have to pay a lot for it, so much that you couldn't afford to eat anything else all day. Toby couldn't remember what an orange tasted like.

Toby watched the children working with their parents, helping make the family some money before they went to school after breakfast. He felt a pang of loneliness as he watched one dad, his face deeply furrowed with smiley creases, ruffle the hair of a boy, both of them laughing easily at something one of them had said.

* After watching the activity for fifteen minutes, they walked further into the market, picking their way through the stalls, down past the library and towards The Carlton cinema, where they stopped and looked at the film posters in the windows. None of them had even seen a movie. Vera and Esme were excited by the posters showing brightly dressed women wearing colourful nylon dresses and sunglasses. Sunglasses? Robin pointed out you would never need those in London.

Vera laughed at him "Don't you know what Hollywood is?"

"A village near Romford?" shrugged Robin, "A type of tree?" A bit further down they stopped, sat down on the front step of a shop, and watched. Toby couldn't have been the only one feeling hungry, as Robin leaned over and whispered to them, "We should sneak out and grab some spilled apples."

"That's thieving!" protested Esme.

"No, it's taking advantage of a favourable situation," said Robin, his eyes bright with mischief.

Vera turned to Esme, "And how long is it since you've had a good apple, Esme?"

Esme was a very good gardener, but they didn't grow apples at the orphanage's allotment. Esme thought for a minute.

"Years."

"There you go then!" said Toby.

"That's no excuse to..." started Esme before Toby cut her off again. "And what's the point of getting out of the Orphanage if we don't do something naughty?"

Esme folded her arms, not prepared to go along with her brother, though he did have a point.

"If we're going to be bad we might as well be good and proper bad." said Vera, backing Toby up.

As if the question were settled once and for all, and before Esme could pipe up again, Toby pointed back out into the busy street. "There are tons of shadows between the stalls. If we wait there we should be able to pick off the odd apple without being seen."

"Blow that!" said Phillip and before anyone could protest he stood up, walked around the back of an unwatched apple stall and pushed it forward, tipping a few dozen apples into the middle of the road where they started to roll down the gentle slope of the High Street.

Robin was quickest off the mark, darting across the line of apples, picking up one in each hand and scooting to the other side of the street, melting into the darkness behind another row of stalls. He waved the others forward before disappearing up a side street.

Taking the hint the others followed, each grabbing two apples and running past the stalls and into the lanes behind the market. Esme didn't take any, but she made sure to follow the others so she didn't get separated.

* The shouts of the angry stall owner bounced up the alley behind them as they ran, but there was no way he would leave his stall unattended long enough to catch them, and he didn't even bother trying.

They kept running for a hundred yards, their hard shoes clattering on the footpath. Then they slowed, making their way left and right in the streets until eventually they found themselves up on a quiet street lined with houses.

Robin giggled, holding up his two apples as if they were made of gold. Toby shh'ed him, then started giggling too and soon they were all at it, chuckling at their victory.

"What do we do with them, then?" said Vera.

"Eat them?" suggested Robin, sarcastically.

"We can't eat them all now," said Toby, "we have to give June one."

"Let's eat a couple now and hide the rest in the veggie shed, among the potatoes." said Vera.

"How will we divide them up?" asked Phillip.

Robin reached down into his pocket. "Look what else I got!" He pulled a curved knife, as long as his hand, from his pocket.

"Gosh!" said Toby, both impressed and frightened at the lethal looking blade.

Slicing the apple into quarters and, keeping one slice for himself, Robin gave one each to Toby, Phillip and Vera. Esme didn't say anything.

Toby bit into his quarter. It was beautiful, the sweetest thing he had tasted in a long time. Looking at Esme he handed her half of his share. She smiled at him. They were brother and sister after all and if they didn't look after each other, who would?

* "Walthamstow Reds." said Vera.

"What?" said Toby, barely paying her any attention. This was just the usual kind of random thing that Vera said.

"That's the variety of apple. See how they're pink and blotchy on the inside?"

They all looked and sure enough there were splashes of red on the white flesh of the apple.

"They only grow around here. They're local apples. Walthamstow Reds."

"And we got them red-handed!" said Robin.

It was then that Esme pointed into a house, the curtains in the front room were open a little and a clock was visible on the back wall. "Five to seven!"

That shut them up. They had five minutes to get back to the orphanage before the wake-up bell. Five minutes to do a ten minute walk.

"Come on then, you Walthamstow Reds, let's get back!" said Toby and led them at a trot back to the orphanage.

They slipped up the stairs to the dorm, where June looked fit to burst with worry, getting there just a minute before the morning bell sounded.

As he sat down to breakfast Toby had to admit he felt good. It wasn't just the thrill of doing something naughty, they had done something for themselves. He knew already that they would be taking more trips out of the Orphanage.

Looking around the table at the glowing faces there, he realised that 'The Walthamstow Reds' would be right behind him, and if that meant there was going to be trouble, they would be ready for it.

03 The Papers

Even though they went down to the market three more times in the next month, June never once came out with them.

June always tried hard in the garden, sweating and grafting away, but at the end of the day the piles of weeds or potatoes she had taken from the garden were always half the size of anyone else's. The other Walthamstow Reds would often top her piles up when she wasn't looking, so she wouldn't feel so bad or get into trouble with Braithwaite, the grumpy gardener.

She wasn't strong, or practical, but she was good at other things. Like homework. She was a magic at that. She could

finish your homework for you before you'd even finished reading the questions. She was also good at anything that required attention to detail - she seemed to see things that no one ever noticed.

So it wasn't a surprise that it was June who saw the smallest thing, something that would prove to be very important.

One night, as they were munching on apples they had obtained from a market raid that morning, she noticed that Toby had wrapped his in a large piece of dirty newspaper.

"What's the date on that, Toby?" she asked him.

He decided to humour her as he knew she liked to be exact about dates and numbers, so he read it out, "September the third, Nineteen Forty Six."

"Three days ago." said June, "May I have it?"

Toby shrugged and handed the ragged piece of paper over to her.

She smoothed it out on top of her bed and started reading. No one thought much of it, June read everything she could find, no matter how boring. She even read text books, books that should have been years too difficult for her.

Robin was halfway through telling them all, for the umpteenth time, how he was going to start a Rolls Royce shop after the war when June's small voice interrupted him.

"The war's not going to end, at least not soon. And not well, not for us."

They all looked at her, confused. "What are you talking about?" said Esme.

"Come and look." she said.

They all clustered around June to see what she had found, each pulling at the paper to see what was on it.

"Stop! You'll rip it!" said Toby urgently. He pulled the paper up into the air and read the headline.

"Germans mass along French coast. London to feel Speer's wrath as new V6 rockets set to launch."

There was a moment's stunned silence. This was the first they had heard of Germans on the French coast, or of rockets pointed at London.

"Jeepers." said Robin, seriously.

June had gone ahead in the article and now read aloud from it, reeling off a list of numbers. "A million troops, thousands of planes, hundreds of ships all gathering around the Dutch, French and Norwegian coastlines."

Toby felt a little sick, and looking at Esme he could see that she was confused and upset too.

Mr Finch gave them regular updates at breakfast prayers and, according to him, everything was going fine. According to Finch the Germans had given up on England and had settled on occupying mainland Europe. According to Finch there was nothing at all to worry about.

"You know what that means." said Vera, her voice low and tense.

"No." said Phillip, who always needed things spelt out for him.

"They're going for London. That's why they're in Holland and Norway. They want to come in over the South East and Essex coast, maybe right up the Thames itself."

"But I thought," said Toby, his brow creased with confusion, "we had all this under control."

Vera spoke again, her face ashen with worry, "One thing is certain, we can't trust what Finch tells us."

They all went silent then, thinking about what a German invasion of London would be like. The truth was they had no idea what it would be like, but everyone was certain it wouldn't be any good.

They had all been five or six years old when the war started so they had lived with it constantly, but only as a distant threat. To them the war was an excuse for Finch to give them less food or to work them harder. The fighting itself was a long way away and happened to other people.

Robin broke the silence. "I wonder how big a V6 rocket is. Must pack a big wallop. Remember the V2?"

No one needed to answer Robin's question. They all remembered the London Blitz of the early 1940's. Several houses just up the road had been destroyed and dozens of people injured, though it was much worse down on The Thames where the docks were. They had got used to seeing searing

orange flames on the horizon from fires in the factories that ran down the Lee Valley to the docks.

That was six years ago - how bad would a V6 be? Were they three times worse than a V2?

Toby decided he needed to speak. He liked to think of himself as a leader and he knew that leaders spoke first and encouraged people. "We should let everyone in the Orphanage know what's happening."

Esme shook her head. "Not yet."

"Why not?!" Toby frowned at his sister for contradicting him.

"We don't know enough, let's go out tomorrow morning and get a whole bunch of newspapers. We must be able to get some from somewhere."

Vera, Robin and June nodded at Esme's idea.

"I know where." said Robin. "I'll go out by myself and get some."

"I'll come with you." said Toby, "We'll leave them out for everyone to read." He added, "Finch better not find out it was us or he'll make our lives hell."

They all agreed with Toby on that. No one wanted to be on the wrong side of Finch.

So the next day all the children in the orphanage found a copy of 'The Times' on their table as they came in for breakfast. Robin and Toby had gone out alone at six o'clock

and swiped eight, one for each dorm, off the top of a bundle that was left outside the local newsagent on Hoe Street.

* The scene in the dining room at breakfast was chaos. Children had pages of the paper in front of them, passing them rapidly around the table so that everyone - at least the children who could read - could see what was really happening in the outside world.

It was grim reading. The English Prime Minister, Lord Basham, had admitted to Parliament that they were powerless to stop the build-up as most of our own troops were still tied up in the war in the Baltic (wherever that was) and it would take weeks to get them back.

There were stories about the failure of British Intelligence - why was it that none of Britain's spies had known anything about the build up of troop before they happened? How had everyone been blind-sided by the German Chancellor, Albert Speer?

June was particularly interested in a long and dense article about the German code breaking effort. She sat like a sparrow, pecking and tutting at the article as if it were food. When Toby asked why she was so agitated, she did her best to explain what was going on. Apparently the English had cracked the German's Enigma code early in the war using their new inventions - computers - and that had given them an intelligence advantage for many years. But two years ago the Germans had realised what had happened and started designing

and using their own computers to make uncrackable new codes. So now the English couldn't read the minds of the Germans like they used to. Ever since the failure of the D-Day landings in France in 1943 the English had been on the back foot. That was the simple version, though June said it was much more complicated and that the maths was really interesting.

Toby had to take her word on that.

* When Mr and Mrs Finch came in for breakfast and saw what was happening they panicked and rushed about the room, desperately trying to pull the papers out of the children's hands. Other children were pulling the papers back out from behind them and the Finches were getting crosser and crosser, shouting all sorts of threats and punishments at them. But there were too many children and eventually the Finches had to get out, leaving the papers behind and locking the children into the dining room without any breakfast.

The children barely noticed their hunger as they sat there reading the papers and talking about the news. Some of the little kids didn't understand what was happening and started to cry. Esme and Vera went off to try and explain things to them, explain and give them a hug.

Finally, at nine, Finch unlocked the door and stood in front of them, looking for once humble in his long frock coat and too-tight dog collar. He was wringing his hands and when he spoke he sounded older and weaker than usual, his pinched face flushed with anxiety. Beside him his wife stood with

crossed arms, formidable and silent, as stern as her husband was nervous. Toby thought Mr Finch looked about as frightened of her as he did of the children.

"It was the parish's fault," he started. "I wanted to tell you everything but they wouldn't let me." His voice was lost under the sound of fifty children booing and jeering and it took him a couple of tries to get them all to be quiet. "Yes there are Germans on the other side of the channel but really, there is nothing to be worried about."

This statement bought more boos. How could there be nothing to worry about if they were about to be invaded?

As the hubbub died down, Toby, thinking it was about time he showed his leadership qualities again, shouted out over the dining room, "How about you give us the papers every day then, if there's nothing to worry about?"

The very impertinence of this question silenced the room. Everyone looked at Mr Finch, who was beet-red now, and then back to Toby who was trying his best to look strong and not show how he was really feeling, which was absolutely terrified. The face-off seemed to last for ever, with both of them looking at each other. Who would break first?

"Newspapers?! For children?!" spat Mr Finch. "Very well, you shall have newspapers. But," he raised his pointer finger high into the air above them, "don't blame me if you don't like the news!"

This brought a series of cheers and Toby felt encouraging slaps on his back. As Mr Finch left the room he looked over at Toby. He felt an icy stab of anxiety as Finch gave him a smile, the kind of smile that said he would be taking special interest in Toby from now on.

04 Shortbread

Just four hours later, when they were out at the allotment weeding, Toby heard Robin mutter "Incoming, three o'clock." under his breath.

Toby looked up to see Mrs Finch storming across the gardens towards them looking like murder. Her shirt was catching the wind and billowing into her face and she had keep angrily swatting it away from her as she walked. You could practically see the steam coming out of her ears.

Toby would have burst out laughing, but he realised that she was heading straight for him. He kept his head down, digging in the dirt, pretending to concentrate on his task.

"You!" She barked, forcing Toby to look up into her broad sweaty face. "Headmaster's office! Now!"

Toby barely had time to nod before she turned and started to flap and tut her way back to the Orphanage.

* By the time he had cleaned himself up and walked slowly back to the Orphanage it was twelve o'clock. Toby was moving as slowly as he thought he could get away with because he was

scared. He had a terrible feeling of dread in the pit of his stomach. He was going to get the strap, that was certain. And, worse than that, he wondered if Finch would use his darkest punishment - solitary confinement.

The only person who had ever got solitary before was Spencer Digby, an older boy who towered over Finch. Digby was just about to turn fourteen, the age the children were let out into the adult world. He had called Mr Finch a horrible old miser in front of the whole Orphanage. Spencer had added a some colourful swear words as well, the kind of words the market traders might use.

Finch put Spencer into solitary for his entire last week.

They had all heard Digby late at night, begging to be set free, asking for forgiveness, promising to be good, but Finch left him in there to rot. When Spencer came out he was meek and seemed to walk with a stoop. Finch had broken him. Then he kicked Digby out the gate and into the real world with a sneering laugh.

Remembering it made Toby even more apprehensive. By the time he knocked on Finch's door his heart was racing and his hands were clammy. If this was leadership he decided he didn't want any of more of it.

"Come in." said Finch, sounding surprisingly pleasant and cheery.

Confused, Toby pushed open the door and saw Finch, not hovering behind his dark mahogany desk wielding his strap as

usual, but sitting in a comfortable chair by the window, a closed Bible on his lap. Finch gestured to the empty chair across the occasional table, "Have a seat Toby, please."

Toby didn't know what was happening. Was Mr Finch actually being nice to him?

He sat down warily. Mr Finch poured tea into a delicate cup and pushed it over the table towards Toby and then picked up a plate.

"Biscuit?"

Toby's eyes just about popped out. Biscuit? He couldn't remember when he last had a biscuit, and he'd never had any as fine as the selection on offer now. There were shortbreads and pink lady fingers and wafers. Which one? He quickly picked a shortbread. The twinkling sprinkle of sugar was too much to resist.

Biting into it was heavenly and the tea to wash it down was fragrant and sweet, much nicer than their own.

"I am glad you could join me Toby, I wanted to talk with you." Finch smiled a broad smile that showed off his crooked and decaying teeth, making him look as friendly as a crocodile hungering after a meal.

"You did?" said Toby, unable to keep surprise out of his voice.

"It was very clever, what you did today."

"Was it?" Toby was really confused now, why was Finch complementing him?

"Oh yes." Finch bit into a wafer and the chocolate filling slid down his lower lip. He quickly tilted his head forward and caught it back into his mouth with a horrible sucking sound. "You put me in a corner."

"Did I?" said Toby.

Finch smiled his not-smile, "You know you did." Finch tapped a shortbread on his saucer before dramatically plunging it into his tea. "Very clever indeed."

Finch waited a moment, pulled the biscuit out and, in the way a sparrow might feed it's young, let the whole thing drop with a fleshy plop into his upturned mouth.

Toby felt a wave of nausea come over him and he had to pretend to cough to cover his disgust.

Finch looked directly at Toby, "You put everyone against me."

Toby felt sweat suddenly prickle on his forehead. "Well, I think it would be fair to say that everyone agreed with me at the time."

"Is that right?" Finch took another shortbread and repeated the whole hideous dunking routine. Toby had to look at a photo on the wall, a wedding portrait of Mr and Mrs Finch, to stop himself from gagging. They didn't look much younger than they were now. They couldn't have been married a long time.

Mr Finch continued, "It is good to be a part of the majority, wouldn't you say?"

Toby felt like he was being asked a trick question, but he couldn't see what Mr Finch was driving at.

"If they agree with you, certainly."

Finch nodded, leaned back in his chair and looked out the window. "Sometimes you must keep your own counsel and do what you think is right even though it goes against the majority. Because you know that one day your kind will come and save you, will come and prove you right. Then the sacrifice will have been worth it."

Mr Finch was making no sense at all. Toby wondered how long this was going to last. He would have preferred to get the strap, at least that was clear cut, all this talking was making his head spin.

"If you say so, Mr Finch." he said.

Finch snapped back to him, making Toby jump and his cup rattle in its saucer, "Boy! I'm offering you something here, the chance to be a leader, the chance to be part of the New World. Will you embrace that?"

Toby really had no idea what he was meant to embrace, no idea what the 'New World' was, all he knew was that Finch was raving mad and the sooner he got out of his office the better.

Finch leaned over the table towards Toby. "Don't you want to be a leader?" Finch asked, his red face just inches away from Toby, his breath both sickly and sweet at once.

Toby spoke quickly, before he had a chance to think. "Yes sir. Yes I do, but..."

"Excellent!" said Finch, pulling the cup and saucer from Toby's hand and practically pushing him out the door, "Await my word!"

"But I don't understand what you want!"

"You will boy, you will." Finch put his fingers to his lips to silence Toby's next question.

With that Finch slammed the study door closed and Toby found himself back in the corridor, grateful that he hadn't been caned but confused, deeply confused, about what he had just agreed to.

* Later, as Toby lay in bed, unable to sleep, he thought about the position they were all in. As orphans they had no rights and with no parents they had no one to stand up for them. The Church, represented by Finch, was meant to be looking after them, but the power he had over them was total.

It was unfair. Why should this one man have so much say in the lives of fifty children? Why should Toby have no real choice when Finch asked him to do something? Finch was using his position to lord it over him, to manipulate him in ways that weren't yet clear, and Toby didn't like it.

He turned in bed and saw Esme looking at him, her face only a couple of feet from his, a pale disc in the moonlight that leaked in around the threadbare curtains in their room.

Yes, Esme was a pain sometimes, but there were moments that he felt very close to her, almost like he could see and hear what she was seeing and hearing. He remembered

the time he had hurt his leg last year, slashing it deeply with a scythe as he was cutting hay out in Chingford Mount. Esme had been two miles away at the allotment but somehow she knew he had been hurt, and ran to Whipps Cross hospital, getting there just as he did. Braithwaite, the gardener, was amazed to see her there because he hadn't sent a message to the Orphanage. Esme said she just had a sudden feeling of knowledge in her stomach and a strong urge to go to the hospital. Sometimes the thought of that spooked him out. And sometimes he thought they simply knew each other very well and she had made a lucky guess that day.

Whatever the truth was, it felt good now when she put her hand in his and squeezed it before closing her eyes again and falling asleep. Everything would be all right, everything would be all right if they could just stay together.

05 Double cross

The next day Finch chose Toby to ring the bells. First for breakfast, then to signal the beginning of work, then lunch, then back to work again, the dinner bell at six o'clock and, finally, the bell that sent everyone to bed at nine. Ringing the bell was meant to be a privilege but to Toby it felt like punishment. Finch smiled at him. A lot. Which made Toby feel nervy-sick.

He hadn't told Esme about yesterday's meeting with Finch, and all through the day she looked at him oddly. It wasn't like Toby to keep something from her and he felt ashamed.

But he had to admit to himself that he did want to be a leader, to be something other than a labourer when he got out of the orphanage. He wanted to be able to look after his sister. Toby knew that she was perfectly capable of looking after herself, but he still felt the obligation of the older brother.

Actually they had no idea which of them had been born first, but Toby believed he was the older one. It was just a feeling he had. A feeling he needed.

* That night, when the six of them were sitting on their beds in the attic, Toby noticed that no one was including him in their chit-chat, or even looking at him.

Robin and June were reading, Robin was pretending to read one of his Beano comics and June a maths book. Philip was throwing a tired old tennis ball into the air and catching it and Vera was, as always, doing some hand sewing. Esme was looking at the window. Everyone was silent.

Silence drove Toby crazy, he hated it. He would rather be talking, arguing even, anything other than the incriminating quiet. Still, he didn't want to be the first to give in, to break the silence, so it went on for ten minutes, until he couldn't take it anymore.

"Is something wrong?" Toby asked Esme.

"With me? No." Said Esme still looking out the window.

Robin gave a small snigger.

"What's up with you?" snapped Toby.

"Just clearing my throat." said Robin.

Toby frowned. He looked at each of the others in turn but still none of them would look him in the eye. No one but June, who was always incapable of telling a lie.

He decided to ask her directly. "Why won't anyone talk to me, June?"

"Well..." she started, not looking up from her book, "I think everyone is wondering why you were ringing the bell today."

"So what if I was ringing the bell?" said Toby, sounding petulant.

"No one gets to ring every bell in the day, Toby." said June.

"Yes, and?" said Toby again, even more defensively.

June continued, "And that meeting you had with him yesterday. There were several theories. The main thrust seemed to be that you had sold out to Finch."

Toby felt the blood rush to his face. "Sold out? What do you mean by that?"

Esme spoke softly. "Maybe you'd agreed to stop being a pain in return for something."

"Maybe the next time we sneak out of the orphanage we'll find Finch waiting for us, with a big net!" said Robin.

Toby didn't want to tell them the truth, he didn't want to say that he had agreed to something but that even he didn't know what it was. He had to think of something that didn't make him look like a total idiot.

"Well..." he started, not quite sure of what he was about to say, "I did get Finch to, to..."

"Yes?" said Vera, looking at him expectantly.

"I got him to trust me," he said, "so that I could find out what he is up to."

Toby had surprised even himself with that, but once he said it, it made perfect sense. "I am a double agent!" he announced grandly.

Esme clapped with happiness. "Oh thank goodness for that!" Then she turned to Vera, "See? I told you he hadn't gone bad."

Vera shrugged, looked at Toby and giggled as if to say that she hadn't really been thinking badly about him either. "I just thought it was odd." she said.

"My behaviour was odd," said Toby grandly, "you were right to question it."

He turned to the rest of them. "We must stick together if we want to be able to survive the coming crisis, and that means we must trust each other. That includes questioning each other if need be." Toby liked the sound of that, he felt like a leader.

"So why," said Robin snidely, "didn't you tell us what you were doing?"

Trying not to sound as caught out as he felt, Toby turned to Robin, who was looking at him closely. Toby decided to raise his voice at Robin, because he knew Robin didn't like being shouted at, "Because I didn't know if it would work, that's why!"

Robin looked away, though he didn't look like he really believed Toby.

"I think it's brilliant." said Philip. "Well done."

"Thanks," said Toby, grateful that Philip was on his side.

"So then," said Vera, "what's the plan?"

"The plan?" stuttered Toby.

"Now that you have his confidence, what's the plan?" repeated Vera.

Toby had no idea what the plan was.

He knew he had to say something, so he started to speak, hoping something sensible would come out. "That's why I need your help." said Toby. "I have an idea, but... I was interested to know what all of you thought I should do." Toby thought that was a stroke of genius - turn the question back on them.

"What was your idea then?" asked June, missing Toby's point.

Toby sighed. It was hard to be angry at June because she really didn't have a clue about when she was being annoying so it was pointless getting cross as she would just cry.

He had to make something else up. "I wanted to gain his trust so that I could get our point across. Finch doesn't like being made to seem like an idiot, right?"

The other children nodded in agreement.

"So if he trusts me then I can suggest changes from the inside and he can make them look like they were his idea!"

Toby thought that was brilliant, and it was even possible. Maybe he really could use his influence with Finch to make all the children's lives better. "For a start, I could get him to stop using the strap and cane so much."

Philip nodded. "That would be good." Philip was the one who seemed to get the cane most.

Esme turned to look at Toby. "You could find out things about him."

"Could I?" asked Toby, unsure of what she was getting at.

"Yes," she continued. "You could find out what he's really up to."

Everyone looked at Esme, suddenly curious about what she meant. The room felt hot and still, as if something important was about to happen.

"There's something about him, and his wife, that just doesn't add up."

"You're right about that Esme." said Robin, "For a man of God he doesn't have much good in him. At least not next to old Cape."

They all went quiet for a moment, remembering Mr Cape, the Headmaster before Finch, a genial and enthusiastic man. It was Cape who had broken all the rules and set up the Attic Dorm so that Esme and Toby could be in the same room together when they came out of the parish nursery. Cape said it would be 'inhuman' to break them apart. Cape had then selected some of the more 'special' orphans and put them all together. Then one day about two years ago, without any announcement, Finch had stood before them at breakfast and told them that Cape had given up on them and that the parish had decided they needed a firmer hand.

"Good old Cape." said Esme, her voice soft with fondness.

"I was looking at the photo of the Finchs' on their wedding day," said Toby, "and it seems to me they haven't been married very long. Mrs Finch was wearing a shirt she wears now, and it still looks new. I think they were married just before they took over the orphanage."

"And why would anyone want to marry Finch?" said Vera, a shudder of disgust running through her.

"The same reason anyone marries anyone." said Robin, "They've got a lot in common."

"They seem so different." said Esme, "He's thin as a rake, she's built like a church. He's mean and clever and weasley, she's stupid as an ox."

"It must be something else, a shared belief." said Toby.

"It's not religion, obviously." sniped Robin.

Esme sat up on her bed. "A shared belief. Exactly Toby. It can't just be that they're both horrible people, no one goes around thinking 'I'm a disgusting human being, I have to find someone as disgusting as myself to marry'. I think they got married because they do have something in common, and it's something they both must really love."

Before Esme could continue, a sound they hadn't heard for many years cut through their conversation. It was the urgent call of the air raid siren, the sound that said danger was on the way. Death was going to fall from the sky.

06 Now and then

For a moment no one knew what to do. They all looked at each other in surprise - how could there be an air raid so soon?

Vera was the first one to snap back to reality.

"Downstairs, now!" she yelled, jumping up from her bed.

They quickly grabbed their warm clothes and jackets and spilled out the door. Within two minutes they had corkscrewed down the main staircase and joined the cram of children in the basement.

The drill was that each dorm called out their name when they were all in the basement and Mrs Finch ticked it off on a blackboard with chalk. Esme shouted "Attic!" as they all tumbled in. When the names of the other eight rooms were called out a couple of the older boys pulled at the massive

wooden doors until they slammed shut, then barred them from the inside with heavy slats of iron.

It wasn't nice down there. There was no fire and only a couple of kerosene lamps for light. The wooden benches were narrow and the children were rammed shoulder to shoulder, shivering and instantly uncomfortable. Their breaths clouded in the cold, earthy air as they listened as hard as they could for rockets.

Finch, his wife, Braithwaite and Collins all sat around a table at one end of the basement. They had their own lamp and thick fur blankets draped over their shoulders and knees. Finch read a book, one of his thrillers, and chewed on a chicken leg while his wife embroidered a sampler. They could have been on a picnic. Braithwaite and Collins, both of whom seemed old as rock, chatted to themselves and laughed quietly, the pungent fumes from their pipes stinging the children's nostrils.

Toby knew there was something weird about Finch, something about what he was saying yesterday afternoon, but he had no idea what it was. What had Esme noticed about him? He whispered to Esme, "What did you mean about Finch?"

"He's hiding something," said Esme.

"Is he?"

"Yes." She looked at Toby, her face shadowy in the low flickering candle light. "But I can't tell you why I think that. It's just..."

"Yes?" Toby encouraged her to keep going.

"It's the way he looks at things."

"Really?" That didn't seem like much to go on.

Esme screwed up her face. "I can't explain it, it's like he's greedy. Greedy and impatient, like he's waiting for something."

Toby looked at Finch. He was lost in his book, gnawing on the chicken, his narrow nose quivering above the white flesh. It wasn't an attractive sight, and Finch was obviously mad, but Toby couldn't see anything sinister in it.

Toby started to talk but the hubbub of chatter in the basement was cut through with a horrible sound. Everyone instantly stopped talking and listened.

It was a grating high-pitched whine, a sound that felt like it was inside you rather than high above and as it got closer and closer it seemed to get further into your head.

Toby clasped his hands to his ears but it made no difference. This was much worse than sound of the V2 rockets that had come over earlier in the war. These were louder, more intense, and it kept building until it seemed to drown his senses - surely it was going to land on top of them.

Toby looked around and saw the looks of terror and disbelief on the children's faces. Then he looked at the adult table.

The gardener and cook also looked scared, but Finch and his wife were different. They were transfixed by the sound, just

like everyone else, but instead of looking scared they looked thrilled. They looked like they were enjoying themselves.

After what seemed like minutes but could only have been seconds a great, noiseless shudder passed beneath them, the shock wave of the rocket hitting the earth. It was followed quickly by the terrible, deafening explosion as it's payload of high explosive went off. The impact seemed to be right beside them but Toby realised the fact that he was hearing it meant they weren't dead and that the rocket must have landed close by, but not close enough to cause them any damage.

After ten seconds of violent shaking the earth stopped shifting beneath their feet and the sound slowly ebbed away into an eerie silence.

Toby looked again at Finch and his wife. They were sharing a look, a look of happiness. Finch reached out and took his wife's hand and patted it with his other. Toby had never seen Finch be kind or affectionate to her. Esme was right. There was something weird about Finch and his wife. And now he was honour-bound to find out what it was.

The rockets kept coming for another hour and, although they all strained and sweated through each one, none of the sixteen more rockets that fell on London that night made it anywhere near Walthamstow.

* When the all-clear sounded they made their way back up to the dorm. It was impossible to sleep. Instead they talked long into the night, wondering about the war, about the new

rockets, about how it was impossible that the Germans would invade and how they would be saved. Somehow.

"I'm not so sure." said Toby. "The Air Force must have been trying everything it could to stop the rockets, but they still got through. More will come, perhaps many more, until London is on its knees."

Toby's gloomy statement was followed by a deep silence that was only broken by the sad, soft sound of Vera sobbing.

"Of course," said Toby, trying to lighten the mood. "What do I know?"

"Nothing." said Philip.

"Nothing at all." said Esme, her voice lacking conviction.

The silence lengthened, as if they were all asleep. But none of the them slept for hours, not until their need for sleep had won a battle with their racing minds, quelling the fire of nerves and worry with its welcome and soothing darkness.

* The morning papers were full of the raids. It was too early to be making casualty lists but many hundreds were feared dead. There was a quickly drawn map too, the location of each bomb was marked. Most of them fell down near the docks.

Robin read aloud as the others ate their porridge and apple. "The Walthamstow Rocket fell at Low Hall Farm and destroying all the farm buildings and severely damaging many of the streets around. Broken glass was reported as far away

as Hackney to the West and South Woodford in the East. It is thought the rocket might have been aimed at the aircraft factories in the Lee Valley."

"The rocket landed a mile away from us." said June.

"It must have been huge!" said Vera, her eyes wide in awe. "It felt like it was in the next street."

"Thank God that it wasn't," replied Robin, "or we might look like this." He let the mushy porridge slide off his spoon and plop into the bowl."

Vera put her hand to her mouth as if she might throw up.

"At least it would be quick." said Robin. This didn't comfort Vera, who stood up suddenly and walked quickly to the toilets.

"She's going to fall apart." said Robin unsympathetically, then helping himself to Vera's porridge.

"She feels things more than we do. We have to help her." said June, pulling the porridge back off Robin. The two of them tugged at it until Robin relented with a scowl. June pushed the bowl back into the centre of the table.

"It doesn't make sense to waste food, 'specially not now." said Robin, still truculent.

Esme looked at Toby. He knew what she was thinking. The way Robin had said *_not now. There used to be a better time, called _then,* but they were living in a harder time, a time called *_now_*. One rocket had signalled the coming of a whole new era. *_Now_* meant danger, real danger.

Toby nodded to his sister, showing that he understood what she was thinking.

As they sat quietly eating, letting Robin's comment settle, Toby looked at them all, one by one.

June looked almost normal, her round face still shone like a bowl of milk, but every now and then Toby saw her steady blue eyes give an involuntary twitch. It was her nervous sign. Unconsciously, she tried to wipe it away with the back of her hand.

Phillip just looked blank, like someone had hit him and he was waiting to see how angry he felt. Robin, his narrow face looking even more pinched than normal, chewed on nothing, his eyes distant and metallic. Esme just kept looking at Toby, her eyes sad but also expectant. What did she want from him? What was Toby meant to do about all this?

Vera made her way back to the table. She was still looking shaky as she sat down but had regained some composure.

Robin was onto her immediately. "Do you want this?"

Vera shook her head.

"Anyone else?"

This time no one challenged him, so Robin snatched the bowl and dug his spoon into it like he was digging for gold. He finished it in a matter of seconds before pushing it back into the middle of the table and giving a loud, wet burp.

Esme sighed.

"Pardon me." said Robin, not really meaning it.

Toby cleared his throat and looked around all of them, making sure that he had their attention.

"Things have changed. We don't know how difficult it's going to get but it looks bad, very bad. The only chance we have to get through it is to stick together. It's not like we can look to our parents for help, is it?"

No one said anything. Robin shook his head and muttered. Sometimes Robin said that his parents had been tricked into giving him away and that one day they would come and save him. He wasn't claiming that now.

"So that's settled then." said Toby, taking the silence for agreement. "We stick together." He continued, "We may not be able to do much about the rockets but there is something else we can do. Something closer to home. Something to do with Finch."

Now he really had their attention. Everyone was listening to him. He lowered his voice to a whisper. "Here's the plan."

07 The bible

Finch kept Toby on bell duty for days on end. Only the Walthamstow Reds knew Toby's plan, so all the other orphans thought that he was just being a suck and they stopped talking to him. Toby didn't blame them, he probably would have thought the same thing himself, but it was horrible to be thought a traitor. He kept smiling and ringing the bell and pretending

everything was fine, waiting for the moment to spring his plan.

He suffered for three days until, in the middle of the afternoon, the air raid siren went off again.

Toby was working in the kitchen, peeling a hundred small potatoes and dropping them in a large pot of cold water for the evening meal. He knew Mr and Mrs Finch were in the drawing room having afternoon tea because he had taken it to them ten minutes earlier. He was in the perfect position at just the right time. Which was annoying as a bit of him wished he didn't have to carry out his plan. It was very risky.

Toby slowly dried his hands, taking his time so that everyone left the kitchen before him, then popped his head into the main corridor. After a short while the drawing room door opened and Finch and his wife bustled along it and down the stairs into the shelter. Children from all around the orphanage followed them, silent and urgent, and shortly Toby heard the shouts as they called out the room names. One of the Reds called out 'Attic' and soon after that he heard the sound of the cellar doors being barred from the inside.

There was no way into the shelter now, he was on his own out here.

Suddenly he felt someone grab his shoulder. He jumped with fright and it took all his strength to not shout out. Turning to see who it was, he was surprised to see Robin's grinning face.

"Couldn't let you do this alone Toby." Robin said.

Toby sighed. "You're an idiot. They're sure to notice two of us missing."

Robin laughed. "No they won't and even if they do, they'll be hoping that we both get one in the neck, won't they?"

Toby looked at Robin, thinking that he was totally mad. But he was also glad to have someone with him. "Come on then." he said, indicating the stairs.

Together they crept upstairs to the first floor and around to the back of the house, to the door to Finch's study. Toby tried the handle, but it was locked.

"Weren't expecting that, were you?" whispered Robin.

"No, not at all." said Toby, shaking his head. "It never used to be locked."

The door had always been open in the past. No one would dare to go there without Finch's say so anyway.

"Maybe he's got something to hide now." said Robin.

Toby nodded. "Not going to find out now, are we?"

Robin smiled at him and, dipping his hand into his pocket, brought out a small hooked piece of wire. "Oh yes we are."

Toby watched astonished as Robin worked the wire into the lock. After a couple of twists and turns Robin gently pushed on the handle and the door clicked opened.

"Brilliant!" said Toby, sounding more enthusiastic than he felt.

"After you, Sir." said Robin, pushing the door open for Toby.

At that moment they heard the first rocket come in. Even though they were expecting the noise they were struck dumb. It was even louder outside the cellar. Louder and higher pitched, as if someone were playing your spine like a violin. Toby gritted his teeth and walked into Finch's study, doing his best to ignore the approaching scream.

He'd been in here often enough, so he knew the layout of the room. A big old desk and chair in front of a bank of cabinets and then, near the window, the two easy chairs and the table where he had sat watching Finch dunk his biscuits just a few days ago.

"What are we looking for Toby?"

Toby didn't really know what they were looking for.

"Strange papers, odd keepsakes, anything unusual. There must be something in here that will give him away."

Robin nodded and turned to the desk, the most obvious place to start looking. Toby went to the bookcase and started along the shelves.

They kept looking for more than an hour. Every now and then Toby would quietly ask Robin if he had seen anything, but Robin always shook his head. Then they would hear a rocket coming closer and they would pause, wondering if they would have to take shelter under the desk. Not that a wooden desk

would help much if it was a direct hit. Not even being in the cellar would help in a direct hit.

Toby kept going along the bookcases, carefully picking up each book, flicking through the pages and then putting it back in the shelf. Most of the books were old and untouched for years so they had a thick layer of dust on the top. They must have been books that came with the job. There were also novels and poetry, old stuff, the kind of thing that Toby thought no one would ever read. Strangely there was dust on all the books that Finch probably should be reading too, all the books on Christianity and education, the kind of books that Mr Cage would have read. Not even the hymn books or prayer books had been taken off the shelf in a long time.

Maybe Robin was right and Mr Finch was not much of a man of God after all.

Toby thought back to his meeting with Finch, there was something on the edge of his memory. The Bible. That was it! Finch had had a Bible on his knee when he was talking to Toby.

Toby went over to the easy chairs and the occasional table under the window. There was the Bible, large and old, laid out on top of the table. He picked it up and started to flip through the thin, delicate pages. It wasn't until he turned the last page he saw anything unusual. Concealed right at the end were several newspaper cuttings. Toby squinted to read them and took a moment to realise that the language they were printed in was not English.

It was German.

"Robin, come and look at this."

Robin stopped what he was doing and came over, practically grabbing the Bible out of Toby's hands.

"Ah!" he cried out, seeing the articles. "He can read German." Then, less sure of himself, Robin continued. "Does that prove anything?"

"No," Toby agreed, "it doesn't mean anything by itself. But he hasn't read anything else in the room. They're all covered in dust."

"So he's not much of a reader." Robin shrugged.

"If Finch reads German then he could be a sympathiser."

Robin looked confused. "Why would an English Curate sympathise with the Germans?"

Toby remembered back to Finch's mad ranting of the other day. All that guff about belonging and being proved right in the end.

"An Englishman, even a Curate, would sympathise with the Germans if they were a Nazi."

Robin blinked rapidly trying to take in what Toby was saying. "Finch a Nazi? But that's impossible. What would he be doing running our orphanage?"

"That's a very good question." said Toby, shrugging.

They both tried to think of a reason why a Nazi would bother with them, but they were flummoxed. Suddenly it seemed

like a stupid idea - how could Finch, a Curate in the Church of England, also be a Nazi Party member?

While they were standing there the all clear siren sounded.

"Let's get out of here." said Toby, placing the Bible carefully back on the table.

Robin nodded and they both scurried through the door.

As Toby pulled it closed he realised something. "You can't re-lock that door, can you?" he asked Robin.

Robin looked at the door, realising what Toby was driving at and shook his head.

"He'll know someone has been here." said Robin.

"He will." said Toby, "But he won't know who."

Robin ducked back into the room and came back out with a silver fountain pen.

"What's that for?"

"He'll think someone was nicking something to sell down the market. It's called distraction. If he's worrying about the pen he won't look for another reason why someone would be in his study." said Robin as he made off down the hall, back towards the stream of children who would be coming out of the shelter.

Toby wondered if he'd ever see that pen again. At the moment he didn't care much. They had found out something about Finch that pointed in one direction, but it wasn't enough to prove anything.

He would have to think of another way to dig deeper.

08 A loyalty test

Toby was back in Finch's study much sooner than he expected. It had only been an hour since the all-clear had been given. This time there was no tea on offer.

Finch stood looking out the window, his hands twisting and grasping each other behind his back as he spoke. "Do you know anything about the break in to my study, Toby?"

"Your study was broken into Mr Finch? That's terrible." said Toby.

"Yes," said Finch, his voice low and mean. "It is terrible. Terrible and unforgivable." He turned to Toby, his face a picture of tension and anger, "I will not be mocked, not by a bunch of children."

"How do you know it was a child?"

"It must have been a child. I trust everyone else."

Toby wondered if that meant all of the adults were in on Finch's secret. Maybe they were all Nazis. It would make sense for Mrs Finch to be a Nazi if Finch was, but Collins and Braithwaite too? Those guys seemed as East End and Royalist as it came. They would cuff you if you so much as smirked at the King.

"Well then," said Toby, "which child? Perhaps I could keep an eye on them?"

"Yes, you will keep an eye on everyone Toby," said Finch with a nasty, lop-sided smile, "but I was thinking of something else. Maybe a test."

"A test." Toby smiled. "What kind of test?"

"A loyalty test."

"Good idea." said Toby. "Which child should we give the loyalty test to Mr Finch?" he asked, knowing that he might not like the answer.

"I thought we'd start with you." said Finch, his eyes boring into Toby.

Toby did everything he could to not twitch or wince. "Me? It's unlikely that I would break into your study."

"Is it?" Finch asked. "Why is that?"

"Because..." said Toby, unsure of what he was about to say, "because I could get access anytime, couldn't I? I'm in here now. You invite me in all the time."

"That's true." Finch wrinkled his nose. "Nevertheless I think it's time you did some leadership training."

"All right." said Toby, sounding much more confident than he felt, "Let's do it - fire away!"

"You want to do it now?" asked Finch.

"No time like the present."

Finch turned and faced out the window, looking down on the kitchen garden where some of the orphans would be working.

"Now let's see, who's been a naughty girl then?"

His hand wandered over the window, picking out the girls below.

With a sudden jolt of horror Toby realised that Esme, June and Vera would be among the dozen or so girls working on the herbs.

"This one." said Finch, pointing to Esme and turning towards him. "Go and get that girl will you? There's a good chap."

* Toby felt sick as he walked down into the garden and tapped Esme on the shoulder. Her smile froze when she saw his face.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"Everything. Finch suspects it was me who broke into his room, and now he's giving me a loyalty test." He couldn't look her in the eye. "A loyalty test that involves you. I don't know what it is."

Esme nodded and looked serious. "I'll play the game, don't worry."

Toby held her hand as they walked together back up the stairs to Finch's study.

* Finch motioned Esme into the middle of the room and then handed Toby his strap, a long tail of tough old leather. It was an ugly thing to hold and Toby knew how much it hurt to have it bought down on your palm. Toby felt like he was going to cry and had to take a couple of short breaths to calm himself.

"Now Esme, did you go to bed late last night?" said Finch, inventing a crime on the spot, as he often did.

"Yes Mr Finch, as it happens I did go to sleep a little later than I should have last night."

"That's worth the strap, isn't it?" said Finch to Toby.

"Yes sir, one strap, at most." said Toby, looking Esme in the eye as best he could.

"I agree," said Finch, adding, "but let's not bother with that."

Toby let out a sigh of relief and smiled at Esme. She shook her head very slightly - only her brother would see a gesture that small from her. She was telling him it wasn't over yet.

"Let's ask Esme a far more interesting question," said Finch, "let's ask her if she knows who broke into my study today."

"Yes, Mr Finch, that is a much better question." said Toby.

"So ask it, boy."

Toby looked Esme squarely in the face. "Do you know who broke into Mr Finch's study?"

"No, I do not." said Esme, her voice earnest and strong.

"Very good." said Finch. "Now ask her six more times, and every time she tells you she doesn't know, give her the strap."

It was the hardest thing he had ever done in his life. The only reason he could get through it was because he knew Esme would be furious with him if he gave himself up.

Esme was a brick. She didn't cry or shout or even smile, she just answered six times that she didn't know who it was

and then waited for the whish of the strap as it sliced the air.

After the last time he brought down the lash Toby looked at Finch, making sure to control the new hatred he felt towards him. Finch wasn't smiling or sneering as Toby expected. He looked impressed, like the twins had surprised him.

"I don't think she knows anything, Mr Finch." Toby said.

"I would have to disagree with you, Toby." replied Finch, his voice unusually calm. "I think she knows everything. I think you both know everything." Finch turned to look out the window, speaking quietly to himself, "It doesn't matter now. It's all over and we have won."

Finch stayed staring out the window, looking up into the sky, as if he were looking to God for an answer. After a couple of minutes it seemed like Finch had forgotten they were there.

Toby looked at Esme, who was holding her hand under her armpit and looking very red in the face. "May we go, Mr Finch?" Toby asked, keen to get Esme out of there.

"What?" Finch looked back from the window and took a second to realise that they were both still in the room. He waved his hand at them, then moved towards the desk, muttering something to himself.

Toby and Esme walked calmly to the door and closed it behind them.

"Sorry." he said, though the words were barely adequate.

"Don't worry," she said, "there's nothing I wouldn't do for my younger brother."

He started to say that he was the oldest and she laughed at him. He laughed too and together they walked back down to the kitchen garden, ready to work on the vegetables and help prepare the meal for the evening.

* When she saw Esme's hand, Vera went over to the lavender plot and, careful not to be seen by Braithwaite, stripped the leaves off one sprig, then disappeared into the kitchen. A few minutes later she came back with a muslin rag soggy with oil and crushed lavender leaves.

"Put this on your hand whenever you get the chance, it will help." said Vera, pressing the bag into the welts on Esme's hand.

"Thanks Vera." Esme gratefully closed her sore hand around it.

"How come you never did that for me when I got the strap?" said Toby.

"Because you're a boy, idiot." said Vera, scowling.

* As he stabbed his fork into the earth, lifting weeds and slamming them into a wheel barrow, Toby felt angry. No, he felt enraged. Finch was more than a bully, he was evil. What man would make a child strap their own sister? Toby shook with hatred and he imagined going straight back up stairs and punching him as hard as he could. Of course that would be a

pointless gesture and Toby forced himself to keep working - he would be no good to anyone if he was put in solitary.

After half an hour he had calmed down and after another hour he was enjoying doing the gardening again. Finch seemed to think that gardening was some kind of punishment, but Toby and Esme both loved it. It was a kind of everyday magic to work the earth and have vegetables slowly rise from it when they came into season. He never tired of the small kitchen garden where the herbs and delicate plants lived. Just looking at the fresh greenery reminded him that there were natural cycles that governed their lives, something bigger than their own small cares.

He often thought that he would like to be a gardener when he got out of the orphanage. He could do an apprenticeship, maybe in one of the orchards further up the Lee Valley. He imagined himself warm in the sun, looking out on a glade of apple trees, their branches swaying like happy children holding their arms up in a gentle breeze.

And it was while he was relaxed and thinking about nothing much that he had an idea, a way to get Finch to show if he was a Nazi or not.

"Heil Hitler," he muttered under his breath.

09 A salute

"Heil Hitler!"

The shout came loud and clear across the room, as planned.

All the other children in the dining room looked at the child who said it in horror, but Toby had his eyes fixed on just one person. Finch. The next second would reveal everything.

* Last night the Walthamstow Reds had talked for hours. Toby had called the Red together and jokingly called it a War Council and, silly though it sounded, the name stuck. June had a spare notebook and she wrote 'Walthamstow Reds War Council' on the front of it in pencil. Her writing was so neat it looked like she used a ruler to line it up. Robin dragged their work table and chairs into the middle of the room, lit candles for it, and the six of them took their places around it, their faces dancing in the flickering yellow light.

Toby's plan was simple, it only took a couple of minutes to tell the about it. They all agreed immediately it was the thing to do. June wrote the date on a page, then added "Secret decision one: Agreed by all."

The problems started when they tried to agree who was going to do it.

Toby was ruled out immediately by Esme. "It can't be Toby. If he does it, Finch will know that he had found him out. Toby would go straight to Solitary."

"Agreed." said Vera. "Not Toby."

"I agree too." said Robin.

"Well I don't!" said Toby. "I'm already in trouble, so it might as well be me."

"Let's vote on that then." said Esme, coolly looking at Toby who was about to protest again. "It's a war council, isn't it? We should all have a say."

Toby shrugged. "I guess so."

"So let's talk it through and then vote." said Esme.

No one disagreed.

"Okay," said Vera, "I think it should be one of the girls."

"What?!" said Toby, outraged at the idea.

"Why not?" said Esme. "Girls can do anything that boys can."

"They can, it's true." said Robin, a surprising thing for him to say, thought Toby, since Robin never said anything nice about girls, ever. "They can do anything that boys can. With one exception - they shouldn't do anything important."

Vera threw a balled up pair of socks at him. Robin flicked them away from his face at the last minute, laughing at her.

"Are you going to listen to my reasoning, Robin?" Esme said calmly, like she was talking to a baby.

Robin shrugged, his fun over for now.

"Tell us your reason Esme." said Phillip.

"Thanks Phillip." said Esme, acknowledging his help. "I think it should be a girl because Finch won't hurt them. Well, not as much."

Phillip nodded "That makes sense."

"It should be me." said Esme.

Toby found himself standing up suddenly and wagging his finger at his sister. "No! You've already suffered enough!" He pointed at her hand, the lavender bag still in it.

Esme shrugged. "It's just pain."

"Just pain?!" gasped Toby. "No!"

"I'll do it then." chipped in June, as if she was offering to get someone a piece of toast from the rack at breakfast.

"No," said Toby, shaking his head, "not you June."

"Definitely not." said Robin, backing Toby up.

"Why not?" asked June, her beaky face creased with confusion.

"Because you are a terrible liar." said Esme.

"No I am not!"

Everyone laughed then, everyone but June, who looked offended.

Esme spoke in a soft voice, "June you are the smartest child in the orphanage by a country mile, but your skills don't extend to deception. If anyone asks you a question you would tell them the absolute truth. Lying is simply not in you."

"Is that true? Really?" asked June, looking for someone to give her an answer. "Phillip?"

She asked Phillip because he wasn't much of a liar either. It wasn't that Phillip couldn't lie but he wasn't quick enough to back up a lie with another one. Once you told one lie you

usually had to tell a whole pile of others, quickly, and that required thinking on the spot.

Phillip closed his eyes, like he didn't want to say anything, like he wanted the problem to go away. When he opened them again everyone was still looking at him.

He sighed. "June you cannot lie. You're even worse than I am."

"That bad?" asked June.

Phillip nodded and hung his head.

"Well, I can see I'm not needed here then!" June, closed her notebook, turned away from the group and flopped down on her bed.

"I'll do it." whispered Vera. "I can lie and I haven't done anything brave yet." She paused and looked into their faces one by one. "And it's about time I did something brave."

Toby was surprised. He'd always thought Vera was just into clothes and what things looked like, but here she was putting herself forward.

"Let's vote on that." said Robin. Toby thought he could hear the relief in Robin's voice.

"All right." said Esme, "Who votes in support of Vera doing it?"

Four hands went up. Vera, Esme, Robin and Philip. Toby wasn't going to win this one. He raised his hand too.

* So it was Vera who yelled out 'Heil Hitler' at the top of her voice, just as Finch came into the kitchen for breakfast, Mrs Finch following close behind.

A heart beat later, as if by magic, Finch's right hand shot up, his back straightened and he barked 'Heil Hitler' as he gave the Nazi salute to fifty children, his wife, the cook and the gardener.

A gasp of shock went around the room and everyone seemed to freeze for a moment. It can't have been long, a second or two, but it seemed like forever. Toby, ready for it, had time to look around.

He saw the dumbfounded look of horror on Mrs Finch's face. He saw the teacup of the slack-jawed Collins tilt forward towards the table, a wave of tea leaping into the air. He saw children missing their mouths with their porridge spoons as they turned towards Finch. And he saw the transformation of Finch's face. He started proud and strong, then there was the awful moment when he realised what he'd done, followed by the desperate flick of his eyes as he looked around the room to see who had tricked him.

Toby was glad to see that Vera had already put her hand down and turned to the table. Finch didn't see who had made the salute. What he did see was a sea of outraged children. Everyone knew instantly what it revealed, what it meant. The Anglican Curate who ran the orphanage was a Nazi sympathiser.

Finch spun to look at his wife. They shared a look and then she waved him away distastefully, like she might dismiss a child who had wet their pants. Silently, shamefully, Finch left the room, not looking back, leaving his wife to clear up the mess.

She pulled herself up to her full height and regarded the room. Her usually red face had washed out to white. She looked like a ghost. But she didn't falter.

"Back to your breakfast. And quietly." was all she said. She didn't need to say it loudly, the room was still dead quiet, but it was obvious that anyone who didn't do exactly what she said would be in for a bad day. Or a bad life.

All the children turned back to their plates of porridge as one and started eating.

"I simply don't understand how he could be a traitor. He's English, how could he like the Nazis?" said June under her breath.

Toby shrugged. "Maybe he's not happy with his lot." he whispered, "I mean what adult would think looking after us was a fun thing to do with your life?"

"Mr Cage liked us." pointed out Vera.

"He didn't like me very much." muttered Robin.

Vera shot back, "There was good reason for that."

Esme cut them off before they started getting nasty. "Come on, we have to stick together, remember?"

"Now more than ever." said Toby, darkly.

Esme looked at him. She could tell he had something on his mind. "What is it Toby?"

He shrugged. "Anything could happen, right?"

"I still don't understand it." said June, as if no one else had said anything.

"It's simple," said Vera. "Finch can see what way the wind is blowing. He knows the Germans will be here soon, and he wants to be in with them. What's that called, Esme?"

"Collaboration."

"That's it! He's a collaborator."

June looked at Vera. "So what what does that mean for us?"

No one had an answer to that. None of them could see into the future.

Toby sighed. "I've just figured something out. I feel so stupid."

"What is it Toby?" Vera was looking at him, scared.

"He's been trying to recruit me. He wants me to be a Nazi too."

* When the big railway clock they lived by reached eight, Toby stood, walked to the front of the dining room and reached up to the small ship's bell and softly pulled the ringer from one side to the other. As the bells warm sound rippled off the brick walls all the children got up and walked out to their next task.

Watching them file out of the room with downcast eyes Toby realised that everyone was scared and worried. Deeply worried.

The little kids looked like they were on the verge of tears and looked at him like he was the problem.

He felt a sudden sense of responsibility. Hadn't it been his idea to expose Finch? Well they had done that and what good had come of it? Nothing. Toby had to think of a way to make Finch's mistake a good event for the orphanage. Amongst the ongoing tension of the new blitz and the threat of invasion there had to be some good news. And he had better find some, fast.

10 Truth to a vicar

Every Sunday the whole orphanage walked along Shernall Road, up Church Hill Road and then into St Mary's parish church for the morning service.

All the locals were there and everyone wore their Sunday Best. It was the one event that made the children feel like they belonged to a community. People even smiled at them, though Toby always thought they only smiled so they didn't have to actually talk to them.

The orphans had the worst seats, up the stairs and beside hissing and farting organ, right at the back. The children from the church day school, the children with parents, sat downstairs in tight wooden pews and if any of them looked up the back towards the orphans their parents would tell them off.

Toby liked the church. It was really old and had some excellent old plaques in it, some with skulls and skeletons and strange old English epitaphs in curly writing about 'extravagance' and 'fins'. June told him recently that those long 'f's, the one's with the tails, were actually pronounced as an 's'. Suddenly the epitaphs made a lot more sense. What he was sure about was that those old folks were really scared of the devil, and there was only one way out - to obey God and his representative on earth, the vicar.

Pethergrew was talking from the pulpit, giving his weekly sermon. Pethergrew was an old man, at least forty, whose hairline was creeping up his dome and who wore glasses with the thickest lenses Toby had ever seen, like a pair of goggles a motorcycle rider might wear.

Today's sermon was was about unconditional love and about how we should forgive everyone everything instantly. Pethergrew seemed really wrapped up in it, his voice had gone all dreamy and he looked up to heaven a lot. It seemed a strange thing to be talking about, specially when everyone had half an ear out for the air raid siren. Even though the church had a crypt it wasn't very big or very deep. Toby had no doubt that there wouldn't be room for the orphans if a V6 came over.

Toby was sure they should be worrying more about stopping the evil Germans from invading England than forgiving them. If Toby was the Vicar he would have been talking about how to

spot a German plane in the sky, or how to make a better blackout curtain.

Toby looked over to Finch, who had reappeared this morning, not saying a word to anyone. It seemed that Finch's way of coping with the humiliation of the other day was to hide. But it would have looked strange if he had missed church - that would have been noticed. Finch sat quietly as Pethergrew wound up the sermon with a prayer and managed a barely audible 'amen', but it seemed an effort.

Twenty minutes later, as the service came to a close and the congregation were shaking hands over the pews and wishing each other well, Toby felt his palms get sweaty. And when it was their turn to get out of their seats and walk back downstairs his legs had a moment when they felt weak and spidery.

"You all right?" asked Esme.

"Good." said Toby tersely, doing his best to smile.

She had no idea what he was about to do, none of the other Walthamstow Reds did. Toby knew that broke the rules but this was a risk he needed to take alone.

As they wound down the stairs Toby dropped to the back of the group, letting Esme past him. She looked at him, knowing something was up, but he knelt down and pretended to tie his shoelace. That kept her off his trail.

He stood up and followed the rest of the children down the stairs but instead of turning right and out onto the path in

front of the Church he turned left and joined the throng of the congregation.

Suddenly amongst them all Toby felt small and insignificant. Everyone was smartly dressed, despite the war rationing, and even in his best, most clean, clothes he felt shabby. The men wore trilby hats, women wore heavy day dresses and gloves and the children looked like perfect little versions of the adults. Everyone clutched a cup of tea and chattered politely. Some people looked down at him as he scooted through the crowd, perhaps wondering how such a dirty child had got into the church, but he was moving quickly and no one had a chance to pull him up.

After a couple of minutes moving around at random he saw Pethergrew and quickly moved to striking distance. Pethergrew was talking to a very old woman in a wheelchair, talking loudly and having to repeat himself as the old woman had bad hearing. The lady didn't notice that Pethergrew was irritated by her. Must be difficult to pretend to be nice all the time, thought Toby.

As Pethergrew managed to separate himself from the old lady Toby walked up to him, grabbed his sleeve and pulled him around to look at him.

"What are you doing, boy?!" gasped Pethergrew.

Toby turned to face him. "Sorry Vicar, but I have something very urgent to tell you, something about the orphanage, about Mr Finch."

Pethergrew eyed him suspiciously, "And who are you?"

"Toby. Toby Tunstall, Sir. From the orphanage."

Toby was doing his best to look serious and grown up. "It is really very important, Sir."

"Very well, follow me." Pethergrew sounded angry at being collared in such a way, but his curiosity had got the better of him. He swept away to the back of the church, toward the sacristy. Toby scampered to keep up, looking back to check that no one had seen him break away.

The sacristy was a small, dark room used to store candles and vestments. Pethergrew started to untie his elaborate robes. "What is it then?" he barked.

Toby had imagined that Pethergrew might be a nicer person, considering all his sermons about Christian love, but up close Pethergrew simply looked harassed. For a moment Toby wondered if he were doing the right thing.

Then he remembered why he was here. He had no choice, what he had to say was more important than how he felt about the Vicar.

"It's Finch, Mr Finch," began Toby, his voice sounding louder than he expected in the small echoing room. "Finch is a Nazi."

Toby had imagined that Pethergrew would be shocked, or that he might get angry. Instead he looked at Toby with an amused smile. "A Nazi, you say?"

"Yes."

"And you have proof, do you?" Pethergrew said this like he was indulging a five year old.

"It's true, yes." Toby's voice started to rise as he tried to drive his point home.

"Out with it then."

Toby quickly told him about the German articles in the Bible and the 'Heil Hitler' incident in the dining room.

Pethergrew listened, continuing to take off his robes and tidy up after the service. He stopped to look at Toby only when he had finished talking.

"What you are saying - these are very serious accusations," said Pethergrew looking over the top of his glasses at Toby.

"Yes. Yes I know. But it's important to the church, to know these kind of things."

The Vicar went back to stacking bibles. "It would be important, if it were true."

Toby realised that Pethergrew simply didn't believe him.

He felt ill. All this for nothing? And if he didn't get back to the orphanage soon he would be in deep trouble.

The Vicar smiled at Toby. "You've been reading too many war stories. You have a good imagination. Go back and forget all this nonsense. There is no way there could be Nazis inside the Church of England."

Toby turned and ran.

He sprinted like the wind to try and get back to the children before they reached the orphanage. Rounding the

corner from Prospect Hill onto Shernall Road he could see them about fifty yards in front, walking towards the final turn.

He had about twenty seconds to make the distance.

Putting his head down he ran even harder, his breath coming in ragged short gasps. He felt like he wasn't in his body, that it was running for him, somewhere below. He was close, another ten seconds, another twenty yards and he'd be there.

He almost made it too. But he tripped on a tree root that had worked its way above the footpath. He flew forward, landing knees and hands first on the rough tarmac. He got up quickly, but looking down he saw he had scraped the skin off his knees and they were bleeding. Trails of bright red blood started to run down his shins. He couldn't help himself - he yelled out in pain and shock.

Up ahead the children turned into the orphanage gate. Esme was last in, looking back at the stricken Toby, wondering what he had done.

Toby looked up to see the gate close, and then, seconds later, Finch coming back out and walking towards him.

Shaking now, Toby could barely stand. His face a storm, Finch reached him, roughly grabbed his jacket and started to drag him back to the orphanage.

Finch hissed into his ear, "What have you been doing, boy?"

Toby was trying not to cry. All he could manage was to shake his head.

"Don't doubt that I will find out." spat Finch. "And now," he said, pushing Toby through the gate, "I've got a terrific excuse to break you."

11 Solitary

Toby knew exactly where he was going.

Solitary.

Finch marched him from the street into the house, down the steps, past the doors to the big cellar, along a narrow low corridor to a tiny, chest-high door. Opening it, Finch pushed Toby in, and swung the door closed behind Toby before he even had time to turn around.

Toby managed not to call out or beg as Finch walked away, but only just. He knew there might be consequences when he tried to talk to Pethergrew so he shouldn't have been surprised to end up here, but the truth was he had not let himself think about it.

Now here he was, and here he would stay for a while. He sighed and looked around. The walls seemed to be made of black earth and they oozed slime. The only furniture was a narrow wooden bed with a couple of old blankets on it that smelt of rotten cat and a straw mattress that turned up at the edges, like an old piece of mouldy bread. An ancient and corroded tin bucket stood in a corner, that must be the toilet. There was a small, high window made of old glass and you while you

couldn't see anything through it you could get a sense of what time of the day it was.

For the first few hours, still feeling upset and sore from the fall, he paced the room. Five steps along, then five steps back. Five steps along, then five steps back.

Later, when the shock had worn off, he lay down on the bed and looked up at the rough cement ceiling and wondered how long he would be down here and what would happen to him now. Finch could put him out on the street, that was a very real possibility. Without Esme. That's what scared him most, not having to survive on his wits or living on the street, but living without his sister. Who would he talk to? Who would he tease? Who would provide him with advice? Even now it hurt him that she wouldn't know what had happened to him. He felt bad for not including her in his plan - she would be fearfully worried.

Much later, when the final bells of the day had rung and Toby was lying in complete darkness, he thought about Esme again. He imagined that he could reach right through the walls and floors of the orphanage and hold her hand. It might have been fanciful, but it helped. He felt less lonely and sore and, even though he was cold and his knees ached, he was able to sleep.

Next morning he woke to the creaking of the door. A bowl of porridge appeared, pushed in at floor level before the door swung closed again. It was the first food he's had since

breakfast the day before. He fell on it and ate it all in a minute, so fast he almost made himself sick. He promised himself he would eat slower next time.

As he sat on the floor he noticed that there was a small patch under the bed that was less black. He shuffled over and reached right up near the wall. His fingers grazed something. He pulled it out. A tatty old Bible. He wished it had been something he actually wanted to read but then anything was better than nothing. He tossed it on the bed then sat and wondered what to do with his day.

What Finch wanted was to break Toby's spirit, so what he had to do was invent ways to keep himself active and mentally alert. So he made himself a schedule.

At the sound of the work bell he started to do exercises. He made himself do press-ups, star-jumps and sit-ups, one hundred of each. It was hard work, specially the press-ups, and he had to shout at himself to keep going to one hundred. When he was finished he shook out all his limbs and did a series of stretches before resting. His muscles were sore, but it stopped him worrying about his knees and it felt good to exercise.

After a lunch of watery stew he made himself do the times table up to twelve twice over then tried to remember as many formulas and maths rules as he could, like all the ways to figure out circumferences and areas. He used the formulas to try and work out the surface area of the walls, floor and

ceiling of the cell, forcing his brain to work as hard as his body had earlier.

After that he spent the rest of the day reading the Bible. Having no idea how long he was going to be in here he thought he might as well start at the beginning, so he started with Genesis.

In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.

Reading the Bible in school was pretty boring. Adults always wanted you to read a certain part of it and then they would tell you what it meant. Toby discovered that if you read it for yourself it was much more interesting.

It full of violent stories. The God in the early part of the bible was a long way from Pethergrew's all-forgiving God. He was tough and mean and prone to having favourites. Toby found himself captivated and read right until the light petered out.

When night fell and he was left sitting in the cold and dark he realised that night time would require his best efforts to remain positive. He thought he should probably pray, but he wasn't sure that the God he was reading about would have much time for a twelve year old boy stuck in a hole in the ground because he'd denounced a Curate. So instead he

decided to believe that Esme could hear him if he talked aloud.

He spent a while telling her everything that had happened, how he had talked to Pethergrew, how Pethergrew hadn't believed him, how he had hurt himself and what it was like in solitary. Strangely, he felt that she was hearing him. It was probably just his imagination, but it was a good feeling. When he was tired he imagined again that his hand in Esme's. Instead of falling asleep lonely and depressed he fell asleep feeling looked after and loved.

In the morning he repeated the pattern. In the day he exercised, did his mental maths and then read the Bible. That night he talked to Esme.

On the third day he started to learn parts of the Bible so that he could recite them back to himself when it was dark. He chose uplifting sections of the bible. It was good to hear a voice, even if it was just his own.

And that's how it went for the fourth, fifth and sixth days. Exactly the same thing. Every now and then he got the sense that there was someone behind the door, standing there, listening in. When he felt that, he would stand close to the door and go deadly quiet. He thought it might be Finch, and he thought of the silence as a battle of wills. Toby would stand there, still and waiting, until he sensed the presence was gone.

Somewhere in the course of the week Toby realised he really liked the Bible. It was so much bigger than The Church made out. Yes, it had plenty about morals and love, but it had magic and jealousy and fighting and epic struggles as well. But the most important thing was there were plenty of stories about people persevering in times of oppression. Jesus in the time of the Romans, the Israelites in the time of Egypt. There were plenty of people in the past who had suffered and made it through, and he could too.

So when the door was pulled open on the morning of the seventh day of his confinement, he walked out without even looking at Finch as he passed, feeling better and stronger than when he went in. He was skinnier and his eyes took a while to adapt to the sunlight, but he felt he had won a victory over Finch, a victory fought in will power and played out in silence.

* When he walked into the dining room for breakfast Esme couldn't help herself. She bounded up to him, smiling, and wrapped her arms around him. In front of everyone.

Normally he would push her off. He didn't want anyone to see him being so mushy, let alone all the children in the orphanage, but today he held her for a couple of seconds before he walked with her back to the Reds' table.

Sitting down, he shook hands with everyone, and launched himself into his porridge.

When Toby had wolfed his own down, Phillip pushed his bowl towards him. "Leave me something." he said.

Toby ate a quarter of it, then Robin pushed his bowl forward. Everyone at the table gave Toby a portion of their meal. By the time June pushed hers at him he was bursting, but he felt he should be fair and so he choked down some of that too.

Once he had finished Esme spoke. "So Pethergrew didn't believe you?"

Toby was confused. "How do you know that?"

Esme smiled, "You told me, remember?"

Stunned, Toby asked her what she was talking about.

"You spoke to me, every night."

Everyone around the table looked at Esme. The look of disbelief on Junes' face was comical. Robin just about lost his porridge snorting with disbelief.

"I did," said Toby, "but I thought I was talking to myself."

"I heard every word." Esme continued. "Ask me something I couldn't possibly know."

Toby thought for a second. "I know. Tell me who the Vicar was talking to before me."

Esme shot back, "An old lady in a wheelchair. You said he couldn't hear her, that he was impatient."

Toby couldn't believe it.

"Is that right?" asked Esme.

"Yes," said Toby quietly, "that's exactly right."

The others looked at them like they were mad. Toby decided it would be best if they talked about something else.

"So what's been happening up here, then?" asked Toby.

Esme looked at him strangely. "Didn't you hear what I said to you?"

"No." admitted Toby. "I didn't know it went both ways. I wasn't listening."

She smiled. "It's a conversation, silly."

Anxious to cover up his failure Toby asked, "So what's Finch been up to? Has the church done anything about him?"

Vera spoke to the others. "He doesn't know, does he?"

Esme shook her head. Phillip looked down at the floor and Robin pretended to be interested in his spoon.

"What is it?" asked Toby, feeling alarmed that no one would tell him what was going on. Esme pushed a piece of paper and a pencil into the middle of the table.

"You are going to write down what I'm saying in my head. Words from the front of the newspaper."

Toby laughed. "But that's impossible!"

She shrugged. "Let's just try it."

Toby shrugged, pulled the paper towards him, picked up the pencil, then looked at Esme.

She held his gaze. Everyone at the table was quiet and intent, wondering if anything would happen.

For a while Toby nothing happened. He felt a little stupid with all of them watching him, but then, like he was opening a parcel in his mind, he heard three words distinctly and clearly. Without thinking he wrote them down and held them up for all to see.

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