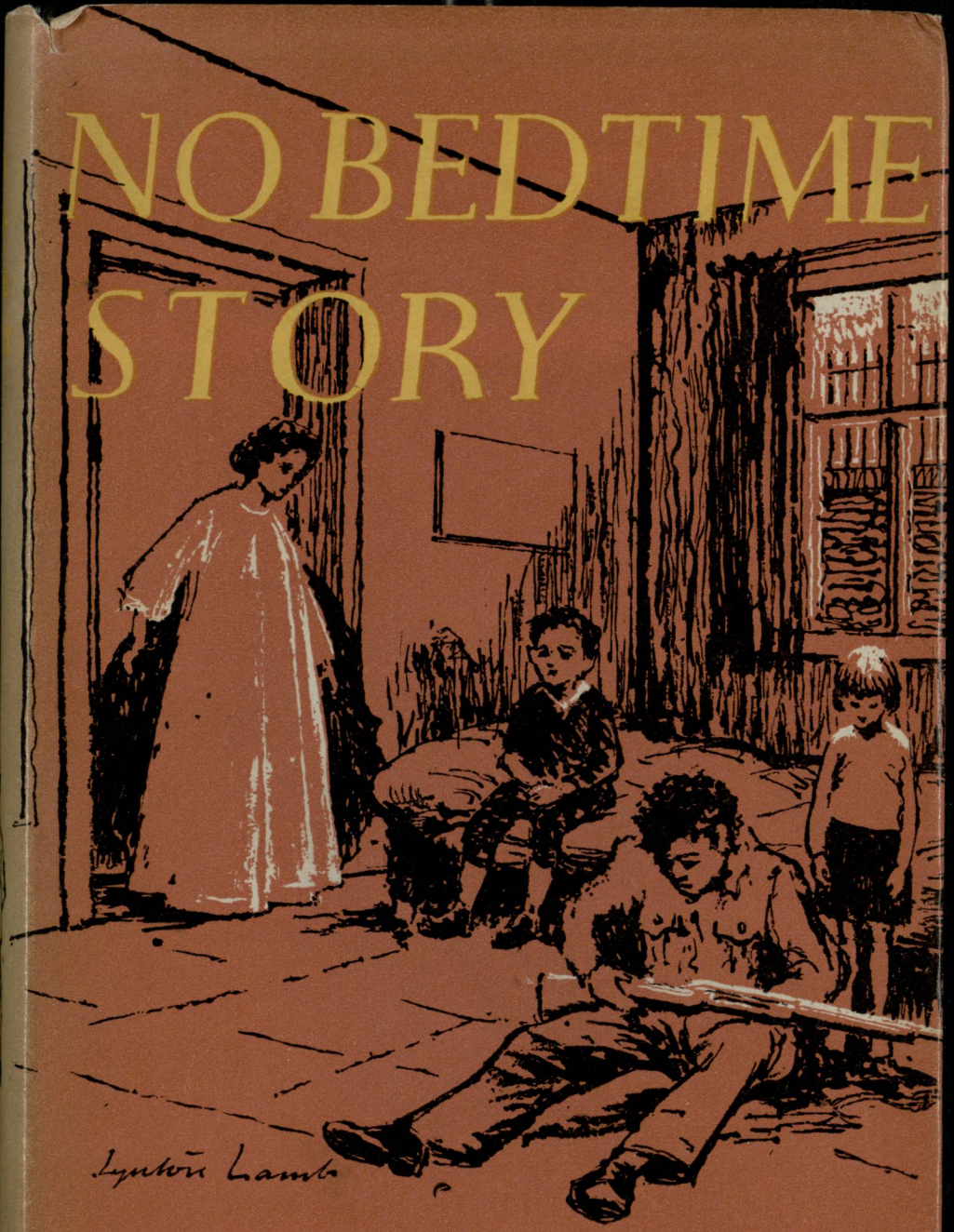
NO BEDTIME STORY



MARY CRAWFORD

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Then one day Jacko realizes that people are trying to do something about this Freedom, and the first results for him seem to be that life becomes very much more complicated, and worrying, and difficult. For one thing, he is left to look after his four-year-old sister, Vicky, alone. Christine soon comes to help, and has to stay when her own home gets knocked down by a tank. And then her friend Banger arrives, and they, being a few years older than Jacko, get the food and make plans. But Banger is mostly busy with fighting.

The fighting intensifies and soon becomes a full-scale battle; and when the air raids start Jacko has his own moment of anger, and violence, and horror.

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A NOVEL BY

MARY CRAWFORD

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Many battlefields, up and down the earth, are represented in this fable by a country which is not on any map. The military background is a composite and the characters are imaginary

CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1

THE announcer said she was sorry. Children's Hour was cancelled. She said we weren't to be cross about going to bed without our bedtime story.

"Cancelled? What *is* that? *Cancelled*," said my little sister Vicky.

"No bedtime story, it means," I told her, and switched off the radio.

"Then I *am* cross. Of course I am. There always is a bedtime story."

I could see she was deciding to get into a rage. To distract her, I said I would get her a sweet, off the top shelf.

"You can't," she said. "You mustn't."

"I can *now*. I was told to look after the house."

I climbed up the shelves, with my feet between the saucepans first and then the plates. My mother had made me a solemn promise, several times, that at any minute I would start shooting up like a beanstalk; but I still had to climb for the sweets. And my enormous feet—which she said meant that I would be a really big man—clattered against a dish.

"You are a naughty boy," said Vicky. "You almost broke it."

"Well, don't you want one?" I held out one sweet. My mother always said you had to be firm with Vicky, but nobody else except me ever really tried.

"Yes, please," said Vicky in her most polite voice; "but you must let me choose the one I want for myself."

My father had gone out early in the morning. "It's a day of great events," he said. My mother had got up in a hurry. She had put on her green overcoat on top of her nightdress and her hair was still in a long black plait tied at the end with a bow of white tape. When you are young, most grown-up people look all the same age, unless they are really old, but people used to call my mother a young woman, even when she was dressed for going out. If they had seen her with the pigtail, they might have thought she was one of the big girls at school.

She stood up on her toes and put both her arms round my father's neck and hugged him goodbye.

"Look after yourself," she said. "Don't take too many risks."

"Life's a risky business," he said, "and the more alive you are, the bigger the risk."

"Of course. All the same, try and look after yourself some of the time. It's all very well being more alive, but it's still something to be alive at all."

My father was a big man—voice, muscles, everything, even his nose. He was clever about talking and doing tiny things with his hands, like mending watches, as well as thinking of good ideas. He was never ashamed or afraid. About the time when Vicky was born he was in prison because (my mother said) he had resisted injustice. The woman who does babies said he was a bad man not to think of his poor wife and stay out of prison just then—at least until he knew that his baby had come safely into the world. She said it years later and my mother just laughed. She said she scorned feeble people, whether they were men or women.

The woman got up and went away, and I asked my mother if he was still resisting injustice or only employed in the printing works. She explained that good (and not feeble) people resist injustice always, but most of the time they can do it in a quiet ordinary way which is not too much noticed.

We couldn't help noticing, of course, that he wasn't at home as much as most fathers. He'd come home from work, eat his tea and go out again—for the work that had nothing to do with earning a living. He always called it his Union work because, as everyone knew, he was an important person in the printers' union, and made speeches at their big meetings. But two or three times we had secret visitors—nothing to do with printing—from foreign countries already in the thick of the fight. I wasn't supposed to be in the room when they talked to my father, but sometimes I was. So I knew there were places where resisting injustice was always noticed at once and punished with ghastly tortures as well as death. It was much more dangerous to live there, but also more heroic. Some of the visitors had plans for going to America, which really *is* the land of the free, but obviously that meant they had to give up being heroes.

Prometheus was the greatest hero I ever heard about. If he had been invited to America it wouldn't have made any speck of difference. He scorned to escape the gods. They had to look at him, hanging on his rock with an eagle gnawing his inside, until they changed their minds. I was glad the time had come when everybody was going to notice what my father (and, of course, all his friends) wanted.

My father and mother stood hugging each other for a long time, as if the great events my father talked about were holding them close together.

I asked my father, "Why are you going out so early?"

He said, letting my mother go, "There are one or two things to do before I go to work, and I may be late home. Then you must look after the house and help your mother. You'll do that, won't you?"

I said I would. He pushed his finger through my hair. Then kissed Vicky, who was standing up in her cot.

"I wish I could be with you," said my mother. She lifted her face, but he did not kiss her again, just touched her on the cheek with the tips of his fingers, and said, "This long wait will soon be over."

I was dressed already, long before my usual time. The feeling of great events had got hold of me and hauled me out of bed. Because of them, everything had suddenly become large and bright and thrilling and full of life. Though no one had told me what they were, I wanted to join in—if I could. I kept hold of my father's coat. Not that I wanted to keep him at home, and, of course, I knew he couldn't take me with him—it was just that all the marvellous excitement seemed to be streaming out of him and I didn't want to let it go.

But when he undid my fingers and then afterwards we heard his footsteps ringing down the stone passage outside, the excitement was still with us in the room.

My mother stood by the window, brushing out her hair. Through this window, the sun shines for a little while every morning. I stood watching how her hair, with the sun through it, floated out and vanished at the edges like smoke. She was singing an old song that we all knew, but with new words.

I asked her to tell me the words slowly; but then she stopped singing because, she said, the words were dangerous. I burst out laughing. It was wonderful to think

that words too, on this day, had a new and amazing power.

"I'll teach you the words," she said, "tomorrow or the next day."

Remembering what my father had said, I moved Vicky's cot, all by myself, into the bedroom at the back, where it had to be squeezed in behind the big bed. Then I went back and folded up my own bed, so that the room was all ready for breakfast. I even noticed, in the middle of breakfast, that my mother had forgotten to re-fill the kettle for the washing up. So I took it to the tap in the passage and filled it and put it on the gas. But when we were all finished and the water was boiling she suddenly said she would do the washing up later. She wanted to come with us as far as Vicky's school.

"But I can take Vicky," I said. "I always do."

My mother laughed. "It's not that I don't trust you," she said. "But we're so early; we can all have a walk in the sun."

The trouble was, I suddenly distrusted her. In the mornings, she was usually busy and serious and bustled us out of the house; but now she was looking at me sideways as the big girls do at school when they are teasing you or want something. I thought she wanted to make me look silly.

At my own school, I could never forget that I was years the youngest in the class and (which made it worse) much too small for my age. The bigger boys, who talked in men's voices, except occasionally, had stopped asking me into their game, because I was useless, they said, and did nothing but run up and down on the edge. Even the teachers, though they were quite pleased that I was usually top, said funny things in my reports: "A promising pupil.

No lack of intelligence, but young for his age in other respects. Must learn to accept responsibility and take the rough with the smooth."

Yet I sometimes felt almost grown-up—not just clever—with Vicky's teachers, my mother's friend Aunt Barbie (who'd taught me reading years ago) and Christina, who wore three bracelets as well as a cross on a silver chain round her neck and always smelled of flowers. They knew I was perfectly responsible about taking Vicky, and they never seemed to notice my age particularly—though Aunt Barbie was really quite old and Christina had been celebrated, before even she left school, for acting in a real play in our real town theatre.

"You'll make them say I'm a baby," I told my mother. "I can go to school the other way. By myself."

"I'd rather you didn't today."

"All right, then. I'll stay at home."

I was angry. And my mother's face became cold and distant and scornful, just as it did the few times that she quarrelled with my father. Then it used to frighten me, but now I only had the anger, solid as anything, inside me.

She took me by the shoulders and shook me and said in an angry voice, "That's enough. Today of all days I don't expect you to make trouble. Get your books."

"You'll have to carry me," I said, turning my back.

I heard her moving about the room. At last she said, "I'm sorry. I'm not myself. Please be good."

Her voice was her own again, but I was still furious. What right had she to shake me—and what right to become a different person, without any warning?

"I'm resisting injustice," I said. I heard her sigh—or laugh; and I was glad I hadn't given in. Then she and Vicky went out of the room and along the passage and up the seven steps to the street.

This is the ordinary way in and out of the flat; there is another way, too, only used by me, through the window of the bedroom at the back. Here the ground is higher, and comes almost up to the top of the window, with a narrow trench between, so that in one corner of the trench (where I have cut some steps) a person is invisible. He cannot be seen from the bedroom, or from the waste ground outside.

I was not supposed to dirty my shoes before school, but I was determined not to follow my mother and Vicky. At least, not at once. I went out through the window, and ran, and hid behind some bushes in the park, with the idea of tracking them when they came past.

They were a long time coming. Perhaps they had walked slowly, in case I caught them up. After a while, I heard their footsteps. My mother was humming the same song she had been singing that morning. When they had gone past, I pushed the leaves apart, ready to dodge ahead and burst out on them.

At that moment, a man was coming by on a bicycle. He heard the song too, and turned his head and waved. Then suddenly it looked as if he had taken fright. He pedalled away as if he was being chased by tigers. I could see that even the tune must be dangerous.

I ran like the wind then and caught hold of my mother and told her to stop singing. "Was I singing?" she said. "I didn't know."

"It's a good thing I'm here," I said.

"Yes, my darling; you came just in time."

"I am your darling too," said Vicky, "and I want to be carried."

My mother carried her a few steps—though she was only being lazy and could walk perfectly well—until a dog we knew came bouncing up with a stick in its mouth.

My mother put Vicky down, and threw the stick, and the dog brought it back. Then I threw the stick, about twice as far, and the dog brought it back again. Then Vicky wanted to try, but she hardly threw it any distance. The dog shot past it and jumped about barking. Vicky ran after the dog and my mother ran after her, pretending she couldn't catch up. And I ran ahead of the dog and tried to make it race me, but it wouldn't. In a minute, we were all running and laughing, and so went on to the school, throwing the stick for the dog to lead the way.

We were the first to arrive. Christina was in the playground, washing off the wall some chalking somebody had done. Aunt Barbie saw us through the window and came out to talk to my mother.

"Some very nasty pictures," she said, pinching up her lips, "done by a friend of Christina's."

"He is not my friend," said Christina. "He's just a boring nuisance. That's what I keep on telling him."

Aunt Barbie's corrugated brown face got back its usual smiling and surprised expression as she walked with us to the gate. She always said it was a tonic to talk to my mother—she listened as if she meant it. Christina was a usual subject, because Aunt Barbie actually was her aunt.

"What is one to do for the best?" she said. "Christina spends half her time locked in her room making faces at herself in the glass; and the other half running around with her Bohemian friends. Perhaps I ought to have let her take a stage training, but we both have to earn our living and she is really very sweet with the younger children."

"They all love her," said my mother.

"Everyone does. I'm a little silly about her myself, but that only makes me see the risks. Didn't you meet her

elderly admirer—the one who writes that extraordinary poetry? His idea, if you please, was that he should pay her fees at the Academy. I refused, of course, and she thought me a monster. I can see, too, that it would seem cruel, but really . . ."

"He just might have been genuine," said my mother doubtfully, "a real patron of the arts."

"That idea made me just as uneasy. It's a three-year course, and I don't believe she would have stuck it. She hasn't the application. I might have found some way of raising the money; and, of course, I got busy trying to work it out. Christina acted as if the world had come to an end—for three days. Then it all blew over. I fancy they quarrelled. At all events, she now tells me she's engaged—at her age—to a scruffy, myopic student I dislike even more, if that's possible. He gives her long lectures on philosophy and politics, which she doesn't even try to understand. Just drinks it in with her eyes."

"That would go to anyone's head," said my mother, smiling.

"Yes; she is pretty," said Aunt Barbie quickly, not wanting to boast.

It was true. Christina was in real life like she was on the stage, leaning over a balcony and talking about nightingales. But she did put on a face like a mule when Aunt Barbie scolded her, which she did often. It made me ashamed to hear her being scolded; she was too big. And I was ashamed to see Aunt Barbie *not herself*, with her voice grinding and her face clenched. Just the thought of the man Christina was engaged to made her look horrible.

Suddenly she shook her shoulders, and sighed. "I shouldn't be wearying you with my own tiresome affairs at a time like this."

"It all makes it particularly hard for the young people," said my mother. Aunt Barbie sighed again.

"My dear," she said, "when I was a girl I was taught to fear God and love my neighbour. The mistakes they make now is to think of nothing but expressing themselves—which is a far less interesting subject. I have done my best, but I did wrong at the start, when I promised my poor brother's wife to bring Christina up in her own faith. We are all Christians, I suppose, but I am at a loss when it comes to teaching the child things which I emphatically do not believe myself."

"Yes," said my mother. "So were we."

"That's entirely different," said Aunt Barbie decidedly. "All children need some kind of solid religious background. I wish I could convince you . . ."

My mother muttered something undecided. She and my father both loved their neighbour, Aunt Barbie, but otherwise they never much liked religious people. My father said that if they had acted as good as they talked they would long ago have made the world a place where decent people could live in peace; and, of course, they wouldn't still be quarrelling with each other. My mother was more polite, but it was embarrassing if you happened to know she was keeping all her real thoughts to herself. She was never, never going to teach me to fear God. And though she did want you to keep on at loving your neighbour, until you succeeded, my father used always to agree with me that with some people it's pretty well impossible.

The other children were arriving. I saw Eric, my best friend, though he had got hopelessly stuck in a lower form, pushing his little brother through the gate. Without saying goodbye, I went off with him. I tried to tell him that this was a day quite different from any other,

but he said I was making it up and asked questions I couldn't answer. By the time I had had three of my sums marked wrong and rubbed a hole in my map to get out a blot, I began to think I had made a mistake.

Anyway, the map was driving me crazy. I hate copying, though I do pictures out of my head for fun, and the painting part of maps is all right. I'd specially brought to school the good paint-box my mother gave me; but because of the blot I had to do the copying again. I was disgusted with the sight of our tiny little country, shaped rather like a whale, but with the other big countries crowding round so that it never quite touches the sea. That isn't fair. We learned in geography that the great seafarers, upwards and sideways, were our cousins who in ancient times had gone on further when we stopped. The result is that we haven't even got a real navy, only a few practice ships on the big lake between here and the mountains. My father said we were a great people, and of course it was true. But it would have been better to be bigger, and with ships.

Eric and I both brought our lunch with us. We sat on the bridge and talked about his new bike, which was his cousin's old one really. We talked about how to improve it and how to force his father to let him use it for school, not just for Sundays and special occasions. It was no use to him on Sundays, anyway. His father and mother had a shop, selling vegetables and other things, and every Sunday they went to his uncle's farm, in the shop van, to collect vegetables and eggs and chickens. There was no room for Eric on the front seat—they were both so fat—and he was always sick, shut up in the back with no windows. But they said it was good for him.

The only time I went I liked the uncle and the farm, though I agreed it was boring in the van, just looking at

two fat backs, even if you weren't the sort of person who felt sick. Eric said he would much rather be bicycling about the streets with me. I asked him to come and spend a whole Sunday with us, from breakfast to supper —my mother had told me to ask him any time, as often as we liked.

"Did she really?" said Eric.

"Of course she did. You know that. And she's always saying it to you."

"My mother is the real trouble," he said gloomily. The fact was he liked my father and mother much better than his own, who were always talking about money and reminding him that the business was going to be his one day. Which he thought a hateful idea, especially as it made them keep him in the shop whenever he had some free time. And even going to the farm, which anyone else would enjoy, was spoilt for him because it was *learning the trade.*

"You're lucky," he said, "to have parents who don't push you around."

"They do sometimes," I said, mostly to cheer him up. Mine were annoying often, but they weren't mean beasts like his. His mother was the worst, calling him her Erickins one second and blowing him sky-high the next. I even told her she was a mean beast once, for calling him a liar when he wasn't. So now we mostly went back to my house after school, which was much better. It was only boring when Eric wanted to spend *all* the time with my mother, while she was putting Vicky to bed or cooking. Sometimes my father teased her about it afterwards and called Eric her young admirer, which made my mother blush. She liked Eric and was sorry for him, she said; but you could see my father's teasing was a sort of clever invention for explaining he was her admirer too.

I told Eric to ask if he could come next Sunday. He said he would, but, of course, he always put off asking anything when there wasn't much hope. He quickly changed the subject. He said, once he'd got hold of the bike for weekdays, he'd come round every morning, and we'd both go to school on it, riding in turns.

There was a lot of arranging to be done about where the first person should drop the bike and then how far the second person should shoot past him, when it came to his turn. And how many changes we ought to make between riding and walking. And where. We talked it over till the bell rang, and later when we were coming home we marked each stopping-place with a secret sign in chalk.

All this was exactly like any day, working out something complicated with Eric, at lunch and on the way home. I only remembered it was different when he suddenly said at the last minute that he wasn't coming in. His mother had told him to go straight home.

Though it was still full daylight outside, the bedroom was dark. I felt for the knob of the bed, where my father used to hang his working coat, but it was not there, so I knew he had not come in yet. In the front room my mother had pulled a chair right under the window and was sitting sewing. Vicky was pulling a cart round the floor, singing in her own language, to a tune of her own invention.

I sat down at the table (because I was hungry) and watched the bottom halves of the people going past the window. My mother and I had a game we used to play with them, making guesses about what their top halves were like. But that day she just went on sewing; and I went on watching, by myself.

"There are more people today," I said after a while, "and they look different."

"I know," said my mother.

"That one," said Vicky, thinking we were playing the game, "has a cabbage on his head." My mother looked at her and smiled. "Laugh," said Vicky, holding her sides and rolling round her body and making shouting noises, supposed to be like laughter. My mother looked up out of the window.

I asked if they were going to make their demonstration there outside our window so that we could all see it.

"No; they are just getting together in out-of-the-way places like this. Then marching to the Town Hall. Christina's fiancé must be there somewhere, poor boy."

"And Christina too?"

"I don't know. Aunt Barbie wants to stop her, and perhaps she's right."

"Will there be fighting?"

"I hope not."

Though my father had not come in, my mother folded up her sewing and laid four places at the table, and put out the food, with a nut cake she had made the day before. She did not say anything about my father, except: "I wish I had remembered to give him some cake to take in his pocket."

When we were finished, she washed the cups and plates, and I dried the cups and hung them on their hooks. I wanted her to play draughts, but she said she had to do some shopping, and might perhaps go and see if my father was with his friend at the café. She put on her green coat and took her string bag. I was left to play with Vicky, who only wanted to drag the cart between my legs, again and again and again.

Afterwards, we stood on the chair by the window and watched some of the students going past with flags. There

were some policemen there too. A student stuck out his flagpole, partly by mistake, and tripped one of the policemen. Two other policemen got him by the arms and took him away shouting. The other students ran away in different directions.

Then there was nothing to see. Only the empty street and a broken flagpole. I put on the light and drew the curtains. Vicky began to cry, which my mother always says means it's time for bed. I thought she would probably stop if she listened to the bedtime story, so I switched on the radio. There was some music first, then the voice we knew said there was no bedtime story.

I went to get Vicky a sweet; and it was while she was poking about in the tin that I first heard the guns. Vicky was only thinking about the sweet, and I quite easily persuaded her to go to bed. She even helped me bringing in the cot and took off her own shoes.

I stayed up a long time. I don't know how long because the clock had stopped. My father usually winds it when he comes in, but I had forgotten. Once, the guns went off quite near at hand, but mostly they were far away and muffled. For a time, they stopped altogether, and I must have gone to sleep. When I woke up I went to look if my father or mother had come home; but their big bed was empty.

I wanted to go out and look for them, even if there *was* shooting. But I was afraid they would be angry if I left Vicky alone, so I undressed and cleaned my teeth and went to bed. But after that I didn't go to sleep at all. I was wondering where they were and when they were going to come home.

CHAPTER 2

I EXPECTED my mother to walk in at any minute, and I knew she would be pleased if we were doing everything just the same as usual. I got breakfast for us, and took Vicky to school. I made her run all the way, because I had only been able to judge the time by the sun.

There was nobody at all there, except a big boy, or really a man, chalking on the wall just where Christina had washed it. I knew him by sight and reputation, because he had been a famous boy at our school, for stuffing some gunpowder under an inkwell and blowing it up in algebra. For this reason he was always called Banger. It happened long ago, and now he was out at work, but it was still remembered. Everybody was told about Banger their first day at school.

Banger said, "Hullo, Jacko."

"Why do you call him Jacko?" said Vicky.

Banger put the chalk in his pocket and looked me up and down. "Because he's small and ugly, and added to that, he looks like a monkey. But don't you worry, Jacko. Those that haven't the beauty must work it out with their brains. That's my advice to you, Jacko."

I could see, now that I was looking at him near to, that he was ugly too, his black hair grew back off his forehead much too near his eyes and his chin stuck out forwards and sideways.

"What do you think of my pictures, Jacko?" he said.

I didn't know how to answer. I looked carefully at the pictures and tried to think of something nice to say. He had started by writing BANGER and CHRISTINA sideways up and then put in some extra lines to make it look like a man and a woman, with no clothes on, dancing close together.

"They're naughty," said Vicky. "Aunt Barbie will smack you."

"What do I care?"

I could tell the pictures were supposed to be naughty, but I still admired Banger for doing things no one else would think of. And though you could tell he wasn't a real artist (according to Eric, I am!), he had managed to put in everything with very few lines—which is much more difficult than you expect. Besides, I was pleased that he noticed me and had bothered to give me a new name. It was the name I kept all through the fighting. I never felt sorry about losing my old name because everything was different and the only thing to do was to be different myself.

When Christina came and found us talking to Banger she wouldn't say anything to him, but took us with her into the big schoolroom. She pulled out lots of toys and put them all over the place as if all the children were there. Vicky got into the see-saw boat and shouted and yelled until Christina had to get in at the other end. Christina said to me, "Shut the door, will you? And lock it."

Banger was standing in the doorway. I thought he might want to stop me shutting the door, and I was relieved when he stepped in, locked the door himself and put the key in his pocket.

"Good morning," he said, looking at Christina.

She went on swinging without answering. "I was saying good morning to you," said Banger. "That's the proper thing to do, isn't it?"

Christina was talking to Vicky, but after a while she said, "Why aren't you at work?"

"Too much going on. Can't waste my time working. That's me." He took a knife out and flashed it. Christina said, "You won't find any fighting here."

"Good," said Banger.

"Can't you see I'm busy?"

"I want to ask you something."

"I can tell you already I won't answer."

"Why don't you look at me? Frightened?"

"There's nothing worth looking at. I don't want to waste my time either."

"You've wasted a lot of time on that student of yours with the thin neck and bottle-bottom spectacles."

"I don't know who you mean. Go away, can't you? Auntie Barbie will be here soon."

"Liar."

"How do you . . . ?" She stopped herself before the last word.

"You've just told me."

"As a matter of fact, she's been sent to look after some lost children. The schools have been closed. If you hadn't been getting in my way, I would have taken Vicky home and gone to help her."

"Are you going to tag on after her all your life?"

"What business is it of yours?"

Banger walked across the room with long steps and stood towering above her, his knife flashing.

"You and that pious old maid. Why do you have to treat me like dirt?"

In his excitement and fury, he pulled his mouth all

crooked. I could only just hear what he said. He ended with a kind of howl, like a dog shut up in a shed. Vicky started whimpering, but to me it was a noise too extraordinary to be frightening, like a thunderstorm.

Christina was not frightened either, in spite of the fact that it was aimed at her. Of course, she was angry, and that does stop you feeling frightened. She got out of the boat and stood up in front of him, not bothering about the knife.

"Because you *are* dirt. If you want me to change my mind, stay and help me tidying the cupboards and locking everything up. If not, you can go away."

I had never seen anyone in a shouting rage before. It was Banger's own sort of rage, as I afterwards found out. His different feelings switched on and off like lightning. This time, he suddenly shrugged his shoulders and started pitching the big bricks into a box.

I had been wasting too much time, not able to interrupt them. And if the school was going to shut there was only a little time before I was stuck at home with Vicky. As soon as Banger suddenly went silent, and put his knife away, I said I wanted the key, to go out and find my mother.

Perhaps Christina thought she was somewhere just outside. She told me not to be long; and I said I would be as quick as I could. I was sure I would know something soon.

I thought I ought to go to the main square. Because I had no money for the tram, I had to run; and I thought I ran fast, because no trams went by. One or two people asked me where I was going, or where I lived; but they seemed to be satisfied when I waved my hand forward, without stopping. When I got near to the main square, there was nobody out in the roads; and in the square,

nobody was walking about. I stood at the corner, against the wall, because it almost looked as if nobody was allowed there.

When I had got my breath, and looked around more carefully, I did see some people. Most of them had fallen on top of each other near the steps of the Town Hall, and there were a few scattered about near me. At the top of the steps, between the pillars, were some soldiers. They were standing up, but they were not moving or talking.

Suddenly, three lorries drove into the square. Two went the other side, and one drew up almost beside me. The driver and another man, with red hair, got out and began putting the people into the lorry. I thought I might ask their advice about what I should do.

"You run along home," said the driver. "This isn't the place for you."

I said, "Where are you taking all these people?"

"To the hospital," said the man with red hair.

"That's right, mate," said the driver. "We'll just give them a day in bed and they'll be up again tomorrow."

"Up or down," said the man with red hair, "it's hard to tell."

"May I come with you?" I said. "I want to see if someone I know is in the hospital. She was wearing a green coat."

"No green coats in this lot," said the driver. "You run home. You'll be let know from the hospital if she's got in there."

"That's right," said the man with red hair. "It's as much as our life's worth."

"Don't overdo it, mate," said the driver. "Just send him home. We've got work."

I moved along the wall to the front of the lorry, where they couldn't see me. I could hear them puffing and

cursing. After a while, I heard shouts from one of the side streets and after that a police whistle. Some of the soldiers opposite came running down the steps carrying a machine gun. There was a flash somewhere and a crack, and one of the soldiers fell over and rolled down the steps. And at that moment I knew for certain that all the people lying in the square were dead.

I heard the driver say, "Better get out of this."

The red-haired man said, "You too," and picked me up and put me between them in the cabin of the lorry. The driver started up and drove without stopping, even at the cross-roads, to the cemetery. They both told me again that I'd got to go home; but I wanted to be certain first that all the people lying in the cemetery were strangers.

They were arranged tidily in rows, so I was able to walk down between them, when I had dodged out of sight of the lorry, looking for the green coat. I didn't think it was any use looking at the faces, because some of them were not like faces. The clothes were torn too, but not so much.

I found the green coat at last, and the face, which was not bloody at all. But it was white and glossy like a candle, and though it looked like my mother, it was also quite wrong. I might not have been certain it was her, except that she still had her string bag, half-full of fading spinach, twisted round her wrist.

I wanted to ask her what I was supposed to do, but she was looking as if I ought to know for myself. It was like several times when I was rude to Eric's mother. My mother was usually furious with *her*, but she blamed me too. "I love you very much," she said once, "and I would like you to behave well even to the hateful people who can never love anyone. You're a big boy and I can't

always keep on reminding you. Try as hard as you can to behave properly when I'm not there."

Of course, she was thinking of ordinary behaviour, like not sulking and not taking a mean revenge when people like Eric's mother are surprised you haven't got a servant to do the washing. There is more difficulty about knowing how to behave on unusual occasions.

But my mother certainly meant the spinach for us; so I took the bag off her wrist. Without noticing, I had come within sight of the lorry. The red-haired man was picking his way towards me.

"Hey, you. What's that you've got there? Who is it? What is it you're wanting with that young woman?"

I ran faster than I had ever run before. I could have said, "This is my mother," but it wouldn't have seemed like the truth. It was my mother's green coat, and my mother's string bag; but the *person* was not my mother herself. My mother was not there.

CHAPTER 3

WHEN I got back to the school, only Banger was there, sitting on one of the outside benches, smoking a thin cigarette. He asked me why I'd been so long; and before I'd had time to answer told me that Christina had taken Vicky to her own house, to give her dinner, and that he would show me the way there. He threw away his wet black stub, and we started off.

"And I haven't done so badly," he said. "I'm hopeful. It just shows, Jacko, it pays to keep on. You'd have thought Christina wasn't ever going to look at me; and now she's asked me to her house. That's something, isn't it, Jacko? I've a lot of hopes, but don't ask me what they are. First thing, I'll get that student sorted out. He's no good to a bright girl like Christina. I can't think what she ever saw in him. Perhaps it was only because her auntie didn't care for him; not that she cares for anyone who's after Christina, jealous old bitch. I've got to get her sorted out too. Christina doesn't want to go and help her. Why should she? She ought to have been on the stage, where people could see her. Oh, well, perhaps after this shake-out she'll show a little enterprise. Or somebody else will. Where do you put your money, Jacko? On the student?"

There was something sad and horrible about the way he went on and on talking, but I was glad he did. I hadn't got anything to say. He kept on nudging me, and

once or twice put his hand on my head as we went along, but he seemed to be mainly talking to himself. I didn't have to answer or say anything, and I wasn't even thinking about anything much, until we had almost arrived at Christina's house.

"End of the road," said Banger. "On the corner, the old house with two stories."

I heard guns going again somewhere; and I was beginning to feel a bit hungry, in spite of everything. Banger was jumping with excitement and took out his knife.

We were almost up to the cross-roads, opposite Christina's house, when there was shouting ahead, and some small explosions.

"Let's get back," said Banger, clutching my arm. But our retreat was cut off. Behind us, a tank was slowly advancing, looking as if it filled the street from side to side. I saw much bigger tanks later, but this one looked big at the time. Banger pulled me into a doorway. At that moment, Christina opened the door opposite, and she and Vicky stood looking at us, as if they heard nothing.

"Get back!" shouted Banger.

Christina tried to snatch up Vicky, but as soon as Vicky saw us she lurched forward. Before anyone could do anything she was in the middle of the road. Christina looked at the tank, hesitating.

"Come back," she shouted.

"Come on," shouted Banger. Perhaps I could have moved, but he was holding me very tightly; and I didn't know Vicky was going to stop where she was. It was Christina, in the end, who swept across the street, caught Vicky up as she ran and fell against us in our doorway. We just stood there while the tank went slowly past.

"You fool," said Banger. I could feel Christina shaking.

Then she gave a cry as some guns, only just round the corner, opened up. The tank swerved, firing back; and it swerved too far. We saw it hit the corner of Christina's house and edge out half the window and some slabs of brick which broke up as they fell. When the tank had passed on, there was a clear hole at the bottom of the house, like a cave.

"Look out," said Banger, and pulled us all back further.

We could see the top of the house beginning to tremble. A few more bricks fell into the hole, and then the whole side of the house leaned a little sideways and fell after. It seemed to fall quite quietly, but immediately afterwards there was a great clatter and roar and clouds of dust.

In the next silence, nobody seemed to be moving anywhere. The tank had gone on. We stood quite alone in our doorway, with the yellow dust settling on our hands and faces.

Vicky suddenly started screaming. It is a dreadful thing to see a house collapse; perhaps the most dreadful thing in the world. If somebody dies, even if you see them killed or see them dead, you only get to know gradually that they really are dead for ever. But with a house, it is different; you can believe at once what you see, even if you are as young as Vicky.

"Shut up," said Banger in the voice that means you must, so that even Vicky understood. Amazed, she looked at him between her fingers, but he wasn't bothering to take any more notice of her.

"Anyway, they've stopped shooting," he said. He grinned at Christina in the way we do at school to prove we are not afraid—when really we are. I didn't like it, though I was sure Banger must do it for some different reason. In books, people like Banger, who stop at nothing, do not know what fear is.

Christina had allowed Vicky to take her hand, but she looked almost asleep. All she said was, "I forgot my letters. I shall have to go back and get them."

"Where are they?" said Banger. "I'll do it." His face was chalk-white and sweaty, but he was grinning still in the same way. Christina said they were in her bedroom on the first floor, in a plaited straw box of different colours.

"Watch me," said Banger. He ran across the road, crouching, one shoulder up to his ear. The door stuck; but it gave way when he kicked it. We could see the staircase still there, and we saw him run up it. The next thing was that he opened the window on the first floor and began to throw things out—a coat, a pillow, a pile of light clothes which fluttered on the way down, and at last the straw box. When the box came out, Christina ran to pick it up; and Banger leaned out as if he were going to talk to her.

He hadn't realised (though we could see quite clearly) how near this window was to the jagged edge of wall. But when he was leaning out he looked across at it, and saw a few more bricks dropping. Without stopping to think, he jumped out of the window; and another lump of wall fell behind him, so that we could see straight into a corner of Christina's room.

Christina stood hugging her straw box, and took no notice of her other things, or of Banger. She did not seem to be interested in the fact that he had acted like a hero. Banger stayed half-on, half-off the pillow, just as he had dropped, holding his ankle and looking at her, with his front teeth clenched. Probably he was *willing* her to see that he had hurt himself; but it was no use. At last he said, "I should think I've broken my leg."

He rolled up his trouser and we could see a gash, bleeding a little, where one of the bricks had hit him.

"We ought to wash it," said Christina. "Can you walk?"

"Poor Banger," said Vicky. "It's making him begin to cry." And she was right; there were two wet streaks on his face. Yet when Christina gave him her hand he did get up, though he immediately put his arm across her shoulder to prop himself.

"I want to go home," said Vicky. Christina looked once in a puzzled way at her own wrecked house, and shifted the straw box under one arm. Banger said, "Well, let's get going." Vicky took his free hand; and all three of them started down the street without looking back. I collected the coat, and as many of the other things as I could. I got some of them into my mother's string bag with the spinach, but there was quite a lot over; and the pillow. It took me a long time to catch up with the others because it all kept slipping. But I thought we might be sorry afterwards if anything was left behind.

In the end, they waited. Banger lit one of his black cigarettes, and kept it stuck on his lip after Christina made him take some of the things away from me. His leg seemed to be all right again. I couldn't help wondering if we would find our house, too, in ruins; but none of the others seemed to be worrying. Vicky told them they would have some cake and coffee, and Christina said thank you in the ordinary way and Banger walked faster.

I couldn't understand at all what had been happening. My father would have been able to explain it, I knew; but with Banger and Christina I couldn't even tell what questions to ask. Christina was only bothering about making Vicky hurry, and Banger kept on cursing because he couldn't get a good hold of his bundle.

I interrupted them suddenly. "Who was it in the tank?"

"Soldiers, be damned to them," said Banger.

"What soldiers?"

"Ours," said Christina. "At least, that's what they call themselves."

"But our soldiers ought to be fighting the enemy."

Christina shrugged her shoulders. "They do what they're told," said Banger.

"You mean, they are fighting us?"

Christina almost smiled. "Some of us are fighting *them.*"

"Against injustice?"

"That's what they all say, Jacko," said Banger. "But me, I fight for myself. Now tell me I'm all wrong."

He was looking at Christina. I thought she was going to be furiously angry. Instead, she put her hand on his arm and said:

"I'm sorry. I forgot to thank you for getting my letters."

Our street, in the half-dark, looked the same as usual, except that it was empty.

I knocked at our door, in case; then opened it with the spare key I'd remembered to take off the hook. We all went into the big room. I asked Christina to sit down, like people do. She put down the box, but she stayed standing in the middle of the room, looking slowly round.

"Is your mother not here, Jacko?"

I shook my head. The words were difficult to say. I shut my eyes, pretending I was quite by myself, and got them out at last:

"She's dead."

CHAPTER 4

CHRISTINA sat down on the floor and pulled me and Vicky into her arms. "You poor children," she said. I leaned against her arm, which seemed to come out of a huge emptiness. I could hear myself breathing; and her smell of flowers was so faint it had almost vanished in space. I tried to catch it, under the smell of dust, in the same way that my mother has told me to listen for the second fiddle. I could feel her sadness too. But my own sadness seemed to belong to some other boy a long way away. Not to Jacko, who had passed through the day without crying or flinching, and had only just noticed that his stomach was yawning with hunger. I did not think at all about my mother. Christina and Vicky cried (though Vicky had no idea what it meant to be dead). But I never cry.

When Christina let us go, I stayed sitting on the floor without thinking about anything. She drew the curtains, and switched on the light. Banger turned on the radio. It said that the Government, by its prompt action in calling out the soldiers, had kept full control. Some people, it said, had been killed in a few places (our town was among them) but that order was now restored, under martial law. Nobody was allowed to go out of their houses after dark. I asked what martial law was. "They shoot you at sight," said Banger. Christina tried to make it better. "Only after dark," she said.

I went into the bedroom. My father had been back and fetched some clothes. I could see his working jacket wasn't on the knob, and his other suit had gone from behind the door. He had left a letter on the pillow for my mother. It had been written in a hurry, but I just managed to read it. It said, not to worry, his Union work was taking him to headquarters for a few days, but the job was likely to be *successfully completed* before the end of the week. He sent us all his love.

I noticed suddenly that I was still holding my mother's string bag. I took out Christina's things, and shook it about, and saw that my mother's purse was hidden among the blackish green leaves. There was quite a lot of money in it, too. This was the first good thing that happened that day. A person still needs some money today, for food and things, even if the world is going to end tomorrow.

I went to tell the others. Christina was tying up Banger's leg with a handkerchief. Banger said he was going out to get us some food.

"I haven't got any money," said Christina. "Have you?"

Banger tapped his forehead. "I've got brains."

I showed them the purse, but Banger waved it away. And Christina reminded him he mustn't go out because of the curfew.

"Do you want me to stay?" said Banger.

"I certainly don't want you to get shot," said Christina in the cheerful voice she uses to the little children. She put the spinach on to cook; and I got out all the other food we had—the remains of the nut cake, and some cheese, and some coffee with not much milk. Banger tried to help, but he didn't seem to know anything, even about how to put plates and knives on the table.

Christina, watching the saucepan, asked him where he

lived. He said he'd lodged all over the place, ever since he left home, because of a man—one of his mother's friends—who'd treated him like a dog. Out of revenge, when they played cards, Banger got some of his money by cheating; but the man found out and they fought. I couldn't see why his mother hadn't stopped them, and I asked Banger what she did.

"Screamed," said Banger scornfully. "So then I got to hell out."

He was looking at Christina, trying to make her notice him; but she only told us to sit down; supper was ready. He took his jacket off and pulled his tie loose, and sat sprawling in my father's big chair. Christina divided all the food equally and said if we ate it slowly it would seem more. She told Banger he was eating like a wolf, but when he said he was still hungry she gave him half her cake—which he ate in one mouthful.

When the food was finished, she let Vicky come and sit on her knee. I read them my father's letter and told them that Union work might mean anything—it was a kind of code. Vicky wanted to know what it did mean, but I wasn't sure. She wouldn't have understood, anyhow. So I just told her it meant that father wouldn't be back for a few days.

"Never mind," said Christina, hugging her. "I'll stay and look after you until he comes home."

"So shall I," said Banger in a loud voice, staring at Christina over his cup.

"We've not much choice," said Christina, without looking at him. They both seemed to have forgotten about Vicky, who was practically asleep and slipping off Christina's knee. I went to fetch the cot, and then Christina and Banger came after me, not to help, but to look round the house. They stayed in the bedroom, where I

heard them quarrelling. They were still quarrelling when they came back.

"Well, if I'm not wanted, I'd better go," said Banger. But he still stood waiting, with his jacket over one shoulder.

"I don't mind you sleeping on the floor," said Christina.

"Is that where you'd put your student?"

"It's nothing to do with Thomas. And if you want to know, the engagement's been broken off."

Banger whistled. He still seemed suspicious. "When was that?"

"Yesterday, I suppose. I wanted him to stay with me, and he said he hadn't any use for women who didn't respect a man's political opinions. So I said he and his friends were going to the demonstration just to show off and get attention."

"Could be," said Banger. "Pity they got more than they wanted."

"Don't," said Christina. "It was wicked of me to send him off in a rage. I didn't even mean what I said; it was just something I'd got from Aunt Barbie. When he explains, I believe the same as he does. But I got so mad I said anything. So he said he'd finished with me; and I said the sooner the better. And now he's out there, somewhere, fighting to save our country. . . ."

Banger was fidgeting. "And I'm the one that's here," he said, screwing up his eyes.

Christina didn't seem to hear him. She put her head on her arms, across the table, and started sobbing. "I love him, I love him. . . ."

It is hateful to see grown-up people crying. I tried not to look, though I felt sorry for Christina; and for Banger, who had no home and was being sent out into danger. Besides, I wanted him to be able to stay. Christina said she would look after us, but sometimes she didn't seem

old enough. Even if Banger did horrible things sometimes, he was older and stronger; and a man.

He hated Christina's crying as much as I did. "I'm getting out of here," he said. But he still put off actually going. And at last Christina stopped crying to say, "You can't leave us. There's no one else."

I could never understand Banger's quick-change moods but when you saw them happen you knew they were real. In a flash, he and Christina were friends again and had arranged that I was to try sleeping in Vicky's cot, and Vicky and Christina would sleep in the big bed in the bedroom.

It's no use making a fuss about sleeping in a cot when people like my father and Thomas are fighting to save their country. Vicky laughed at me, but I wasn't at all ashamed. I was proud that I had given up my bed to Banger.

I did wish I could stretch my legs right out. I kept on twisting and turning and stubbing my toes on the bars. But when I thought of Christina and Vicky in the next room, and heard Banger grinding his teeth in his sleep, I didn't see how we could have done any better. Everything would have been much more hopeless if Vicky and I had been left alone.

CHAPTER 5

CHRISTINA was disgusted next day because we had all completely forgotten to wash. She gave me and Banger a big basin of water and took the kettle away for her and Vicky. I let Banger wash first. He had slept in most of his clothes, so he just rinsed his face and hands. I lent him my wash-cloth, but he didn't even soap it. Just squeezed it hard and pushed it round the top of his neck, trying to avoid his shirt.

Christina had told us to wash properly. So I soaped myself all over, though Banger laughed at me and told me it was a waste of time and effort. I hated the way he laughed, but, of course, you have to agree that it is a waste to wash if you are clean already. I often do only my face and hands when no one is looking, but sometimes I am sent back to do it again.

Banger was still only half-clean, as anyone could see. Christina told him he must have a proper wash in the evening. He was too grown up to send back.

After a peculiar breakfast, with disgusting weak black coffee and biscuits instead of bread, Banger told me I could come out with him to get milk, if we could, and supplies of other food. Christina reminded him to fetch his toothbrush and pyjamas from his lodgings, if they were still there.

"I don't need any fancy stuff," said Banger scornfully. In case he hadn't got any pyjamas, I lent him some of

my father's. He tried them on over his clothes and went to look at himself in my mother's big glass. When he came back, he had slicked his hair over his forehead with spit. He walked up to Christina with his little finger cocked and said, "Just look at me, my deahs. Don't you admah my night attah."

I laughed, but Christina was furious. She told us to get out before she threw us out. And she slapped Vicky, who had quickly got into the same attitude and was trying to say the same words in the same voice.

Banger took Vicky's old push-chair, and a sack. I took my mother's purse, though Banger said it was crazy to spend money when nobody was going to bother about what you did. Besides, how could you buy things when the shops were shut?

He made me get on to his shoulders and climb into somebody's larder window. There was no one about, and the shelves were piled so high with food, you couldn't feel bad about the people it belonged to. I thought they had probably run away; but if they hadn't, there was enough to last them years.

I passed a lot of sugar and butter and some tins and half a chicken out through the window. Then I got down off the shelves and opened the door into the kitchen. The sun was shining on the table, which had nothing on it except a blue plate, with some peaches and black grapes. I wanted them badly, and went slowly and cautiously across the floor. But just as I was stretching out my hand, I heard someone coming downstairs. So I ran back to the larder, shut the door, and called softly to Banger. He hauled me out so fast that I tore my jacket; but he made me wait, then, while he shut the window and wiggled the catch with his knife to look as if it had

never been opened. "We may want to come again," he said.

He had filled up the sack with twigs and sticks from the garden, arranged so that everyone would think we were only collecting firewood. But we met very few people on our way home, even when we were in the streets. Later on, I took Banger along the footpath through the woods where we sometimes go for mushrooms. Our side-street disappears into these woods, so we were able to get to the flat secretly and go in secretly through the window.

Christina didn't say anything when she saw how much we had got. Obviously, she was only half-pleased. She didn't even remind us about the milk (and the tooth-brush) which we had quite forgotten.

I suppose she thought it was wrong to steal. And I knew it was supposed to be wrong, because when my mother was there it *was* wrong. But now it was much more right to follow Banger. So much had altered. Only a peculiar, brave, sudden person like Banger could possibly understand what you ought to think about it.

The chicken was good, though Banger said there wasn't enough of it. I was sorry I hadn't managed to get the peaches and the grapes. When we had finished, Christina collected all the chicken bones and put them on to boil for soup.

In the afternoon, Banger taught us a new game of cards. We played for lumps of sugar, because I was the only person with any money, and he said he couldn't stand playing for love. Vicky, of course, got in a complete muddle, so Banger, who was in a very good mood after a successful morning, said he would take her into his Syndicate. After that, he played the cards, and she collected the sugar, in piles. Christina lost everything she

had, and was forced to borrow from the Syndicate. My pile was never very big, but I never went bankrupt. Banger said that if you went bankrupt, the Syndicate owned you.

The soup smelt nasty, and he told Christina to take it off the stove. She wouldn't, unless he switched off the radio, which was always saying the same thing in between bits of music. It kept on saying that everything was calm—though we still heard shooting sometimes, and sometimes a convoy of lorries went past the corner of the street. Christina said it made her miserable to hear lies. Banger said that didn't interest him, one way or the other; he just liked noise. He turned the radio up, and then at least we didn't hear quite so much noise from outside.

When the Syndicate had won all Christina's sugar for about the third time, Banger and Vicky put their winnings in a bag. For a special prize, Banger let Vicky have a puff at his cigarette. He then asked me if I'd like to go out again for a bit, before it got dark. Of course, I was pleased. We had been playing cards for hours, and the room was stuffy, with the soup and Banger's cigarette smoke.

Christina went to look at the soup. She kept her back to us, rattling the saucepans about. Anybody could see she wasn't pleased with Banger.

"The kids like me all right," he said. "What about it, Jacko and Vicky?"

I said of course we liked him. Vicky just clung on to his leg, begging for another puff, though the first one had made her double up with coughing.

"They don't know," said Christina, without turning round. "They don't know anything. But Jacko is not to go out."

"You'll come along with me, won't you, Jacko?" said Banger.

"Yes, if I'm let."

"Oh, come on, you're a big boy . . ."

"All right." I didn't see why I should bother with Christina. It was no use keeping to the old ideas, about stealing and so on. She was beginning to seem stupid; and she was suddenly ugly as well. When she turned round and shouted at me she was as ugly as a witch.

"Listen, Jacko. If you want me to stay here with you and Vicky you must do as I say. Otherwise . . ."

Banger suddenly had a new idea. "If you're thinking of leaving," he said to Christina, "why shouldn't we go together? Why bother with the kids? Come on. I'm ready when you are."

He took her arm, but she jerked away. "Don't be a fool," she said. "Leave me alone."

"We'll see about that," said Banger. He kicked out his leg to dislodge Vicky, who was still following him round, and went straight out of the house without saying any more. I couldn't go with him, because he completely forgot that he'd asked me. If he'd asked me again I would have gone, in spite of what Christina said. It was stupid to say we had to obey her—when he was so much the strongest. So I told her she ought to obey him, but that only made her laugh, in an angry sort of way.

She played with Vicky for a bit, not talking to me. Then she made me help tidying the room, still not talking. Then she found my mother's workbox and told me to take off my jacket and give it to her to mend. So then I got my drawing book out and did a picture.

I first drew two men fighting with swords. Of course, I know that swords haven't been used for hundreds of years; but it is easier to draw a man-to-man fight. One

of the men was a prince. The other was a pirate who had carried off a king's daughter—which doesn't happen now either. But I wanted to put the reason for the fight into the picture. So then I drew the king's daughter, standing under a tree, clasping her hands and shouting to encourage the prince. Far away at the back was the king's palace, on fire.

It was a nuisance that I had taken my good paint-box to school and left it. I put on some diluted ink with a brush, and some bits of red and orange made of jam. Christina began to be less annoyed and let me have what I wanted. I quite liked working out what would do, but I couldn't think of anything that would do for green. So there was no green grass and no green leaves on the tree.

Vicky was drawing too. She drew about one picture a minute and wanted me to look at them all and say they were good. Actually, they were all the same picture —scribbles going in one direction—but meaning different things. She always had to tell me what they were and then I could sometimes see it and sometimes not.

At last she took them all away to show Christina. I looked at my own picture again and saw a big empty space in the top corner. So I drew a bird, just alighting on a branch of the tree. It was a talking bird, bringing a message. I didn't want to write in the message—it was secret—so I just gave the bird a wide-open beak. Then Vicky came back and said the bird was going to gobble everything up. That infuriated me. I could see I hadn't got the bird exactly right, but when I half-shut my eyes and looked at the whole picture, the bird alighting on the tree certainly made it much better.

I liked sitting there drawing, with Christina sewing under the window. The room looked more like it used to before anything happened. We had tidied everything

away, except for Vicky's toys, and Christina had strained the soup, and emptied Banger's cigarette stubs out of two or three saucers, and wiped the table. And she was in a good mood at last, looking like herself. If it wasn't that I always draw everything out of my head, I might have drawn her to be the king's daughter.

Christina suddenly said she was sorry she had lost her temper. But it was worrying, not knowing what she ought to do.

"We can't do anything," I said, "except stay here till my father comes home. He said he would be home at the end of the week."

"But we could go and find Aunt Barbie and the other children."

I asked her if she knew where to start looking; but she didn't. She said she didn't particularly want to go, anyway. She brushed my jacket and folded it over the back of a chair. Then she took down her straw box from the top of a cupboard and started looking through the letters. They were all letters from Thomas, the student she used to be engaged to, and I wanted to know if he and my father were fighting side by side. Christina thought it wasn't likely. Thomas always said that my father was one of the great leaders of the secret opposition, and probably he had been called away to be a leader in the proper government, chosen by the people.

"Well, then, everything ought to be all right soon. He can stop the fighting and come home."

I knew it was a silly thing to say really, even while I was saying it. If it was easy to throw out the old government, it would have been done long ago.

"Though once," I said, "they put him in prison."

"We are stronger now," said Christina, "if only we are left to settle it ourselves. . . ."

I thought of our country on the map, with the big countries arranged all round, waiting to interfere; and our capital city—where my father must be—almost touching the most dangerous frontier.

"Well, at least," I said, "everyone knows now that we can fight. And I'm glad we're fighting, even if . . ."

I suddenly forgot what it was I wanted to say. Christina went on sorting through her letters.

"I wish I could explain it all to you," she said, frowning. "But your father could do it much better. Or Thomas. He always said I was stupid and didn't trouble. And it's true I never listened very carefully. Sometimes I thought he was just talking and repeating things he'd read in books."

She picked up one of the letters and read it out.

"'Christina. It's simply no use your saying I've *got* to come on a picnic. No picnics for us, my dear girl, until we've got over this crisis. You don't seem to have grasped that I mean what I say. Of course I love you; but we have all got to sacrifice *whatever is necessary* for the sake of freedom and justice. Nothing else will do. And in any case, sweetie, what's a picnic?'"

"My father was almost always busy too," I said; "but he used to like picnics."

I thought it was a shame Thomas wouldn't come on Christina's picnic. But it was a shame too that listening to him bored her. I only wished somebody had told me more. It is muddling when you don't know—or only vaguely—what you are aiming at or what the results of all you are doing will be. My mother always answered questions as well as she could, but she had to stop people bothering my father, even if it was only me. He hardly ever had time to talk to me, and when we all went for a walk on Sundays he said he wanted to relax and enjoy

himself. And sometimes he was so tired that he simply had to spend part of the time asleep in the sun, with his head on my mother's knee. They didn't know—and nor did I—how useful it would have been if he had only had time to explain to me everything that was going to happen. He only had time to give me a few clues, like a secret message in code.

All the same, it was always more fun when he came out with us. He didn't laugh and play about with me and Vicky, like my mother, but he was very good at thinking of new things to do.

"He showed me how to build a fire," I told Christina, "so that you could be sure of lighting it with only one match. And he taught me three ju-jitzu holds, and to vault a gate and to row a boat—as well as how to tie it up with a knot that never comes undone."

Christina said I was lucky to have that sort of father; and I said if she liked she could come out on the river with us, when he came home. Of course Vicky wanted to go out for a picnic at once. We had to tell her, several times, that we had still got to wait. She said she hated waiting, and we told her so did everybody.

Christina read out several more bits from the letters. She said she hadn't realised before how much they meant; but she did see at last that people going to the wars had less time for love. There were some bits about love, but she didn't read them out.

When she read out the words "freedom" and "justice," they made a shiver run all down my spine. They were words I had partly forgotten for a few days. They sounded glorious, in the room that was looking like itself again. You could even think that they came into the room, like the bird into my picture, and made it more itself.

Christina said the picture was good. She stuck it up

over her bed, so that she could have another look at it every morning and evening. I don't know if she did or if she didn't, but I sometimes did when I had work to do in that room later on. I went on thinking it was fairly good for a time. Then I stopped noticing it.

CHAPTER 6

I SUDDENLY noticed that the room was not quite itself—there were no newspapers. I asked Christina if Banger would bring one back.

"I don't expect there are any, Jacko. And, anyway, Banger isn't interested."

"All the same, I'm sure he's on our side."

"He says he's against both sides. But he doesn't really know which side is which. Sometimes I think he hardly knows anything."

"He doesn't know how not to talk with his mouth full," said Vicky. She was always pleased about catching people doing something wrong. My mother used to say it was just her age, but she usually shut her up. So did Christina.

"That's not his fault," she said. "He never had any proper home and he never had any friends."

I said, "But he must be on our side now, because we are his friends."

"If he behaves," said Christina. I told her she ought to let him be on our side, anyway.

"You don't understand," she said. "I'm sorry for him, and I want to be nice to him, but he makes it difficult himself. . . ."

"I love Banger," said Vicky.

Christina made a funny face. "Well, I suppose all that anybody wants is love."

Banger must have come in through my secret way.

"You've got something there," he said, "and I'll try to behave. Another game of cards? Just to pass the time."

We didn't really want to play, but we all wanted to be nice to him, even Christina. He put Vicky on his knee and Christina dealt the cards. Then Banger took a pile of money out of his pocket and divided it into three equal heaps, as far as it would go.

"Just a loan," he said.

Christina didn't answer. She was looking at a ring with three red stones in it, which was lying on the table, too, with what was left of the money.

"An investment," said Banger, putting it back in his pocket.

He persuaded her to give us something to eat while we were playing, and we went on until it was quite dark and long past Vicky's bedtime. The radio was on all the time. I thought that was silly at first. I agreed with Christina that there's no sense in hearing lies; they only muddle you more. But then there was an announcement that seven people had been condemned and executed for disobeying the martial law. Their crimes were looting and setting fire and conspiracy.

"You had better look out, Banger," said Christina.

"I always manage," said Banger. But he said it loudly, daring us to say he couldn't.

Then the names were read out, and the conspirator was a man I had seen once because he worked in the printers' union with my father. After that, we *had* to keep the radio on, in case there were more lists of names; and we began to be bored with playing cards, all of us but Vicky. Christina had been forced to borrow from the Syndicate again, twice, and Vicky was so rich she yelled

and screamed when Christina started putting her to bed.

Then Banger was bored with that. "Out!" he said, making a horrible face, "or else . . ."

Vicky was so amazed that she made me laugh out loud. She went away utterly silent, looking at Banger over her shoulder, not at all frightened, but admiring. "I wish I could do it," said Christina as she poured some hot water out, supposed to be for Banger. But he was too busy to wash, he said; he was working out Christina's debt on the back of his cigarette packet. When she came back after settling Vicky, he showed her the huge total and asked if she'd like to pay at once.

"Don't be silly. How can I?"

Anyone could see from his face that he was thinking of something that was no good. He didn't look certain himself even. He got up in an awkward way and put his arms round Christina and tried to kiss her.

"Like this," he said.

Christina got out of his arms somehow and took one step back. Then she hit him, hard, across his face. I thought for a second he was going to hit back. Perhaps I stopped him by yelling. Anyway, he went over and started twiddling the knobs of the radio. The announcer who always said that everything was calm—even if six people were shot—flashed past. Then Banger caught another voice, a faint, different voice, which said:

"Listen, everyone. Nine towns are now in the hands of the free citizens. Courage, friends, you are fighting for your country and your freedom. . . ."

Christina suddenly held out her arms to us all. She was suddenly shining and glorious. And Banger's face changed too. He stared at her and took two slow steps.

He was shaking all over; and said, in his most terrible, howling voice:

"Christina, Christina, I can't stand it. What am I going to do?"

Christina looked at him quite calmly and never moved when he put his big hands on her shoulders.

"You could fight," she said. "You could go and fight with the others."

CHAPTER 7

BANGER did go out to fight. He sharpened his knife and showed us how you were supposed to hold it, so that the thin blade slid through the space between someone's ribs. We gave him the spare key and told him to come back any time when there wasn't any fighting to do.

I ought to have gone with him, but I didn't think of it quick enough. Afterwards, there was no one to show me who to fight and how; and, besides that, Christina wouldn't let me. We had enough food for a siege, she said, and the best thing we could do was to wait quietly at home, trying to be patient.

I did try, but Vicky, who, of course, didn't understand, was awful. Christina and I had to spend most of our time amusing her; and that only made her want more amusement. Luckily, Christina was the best person I ever met for thinking of amusements. She was better even than my father—at least indoors. We never had any nice times out of doors with her; but in all that time we were sitting indoors, waiting for Banger and trying to keep out of danger, she was never once stuck. She could do long scenes out of plays, remembering all the words and acting all the parts; and when she was in the mood, she could do all sorts of imitations—a lady trying on a lot of different hats and a postman reading other people's letters. She also taught us a lot of different prayers.

I liked the imitations best, but Vicky went crazy over

prayers. I asked Christina if she believed in all the prayers, which have not really made people a scrap better, though they have been saying them over and over for thousands of years. Christina said she had believed them all when she was Vicky's age, but that Thomas, who seemed to think like my father about everything, had given her doubts. All the same, she thought it was worth while saying prayers; and it did sound, when she said them with Vicky, as if she wasn't just doing a recitation. Even I, though I meant to be exactly like my father, could imagine that the prayers were helping to stop the shooting and keep people safe. And there was one prayer I really thought might work. It began, "Saint Michael the Archangel, defend us in battle . . ."

Once Vicky got into practice, she was always kneeling down and putting her hands together and saying, "O God, Heavenly Father, bless all of us—me and Jacko and Christina and Banger and Father and Mother and Aunt Barbie and Christina's young man called Thomas. Look after them and try to bring them home safe and sound. Amen, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost."

I thought it funny to put in my mother. She couldn't come home, however hard God tried. But Christina said it was quite all right. The ending she put on to all her prayers was funny too. She could give me a lot of definite information about the Father and the Son; but she herself admitted that the Holy Ghost baffled her. He (or it) was indescribable. Well, in a picture or a poem there are always important bits you can't say anything about, though they mix up somehow with your general idea.

We both agreed that Vicky rather overdid all the praying. But Christina said it was anyway a better occupation for her than doing the babyish recitations Eric's mother

thought so sweet, *with gestures*. Christina simply wouldn't allow her to put her finger to her mouth and curtsy; but she was fond of her singing. People had said before that Vicky had perfect pitch, even at her age, and she taught Christina the tune of my mother's song. They used to sing it quietly together quite often.

When we cooked our food, we always made enough for Banger, because we expected him to come home for meals, at least sometimes. I don't know why we thought that. It is quite obvious really that fighting soldiers, even if they're not real soldiers, can't have regular meals; or sleep. We had the radio on all the time. The usual station went on saying that everything was under control. But the other voices (more and more of them) added new names to the list of free towns.

I went on sleeping in the cot, so that my bed was always free for Banger. He was away for three nights; and it was in the middle of the night that he came back. Christina and Vicky must have been asleep; and so was I. But I was woken by tramping noises on the outside steps.

Banger came in first. He had got on a cap, which made him look more like a soldier, and a rifle on his shoulder.

"Well, Jacko, we've got company. Jump out of your cage, boy, and find us some glasses."

Two men came in after him—young men about his age. One of them had his left arm strapped to his body with a bandage and a big piece of sticking plaster over one ear, but all the same he had a gun too. So had the third man, who was wearing clothes quite different from anything I had seen before. They were just as dirty as the others, but they had lasted out better. As if he knew you had to wear the right clothes for fighting, just like ski-ing or football. Banger and the wounded man were

wearing their ordinary clothes; and someone had slashed the sleeve of the wounded man's jacket, so as to put the bandage on.

I got out of the cot and shook hands with both of them. The wounded man said good evening to me; the other only smiled, because (as I soon found out) he knew very few words in our language. We sat round the table. The foreigner kept on smiling at me, which was stupid in a way because I couldn't go on smiling back, as if we were making a conversation, by smiling. But I liked him at once. I didn't like the wounded man, because he was looking around all the time, twisting his long neck, with a peering, sneering expression on his dirty yellow face—though it may only have been because he had lost his spectacles. He seemed to mind more about his spectacles than about his wounds. He said he must go and look for them first thing in the morning—somebody might have found them in the dressing station, for instance, or in the attic room where he had been standing, at the left side of the window, shooting soldiers.

Banger filled our glasses from a bottle he had brought with him. The wounded man put a hand over his glass, but Banger made him move it.

"After what we've done," he said, "we deserve something."

The wounded man allowed his glass to be filled, but didn't drink. I wished I hadn't, too, when I took the first taste. It was so horrible, I wanted to spit it out. But I just managed to swallow it.

The foreigner, smiling, raised his glass and proposed a toast.

"What does he say?" asked Banger when he had drunk the toast and filled his glass again. The wounded man said he was drinking to our country and our country's

freedom; and wanted us to know that he was proud to be fighting with us.

"Tell him we're glad to have him," said Banger. "Come on, drink up."

"Your health, Smith," said the wounded man. They all drank, but I could see he took only a small sip, almost a pretence. Smith, the foreigner, made a long speech in his own language.

"What does he say?" said Banger.

"He says he is ashamed of his own people."

"Took a long time saying it," said Banger. I laughed. The wounded man looked at us both in a disgusted way.

"He is right to be ashamed. These people say they love freedom and democracy, but they do nothing for it, at least only when they are getting hurt. What sort of love is that? Just a fine name for keeping everything nice in your own garden. Of course, they love that sort of freedom, and so far they've been able to get it, but something's going to spoil their nice picnic one of these days. Then they'll know why we laughed when they talked about love. What use is love from people who only think about themselves?"

Smith was asking him to explain, but he shrugged his shoulders. Banger was frowning, trying to think. "But it's our fight after all," he got out at last. "It stands to reason they think they'd sooner keep out when there's nothing in it for them, like you were saying. Done it myself many times."

"Very likely," said the wounded man, pulling down the corners of his mouth. "Your political education seems to have been sorely neglected. They haven't grasped it either, but *we* are fighting for *them*."

Smith was saying something else. The wounded man

stopped giving Banger a political education, and listened. Then he explained:

"He says he loves his mother-country. But he envies us because we have a country we can love and be proud of as well."

"I know what he's getting at," said Banger. "I'm not saying this country's done a lot for me, but times like this you feel different."

You could tell Banger was pleased to have got some friends at last, even if they jeered at him. But he was embarrassed too. I thought it was because he'd never learned even as much as I had about how to behave to visitors—or because he was afraid Christina would be disgusted about the noise. They did make a lot of noise, and sometimes Banger looked round at the door and listened. I couldn't think why he was so worried. I was sure Christina would be pleased really, in spite of the noise, that Banger had some friends he had found for himself.

Smith was trying all the time to help him out by smiling in a friendly way. But he couldn't say anything much in our language. The wounded man went on talking, in an angry and jeering way. He kept on blinking his eyes —because he had lost his glasses—and most of the time he was shivering with cold too.

"Put that drink down," Banger told him, holding out the bottle like a pistol.

The wounded man had his hands round his glass, holding it tight, but you could still see that he was shivering.

"Come on; it'll warm you up," said Banger in an easier voice.

Smith was trying to explain something. He pointed to his own head and repeated our word for "bad" again

and again, pronouncing it in several different ways, all of them wrong.

I said, "He thinks people oughtn't to drink when they've had a bash on their head."

"What of it?" said Banger. "We've had a packet, and there's more coming."

Smith took off his mackintosh jacket and put it gently round the wounded man's shoulder, in the place of the slashed coat, with the good arm through one sleeve.

"Yours," he said in our language. "I give it." He smiled to show he knew he was speaking badly. Banger filled his glass.

"All friends?" said Smith, raising his glass and smiling. The wounded man was still shivering, under the jacket, but Smith looked quite warm and cheerful in his thin shirt, dazzling white where it had been covered up, but black at the cuffs.

"All friends," said Banger.

This time, the wounded man drank too. He seemed to have forgotten that he didn't want the drink, and he allowed Banger to give him some more. Smith, smiling, looked round.

"Nice here?" he said. He nodded at Banger, thanking him. The wounded man didn't want to thank anyone for anything.

"Wasn't there some girl?" he said. "We heard a lot about her, but where is she?"

"She's asleep," I said. The wounded man looked at me and then at Banger.

"Wake her up, why don't you?"

"We should sleep too," said Smith.

"That's right," said Banger. "We'll fix you up here on the floor, when we've finished the bottle. You'll see her in the morning."

"So our friend keeps his girl to himself!" said the wounded man in a disgusted voice.

"To this sleeping girl!" said Smith, lifting his glass. Banger drank too, and the wounded man drank a full glass straight off, in one gulp.

"You've been lucky," he said to Banger. "How was it you happened to come by her? Just tell me that." He was drunk, I could tell, though I had never seen anybody drunk before at home.

"You mustn't shout so loud or you'll wake her up," I said.

"She'll wake up sooner or later," said the wounded man. He and Banger suddenly burst out laughing, as if they were sharing some private joke. Smith smiled at me, because we were both out of it. When the wounded man explained, in Smith's language, what the joke was, he just went on smiling and stroked my hair.

The door opened suddenly, and Christina herself came in. She was wearing a nightdress with a blanket pulled round her shoulders, and looked as if she had just jumped out of bed without thinking. I looked at Banger, waiting for him to introduce his friends; but he was looking at the wounded man with a cruel, laughing, triumphant expression that made me stop breathing.

"So that's your tart, is it?" said the wounded man, peering in Christina's direction.

"Thomas!" said Christina.

"Do I know you?" said the wounded man. "Have I met you? Who are you?" He got up slowly from the table. Smith got up too, not smiling. But Banger was smiling, though in a strange way.

"Tell him it's not what he thinks," said Christina. I don't know if Banger would have said anything; but he

wasn't given a chance. The wounded man, holding on to the table to keep himself upright, said:

"Why should I listen to him? Or to you? Here it comes again. *Love.* You'd better take cover, boys, if you ever hear anyone talking about love."

"I do love you, Thomas," said Christina. She stood staring at him, holding her elbows, as well as the rug, which was slipping round her waist. He walked, as well as he could, up to her.

"You can keep it," he said. "Move, will you? I want to get out of here."

He picked up his rifle, which was propped against the stove, and turned to Banger.

"And you can keep *her*, friend, and I wish you luck."

Christina still didn't move. Thomas sucked in his lower lip under his teeth, and got a good grip on his rifle. Perhaps he was going to hit her. But Banger got in front of Christina and hit him first, and Smith managed to catch him as he staggered back.

Christina said, "Leave him alone, Banger. I must talk to him."

The wounded man looked at her, and spat.

"Get me out of here," he said to Smith. Smith jerked his head at me, meaning that I was to open the door wider and let them through. I did that first, and then went and opened the front door at the end of the passage.

I stood outside, not wanting to know what they were all doing. I heard the wounded man's feet dragging along the passage. It was a windy night with black clouds blowing across the stars, and cold.

Smith got the wounded man to the bottom of the steps. We had to carry him up them, with me holding his feet. Smith thanked me.

"It is a good war," he said. "With bad things."

Thomas was just able to stand. Smith took both the rifles, put his shoulder under Thomas's good arm, and held him up, by catching hold of his hand on the other side. I watched them walking slowly down the street, keeping in the shadow against the houses. Nothing else was moving. When they leaned against the wall to rest, nothing moved; except that the wind blew through Smith's shirt, and made it flap like a flag. It was horrible to see him going out into the cold, and signalling against his will to all the patrols that were waiting to shoot at sight.

CHAPTER 8

CHRISTINA was crying, where she stood, with Banger holding her shoulders to prop her up. The rug had fallen to the ground.

"Why didn't you tell him, Banger?" she said, with long, sobbing spaces in between the words.

"He'd made up his own mind," said Banger.

Christina sobbed more bitterly. "I *did* love him. He ought to have understood."

"He didn't give himself the time."

"But why didn't *you* do something?"

"I stood up for you, didn't I?"

I fiddled about and after a while tasted my drink again. It was still disgusting. I couldn't understand how the others had been able to drink it. No wonder it made them horrible. Banger saw what I was doing and signalled to me to give him the glass, which was still nearly full. He made Christina lean up against the bookcase, then lifted her chin with one hand and tipped the glass against her mouth. She swallowed the drink like medicine, shutting her eyes and making a face.

Banger may have been stupid and ignorant, but he was trying hard to be kind and good to Christina, though he wasn't able to do it like anyone else. The drink, anyway, seemed to make her feel better. She stood up straighter and pushed the hair out of her eyes.

"I hate Thomas really," she said. "Thank you for standing up for me."

"What do I get?" said Banger, but not fiercely. Christina and he stared at each other for a long, long time. Neither of them wanted to say anything. Banger lowered his head first, and began moving it from side to side, like a bull looking for a hole in a hedge. Christina put her hand to her forehead. "I'm so muddled," she said.

"And what about me?" said Banger. He was shaking again, but not with cold, because sweat was running down his face, making channels in the dirt. Christina then said an extraordinary thing. She cried it out, pressing her fists against the neck of her nightdress:

"But I don't know who you are!"

Banger laughed horribly. "I'm nothing. I'm just dirt. I'm just the one who fought for two days on account of you. And now what do I get for it?"

Christina gave a long sigh. Then, very timidly, she put out her hand and started to scrape off a lump of mud that had dried on Banger's coat.

"Don't do that," he said furiously.

"You are not quite so bad as you think," said Christina. She went on scraping the mud off. Banger stood quite still, gazing at her, as if (like Thomas said) he had never learned to understand anything.

"I love you and I can't bear it," he said at last, in a small, small, shaking voice.

"You look terribly tired," she said. He allowed her to take off his jacket. Then she put the kettle on for some hot water, and took a towel off the rail. "You need looking after," she said. Banger followed her with his eyes wherever she went.

While the water was heating, she went away to her own room. Banger sat at the table opposite me, and finished what was left in all the glasses. Christina came back again, carrying Vicky, who seemed more or less

asleep. She put Vicky in her cot and arranged the bedclothes.

"You can sleep in your own bed tonight, Jacko," she said. "Get into bed now and go to sleep as quickly as you can." She said nothing at all to Banger, but went out at once.

I got into bed and shut my eyes. I could hear Banger pouring the water into the basin. I heard him move the basin from the table to the floor; and then back. I thought it was a good thing that Banger was learning at last how to wash properly. He took ages. It was a long time before I heard him softly closing the door.

Of course, Vicky woke up and wanted me to amuse her by talking. I got her to sleep in the end by singing. It made her want to go to sleep, she said, so as not to hear it.

It is always much easier to put Vicky to sleep than to go to sleep yourself.

CHAPTER 9

We all slept late. When I woke, Banger and Christina were sitting at the table eating, and Christina was passing bits of buttered bread to Vicky, who was standing up in the cot, dropping crumbs into the blankets and smearing the bars with butter. Christina didn't seem to mind at all. She had moved all the places so that she could sit close to Banger. And they were sharing a cup, which is disgusting except for children. I knew what they had done, because everyone talks about it at school; but I didn't want to think about it now. I wanted to keep them both to be my friends—even if they'd been creeping about, making their own breakfast and not waking me up.

Christina came over and hugged me, and asked me if I would like my breakfast in bed. I thought I had better, to keep out of their way; and I managed to eat everything without making any crumbs.

When they had finished, Banger started explaining that Thomas and Smith had come in last night because they were helping him with a plan for making hand-grenades. Banger said everyone was making them, and it had struck him as a good idea to store them in the room where he and Christina slept, because they could be taken in and out, through the window, without anybody seeing. Though it was Christina who had first sent Banger into the fight, she didn't seem particularly interested. She smiled in a sleepy way and kept on yawning.

I thought it was a very good plan of Banger's; and said so.

Christina said, "I don't want Thomas to come here, ever again."

"No need," said Banger. "I'm in charge of this."

He got it all organised that day. I helped him a lot. We moved some of the furniture into the passage outside the lavatory, so that there was more space. Various people brought us old tins, and boxes with metal lids, and Banger collected from somewhere the stuff to go inside. He made several journeys with the push-chair and brought everything back camouflaged in sacks. We lifted it all in through the back window, secretly. Nobody has ever managed to keep a good eye on what goes on outside that window on the waste piece of ground.

The explosive was like sandy brown sugar. Banger wanted to melt it on the stove and pour it, which he said was quite safe; but Christina wouldn't give us a saucepan. So I spooned it into the containers, packing it firm, while Banger got on with punching holes in lids.

Then he unpacked some silvery rods and cut some bits of black string off a big roll; and taught me how to prime the grenades. After that, he said, you must really be careful because you'd be blown sky-high if you dropped them, or even bumped into anything. But he made me have some practice. In a sudden emergency, his plan was to fix up all our grenades and give them out ready to use.

He left me in charge the next morning. I went on and on filling tins and stacking them tidily in boxes. He was still out in the afternoon. I heard a lot of explosions and people kept rushing up, wanting grenades.

As soon as I realised that the emergency had arrived, I started fixing up the grenades as fast as I could. When I handed them out, I remembered (I think) to tell everyone

that they must carry them carefully, more carefully even than eggs.

In the late evening, Banger came back and told us that we were now on the list of the free towns, and he brought a small, smudgy newspaper which said it in print. We went out later on to join in the rejoicing. It was glorious. The shouting and the laughing and the lights —everything. But it was especially glorious hearing my mother's song sung by hundreds and hundreds of rejoicing people.

Now that I heard the words—though you couldn't hear them properly till about the twentieth time—I discovered that it was quite the opposite of a private song of my mother's. It was *for* everybody and *about* everybody; and it was sung loudly by all of us over and over. Christina sang marvellously—people in front of us turned their heads to see who was singing. Banger couldn't sing at all. But he carried Vicky on his shoulder and she tried to keep him right by singing right down into his ear. Even so, he made the most awful noises—which, of course, nobody minded. The noise was terrific, anyway. There was so much singing and shouting and laughing—and even crying.

I did read once in a book that people can cry for joy. Of course, there are all sorts of reasons for crying if you do ever cry. I don't. But I can imagine crying for several reasons at once, including the glorious noise of everybody singing.

Only one thing went wrong. Because of so much rejoicing, I started thinking about my father again, and I was almost quite sure he would be at home when we got back, waiting for us, with all his work finished. But there was nobody. The others didn't say anything about him, and so nor did I.

There was a lull for several days, and Banger's rifle stayed propped up against the bookcase. He went out for a few expeditions by himself—never inviting me—to get us food and stuff for more grenades. He said he was waiting for a lorry to take them to a town where there was still fighting. So I could see I was stupid to think my father would come back just because our town was free. He might just as well have given up his work and gone to America, with the people who only wanted to be heroes for a short time.

Banger was almost always in a good mood. He had lots of friends at last, and some of them, not much younger than him, called him Captain. Christina did a lot of jobs for him, like taking off his boots, but he was very obedient to her about things like washing more and not swearing in front of the children. He even got a toothbrush in the end—when she told him his teeth were the best she'd ever seen. He was proud of them too, because he could use them to crack the strongest nuts and take the tops off bottles. He began scrubbing them till they were dead white, which even made a difference to the look of his face.

He was very nice to Vicky, and played with her quite often. He called me his second-in-command and talked to me about everything. He specially liked talking about Christina, but she spoilt that. She said he ought to remember that I was still a child, though I thought a lot and spoke intelligently. That was unfair. It's bad enough being a child. People don't have to remind you.

CHAPTER 10

ONE evening we told stories. Banger said stories were for kids, but even so he could see that Christina's stories were good and he sat and stared at her all the time she was telling them.

Her first story was out of an ancient book, which her friend who wrote poetry had put into modern language. It was about a lady whose admirer got a magician to help him move rocks out of the sea, for her sake. But when her husband came back, and it was no use, the magician wouldn't take any money. Banger said they all ought to have their heads examined, including the poet; and Christina was indignant.

"He was a real writer," she said, "and I can remember lots of his stories almost in his own words."

"All right," said Banger. "I'm not educated." But he was partly laughing and let Christina take his hand. Then she said it was someone else's turn, so Vicky told a pointless story in three sentences, and I told the story about Prometheus, which is the best one I know.

Christina liked it, but Banger said it wouldn't have happened. He never seemed to understand at all that stories don't *have* to happen. Even if you can't possibly imagine them happening to the people you know, they may not be pointless stories. We tried to explain, but he only went on saying that if he had been the magician he would have taken what was owing. He said he couldn't tell that sort of story, and gave Christina his turn.

"What would you like?" said Christina. "The story of the Cripple who loved Music, the story of the Lady who could not Sleep, the story of the Devil's Operetta, the story of the Paradise Garden, the story of the Clay Birds or of the Theban Thief or the story of the young man who saw from afar the invading army crossing the snowy pass and blew his horn?"

"Well, what happened?" said Vicky. Banger was waiting too, and so was I.

"He blew his horn," said Christina, "and the sound echoed between the mountains and brought the avalanche down on his enemies—and on himself."

"That's a very short story," said Vicky. "What is it called?"

"I don't remember, but I know the names of the mountains—the Twin Virgins, the Sleeping Hound, the Judge, the Veiled Widow, the Devil's Fist and the Man with No Name. This young man stood on the white snow, where there were no footprints but his own, in the middle of this great ring of mountains, and then he blew his horn."

"That's more like," said Banger. "At least he made an impression."

I said I had never even seen mountains, and Christina promised to take us all to our own mountains one day—Banger as well. He said he only liked towns, but when Christina persuaded him he said he wouldn't mind taking a look at the country, once at least. Then Christina said it really was his turn to think of some sort of story, and he remembered some ghost stories, from a friend of his mother's who told fortunes. She once knew someone who was lying in bed at night when her husband came in with his clothes all dripping wet; and it turned out that he had been drowned in a flooded river that very day. And there was also a man who killed his friend, by

mistake partly, and married his friend's wife. Then dropped down dead himself when the friend's ghost was sitting in the thirteenth chair at the wedding feast.

Christina stopped him telling these stories. She said they were too frightening, but also untrue. Banger said the fortune-teller knew what she was talking about. Hadn't she promised him success in love? Even though he wasn't a real writer of poetry—with a private income.

If Christina ever mentioned a friend she used to have, Banger got excited. "I'll deal with *him*," he said. And, of course, he had dealt with Thomas. Christina just told him he was silly. Dealing with people who didn't matter was just as silly as believing in ghosts.

All the same, the idea of ghosts keeps you awake, and Banger's stories came from people who had seen them themselves. My father always said there was a rational explanation for everything, but I couldn't think how he would explain a puddle on the bedroom floor from a drowned person's clothes. And even if there are *very few* ghosts, it might be you who happened to see them.

I had to keep my head under the bedclothes for hours, so as not to see any shadows or hear noises. When I was young and really believed in ghosts, my father was the only person who could make me think that ghosts were only made up, out of almost nothing. Besides, you can always go in to your father and mother, if something happens in the night, but Christina and Banger were different. And in the end, even if it's horrible for a long time, you do go to sleep.

I asked Banger the next day if he had ever seen a ghost himself. He only told me that you could frighten It—before It frightened you—by keeping your fingers crossed. That sounded silly, and I wasn't even sure if he was

serious. He was watching Christina all the time, and she was talking and laughing like a person who is being watched. You could see they loved each other, which was good in a way.

Then suddenly Banger asked her why she wasn't wearing her silver cross, and where she had put it. She just shrugged her shoulders. Banger said, wasn't he good enough for a person wearing a cross? He told her to go and get it at once, and put it on. But she wouldn't, even when he twisted her wrist. Though she did cry.

"What am I to do, Jacko?" he said, trying not to be furious and make it into a joke. I looked carefully at them both. He was much stronger; but Christina was angry too. However much he made her cry, I didn't think she was going to tell him where her cross was hidden.

"Give it up," I said.

He was still undecided, but Christina started trying to be nice to him in all sorts of ways. In the end he kissed her, in the way they do in films, for a long time. It was something he did now whenever he came into the house. I never liked watching, but this time I was glad they had made it up.

They sat down at the table and Banger took out of his pocket the ring with red stones, which he said were genuine rubies and worth a fortune. Christina and I both knew it was a stolen ring, but she put it on and wore it ever afterwards.

She let me look at it sometimes; and I did see how Banger might have wanted it so much that he *had* to steal it. If you stared at the middle stone, making your mind a blank, you could see all sorts of things—people and battles and burning buildings and trees growing and flocks of birds flying far, far away, far out over the sea.

CHAPTER 11

CHRISTINA was sleepy most of the time. When Banger kissed her, she stretched like a cat, so that he could kiss her all the way down her neck. They used to like sitting on my bed, while I drew or tried to amuse Vicky. Sometimes we played cards, but it wasn't such fun as it used to be. Banger and Christine talked double-talk to each other and neither of them tried to win. I won quite a lot of money, so I paid Banger's loan, and put the rest in my mother's purse.

In spite of the money, I was bored with playing cards. I waited for Banger to say that he was bored too. He always did in the end. Then sometimes he went into the other room, taking Christina, or else he went out by himself. Christina usually tried to stop him going out, and never understood that it was something he wanted to decide *for himself*, even though he loved her.

She found some wool in one of the drawers and began knitting him some socks. It was wool my mother had got for my socks, but, of course, when Christina asked me, I didn't mind at all having it knitted into socks for Banger. I pretended I was like Smith, giving up my socks for a friend. But I knew that was a lie, because I still had lots more socks, and Smith had only one jacket.

Banger was out and Christina was sitting on my bed knitting when we saw the black skirts of a priest walking along outside the top of the window, and then a blunt,

black boot coming down on to the first step. Christina turned pale. She caught hold of me and almost carried me into the corner where you can't see out of the window and nobody outside can see in.

"Aunt Barbie has sent him for me," she said. "She is probably furious with me because I forgot about her and left her to look after herself like everyone else."

"He can't do anything," I said. He knocked at the door. Christina held me and put her hand over my mouth. As if I was likely to shout at someone knocking at the door!

He knocked again. I struggled. "He'll go away in time," said Christina.

"We don't have to hide," I said furiously. "I can tell him we're busy, that's what people always do."

He knocked again. Christina was hurting me, she held so tight.

"I won't tell him you're here," I promised. It was quite wrong to let someone go on and on knocking, even if it was a house where priests never came in the ordinary way.

"There's somebody knocking," said Vicky. She was putting her shoes on, probably with the idea of going to the door herself. I knew she would want me or Christina to do the buttons up first, but Christina didn't think of it. She let me go, only saying, "I suppose, even if somebody has told him, he won't know for certain."

I opened the door and stood squarely in front of the priest, so that he wouldn't get in by cunning. He was an old man, but his face was smoother and pinker than Banger's. He was very tall. He stared down at me, across a lumpy bundle he was carrying in both arms.

"Is your mother in, my child?"

I shook my head.

"I have brought a message from your father. May I come in and wait?"

I gulped down my spit. Even Christina was not going to blame me for asking him to come in, but to save her I asked him to come in to the room at the back. He put the bundle down on the big bed, and laid his hand, from a great height, on my head.

"When do you expect your mother to come back?"

"She was killed in the first day of the fighting."

The priest groaned. Then he bent his head and tapped himself with his fingers in four places. Then he knelt down and said a prayer. Christina had told me that I ought to kneel for prayers, but I forgot. Anyway, it was better standing, because his face was level with mine, and I could hear what he said. He prayed for my mother, and for me too. He prayed as if God knew about everything that had happened, and yet wanted to be told about it by us. And he prayed to the mother of Jesus as well, asking her to remind her son that I was here in the room with the boxes of grenades, and no mother.

When he stopped, between the sentences, and waited for me, I repeated the prayers, word for word, without wondering at all whether God was listening or not. I was glad the priest was able to make up some good prayers. He was the first person who had done anything for the sake of my mother. And though I didn't need prayers, and couldn't even understand some of them, they made me feel less muddled.

When the prayers were finished, he got up and sat on the edge of the bed, holding me between his knees.

"My poor child, you must think there is never anything but bad news. But I bring you good news. Your father will be home soon. The victory is won. He is one of the great men who have led us to victory. And he will still be there, guiding us with his wisdom and courage, when victory is crowned with peace."

"It's time my father came back," I said. I liked this priest very much and felt that I could say to him whatever came into my head. I knew my father was brave and wise; but it seemed extraordinary that the priest knew it too, because my father had always despised priests. I asked him, "Is my father your friend?"

"Yes."

"Does my father fear God now, because of the fighting?"

The priest seemed to be considering whether or not he should give me a proper answer—or an answer suitable for children. I kept my eyes on him, and he answered:

"No, your father neither fears God, nor loves him. But God has shown his love for me by sending me this friend. And I would like to think . . ."

He broke off and smiled. "You know, this country has been saved by people like your father."

"Is he going to give us all freedom and justice, now and for ever?"

"More freedom, and better justice. We are all human beings and now and again the Devil has his way, even with the best. They do what they can. You must pray for your father."

I said I would, but some time later on. I had done enough praying for the present. The priest seemed to think he had done enough, too. He moved his knees and started straightening his socks, under his cassock. When he bent down, I could see the bundle behind him.

"Why, you've got a baby!"

He shrugged his shoulders and pulled down the corners of his mouth.

"Yes, I've got a baby, and it looks as if I'll have to keep it."

"Did you mean to leave it here?"

"Your father said that your mother would be sure to take it. I said I would give it to the nuns, but its parents were friends of yours and I was glad to think your mother would want it here. Besides," he shrugged his shoulders, "it wasn't so far for me to go. Babies are heavier than anyone would think."

"We *could* keep it," I said. "Christina would look after it—she lives here now—and I would help a bit."

"Let me talk to Christina."

He picked up the baby. I took him by the hand and led him into the other room. Christina stood up when he came in, but she said nothing. Whether it was because of her unfriendliness, or because of something else, he changed when he saw Christina. With me, he had been noble and serious. Now he was more like Banger, a person who doesn't know how to do things, or what to say. He was holding the baby all muddled up, and I wasn't surprised that it started whimpering.

"You are very young," he said to Christina. She sat down again and started knitting. I told her my father's message and why he had sent us the baby.

"If I helped, you would let it stay, wouldn't you?" I said.

Christina never answered. The priest said, "I'm sorry. It was the boy here who gave me the idea. I couldn't expect . . . I mean, it was only because of an old friendship. . . . It was tactless of me . . . I can take it to the nuns, and later on perhaps some good woman will be able to take it into her family."

Christina put her knitting away and stood up. She looked coldly at the priest and said in an angry voice: "I am not a good woman, but I will take the baby and look after it as well as I can."

CHAPTER 12

BANGER had brought us a little milk the day before. Christina made up a milky mixture and put it into the baby's mouth with a spoon. Vicky, who loves anything unusual, and loves men even if they are dressed up in skirts, sat on the priest's knee. He seemed pleased with Christina. I couldn't understand why the sight of him had frightened her so much; because obviously it was all imagination to think that Aunt Barbie knew where she was and had sent him to ferret her out.

We needed a box to make into a cradle, so I went and emptied some grenades out of a box into a sack. Banger had come in and was lying on the bed, fast asleep, with his mouth open. I took the box as quietly as I could, because I wanted to stave off the moment when Banger found out that we had an extra person to bother about.

When I went back, the priest had got up to go. He said to Christina he would like to give her a blessing. But when he said that, the fright came back into her eyes. She looked at him as if she hated him.

"You're too late, Father."

"That's never true," he said.

Christina held up her head, proudly. "I am a great sinner, Father."

I thought it was a ridiculous thing to say. How could a girl like Christina, who is really much stupider than I am, manage to be a great sinner? Besides, it was

obvious she was showing off. Yet the priest took it quite seriously.

"So are we all," he said; "and we are all in need of God's blessing."

She quite suddenly fell on her knees and (I think) kissed his hand. Though I had liked the priest, and it was better that he felt serious and noble again, I couldn't bear to see Christina kneeling at his feet. And I couldn't imagine what Banger would do if he came in and found them.

I thought I had better go back and see if he had woken up. He had turned over on his face, but he was still sleeping. I stretched out on the bed too and tried to see pictures on the ceiling, to pass the time. When it's dark, I always can, but this was twilight. I couldn't see any pictures, unless I pushed my fists against my eyelids. Those pictures are not the best. They don't flow and grow and give a person beautiful surprises. They are just bright, sudden pictures, made by fists.

I played about with these pictures for quite a long time. Banger woke up in the end, because I was fidgeting. We talked for a bit, lying side by side on our backs. I told him the message from my father, and the good news. He said it could be true—so long as we weren't attacked on our northern frontier. Anyhow, he and his friends had made some preparations by rigging up camouflaged strong-points where they could lie in ambush. We were talking quite peacefully about all this, when he suddenly jerked himself sitting.

"Who was it you said brought this message?"

"A priest."

"The devil! What's he up to with Christina?"

I was close at Banger's heels when he walked in. The priest was sitting on my bed, with Vicky on his knee again, and Christina was sitting by the table. Banger

looked at the priest, and laughed, and then, according to his custom, bent over Christina to give her a slow, close, lingering hug. Christina jumped up, knocking over the chair.

"I'm sorry, Banger. That's all over."

Banger looked ugly. "What's he done? What's he been saying to you?"

"It's nothing to do with what he's said. I knew it all the time."

"Liar! Who was it . . . ?"

The priest, from where he was sitting, spoke with authority—the authority you read about in books which is so much more than teachers have at school that it is something different: "You think you have power over this girl, Banger. But she is supported by a power greater than yours."

Banger looked at him with great surprise. The priest moved Vicky on the bed beside him, and stood up. He stood head and shoulders higher than Banger, and anyone could see that the muscles, though hidden under his floppy clothes, were strong and hard. Beside him, Banger looked ill and weak and small; as he well knew. His surprise changed to fear. Most probably he thought the priest was speaking of the power of his own muscles and was ready to show it. He did not realise that the priest was a man who wanted to be gentle with everyone, even people like Banger.

He said, "We are all of one mind, surely, in rejoicing over our victory."

"Victory?" said Banger.

The priest told us his good news, with more details. "The whole of the City is in our hands now, the Parliament building, the post office, the radio station, everything. Listen."

He turned on the radio and tuned it back to the station which never told you anything, except that all was calm. The voice we knew said:

". . . because of the unexpected obduracy of certain small rebel groups, the government, determined above all to maintain order, has asked for reinforcements from our allies. The response has been immediate. Large forces are approaching from the north and have crossed the border in certain places. For your own sake, and for the sake of your country, you are urged to let these troops pass unopposed. The rebel strongholds which have not capitulated will be attacked by air. . . ."

"The bastards," said Banger. The priest was sitting by the table with his head in his hands. Christina was crying.

"I must get going," said Banger, and picked up his rifle.

"There will be work for me too," said the priest, getting to his feet.

"For *you*?" said Banger, laughing.

"I am forbidden to take life," said the priest, "but I can risk my own."

". . . any person," said the voice, "failing to hand in their arms to the State police within the next hour will be treated as a traitor. Any person who fails to inform the police of persons known to be in possession of arms or ammunition . . ."

"Well?" said Banger to the priest, tapping his rifle. "What are you going to do?"

The priest let his hands hang at his side. Banger slung his rifle on his shoulder. Christina suddenly ran up to him and clung to his shoulder.

"I'm frightened. Don't leave me. Ask him to take your gun."

Banger hurled her away from him. "I got into this for you, you bitch; but now it's my fight. Your priest won't

lift a finger. And why should he? He'll fight all right—so long as someone else does the shooting. Look at him."

The priest's face was working, and his hands were clasped. Perhaps he was praying again. I tuned to another station, and we heard . . .

"Courage, friends, we are still free men; and of one mind. We have chosen to fight on to free our captured homes, and build on their ashes new cities where our children can walk in peace. Men, women and children, there is work to be done now. Be ready day and night—with a weapon in your hands."

"Come on, Jacko," said Banger. "We must see about getting the stuff to the right place." We went into the bedroom and began going through the boxes, fixing up all the grenades. After a few minutes, the priest came in and helped us. Then people began coming for the boxes. Banger passed them carefully out, and the priest and I went on getting them ready; until Banger told us to stop. He climbed out. The priest climbed after; and then I got out too, and stood in my hole. I watched them going off across the waste ground, to get into their ambush and keep our enemies at bay.

They had almost got to the hut on the far side when I heard from far away the noise of aircraft. It sounded as if there were thousands of them when they came nearer. I heard a bump. There were flashes from the sky. "Down," shouted Banger. And I could see them all lying down flat on their faces. Then there were several huge bangs quite near; and the small noise of breaking glass, and all sorts of bits pattering down on roads and roofs.

The noise seemed to go on for a long time. The moment it stopped, Banger and his friends jumped up and left the boxes and ran crouching across the empty space to my hole. We squashed ourselves into it and the noise started

again. The priest prayed out loud; Banger put his arm round me and pushed my face against his side.

There was a crash which made my ears numb. A shower of earth and bits of metal hit the wall above our heads. I could feel it falling, though Banger had got his arm on top of me, as well as he could. Somebody cursed. Somebody said, "There goes our armament."

I got my head out later on. The old hut was blazing. You could see everything as if it was daylight. I saw the door hanging by one hinge, and I saw it crash to the ground and shoot up a long, broad flame higher than the roof.

I looked up at the sky, where the aircraft were riding in safety against the stars. So these were the people who wouldn't allow us to look after our country ourselves.

I stupidly said out loud, "Haven't we got friends too?"

I don't think anybody heard me. At any rate, they didn't answer.

Under my breath, I said the prayer to Saint Michael the Archangel; and asked him as well to try and find us some more friends. I thought about Smith, who *was* our friend, and gave Thomas his jacket. But what can one man do, by smiling?

"This is called restoring order," said someone.

Banger said, "Come on, boys. There's a land attack next. Let's go."

There were a few grenades left. Banger made me get back into the room and hand them out. I saw him give two to each person. The priest fumbled about in his long skirts. I suppose, like everyone else, he was putting them in his pocket.

CHAPTER 13

I WAS ashamed of Christina for trying to stop Banger going to fight, especially as she was the first person to give him the idea. But when I got back she had at least stopped crying and screaming. Vicky and the baby were doing it instead, and she was busy pacifying them. She asked me to tear up some towels to make napkins for the baby. Which I did. It certainly needed a new napkin, because it smelt horrible.

We all thought the baby ought to have a name. We called it Rose, which at least gave you the idea of a nice smell. Christina got in a fuss about whether it had been christened; which seemed stupid. After all, it had a name and a napkin. With no father or mother, and bombs dropping everywhere, a baby can't expect *everything*.

The air attack went on, in waves, all through the night. We thought it would be better to sleep all in the same room. So Christina and Vicky and I slept in the big bed, and Rose in her box on a chair. Vicky slept all night, with her head under the covers, screwing them over to her side, so that some of the time I was more or less bare. Christina and I talked occasionally. We tried to guess where each bomb had fallen, and once we thought our own block had been hit. But nothing happened. We were well off, because of being in the basement.

We talked about Banger. I said I hoped he would live through the night.

Christina said, "Whether he lives or dies is in God's hands. I worry mostly about Banger because he's so easily frightened."

I was so amazed, I stopped talking. Christina put her arm round me as if I was a baby. And I even pretended to be a baby, and in the end that made the bangs less important. I could feel Christina breathing, and when her breaths went fast and even I fell asleep too. I had lovely dreams, nothing to do with bombs, but with sailing ships and long stretches of firm sand where Eric and I were making a driftwood fire, to cook pineapples. I woke up laughing, because I had only once eaten a real pineapple and I hadn't once thought of Eric since I walked home from school with him on the last day. I wanted to go out and find him and ride his bicycle—because the rule was that he could ride his bicycle on any day when there was no school.

Of course, when I was properly woken up, I could see that the whole idea was impossible. We couldn't possibly go riding his bicycle in and out of the fighting. While Christina was washing Rose, and giving her the last drains of milk out of a spoon, I told my dream and we talked about Eric. Christina said a day would come when he and I both had bicycles and could go to the farm by ourselves, on Saturdays.

Then she said, the way grown-up people do, that she would very much like to meet Eric again, some time when it was convenient. But that probably he would think her an old lady and not want to be bothered. So then for the first time we talked about my mother. I said it would have been better for him, too, if she had stayed alive.

Christina all the more wanted to meet him, and I told her really everything—all about the shop and how Eric's

mother wanted him to work all the time, especially on holidays, when they had a lot of customers. Even worse was the way she suddenly pretended he was a baby, wanting to cuddle him and washing his ears herself. And worst of all, without even bothering to find out, she said he told lies.

Christina gradually stopped listening. She was trying to play with Rose and make her smile. But Rose never had more than two expressions—one bored and one disgusted. Christina took off her three bracelets and tied them loosely with string to make a rattle; and at last when Rose got hold of the rattle she did at any rate stop looking disgusted. Then Christina suddenly asked me:

"How far away is the shop, Jacko? We shall have to get some more food soon. And that's the end of the milk."

I said I could easily get there and back in half an hour. Since daylight, no more planes had come over, and the shelling hadn't started. Vicky, of course, wanted to come with me, and while we were all arguing Christina thought of listening to the radio. It said that the reinforcements were now well over the border, and that the rebels who had not yet capitulated would be ruthlessly exterminated. Actually, it was put somehow so that anyone who was still fighting *might* decide it was worth while surrendering; but Christina and I both thought that anyone who was scared into waving a white flag of truce would be shot, anyway.

I would have risked going out, but Christina persuaded me to stay, in the hopes that Banger would come back some time. He could always get food. Christina made some toast-water, but the baby spat it out. I never knew a baby could be so ugly as Rose was, but, of course, it wasn't her fault. Christina said she would be quite all

right as soon as she had some proper food. Christina said she must be starving, and that was why it was so difficult to stop her crying. We carried her about the room in turns, which kept her quiet for a bit. But she started crying again the moment we stood still.

We couldn't go on walking up and down for ever. When we were too tired to go on, I thought of fixing the rolling-pin under her box, so as to make a rocking-cradle. This worked fairly well; and one good thing was that Vicky liked rocking the cradle for Rose and dangling her rattle in front of her eyes. You might have thought we had got Rose just to be another amusement for Vicky.

The shelling had started. It was bad, but not as bad as the bombing, perhaps because it wasn't so sudden. Then Banger came home for about two minutes. The whole of the bottom of his boot had got ripped off, and he remembered we had a spare pair of my father's. While he was changing his boots, Christina told him we had got to get some milk for the baby. I didn't think Banger was listening. He seemed to have forgotten that we had a baby and to be angry that anyone bothered him about it. Of course, he was fighting for the lives of everybody in the whole country. Rose was just one baby. All the same, it was the one life that Christina and I had any chance of saving, and I followed Banger to the door, telling him that he must get some tins of milk.

After he had gone, we made Rose some more toast-water, with a lot of sugar in it. She dribbled out a good bit, but she swallowed some. Perhaps it was beginning to dawn on her too that she was in danger of starving and, however miserable you feel, you never stop wanting to stay alive.

Christina and I didn't feel at all hungry, but she said

we must follow the good example set by Rose. So we ate some bread and sausage. Vicky ate a lot. And some cheese and five biscuits as well.

We all slept together again, for company; and we were there in the early morning when Banger came in. He was covered with mud from head to foot and his face was purplish white, under the dirt. He hadn't got his rifle any longer, and his hands were shaking.

"It's finished," he said. "We're beaten. They're coming into the town now. We've got to get out."

We put some things in a pillow-case—a few tins, the remains of a loaf and four toothbrushes, and the napkins I'd made for Rose and some socks and jerseys. While we were collecting the things, Banger stood about, shouting at us to hurry, and telling us a few things. There were thousands of tanks, he said; you didn't see a single soldier, they were all hidden inside; and they drove straight along the roads, at a steady pace, spraying bullets all round them without a pause.

It was a dark morning with drizzling rain. Banger said it was going to clear up, but Christina made us put on our thick shoes and our winter coats. She tied a blue scarf round her head and lent Vicky her other scarf with red poppies on it. She even made us take our gloves, which seemed mad, but they did turn out useful.

Banger went on shouting at us and tried to help with his shaking hands, but that only made us slower. Christina told him to sit down and keep quiet, she was being as quick as she could. From start to finish, I don't think we took more than ten minutes.

Christina was not usually very wide awake, but this time she seemed to know exactly what ought to be taken and where it ought to be put. And she hardly flinched

when Banger suddenly jumped up and threw his knife at the door, right past her head.

"Lot of use it's been to me," he said. "You can't *see* them, and you can't *get* at them. . . ."

Christina just wrenched the knife out and gave it back to him.

"If you *must* use it," she said, "we can take it with us for cutting the bread." Then she put a spoon in her pocket and gave me a little cup to put in mine.

We managed to force Rose's box between the arms of the push-chair, and we piled a few towels and blankets on top. Christina shut the back window and pulled over the catch. Then Banger and I hauled the chair to the top of the steps, with Vicky getting in the way trying to help. Christina, carrying the pillow-case, shut our front door. Just before it closed she stopped it with her foot.

"Have any of you got a key?" she shouted.

"For Christ's sake," said Banger. I didn't say anything. I knew my key was safe in my mother's purse, which I kept always in my pocket. Christina shut the door and came up the steps. She handed the pillow-case to Banger, and took the push-chair.

"Why didn't you use the sack?" said Banger in a fury. The sack would have been better, but it was too late to bother. Christina pushed the chair along the road, with Vicky pulling at the handle on one side.

It looked like any ordinary wet morning, when people stay indoors as long as they can before going to work, or school, or market. But this was only because we live on the edge of the town, on a road which doesn't go anywhere in particular. And besides, most of the people who actually lived in it had run away sooner, perhaps at the time when the bomb hit our block of flats. Looking back,

I could see that our flat was the only one with whole windows and no other bits missing either.

Banger led us out beyond the houses and then waited for us under a tree. We stood under the dripping tree and tried to decide which direction to go. Banger favoured skirting the town on the south, and taking one of the main roads there. As we all knew, the invaders were coming in from the opposite side, so there might be some chance if we hurried. The only trouble was that there wasn't really any good way of getting there, except by going back into the town.

Banger stood there biting his lip, with his hands in his pockets. When he took his hands out, as if accidentally, he was holding two tins.

"Milk!" said Christina.

"Yes," said Banger, looking thoughtfully at the tins, not play-acting, but so muddled by everything that even he was surprised. "I suppose it is milk."

"Oh, dear," said Christina, "I never remembered to put in a tin-opener!"

Christina and I both laughed, because this is a joke everybody always makes on picnics. Banger hadn't ever heard it; he told us to stop nattering and come on.

"Not till I've fed Rose," said Christina.

Banger was furious. "You wouldn't argue if you'd seen what I've seen," he said. But Christina said nothing would make any difference. She was just as determined in her fight for Rose's life as he had been when he was still fighting the losing battle for everyone.

"If the baby dies, it will be my fault," she said.

Banger said she was crazy. "And it isn't even your own. If it was yours, yours and mine . . ."

Christina told him to shut up, and gave him the tin to open. She was quite calm, and waited patiently while

he worked his rage out on the tin. He tried first with his thin knife, which skidded; then with his teeth, but he couldn't get a grip. Finally he made a small hole by knocking a pointed flint into it with a big flat stone.

Christina took Rose out of her box and sat down on a big root. She held out the spoon and made Banger pour out the milk, spoonful by spoonful. Then she tilted Rose into a good position and let the milk slide slowly into her mouth. Banger told her to hurry, but she said it was a job that couldn't be hurried. Even Banger, when he began to calm down, could see that. Rose dribbled at once if the spoon was tilted too much, and none of us wanted to waste any of the milk. Christina told Vicky to lick the drips off the tin each time the spoon was filled, so that not a drop should be wasted.

Banger's hands were still shaking, but he was trying hard to pour straight and show that he was ready to do what Christina wanted, even if he didn't agree. I agreed with Christina, but probably only because I had read about the same sort of thing in books.

"Rose has taken sanctuary with us," I said.

Christina looked up to smile at me. "That's it, Jacko."

Banger was holding out the tin for Vicky to lick. "Those two think they're clever, don't they? Can *you* tell me what they're talking about."

Vicky wriggled her shoulders and popped her eyes—it was one of the showing-off gestures Christina usually dropped on—and said, "I don't understand a word they're saying."

"It only means," I said, "that a shipwrecked mariner, a fugitive or a vagabond, even an ordinary visitor, has a right to be protected. If they die under your protection, you are more or less the murderer and you will be pursued by furies for ever after."

"Furies? What's that?"

"Evil spirits. Ghosts. Only worse."

Banger crossed his fingers. Christina, who had finished feeding Rose, put her back in the box, and took Banger's hand. She separated his crossed fingers and said, holding his hand, "You don't have to believe in ghosts, Banger. You really don't."

"There's worse things, I suppose. I've seen some of them. And we'll see more if we don't get going."

He didn't seem to remember we hadn't decided where to go. I said I thought if we went through the wood—on the path with big mushrooms growing on the sides of trees—we would probably get to the main road which passed, Eric told me, quite near to his uncle's farm.

Everyone cheered up when I told them about the farm. By talking about it, we made it seem quite near.

CHAPTER 14

CHRISTINA wedged a stick in the hole of the milk-tin. She gave it to Banger and told him to carry it right side up. He had the pillow-case too, which he slung over his shoulder. Christina and I took turns pushing the chair and encouraging Vicky. She never can walk without a lot of encouragement.

It hadn't rained much outside the town, and we could see blue sky ahead; but the footpath through the woods was much bumpier than I ever thought when we used to go there for picnics. There were snaky roads across it, and sometimes the chair had to be lifted by two people. We encouraged ourselves by saying it would be much better when we got to the main road.

Actually, it was much worse. It was full of people walking the same way as us, with bicycles and carts and a few lorries trying to get through. Every time a lorry came up, we looked round longingly at it, in case there was any space, but, of course, there never was. After we had walked quite a long way, we stopped even looking round. The other people, who had come further, had given it up long ago. They knew more than we did.

We talked to a man who was carrying a broken suitcase, tied up with string. He told us that further back the enemy planes had dived down over the road and fired their machine guns.

"They sprayed it like weed-killer," he said, "like weed-killer."

He kept on asking us to tell him the best way to the sea. We didn't know. I said, remembering my map, that it must be somewhere between fifty and a hundred miles beyond the frontier. Two girls in trousers, with big boots and bulging rucksacks with a neat coil of rope, said they were going through the mountains, which was a longer journey, but safer. It was impossible to guard all the mountain passes, they said.

Most people were in a muddle, like us, with too much to carry and children who wanted to run or stop, but couldn't manage walking. The two girls were quite different, more like people on a holiday poster. They and the man with a broken suitcase kept on talking about how to get to the sea. They didn't say anything about how to get across it, or in which direction. I thought we were better off to be going to the farm, which I could see in my mind's eye.

Also, it was nearer. But perhaps some of them did succeed in getting to some free country, like America; and perhaps it *was* better not to plan the whole journey at once. Getting to the sea was quite difficult enough. The girls said they were going to try a climb that their father had done once and said was too dangerous for them. Because of the danger, they were certain no one would be there on guard, to stop them getting to the sea.

At one corner there was a complete jam. The man with the suitcase got through somehow, using the case to push people out of the way, but most of us simply stopped. A young man started tearing and hacking at the thick hedge to make a way through, but his wife said she wanted to stay on the road, because of the luggage. We were wedged tightly together and could feel more and more people shoving from behind. The rain caught up with us too and the sky was grey all over. After a bit, I

couldn't see what was happening, we were jammed so tightly, and once when I was pushed away from the others, I almost didn't manage to get back.

Finally we stuck completely against a big car with a foreign number that had skidded across the road. Banger worked his way up to the front window and started talking to the driver. We just clung to the car, so as not to be separated.

An old, old man with two sticks was trying to get past us sideways. Over his shoulder he was shouting to a fat young woman who was telling everyone to stop him.

"I'll sit here by the side of the road," he said, "and smoke my pipe. It won't be the first time I've sat in the hedge on a rainy day; and there's no reason to think it's the last. You get along with you, with that grandson of mine you've got in your belly. Take him across the frontier. Get him out of this. Can't have a grandson of mine grow up and call his granddad an old fool. Take no notice of me. I can smoke my pipe here as well as anywhere. What's a bit of rain?"

The driver of the car suddenly shouted to him to come along in—if he didn't mind hanging from the roof—and bring his daughter. They were just squeezed inside when the planes came back. They whined down and the bullets went da-da-da-da, just in the way we used to make battle noises at school when it was supposed to be a joke.

We crouched against the side of the car. Christina held tight on to Vicky and pushed me against Banger. Rose seemed to be asleep. I didn't have time to think of being frightened. But I found I'd taken hold of Banger's hand, which was jerking and all wet. So when the planes went away and he began to curse and swear in his ordinary way, I was horribly frightened—as if I had caught it

from his wet hand—in spite of the fact that all five of us were safe.

One of the girls was trying to slither to the ground; but the other one was holding her and wouldn't let her bent knees fold up.

"Pull yourself together," she said furiously. "How do you think I'm going to manage by myself?"

The crowd was beginning to move, and we went on with it. Banger said we couldn't do anything for the girl or for the other people lying on the road. There were too many of them. He asked me how soon we were going to get to the turning for the farm. Of course, I wasn't sure. I thought it came at the first village, which ought to be soon, but I had never seen the road properly, craning my neck out of the back of the van with no windows.

It seemed very quiet after the planes went away. We could hear the whir of a reaper behind the hedge. It seemed queer to be reaping the corn in spite of everything, but, of course, you have to, like getting milk for babies. They hadn't even been able to wait for a sunny day.

Banger was still carrying the tin, right way up, as well as the pillow-case. He said we could depend upon it that the planes would come back—and then what would it be worth? He and Christina decided it was better to give up the idea of going straight to the farm and turn down a little rutted path, between high banks, which didn't seem to lead anywhere.

Almost at once, we heard the planes again. But this time it was different. The first one must have come too low and hit a tree or something. There was a noise as if everything was breaking apart. Then all the people we had just left out of sight gave a great cheer.

Banger and I shot up to the top of the bank. The plane had plunged into the ground just where the men had been reaping, at the far side of a huge cornfield. We stood there cheering, while huge flames leapt out of it. For a second, I thought I saw a terrible human face inside the flames. Afterwards in dreams the person inside the flames is always me—but when I saw it I cheered and yelled all the louder. There is no pretence about your feeling when you see the destruction of your enemy.

Under a spreading cloud of solid smoke, the men just went on reaping. We thought they were mad. But then I saw they were desperately trying to clear a wide strip between the burning plane and the standing corn. Christina was shouting at us, and I kept trying to tell Banger that we ought to fly for our lives, but he was too excited to hear. And he didn't seem to notice when dancing flames began running over the top of the corn. The men beat it with their pitchforks, but the flames were in too many places, all at once.

Suddenly there was a long, roaring, wave of flame right across the field, with black shapes of men jumping about in front. We got down to the path and started running, Banger pushing the chair. He was the strongest and he didn't give a damn whether Rose got bumped or not.

CHAPTER 15

"WELL, I'm buggered," I said. Christina stared at me. It was the first time I'd used Banger's word—but then it was the first time for almost everything.

"So am I very buggered," said Vicky. She had practised Banger's word before, but she never got it quite right. Christina still only stared. The path had stopped by a gate into a grassy field.

We didn't want to go back, so we went on. We had to get the chair over and under all sorts of obstacles—walls, fences and ditches—and Vicky kept on saying she was hungry and tired. But there were a lot of blackberries and, in one field, mushrooms. You don't usually eat mushrooms raw, but they were the best food I had ever tasted. Rose wasn't allowed them, so we gave her more milk to make up.

It was still raining, though not very hard, when we did at last get to a road. If only the sun had come out, I might have been able to tell which way we were going, but the misty rain made every direction the same and we had no idea how many twists and turns we had taken already. The road was so small there was nobody on it to ask. The only thing we could do was to go on walking, hoping that we would get somewhere. At least, we went on walking. When you are really tired, you completely stop thinking about where you mean to go.

I did try once, when no one had said anything for ages,

telling Vicky of the big meadow with cows, in the bend of the river where Eric and I had bathed. But Banger told me to shut up; it made him tired. All he wanted was a roof.

Banger was more miserable than I had ever seen him, and he was wetter than anyone else because his clothes were thinner. Even his jacket was sticking to him like wet brown paper; and he was the only one without gloves. I took the pillow-case a lot of the time, and Christina let me balance it on top of Rose's feet. Rose was bored with her rattle—which wasn't actually much good. It kept on falling out of her fingers, until somewhere or other it got lost.

On that day, Christina had much more strength than Banger—more strength than anyone. She even let Vicky hold one side of the chair, pulling it crooked all the time, when I said I was damned if I'd give her another piggy-back. Rose was less trouble, but she was more of a worry. Her face seemed to be getting smaller and as if she was too disgusted even to cry. Christina said she didn't mind losing her bracelets, but she wished she knew more about babies. She didn't think it was natural for Rose to keep so quiet.

"She'd bloody well better," said Banger, "with all the attention she gets."

"I'm bloody badly worse," said Vicky, "and someone must carry me."

Christina didn't bother even to stare. She got us to start singing my mother's song that everyone sang in the rejoicings. But singing used up too much breath. So she said she thought she had enough breath to tell us a story. It was called The Black Sheep of the Family, and it really did make it easier to go on and on moving your legs.

CHAPTER 16

ONCE upon a time (said Christina) a rich landowner had two sons. The elder son was a sensible, well-behaved boy who worked hard helping his father to manage the estate and never took a day off. The younger son was the exact opposite. He went to his father one day and said, "Father, we all know you are going to leave me half the estate when you die, but it would suit me better to have my inheritance at once." The father believed in giving his children anything they really wanted, so he got someone to work out how much half the estate was worth and gave it to his younger son in money. As soon as he had got the money, the young man went abroad. There he spent all his time enjoying himself. If anything took his fancy, he bought it. And if anyone amused him and helped him to pass the time, he said, "Put it on my bill. I'm paying for my friends." This was really a cheap way of getting friends, and he didn't get any good ones. They were friends with only one idea—to help him spend his money for as long as it lasted.

It was a huge fortune, and the young man was taken by surprise when he suddenly discovered that it was all gone. He had never noticed how fast it was going, and he had not noticed either that while he was eating and drinking and enjoying himself with his friends, everyone else was starving. The fact was, there was a terrible famine, and it was only the people with fortunes to spend

who were able to buy food. When the young man's fortune was gone, he took it for granted that somebody would turn up and just keep him going until things got better. But the rich people avoided him and the poor people had no food to spare. He had been too busy to notice when other people were starving and now when he looked like starving too, nobody noticed him.

He had never worked in his life, but after he had tried everything else he decided the only thing was to earn some money by working. But that idea was no good either. As everyone else knew, there was a lot of unemployment. Even skilled men had been laid off and people with good qualifications, teachers, civil servants and university professors. He was a young man who wasn't qualified for anything, yet he looked all wrong for a labourer. When he brought himself to apply for an unskilled job, the foreman just looked at his soft hands and his made-to-measure shoes (now breaking open) and burst out laughing. So did everyone else who was waiting in the queue.

He was almost in despair when a small farmer, out of charity, took him to look after his pigs. It wasn't a good job and he still went hungry most of the time. He couldn't stop thinking about food, and even the bran-mash he put in the pig's trough looked tempting.

After a while, he began thinking to himself, "My father's men always eat well, and here am I dying of hunger. Why don't I go back to him and say, 'Father, I was wrong. I haven't behaved properly to you—or to God either, I suppose. I don't deserve to count as your son any more. But can you give me a job?' "

As a result, he went back home. His father caught sight of him when he was still a long way away and ran to meet him. The young man repeated the speech he had

rehearsed in his own mind. The father let him finish it, but replied simply by putting his arms round him and kissing him.

They went back to the house together. The father called to the servants, "Look out some good clothes and help him dress. He'll need comfortable shoes, and I'd like him to wear this ring. Tell them to slaughter the calf I've been fattening. We must have a good dinner to mark the occasion—a son of mine has come back from the dead. We lost him and we've found him."

The elder son, meanwhile, was still at work. He heard the sound of music and dancing and asked somebody what was going on. He was told, "Your brother has arrived suddenly, and because he has come back safe and sound, your father had the fatted calf slaughtered and ordered a big dinner."

The elder brother, in a sulk, decided not to have anything to do with the party and just went on with his work. When his father came out to persuade him to come and join them, he said, "I've worked hard all my life and always done what I was told. In spite of that, you've never even given me a kid, so that I could have some sort of party with my own friends. Then this other son of yours turns up—now that he's disgraced us all and thrown away his share of the family fortune—and he gets the fat calf!"

The father said, "Yes, you and I have always worked together, and everything I have now will be yours when the time comes, but do you really grudge the welcome I've given your brother? Don't you understand that he's come back from the dead? He was lost and now he's found."

Christina stopped suddenly.

"Is that the end of the story?" asked Vicky.

"Yes, that's all."

"Who told it to you?"

"Aunt Barbie told it to me first, when I was a little girl."

"I don't wonder the oldest brother took a poor view," said Banger.

"It was a great shame," I said; "but all the same he was a mean beast."

"I never saw any fathers," said Banger, "who'd jump up and run around when the Bad Penny turned up. Give him a good hiding, more likely."

"This isn't about how men behave," said Christina. "It's about how God behaves. God doesn't do imitations of human fathers. However bad you are, God forgives you when you are sorry."

"Oh, does he?" said Banger. "Then what about Jacko's ghosts?"

"I told you, those are ghosts inside you, but they are real. God and the ghosts are both real."

"Is God inside you too?" I wanted to know. Christina said she couldn't answer all my questions; I would have to get a book out of the library. Well, there was a time when I did go to the library and get lots of books.

The rain had almost stopped and the mist was blowing away in lumps. Round a corner, we saw a church spire and a cluster of small houses and sheds. The river ran past the church, which made me think at first that we might possibly be quite near the farm.

The church bell was tolling. Christina said somebody must have just died. When a great many people die on one day, I suppose they toll the bell for the whole lot at once. Otherwise, it would have to go on tolling for hundreds of years.

CHAPTER 17

THERE was nobody in any of the houses, so Banger collected some eggs out of a shed. Vicky had taken her scarf off as soon as the rain stopped, so we tied the eggs up in it, and I carried them. Banger took the pillow-case. He kept on cursing it, but he always took it off me as soon as I let him.

Christina said she was going into the church, because there must be some person pulling on the bell-rope. Vicky thinks it a treat to go into a church, so she went with Christina. Banger didn't care for churches, he said, so I stayed outside with him, keeping an eye on Rose.

We sat on the wall, watching the mist peeling back off the river and listening to the bell tolling. The person, whoever it was, didn't stop pulling the rope to talk to Christina.

"Well, we're here," said Banger. "For what it's worth. Worth something, I suppose, to take the weight off your feet."

"How will we know when it's safe to go back?" I said.

"Now you're asking," said Banger, scowling and kicking chips off the wall with his heels.

"Once the fighting's over, Banger, my father will be at home. He'll be looking out and waiting for us. Perhaps he'll see us at the corner and come rushing down the street to meet us."

"Very nice too, Jacko. For you."

"But we'll all be there. Won't we?"

"I wonder."

"But where are you going, Banger?"

"That's just what I was wondering."

"I'm quite sure my father would ask you to dinner, and give you some more clothes. We'll tell him everything about you and all you've done."

"You be careful what you tell him, Jacko. There's some things he mustn't know. Nor anyone else either."

I felt worried. But after all, people do talk about anything—in wars especially. So I said:

"I won't tell about that. Anyway, you stopped it yourselves, because of the priest. And when the fighting is finished you could get married. I mean, if you still want to. And live happily somewhere."

I kept on looking at him, and trying to say something that would cheer him up. But he only got more gloomy.

"She hates Thomas," I said, "but all the same, I hope he finds his glasses."

"Not much use to him now."

"Why not? Oh, is he dead?"

"That's right."

"Is Smith dead too?"

"Shot, the two of them. That night they were with us. You saw me talking to the foreign journalist in the car? It was him told me."

At last I said, "It might have been really their fault. Coming to see us like that. After dark."

"That's what I said to myself. But it's worse than you think."

"How could it be worse?"

Banger took hold of my wrist, hurting it. "I'll tell you just how, Jacko. It was me got Thomas worked up to see my girl. I told him all sorts of things—that she'd do

anything, thought the world of me. I was joking, see, making out that she was my girl. . . ."

"It's no good, Banger. We can't do anything to make it different now."

"Just so you know not to make it worse, Jacko. You're not to tell *her*, see?"

"All right. I won't."

"Swear?"

"All right, I swear."

"Hope to die?"

"You're hurting my arm. I swore, didn't I?"

"Don't you forget it. And let me tell you something. If *she* gets to know, I'll kill you. And no more talk about your ghosts and furies. I've had about enough. No more talk about giving protection to anyone who chances along. Look how we've put ourselves out for that blasted baby! Me too. Though she doesn't take much notice."

"All the same, Banger, I should say she was your girl. Now."

"What *she* says is, I've got to be patient. Me patient! And with all this."

"She is still wearing your ring, Banger. Though she has put the silver cross back on again."

"That doesn't mean much. We had to bring everything we could. Is your shoulder aching?"

"Yes."

Banger stretched himself, got down off the wall and undid his buttons.

"See that rock over there? Bet you I score a bull."

He seemed to have forgotten Thomas. When he was cheerful, he was always trying to make this sort of bet; and it wasn't fair. I went round the corner, out of sight.

CHAPTER 18

CHRISTINA was a long time. The sun came out, very low in the sky, and two swans came floating down the river. We tried to work out how you would catch a swan and kill it. Even I was beginning to know that we weren't really going to get to the farm; and we both thought it would be a good thing to have a big store of food. Though swans do sometimes break your arm. We decided we'd have a try in the morning, when we weren't so tired.

Christina came back at last. She had only found a sort of mad boy in the church who said he was tolling the bell because God was dead and the Devil was coming up out of the river with snakes in his hair. Banger didn't worry either way about God, but the thought of the Devil made him start shaking again. Christina told him to pull himself together; she was only explaining why it took so long to get any sense out of the mad boy. Vicky said he belonged to some nuns, who were going to smack him if they heard him ringing the bell.

"But the convent seems to be miles away," said Christina. "He told us to go to the Count's house."

Banger said it sounded too posh for him.

"I'm not like some people," he said. "I never got introduced to any lords and ladies."

"Nor did any of us," said Christina; "and we're all of us filthy. And, anyway, the Count sailed to America, with

his children and some of his horses. We shall have to go to the back door, and ask the servants."

"More my style," said Banger.

We were walking again. The sun had set and the moon was coming up in a thin blue sky. Christina said how lovely it was to hear all the quietness. Actually, the country at night has lots of noises, but they are like the second fiddle, you have to listen. Once Banger started listening he said it was a bloody racket; and that was true too.

We found the Count's house quite easily, but there was no one at all in it. Huge yellow weeds were growing in the stable yard and the back door was bolted. We went round to the front. Then we saw that it was not just empty; it was ruined. The porch had fallen on to the steps and all the windows were blank. Banger managed to lift the front door open. Inside was an enormous hall with a wide staircase that took two bends to the next floor. Looking up, we could see sky, where a big stretch of the roof had fallen in.

Christina sat down on the bottom step and cried. Banger rubbed his chin. "If you once get the knack," he said, "you can make yourself comfortable anywhere."

He and I went up to explore, but the upstairs rooms were no good. Some of the floors had fallen in, and in one that looked all right Banger put his foot through one of the boards. We did, though, find a pile of old rags and dirty curtains, which Banger said would do for blankets. He also ripped up some of the loose boards and took them downstairs under his arm.

We made a big fire in the hall fireplace, lighting it with some letters addressed to the Count, which were lying there already. We had to suck the eggs, because

we couldn't find a tin to cook them in, but they didn't feel too slimy if you stuffed bread into your mouth after each gulp. There was no water either, except from the tap over the kitchen sink, which wouldn't turn on or off, but dripped in slow drips. We plugged up the sink-hole with rags, to collect water for washing the napkins Rose was always dirtying.

When we were in the kitchen, Banger got a flaming floorboard and very bravely went down some stone steps into the cellar. He discovered a cobwebby bottle that the Count had forgotten when he went to America. Banger was an extraordinary person for always finding bottles.

Christina had spread out the old curtains, with our blankets on top of them. We sat round the fire, steaming. I took the cup out of my pocket and we passed it between us, keeping it filled from Banger's bottle. The wine tasted, very, very faintly, like the smell of an old apple-room, where the last apple had wrinkled away to nothing. But it made us all warm at once, and Christina thought that it was probably stronger than it seemed.

After supper, she fed Rose out of the second tin of milk; and gave us each a spoonful for a treat. Banger knelt up like a dog on all fours to take his spoonful, and Christina patted his head, calling him a good dog.

Vicky said, "Are we living in this house now, for always?"

Christina laughed. "Why not? You and I can sweep the floor and wash the curtains. And Banger can set traps for rabbits and pigeons, and Jacko can collect mushrooms and blackberries. We could make ourselves very comfortable. . . ."

Banger was watching her, like Vicky, as if he thought

she was meaning it. Which was stupid at his age. Anybody not a baby could see she was making it all up, as an amusement for Vicky.

"Shall we have a party for my birthday?" said Vicky.

"When is your birthday?"

"Tomorrow."

"No, it isn't," I said. "It's next month."

"Oh, good," said Christina. "By that time we'll be all settled. We'll have a big party of all our friends. And we'll send out printed invitations with gold crowns on them, because we are living in the Count's house."

Even Banger knew by now that it was all made up. He kept filling the cup and drinking the wine himself, with a dignified expression, as if he couldn't be bothered to listen. But Vicky was still amused.

"And will Banger be the Count?"

"You two make me laugh," said Banger.

"Well, that's something," said Christine, yawning. The game seemed to be finished, but that is something Vicky can never understand.

"Then I suppose you and Banger will be our father and mother?" she said.

Christina looked at Banger and he looked back at her.

"Come on," said Banger. "Tell me I'm not good enough." Christina went on looking at him and said nothing. Banger took a big gulp of wine, then dropped his head and stared down into the cup.

"Don't I know it?" he said. "I'm *not* good enough."

Christina sighed. Then she took the cup out of Banger's hand and asked him to put some wood on the fire.

"Why don't we talk about something else?" I said.

"It's high time we were all asleep," said Christina, "but if you like, I'll tell you one last story. Come on, Vicky. Here's a soft place for your head."

"You and your stories," said Banger. But he sat down again and looked at her, waiting for the beginning.

"It's the strangest story I ever heard," said Christina, "and it's called The Man in the Vile Habit."

"What's a vile habit?" said Vicky.

"I'll show you," said Banger, laughing. He still hated the idea of somebody else telling Christina stories.

She shushed him. "It only means dirty, disgusting clothes," she said.

"Sorry," said Banger. "Let's have it."

CHAPTER 19

As you may know (said Christina), nobody was allowed into Heaven until after Jesus had died on the Cross, and then, when three days had gone by, rose from the dead. But of course, a lot of good people had died long before, so they were put into a fortress, somewhere between earth and Heaven, to pass the time until Jesus was ready to come for them. And somehow the company also included people who died, to our way of thinking, later. Naturally, there were a lot of famous people—great kings, cardinals and holy saints. With them, were a lot of unimportant people, people like us, who had never been famous for anything. And if, unlike us, they had been a perfect example of shining goodness, no one had noticed it. Only God, who had chosen them to come with Jesus to Heaven.

None of them were in Heaven yet. The famous people, as they do on earth, avoided the others. They talked to each other and froze out anyone who tried to join in without being invited. But it annoyed them too when one of the unimportant saints, who had got caught up with them by chance, looked like straying away. "After all, he is *one of us*," they said! They couldn't endure the idea of sharing their own saint with anyone else.

In time, everybody learned to avoid the place where the famous people always sat, which was near the door. Everybody, including themselves, took it for granted that when the procession went up to Heaven, they would be first.

The fortress was under the command of two people. One was called Satan and the other was called Hell, which was also the name of the place. This house, too, is a place which is called by the same name as the person who owns it. Hell and Satan were delighted to have so many people in their fortress and wanted them to stay as long as possible.

The day came when Jesus, whose sufferings on earth were finished, came to fetch everyone from Hell. He marched up to the walls and shouted out: "Lift up your heads, O ye everlasting gates, and the King of Glory shall come in."

Hell and Satan went on with whatever they were doing, because they didn't want to open the door. Jesus shouted again. Hell said (or it may have been Satan), "We had better open the door to him." But Satan said that the doors had been built to resist any attack, and he was going to keep them shut.

Jesus shouted for the third time, "Lift up your heads, O ye everlasting gates, and the King of Glory shall come in."

This time the bolts and the hinges melted and the gates fell to the ground. Hell and Satan could do nothing. The procession formed up, with the famous people in front. Jesus marched at the head, leading everybody to Heaven. He didn't interfere with the way the column was arranged, because everyone seemed satisfied. The only exception was the unimportant saint, who tried to wait to the last. One of the kings caught hold of him in the nick of time. He had never been so embarrassed in his life. But Jesus smiled at him, to show he needn't make a fuss about being in the first batch—it was quite all right.

The famous people were delighted with their first sight of Heaven. The gold and the marble shone, and the air

was like a south wind on a spring morning. They could see that everything was new. They were pleased, but not particularly surprised, because they had always understood that God was going to create a new Heaven for them.

There was one thing, though, that was unexpected. One of the cardinals remarked that it struck a false note. And this was a man who was hanging around in dirty, disgusting clothes, as if he'd lived in the place all his life. One of the kings said there was always bound to be some unfortunate incident at any big event; but it could usually be sorted out quietly, if you got the right person on to it. He asked the unimportant saint to have a word with the man, unofficially, and to find out where he was supposed to be. Some of the cardinals didn't altogether trust the saint. They thought him a bit of a simpleton, in an excellent way, of course. They warned him not to rush in where angels (as anyone could see for themselves) feared to tread. But to act, just this once, in a diplomatic manner.

The saint never argued with kings and cardinals. Beyond that, he knew nothing whatever about diplomacy. He took the man behind a pillar and asked him in a straightforward way how he had got into Heaven.

The man's answer was this: "Well, sir, it was all a bit of a surprise to me too. It was all arranged, you might say, at the last minute. I never set myself up as a good man. Wouldn't have struck me. Didn't strike anyone else either, and I don't blame them. I never let my mate down, though. I even tried to get him to come along at the last minute. But he wouldn't wear it. I'm sorry really because he would have been company for me. You've had the kindness to speak to me, sir, but you're the first one."

"I like your company," said the saint. Indeed, he was glad to find someone he could talk to in Heaven. But,

being a saint, he didn't mention that he found some of the kings and the cardinals less congenial.

"Me and my mate had a good little business," said the man in dirty, disgusting clothes. "It wasn't a thing you wanted to talk about, but most of the country people up and down the Jordan Valley would have put in a good word for us. As a young man, I was all for travel, but when you're getting on you like to settle down among your own people. It was the caravans we robbed, and when I say I wasn't a good man, you can take my word for it. Sometimes we didn't bring it off the way we'd intended, and we killed one or two. Of course, not more than we could help. We knew what we were in for, once we got caught; and we managed to keep going for quite a time."

The saint had long experience of waiting with patience while people beat about the bush, struggling to reveal something they had on their minds. He was reminding himself that he now had all the time in eternity when the man said:

"Tell me, sir, have you ever been crucified?"

"No," said the saint. As a matter of fact, he had been burned at the stake.

"That was what they did to me and my mate. Fair enough in a way. I don't suppose they have much of an idea what they're doing, so you can't altogether blame them. But they might think different if it was done to them. Well, then, they got us strung up on two crosses and stuck them up there on the hill with this Jesus, who came in with you just now, on a cross in between. We'd heard a bit about him before we came up before the beaks. People said he could raise the dead and so on. Well, some of these good talkers can talk them into believing almost anything. They throw a rope up in the

air and send the boy up it. I've seen it done myself in the old days. But after all, if this chap had just been a talker, he would have talked his way out of trouble. They'd got nothing on him really that was going to stick. If he hadn't stood up in court as bold as brass, and told them he was the Son of God and no two ways about it, they couldn't have done a thing. At the time, though it looks a bit different now, me and my mate just thought he must be crazy. Of course, it didn't matter to us whether he thought he was the Son of God, or whether he didn't. There's some say we all are. But he ought to have caught on to the fact that the high-ups, who are very particular about that sort of thing, weren't going to stand for it. Perhaps he did know, at that. One of our jailers saw him in court, and said Jesus told them the whole thing was going just the way he wanted—as if he'd only lived for the sake of being crucified. That certainly is crazy. Though nobody could have called him stupid. He could have twisted Pontius Pilate round his little finger if he'd put his mind to it. He was quite sharp enough to know that Pilate always comes quiet if you make out there's likely to be trouble—everybody says so—and he could have thought up some way of frightening him worse than the priests had done it. But he was a stubborn cuss; he would have it that he was the Son of God and a King as well, and the Saviour they'd all been talking about for several hundred years. The jailer told us it made you think, the way he went on. So the long and the short of it was, he was crucified along with me and my mate."

The saint waited patiently while the man in dirty, disgusting clothes turned his thoughts back to the time when he had hung on the cross.

"You know, they nail you up—not that the way it's done makes a lot of difference, I don't suppose. My mate

was shouting and screaming. I did a bit of it too, but Jesus wasn't that sort. There was something about the way he hung up there made you take a pull at yourself. It wasn't done to make an impression. I've seen men die like actors in the Greek theatres, all set on looking the part and thinking of something to say that's out of the ordinary. He wasn't like that at all. He only said one or two things, and he said them plainly—said he was thirsty, and told his Mother and his mate he wanted them to stick together. Not a sound otherwise, though he wasn't a strong man; you could see that, because he died first. But even his silence gave you courage."

The man in dirty, disgusting clothes began pacing the marble floor. The saint caught him up by another pillar. One of the cardinals tried to break into the conversation, which had gone on a disturbingly long time; but the saint, to his amazement, waved him away as if he were a schoolboy.

"I don't want you to get my mate wrong," said the man in dirty, disgusting clothes. "He never was a quiet sort of person like me. That was why we suited. I did most of the thinking and he did most of the shouting—putting the fear of God into them, to use his own words, if you'll excuse me, sir. Besides, though he was rough, he couldn't ever bear pain. He started shouting at Jesus. 'Fine, Saviour,' he shouted out. 'What about saving yourself, and us too while you're at it.' I couldn't stand that. I suppose, what with all I'd been hearing and all I'd seen for myself, I was beginning to think the world of this Jesus. I shouted out, across Jesus, to my mate. 'Stop it, for God's sake. We're all dying, here on these crosses, but you and me deserve it. He's different.' And then, I don't know what came over me, but I was bold enough to speak to Jesus. 'Sir,' I said, 'spare a thought

for me when you come into your kingdom.' He answered, loud enough for everyone to hear, 'You and I will meet in my palace this very day.'

"There were some people laughing at him, besides my mate, but I took it all as it was meant. And there was one thing bothering me. As you can see, sir, I'm wearing my working clothes, and they aren't much to look at—not even worth washing. And it's happened to me once or twice, when I've had a job to do in one of the big houses—they sometimes need a man who isn't particular what he does—that I've felt awkward. The servants make me look a fool or there's trouble about letting me in.

"Jesus seemed to understand there was something on my mind, and he turned his head round so that we could talk quietly, without the others hearing. They couldn't see much either. I'd thought—because of the pain—that the day was passing very slowly, but the night came on very sudden. I told him what I've just been telling you.

"He took it all very natural. When I got to the gates of his palace, he said, I'd still be carrying my cross; and as soon as the porter saw it he would ask me to come in at once.

"That's just how it happened. The porter was very polite. To me! That cross worked wonders. But I can tell you, I was glad to put it down, because my shoulder had been aching all day. There it is, sir, leaning up against the wall. One of the gentlemen is asking about it, wanting to know who's responsible for tidying it up."

CHAPTER 20

VICKY was asleep, curled up in the corner. The fire was dying down. It just threw a little light on all our faces. Behind us were shadows, except where the moonlight fell on the wall over the stairs. I noticed for the first time that we could just hear the drip of the tap from the kitchen, filling the sink up. There was a board creaking too, and a trail of leaves was whispering and tapping against the empty window-frame.

Christina had told her story sitting up, looking at the fire, with her hands clasped round her knees. When it was finished, she leaned her head on Banger's shoulder and he put his arm round her, quite gently.

"That's my girl," he said.

"Yes, of course," said Christina. He took up her hand and started playing with her ring—the ring with rubies in it that he had stolen for her.

"You'll see," he said. "I'll look after you."

"Yes, of course," said Christina.

"What we'll do, we'll go to America," said Banger. "That's a place where they can use people with their wits about them. I can't stand much more of this, I don't mind telling you. Here we've got the whole of our lives in front of us, but who's to say what we've got if we don't get out. But America's just the place for us, Christina. . . ."

"It would be wonderful," she said.

Of course, I thought they were talking about all of us, and nobody could blame me for thinking, like Christina, that going to America would be wonderful. You can't go on and on being a hero. Prometheus, and Jesus too in a different way, knew they were immortal. But for people it is different. Even people like Christina, who talk about eternal life as if it was a place, know it is different. The great heroes always did somehow manage to make something happen somehow, but it is stupid to go on and on with nothing happening and nobody noticing until you are just dead—not even able to be proud of whatever it was you did.

Banger was kissing the inside of Christina's hand. She took it away to make him listen, and said, "We must get Vicky and Jacko back to their father, and find somewhere for Rose, and then, of course, I'll come with you to America."

Banger didn't try to get her hand back. He said, "All that's over. I'm the boss now. We're off first thing tomorrow. By ourselves."

"But, Banger, we *can't.*"

They stared at each other in a new way. Christina dropped her eyes first.

"Jacko, you tell him we can't."

"You can if you want to," I said. I suddenly understood that it was hopeless to give up completely even trying to be a hero. "I would rather go back to my father. He is still fighting."

"You see?" said Christina. "Jacko and I are just as terrified as you are. But we aren't cowards and traitors."

"Don't you dare call me a coward. I'm a practical man. We've worked wonders with this outfit. But it can't go on. Look at the risks I've taken. Look what I've done. I mind the kids, I get you the milk, I push the bleeding

chair, fix you a fire, keep my hands off you. . . . What more can I do?"

"See it through."

"Listen, Christina. We're beaten. . . ."

"That's not the same as running away."

Banger looked at her with a kind of cunning smile. "As a matter of fact," he said, "we could do with Jacko. And if you're feeling really tough, we might manage Vicky. But Rose is the end."

"I and Vicky would rather go home," I said. "You can have Rose."

Banger took no notice. He said to Christina, "Well, there's my offer. But me, I'd sooner travel light."

"I think you're a rat," said Christina, "and you ought to be grateful to the children. They gave you a good excuse for running away once, when other men stayed to fight. Jacko's father, and Smith, and Thomas . . ."

"That's enough about Thomas," said Banger. I moved further away—he looked so dangerous—but Christina was too angry to notice.

"You're worse than the man in the vile habit. He may have been a murderer, but he wasn't a traitor to his friends."

"Be careful what you say," said Banger. His hand was moving towards his knife. Christina must have seen. She took a deep breath and held out her hand to him, the way you hold crumbs to birds.

"Come here," she said. There was a long silence while Banger stared at her hand. The noises of water dripping and leaves tapping suddenly came back. Neither of them moved.

"We mustn't quarrel," she said. "I wish I could do exactly what you say and I wish I could love you exactly the way you want. But I do love you. Don't frighten me.

I'm frightened enough already. I'm even frightened because the mad boy told us this house was haunted."

Banger looked quickly over his shoulder, hearing all the noises for the first time. Then he jumped up and shouted:

"Who's there?"

From some distant place there seemed to be an answer. He snatched his cobwebby bottle and ran. As he ran through the door, he really did look as if furies were after him.

CHAPTER 21

"Oh, Jacko," said Christina. "I only want to be happy."

She was crying, spread out on the sacks. I crouched beside her and held her hand, trying to be like my father when he cheers people up in the night. Her hand was warm and floppy. I started thinking of my mother's solemn promise that I would soon be a really big man. I even began to believe it, and it was frightening. But I was sorry I wasn't big enough soon enough to take Christina to America.

"In America," I said, "they are able to pursue happiness, as well as having life and liberty. It was a solemn promise."

"Banger will never know how to pursue happiness! I know he is a sad, terrible boy, Jacko, and he will never make me happy. Sometimes I wish I hadn't ever loved him. But you know, once you have loved someone properly . . ."

"You are supposed to be able to love even hateful people. And he is only hateful some of the time, and sometimes he doesn't do it on purpose."

"If only I could explain to him . . ."

"In the end, he usually does what you say."

"Does he? Then perhaps tomorrow I'll be able to make him give up his silly ideas. Only I wish he hadn't taken the bottle. . . ."

She said we ought to stop talking and try to go to

sleep. We didn't move Vicky, but settled ourselves as well as we could. The floor was hard and my mother's full purse, which always had to be in my pocket, dug into me. I took all the money out of the purse and made a pile of it in a safe corner.

Christina got up again once, because Rose was making a faint squeal. It wasn't much and stopped when she was turned over and covered up. Then all the other noises were suddenly louder. Christina started listening to them too; and then remembered that she had never said her prayers.

She might have asked God to make her happy; but she didn't. She asked him to make her stronger. I said that prayer too. Then we rearranged our sacks, sharing some of them, and Christina put her arm over me. We shut our eyes. I thought about my mother—and very nearly succeeded in making her face look real.

I was sorry my mother had never heard Christina's stories—she would probably have liked this way of explaining that a person *can* be forgiven whatever he has done and that it doesn't matter at all if they wear dirty, disgusting clothes and have never been taught how to behave properly. For a minute or two, even Banger had believed them and forgotten his idea that he always had to be bad.

We were nearly asleep when he came back. He wouldn't come in, but stood in the doorway and shouted to wake us up.

"Come here, Christina. I want you."

Christina gave a tiny shout, then caught her breath.

"Hullo, Banger," she said in a completely steady voice. He was standing there feeling for his knife with one hand and knocking the bottle against the wall with the other. Rose was beginning to squeal, so Christina picked her up

and rocked her. She seemed to be trying to make everything seem ordinary.

"You mustn't disturb us," she said in her most ordinary way; "not at this time of night."

"Leave those children," said Banger. "I've come to fetch you."

"I can't be everywhere at once," said Christina with a small laugh.

"Why did you leave me alone?" said Banger. "They're out there now, trying to get at me, whispering behind my back. You've got to come and tell them I didn't mean it. It was a joke, see. . . ."

Christina went on rocking Rose. "I don't know what he's talking about," she said. "Do you, Jacko?"

I did know, but I wouldn't say. I was crouching there, petrified. I could see Christina meant to make everyone calmer, but, whatever she said, Banger only got more wild. When at last he shattered the bottle against the wall, the tinkle of the falling bits drove him frantic. He threw the neck down on the floor between us and drew his knife.

He was not just flashing it for fun; he was holding it in the way that meant *ready for action.* He looked sternly at Christina and took several loud, deep breaths.

"You know as well as I do that baby's dying," he said at last. "Why don't you let me put it out of its misery? They drown puppies and kittens, and I've nothing more to lose."

I thought it was all settled, for all of us. But at the last minute Christina thought of a way out. She put Rose into my arms.

"Take her, Jacko," she said. "Take her and hide her in a safe place where he can't find her."

Then she moved away from us and stood at the bottom

of the staircase, with her hand on the knob of the carved post. She smiled very sweetly at Banger, standing in the door with his knife ready.

"If you want me," she said, "you will have to come and get me yourself."

It was all real, but it had quite stopped looking real. And it was a good thing Christina had learnt how to do acting. Even being good in ordinary life needs cleverness as well; and this wasn't just cleverness, it was genius. Christina just stood there smiling at Banger, loving and forgiving everything—and trying to decoy him away from the first person he had ever even thought of murdering on purpose.

The moment he moved she turned round and ran quickly up the stairs. Banger gave a roaring shout and ran after her.

I hadn't noticed Vicky, but of course she was awake. I made her take my hand. Then, holding Rose as well as I could in the other arm, I took them both out through the open door.

CHAPTER 22

It was all very well for Christina to say we must find a safe place. When we stood on the steps, my first thought was that there were no safe places in the whole world. But I was wrong. I did think of a safe place, and I took Rose to it and left her there.

It was the church where Banger and I had sat on the wall. The moon was still up, so we were able to find our way to it quite easily, and there was even some light inside. Rose was terribly heavy, but as the church was open, it was much better to take her inside instead of leaving her in the porch. There was a statue of the Mother of Jesus, and I put Rose down at once to lie at her feet with some flowers and burnt-out candles. Rose cried a little when I put her down, but not for long.

I wanted to leave a message with her, to show that we were not just throwing away a baby, but had brought it here because of our desperate need. I found a scratchy pen and a pamphlet about some saint who played the organ, with space on the back. I couldn't explain everything, so I thought I ought to write something like the dedication of a book or the mottoes on tombstones. And it seemed a good idea to take something out of Christina's prayers, because then the nuns, or whoever came in and fetched Rose, would recognise what it was supposed to mean.

I wrote:

"Hail, Mary, full of Grace. Deliver us from evil. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Signed: Jacko."

Vicky put her cross underneath. It looked like a kiss, but of course it really meant that she had signed too. I didn't know how to explain that, so I just left the cross looking like a kiss.

The Mother of Jesus was holding her baby, looking pleased and well dressed. She must have looked quite different when she was standing in the crowd to see her son crucified. But that is something women are able to do. Banger and I always looked awful, all the time there was fighting going on and we were fugitives and vagabonds. But Christina, who generally looked awful too, was able to change suddenly. She was able to look so peaceful and beautiful for a minute or two in the middle of it all, you could imagine she belonged in some different sort of world. So I was able to stop thinking that Mary-full-of-grace would be too grand to look after Rose —though Rose was a miserable smelly baby in between dead and alive, who was certain to give everybody a lot of trouble.

However, the actual person who found Rose might not know so much about babies. So I added a PS.: "This is a little girl. Her name is Rose. Please give her something to eat."

Then I lit a candle, but I couldn't put any money in the box out of my mother's purse because it was empty, except for the key of our front door at home. Christina had told me you always have to pay for candles, but I didn't care. Very likely they would be annoyed; but all the same, nobody ought to grudge Rose a little candle to keep her company.

CHAPTER 23

I WANTED to get away as quick as I could. It was no use anyone who came thinking that Vicky and I could do anything more about Rose. Vicky kept on saying she wanted to go home. I don't know where she meant. Perhaps she was thinking of the Count's house, but I didn't dare go back. I didn't even let myself think about Christina still there—though Vicky kept on asking why she hadn't come with us.

It was not much good trying to walk any farther. The moon was just setting, and Vicky kept on saying her legs were tired. My legs were still all right, but my arms were aching, from carrying Rose. It was Vicky who had the terrific idea of sleeping in a boat. There were a lot of boats at one place. Vicky just sat down in the first one we got to, but I looked round a bit and found a better boat inside a boat-house, with some sacks and tarpaulins in it. I managed to persuade Vicky to come into my boat, and I arranged her quite well with sacks round her legs and the tarpaulin over the top. Then I untied the boat and pushed it out with a paddle.

I paddled for a bit, but it was pointless. We were sliding slowly down in the middle of the stream, anyway. So I shipped the paddle and came and lay down beside Vicky under the tarpaulin. I had a lot to worry about, but, compared to Christina, running upstairs with Banger after her—or Rose, stuck in a church all by herself with

just one candle—I was lucky to be lying on my back watching the stars, and floating down the river. Besides, at last I had been able to do something, on my own, without being told.

Later, there was another air attack. I cursed at the aircraft, using Banger's most frightful curses. I cursed every time I heard a bomb drop. When I stood up, to curse better, I could see a distant glow in the sky. It was our own town on fire, but that I didn't know then. Even if I had known, I wouldn't have been able to think of any more curses.

The stream had got more twisty and was running faster. I kept on being interrupted, to guide the boat. But after a long time when the bombing had stopped, I thought I would just see what happened if I left it to guide itself. I got under the tarpaulin with Vicky and must have gone to sleep.

I woke feeling cold. We were stuck on a bank and the boat had swung right round. A strong wind was blowing it against the bank. I caught hold of a willow branch and climbed out cautiously, so as not to wake Vicky.

I was on the edge of a huge field of grass. The night was over, but it was not really morning; so the grass was not green, but grey. The trees on the other side of the field were greyer, against a less grey sky. And flapping on one of the trees was something like a huge pale wing, or a sail.

I don't think I knew at once that it was a parachute. But as I crept nearer, dodging between far-apart willows, I did know. I hoped the enemy, landing here from his parachute, had met someone like Banger who had done him to death with his knife. But, of course, I was afraid for myself too, in case he was alive. It was only because I had to know for certain that I went on. Not knowing

anything for certain is even more frightening than danger.

I came to a place where a little tree had most of its branches broken and brambles had been ground down into the mud. It looked as if elephants had been struggling. I went more warily. If it was where the enemy had landed, I thought he might be waiting, watching me, and ready to pounce.

It was a place where the river took a big bend, sweeping right out and back almost to the place where the parachute was flapping. In case the enemy was waiting by the river, plotting to throw me in, I decided to cut across. I was unsafe everywhere, but I thought I would rather a fair fight.

I went faster in the open, to get across quick. The grass was long and wet, but the wind was pushing me from behind, hard. About halfway, there was a patch of longer grass, with a streak across it of something heavy being dragged. Then there was a wire fence, with one of the posts torn out and broken in half.

I don't think I knew at once that it was the airman who had somehow got stuck to the parachute and dragged across the field, like Achilles round Troy. But when I got to the hedge and saw the parachute hanging there with no man on it, I could see there was a chance that he might be dead—or at least hurt. Of course, if he was alive at all, he might still think of something; but there was just a chance that I wasn't the feeblest person in the huge lonely field. I might even be able to have a try at destroying my enemy myself.

I went down along the hedge and I found him. The groans were what I heard first. He was pulling himself along by his hands and elbows and had nearly reached the water. I watched him do the last bit, slowly and groaning, while the light got slowly stronger. There were

some red and some white flowers in the hedge and blood on the grass.

He had pushed off his helmet. His head was bashed and one of his feet was turned round sideways. It almost looked as if his clothes—so thick and tough that they were less bashed than him—were holding him together. I moved very softly, but I was really quite safe. He wasn't thinking of anything but getting to the water. And he was feeling his way, not seeing it, as if all the blood were pouring over his eyes. He was utterly at my mercy. Mine!

I crept near until I was standing almost on top of him, on the low bank with deep water running past. He got his head over and stretched down his hands to scoop the water up. But it kept running through his fingers, like it does. He wriggled about, groaning worse than ever, and got his shoulders over the edge, so that the top of his body could tip over and his head hang right down.

Because my muscles really are feeble, I always have to think first—before I vault a gate, for instance. I looked carefully at the bank, and the water, and him, while he had one drink.

The thinking was the most terrible and the most exciting part. I almost didn't notice taking his good foot in the grip my father showed me, and swinging him round until most of him was over the edge. Then I just let go.

CHAPTER 24

VICKY had somehow managed to scramble out on to the bank without falling into the water. She was sitting on the grass, bawling, because she had scratched her knee on a bramble.

I said, "Get up. I'm going to take you back home, to look for Father."

I didn't tie up the boat, though I knew I ought to. You are supposed to tie up boats *always*, and especially if they are not yours. Vicky never thought of it because she didn't know. I knew, but I didn't care. We just walked along till we found a path, and then we walked along the path, holding hands.

We had not drifted nearly as far as I thought. Vicky wanted to know when we were going to have breakfast, and she had only asked me about twenty-five times when we got out on to the road and saw the church. As usual, she wanted to go into the church. I had more or less forgotten about Rose, but I still wanted to make certain about anything I could. I told Vicky that if we saw Rose, or if anyone mentioned her, she wasn't to admit that we knew her before. If she did, I swore I'd beat her black and blue. That was a lie, but it's the way some people talk; and it did stop Vicky saying anything silly.

Outside the church, a boy with his arms and legs strung about him in a loose, queer way was raking up leaves. I wanted to avoid talking to him and walked straight

up to the church door, but he shouted at us, in a muddled sort of voice, "Go along in. We get all sorts; you'd be surprised. Don't take any notice of me."

He may have been talking about Rose. At any rate, she was not there and her candle had burnt out like the others. Mary-full-of-grace was smiling as cheerfully as usual, and her wide-awake baby was sitting on her hands bolt upright. Whoever made it must have been thinking of a baby who never went to sleep.

I wanted to get away, but Vicky insisted on going to look at the mad boy's bonfire. It was only smoking slowly. He leaned on his rake and asked us where we came from.

I told him we came from the town and wanted to get back there, if he could tell us the way.

"You'd be better off here," he said. "The Devil's walking up and down in the town this last fortnight, or so they tell me."

"I know."

"Do you? Did you see them coming in from the north, where they float on icebergs with the seals and penguins. Black devils, with fire coming out of their ears?"

I didn't want him to know I could see he was mad. I said that men sometimes looked like devils, and acted like devils as well. But they were men really and we had to fight them like men.

He laughed, pulling his face more lopsided than ever.

"Didn't you see what went on last night? Saint Michael and all his angels came up from the south. Fire and brimstone they threw down on the devils, and the devils still sit there, paying no attention. Saint Michael's lot flew off like sparrows. The devils are more accustomed to fighting and they stick it out longer. The nuns had been praying day and night for God to summon his heavenly hosts, and a lot of good they did! The devils killed off

some of us and the angels finished the rest, the nuns say. You'd better not go back into the town just now, that's my advice."

Vicky was laughing. It was an amusement for her, the way he waved his hands and rolled his head about, and talked nonsense. But I was frantic to get some sense out of him. I couldn't think how Christina had managed, even in a long time, to make him talk sense at all.

"But you are still alive," I said.

He looked at me very suspiciously. "Well, so are you," he said.

"But is the fighting finished?"

"Well, they did say so. But you can't trust them. And you shouldn't ask so many questions. Look out for yourself, that's all."

He stirred the bonfire with his rake, so that a thick column of smoke rose from the middle and almost invisible flames ran round the edges of the leaves on the outside of the pile.

"I do try to look out. But what *for*?"

"Because you're too clever, asking all those questions. They get you into trouble. Now me, the devils don't trouble themselves about me; no more do the angels. Sister Serafina says I'm raking the leaves to the glory of God, but I say different. It's Sister Serafina sees to my food and my clothes and gives me my money every Friday morning. I'd sooner keep out of everyone's way and rake the leaves to the glory of Sister Serafina."

"Is she your mother?" said Vicky.

"Well, the nearest I've got."

"And do you live in her house?"

"Well, I do and I don't. I sleep in the shed and she gives me my food in the passage behind the storeroom. Only today they gave me my dinner in a basket so that

I could get on with raking the leaves. Would you like to see it?"

He fetched the dinner from the church porch, and undid the napkin so that we could see it all—bread and onions and a lump of cheese and apple. He didn't seem to think of it as something to eat; he showed it like people show you their paintbox or their toy trains. I tried not to stare, but my stomach tied itself in knots. The mad boy was watching Vicky, in the interested way you watch a beetle on a stalk.

"That little girl seems to be hungry."

"We're both hungry."

The boy looked lovingly at his dinner, not wanting to disturb the arrangement.

"I could give you one onion," he said at last.

He gave Vicky a small onion, which she ate, though she usually hates onions.

"You don't want an onion, do you?" he said.

"I would rather have bread." He put his hands over the bread.

"Please give my brother some bread," said Vicky. He slid one hand under the other and secretly took out a small piece of bread, which he gave me. I divided it and gave Vicky half.

"Was it good?" said the mad boy.

We both said it was very good, and thanked him. He started tying up the napkin, but stopped in the middle.

"Was it enough?"

We shook our heads. He untied the napkin again, and took out another piece of bread. He broke it in half himself and gave us one piece each.

"There's no sense in going back to the town," he said. "Why don't you stay and help me with all these leaves?"

"They dropped bombs here as well. I heard them."

The mad boy laughed. "Yes; but they didn't hit you or me. Do you think I ought to give you my cheese?"

"Yes, please."

When we had eaten the cheese, he gave us the rest of the bread and his last onion. It wasn't any good asking him other questions, but I did ask him the way home; and he did manage to tell us how to get to the main road. And before we got to the gate he ran after us and gave us the apple.

At the corner, we looked over the wall to wave. After all, though he had done it rather gradually, he had given us all his dinner. But he was lying on his back in the grass, asleep in the sun.

CHAPTER 25

I STILL hadn't really understood what the mad boy was trying to say. The prayer to Saint Michael the Archangel must have worked, but not properly. Well, Christina always said that could happen to prayers. It was supposed to be your fault if you asked for the wrong thing—like the people in stories who always want something silly for their three magic wishes.

Perhaps it had been the wrong thing to ask Saint Michael to bring us reinforcements. I remembered a story how Jesus was beseeched by his friends to summon the hosts of Heaven, to save himself and them. What he said was that he could easily, but he thought it was better not to fight. He said, for him, it was better to be crucified.

But I still didn't really understand anything—until we got to the bridge. An enemy tank was guarding it, and besides the soldiers on guard there was a crowd of other enemy soldiers, just sitting about and having a rest. They were smoking and talking, and when we came up they said things to us in their language which may have been meant to be friendly.

Then I saw two people coming out of the path through the wood. One was an enemy, and he was frog-marching a prisoner. The prisoner was wearing a flying-suit—the sort I had seen—and he had pushed back his helmet.

At first I thought it was the same man—but he was

quite dry and there were no wounds on his head. Then I thought it was his ghost—but that was silly. So then I really knew that it was a different man wearing the same clothes. I knew our friends were defeated and that I had helped to destroy them.

I told Vicky we must hurry. But one of the enemy soldiers held out some chocolate and said something in his own language, smiling. I wouldn't take it, but she did. Of course, she didn't really know who they were, and I simply couldn't go on and on explaining. She wanted me to explain the prisoner, but I just told her it was too complicated for a person of her age, and she ought to think herself lucky. That reminded her of the chocolate.

"You have some," she said. But I wouldn't take even one square. I let her keep it, because she was so desperate, but I said no. It was the only thing I was able to do, from start to finish, that was even faintly promethean.

All through that long walk, she had been trying hard not to say she was tired, because I had told her long ago it was driving me frantic. I suppose that was promethean of Vicky; but she managed it much better after she got the chocolate.

CHAPTER 26

I KEPT on telling Vicky to hurry. I wanted to tell my father what I had done; he was the only person who might make it seem less bad. But, of course, I wanted to put it off too, because he was usually stern at first.

I kept on telling Vicky that we were going home to find him, but I wasn't certain about that either. When I saw the tanks at the street corners, and silent soldiers guarding some of the buildings, I was sure the flat would be empty. But when I saw two women with baskets, stopping to talk in the street like they always do, I thought he was sure to be at home.

We passed some shattered houses and some smoking ruins. Three boys spat at one of the soldiers, but he pretended not to notice. I was terribly thirsty, with no spit, so we just went on.

By the time we came to Eric's house it was almost impossible to go on any farther. I hadn't any money to buy anything in the shop, but I thought I could get a drink of water, and Vicky still remembered, after all that time, that they usually gave her a biscuit.

The shop was open, though there was less than usual in the window. Eric's mother, like always, was squeezed on her high chair behind the counter, adding up figures in a book. She took a minute or two to know who we were. Perhaps we did look different, but she looked exactly the same.

"Well, this *is* a surprise," she said at last. "Where've you been all this time?"

"We've just come back from the country."

"Haven't you been home?"

"Is it still there?"

"You poor little souls! Of course it's there—though it's the only one in the building. And the teacher did tell me that your father's been back. She was asking about you yesterday, but I couldn't tell her anything. Shocking, it's been. She's out of her mind with her own troubles, and looks twice her age. I told her you always were an independent boy. . . ."

"Come on, Vicky," I said. "We must go home."

Eric's mother waddled round to the front of the counter. She bent over and looked at our faces.

"What we'll do," she said, "is send you home in the van, just so soon as my husband comes in. I can see you had a bad time and I'll give you a bite to eat."

She called the maid in to mind the shop and took us into the back room. She washed our hands in a basin, with scented soap, and then put us to sit at the table. They had only just finished eating and not cleared away, so there was lots of food on the table already, as well as a half-full jug of lemonade and a bottle with some wine. All the same, she fetched more things from different places, until the table was more loaded than I have ever seen, even in peace. Eric's little brother came in and kept asking for bits, though he couldn't have been hungry —at least, not like we were. I thought Eric's mother would be disgusted by the way Vicky was eating, and I nearly told her not to use two hands. But then I saw that I was using two hands myself.

"We were lucky," said Eric's mother, not noticing. "We managed to keep out of trouble. Of course, we aren't

the sort that goes looking for trouble, but last night it might have got anybody. You'd have thought they might have let us alone after all we'd been through; and what made *them* want to come interfering I don't know. All that talk about military objectives and then bombing the shop where my sister works. Well, they've learned their lesson. Have some more of this pie, Vicky. You could do with some feeding up. Put some roses in your cheeks."

I had stopped feeling hungry almost at once, but I was still thirsty. She had forgotten to give us anything to drink.

"Please may I have some of the lemonade?"

She poured it out. I was glad she didn't know I was one of the people who had prayed for reinforcements—so in a way it might be my fault, and I was eating and drinking under false pretences.

"Poor little mites," she said. "But you can tell your father from me that many of us don't care for him and his kind. They'd have done better to know when they were beaten, and not kept on screaming for help. Well, we know now what it was worth—all that talk that they'd got the whole country behind them. You tell your father from me there's a lot of decent people only want to be left in peace, and thank God we've got back the government we can trust. . . ."

While she was talking, she kept putting food on to our plates, though by this time I could only eat little bits, slowly. A most horrible thought had come into my mind that I could, *if I wanted*, pretend I was on her side. She could only talk and talk, and I had done something.

I couldn't eat any more. I asked where Eric was.

"Out," she said. "His Highness is always out. He has ideas of his own, you'll be interested to hear, and he has the impertinence to tell me he doesn't like my attitude.

And if I ever catch you giving him ideas, I shall be sorry I put myself out for you."

"I haven't got any ideas—not any longer."

"That's just as well. There's no need for ordinary, decent people to ferret about in things they don't understand. There's been a lot too much of that. The excitement's got into everyone."

"Bang, bang, bump," said Eric's little brother.

"Don't do it," cried Eric's mother, laying her fat hands on her enormous heart. "I'm upset enough as it is, seeing those two looking like ghosts, and thinking of their poor parents."

When Eric's father came in, and stood in the doorway looking us over, she told him everything, including what she had said herself. She decided not to come in the van with us, because she was upset. Also, she didn't want to be mixed up in anything awkward. They both agreed it might be awkward, and she told him to drop us on the corner and not go to the flat. It wouldn't do him any good, she said, to be seen talking to someone like my father. I was more than ever glad that Eric had some other ideas and would be able to meet me out of the house.

Eric's father didn't say much to us, but he allowed us both to sit in front. We had to make some detours, because of road-blocks, and for a short time we were on the road that Eric and I used to take coming home from school. I was amazed to see that some of our chalk-marks were still there. I could remember making them the last time we came home together. I remembered everything, but in a strange way, as if I were reading about other people in a book.

CHAPTER 27

We walked along the last bit of road by ourselves, and down the steps. I opened the door with my key and we went in.

"Who's that?" called out my father. We ran down the passage and he had only just got out of his chair when we went in. I had always thought everything would be quite all right the moment I saw my father, but it wasn't. He hadn't come rushing out to meet us, and he looked old. More like my grandfather, whom I just remember from when I was small.

It was obvious at once that he was disappointed by us, too. He didn't put his arms round us and kiss us. He only said:

"Isn't your mother with you?"

It was only a different way of asking the question I had answered too many times already. I just said the one word.

My father sat down in his chair as if somebody had hit him. Vicky and I stood about. We had got used to managing on our own, but we expected all that would be over now. After a long time he lifted his head and said in a puzzled way:

"But where have you been? What have you done? How have you managed?"

"We managed all right. Vicky wanted a lot of

amusement at first. But she has been very brave. She didn't fuss nearly as much as you would have expected."

Then I saw the most terrible thing I ever saw in my life. My father was crying, with his hands lying on his knees and the tears running down his naked face. I hated him for crying. It turned me into a pillar of stone. But Vicky did a good thing. She ran across to my father and put her arms round his neck. He lifted her on to his knee and they both cried together.

I just stood there with my hands in my pockets, playing with my key. My father noticed me again after a bit, as soon as he stopped crying.

He said, "Well, I had to come to look for you, and now I've found you we must make our plans. Turn on the radio, will you?"

There was some music, mixed up with various announcements. The announcements said:

". . . no reprisals. The independence of the country will be guaranteed and free elections will be held as soon as order is restored. A general amnesty is granted, except to those who, on the eve of peace, treacherously invited a foreign power to their aid. They must answer for the many thousands of men, women and children who lost their lives last night."

My father leaned forward and switched off the radio.

"*They* talk about freedom too," I said.

"Yes; they can talk . . ."

"Some people seem to believe them."

"Of course. Power has always exploited faith."

"Once I read somewhere about people who acted in bad faith. But that was only in a book."

I wanted him to tell me about real life. I wanted to know if the radio really meant what it said. But he went on explaining something quite different.

"There are people who mean to act in good faith," he said, "but they are very weak, very divided. If democracy had the moral force of tyranny—if it was served with the same energy, foresight and self-sacrifice—we could begin to hope. It may be true, here and now, to say we were defeated by force of arms. But there's always more to it. We have all betrayed our faith at some time or other. Not always because we have trusted in false gods, but because we are men."

I don't know what happens to other people, but what happens to me is that as I get older and older I understand less and less. Even the voice my father was using sounded far away, as if he was talking in a huge room, with echoes. I tried to stop him.

"When we make our plans, Father, shall we plan to go on fighting for freedom and justice?"

I couldn't tell whether he was answering my question or talking to himself when he went on:

"Nothing, even my own terrible mistakes, can destroy my faith in freedom and justice. Men have died for their faith before now. Even if we had been better men, fighting with other weapons, we couldn't have been certain of saving ourselves."

"Yes; I know, Father. But would we have known for certain which men to kill?"

He noticed what I said, because for a minute he looked almost angry. But he didn't really answer, just went on:

"So you think it unforgivable? Perhaps it is. But try not to think too badly of us, later on, because we failed to save our country. If we die fighting injustice, it's because the world is still trying to learn what justice is. That's more difficult. . . ."

I was suddenly bored with everything, even with the things this old man my father was saying in his solemn voice. When you first hear them, words like "freedom" and "faith" are terrific, but when you know more your mind starts chasing about the second you begin to consider them. They are like old, old clothes, which you would be very sorry to throw away, but can't stop getting dirtier and dirtier and more and more screwed up.

My father got up and put his hand under my chin to make me lift my head and look at him. But I shut my eyes.

"Wake up, boy," he said, speaking in his more natural way. "Would you like me to take you to visit Aunt Barbie? We have got to hurry up and decide what's to be done with you two."

I said I had to go to the lavatory. I did, too. The minute I got in I was horribly sick. I held on to the seat with both hands while something tore the sick out of my body, like a butcher tears a rabbit out of its skin.

It was no use thinking about anything. No use thinking about Banger and Christina running upstairs and over the crumbling floors of the empty house. No use thinking about Rose being given her supper in bits and pieces by the mad boy in the passage behind the store. No use thinking about Thomas peering through the darkness without seeing the patrol. No use thinking about Smith signalling to them with his bright white shirt. No use thinking of the airman getting a few drops of river water into his mouth at last.

My mother was dead too, and my father was trying to tell me, without saying the words, that his sentence of death had been pronounced. It was no use thinking about anything or expecting anything.

The sick splashed about all over everywhere. I wiped it up as well as I could and washed my face. I couldn't get the smell of sick off my jacket, so I took it off. Then I went into my mother's bedroom and lay down on the bed. I was tired. More tired than I have ever been, even when I had spent hours sorting out the boxes of grenades or carrying Rose to the little church where she took sanctuary. Probably I had done the best I could. So had my father when he got his friends in the end to launch their useless attack. We *had* tried hard. But, like everyone else, we hardly ever knew what we were doing.

It was terribly cold. My father's working jacket was hanging up again on the knob of the bed. So I got up and put it on. Of course, it was miles too big for me. Even the tips of my fingers were some way up the sleeves.

I walked about the room, looking at things. I looked at my picture that Christina had stuck up on the wall. I could see now that it was all wrong. For one thing, the pirate and the king's son had the same face. Eric always says I am a real artist, but he doesn't know what he's talking about. Only a very great artist can draw people so that you can tell for certain *who they are*, and though the faces I do all look quite like real faces, I only know one way of doing them.

And then, there was too much emptiness at the top of the picture, in the parts that were not filled up by the burning house. The bird was far too small. It looked silly, dumped on the tree with its silly little beak wide open. I ought to have done a silent bird with big, soft wings.

But it is never the least use fiddling about with an old picture. You have to forget all about it. And then sometimes, when you think you're bored with drawing and

don't expect to be able to do another picture ever, you suddenly get a good idea for a new one.

If God created man in his own image, as Christina says, he must be annoyed to have got so many bad copies. But being able to create something else, like a picture, is an amazing thing to have put into an image—even badly.

CHAPTER 28

THERE was a roll of knocking at the door. I washed my face again. When I went into the front room, two men were there, in ordinary clothes, but obviously soldiers or policemen. It wasn't like what you would think. I expected blood and shouts, but everyone was standing quite still and silent, and the men were looking more worried even than my father.

The old, bald man said, "Some arrangement will be made for the children."

"Thank you," said my father. You could see he meant they might have thought of it sooner. The bald man pretended he didn't notice.

"If you would like to telephone . . ." he said. "Or I might be able to send a message; anywhere within reason."

"I am hoping to hear from a friend. Could you give me an hour or so?"

"Not that. I'm sorry. A few minutes."

My father sat down at the table, covered with remains of things he'd been eating. He sat in his old chair and I sat on mine. The two men stood by the window, looking out, so as not to listen, and Vicky went over to them and tried to make them talk to her.

"As soon as I leave," said my father, "will you take Vicky and go to Aunt Barbie?"

"Yes."

"You are fond of Aunt Barbie? You, as well as Vicky?"

"Yes."

"You will be good children and do what she says?"

"Yes."

"And when Vicky grows up, you'll look after her? Be her big brother and take her out and see that she has lots of friends of her own age. She's going to be very pretty, you know, just like your mother. Don't let her marry too young. . . ."

He was talking faster and faster; then suddenly stopped.

"That's a long way ahead, isn't it? There's so much I'd like to tell you, but we've very little time."

"Yes."

"Can you remember all I was saying earlier?"

"Yes."

"However things turn out, say to yourself sometimes that you are not quite alone."

"Oh, yes."

"And try, always, to do what you know is right."

"But, Father, the trouble is I usually don't know."

He put his big strong hand on top of mine. "My poor child, I know you're a good boy. I'm telling you all the things I want you to remember when you are older. . . ."

The door had been left open, and Aunt Barbie came running in. She looked wild and strange, and when my father got up she kissed him and then clung to him.

"Time we got on," said the bald man. Vicky was swinging on his hand. I don't think she even recognised Aunt Barbie, who pulled herself back from my father with a great, tearing sob.

"All right," said my father.

They went out of the door and along the passage and

up the steps. Vicky was screaming, out of temper. She didn't want to let go of the bald man and sit on the knee of a shaking, crying person she didn't even recognise.

Aunt Barbie was still crying a bit even after Vicky stopped. I had only one thing I wanted to say, and I said it, whether she was listening or not:

"I told him yes. I had to. But *I don't promise anything.*"

From a portrait of the author by Elizabeth Henderson.

Mary Crawford is married, with two grown-up sons. She lives in Chelsea and works looking out over a quiet street with trees. At school, her ambition to become "a poet and an artist" was regarded with scepticism; and it has in fact been modified in the course of time. She writes mainly in prose and practices, instead of painting, the minor art of making rag pictures. She loves travel, books, good food and conversation (including listening). Her previous novels *Laugh or Cry*, *Roses are Red* and *Itself to Please* (published by Cape) explored familiar situations.

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