

More banging, the shrill whistle, the pressure building up in short blasts of steam; and then the train heaved forward, the engine settling into a slow pulling rhythm as they watched the platform slip away.

'We're off,' said Tucky.

'On our way, boys,' said Miss Roberts. 'Say goodbye to London, and good luck. Not for ever, you know. We'll be back.'

David stared out of the window and wondered what his mother was doing at that moment and how long it would be before he'd see her again.

## CHAPTER 2

IT RAINED ALL THE WAY FROM LONDON TO Exeter. Miss Roberts hardly lifted her head from her books, unless it was to pull out another packet of cigarettes from her handbag. David and Tucky played noughts and crosses until they ran out of paper, and they were left staring at the window waiting for the next stop.

David passed the time by tracing drops of rain as they ran in intricate and erratic patterns from the top of the windowpane down towards the bottom. He would find two or three droplets that began life at the same time at the top, and watch them race each other to the bottom; and sometimes they would join together and plummet down in a great flood.

They stopped frequently and that did help to

break the monotony of the journey; and lunch of a sandwich and a biscuit at Westbury was a chance to stretch their legs and to empty the carriage of Miss Roberts' cigarette smoke.

But lunch was Tucky's downfall. He began to go white almost as soon as the train pulled out of Westbury, and a few minutes later was as sick as a dog. Miss Roberts did her best, but there were no corridors on the train, so all she could do was to hold his head, while the rest of them tried to keep as far away as possible. It was all cleared up at the next stop, but the after-smell still hung on, and Tucky's face was still a pale shade of green. He looked dreadful, and David tried to ignore him and to concentrate on the line of the hills in the distance. He thought it looked like the pictures of Devon he'd been shown at school, but they were still hours away from Exeter, and as the journey dragged on, his thoughts returned again to his house in Islington.

Tucky was feeling better. 'My mum said it won't be long,' he said suddenly. David said nothing. 'She said the war would be over in a few months and we'd all be home again. So it won't be long, will it?'

'Depends on who wins it.' David said.

'We'll win it,' Paul Browning said from the other

side of the carriage. 'Everyone says we'll win it.'

'Then it'll be a long war.'

'Who says?' Paul was sneering.

'That's what my dad said,' David replied quietly. He hated mentioning his father, and he hadn't meant to. He felt vulnerable now. 'He said that if the Germans win it'll be a short war and if we win it'll be long.'

'But we won last time,' Tucky piped up. 'We won then, didn't we?'

'Yeah. He's right,' Paul was learning forward. 'We won all right, and what you can do once, you can do again. That's right, isn't it, miss?'

'What is, Paul?' Miss Roberts looked up.

'The war, miss. Davey says we won't win it. You heard him, miss. We beat them last time, so we will again. Stands to reason, doesn't it miss?'

Miss Roberts closed her book. 'No, Paul. It doesn't stand to reason.' She sounded firm, and everyone listened when she sounded firm. 'I think we shall win in the end, I certainly hope we do. But it will not be in a few weeks or a few months. It may take a long long time to win – a year, two or three years, who knows? You must understand that you will not be going home for some time. You'll have a new home

and a new school and it won't be easy for you. But it will be a lot easier if you can understand that you won't be going home for a long time. One day we'll all go back to Islington, but not for a long time. Understand?'

It could not have been clearer. David had won his duel with Paul, but it gave him no pleasure. He would gladly have lost one little argument for some ray of hope from Miss Roberts. There was none. The carriage fell silent and remained that way until the train pulled into Exeter Station. It was dark already and they were hungry.

Placards were put on, cases checked, then they were on the platform, and out into the cold. Tucky and David stuck together while Miss Roberts gathered the whole school around her for a roll call. Then she led the way through the ticket barrier and towards a waiting bus. There were people everywhere, but it was not like the bustle and noise at Paddington. Here they were standing and staring solemnly as the boys straggled through the ticket hall.

'Where you boys from, my dear?' The ticket collector put his hand on David's shoulder and turned him round.

'London,' said David.

'I know that, my dear,' he laughed easily. 'I know that right enough. But whereabouts in London.'

David felt foolish, and flushed. 'Islington,' said Tucky.

'Not heard of that, have you?' He asked around him and everyone shook their head. 'Off you go then, my dear, and keep smiling.' David did not know what he should be smiling about, and he could not help wondering how anyone could have reached the age of that ancient ticket collector without ever having heard of Islington.

'Talk funny, don't they?' said Tucky, as they rushed after the others.

Miss Roberts marshalled them into the dark green coach in the station yard, and David sat with Tucky on the long bench seat at the back and waited. They all waited, but nothing happened. Then someone realised the driver was missing, and a policeman went off in the dark to look for him. The boys sat numbed in their seats, every one of them exhausted, too exhausted even to be homesick. The driver came back eventually, and there were angry words in front of the bus – Miss Evers was giving him a piece of her mind.

The blackout was in force, and the headlights of



the bus were hooded so that only a thin slit of light struck the road ahead. The engine throbbed underneath them and the bus moved at last.

The journey through the dark lanes seemed unending. David sensed they must be out in the countryside because there were no houses. All he could see were high hedges and the occasional glimpse of a field as the headlights skimmed over it through a gateway. No one spoke in the bus. It was too noisy, but no one felt like it anyway. Tucky had

gone to sleep on David's shoulder, but kept waking up every few minutes to ask if they were there. Halfway down the coach David could make out the shape of Miss Roberts' hat as it was lit up from time to time by the glow of her cigarette.

'This is it,' the driver's voice shouted, and the coach slowed down. Tucky woke up with a start. 'Round this bend and you're here.'

'Placards and cases,' said Miss Roberts. 'Don't leave anything behind.'

'And don't forget your cases, children,' Miss Hardy echoed. 'Make sure it's your own case and no one else's. Check them now, children.'

The bus had stopped, but David could see nothing out of the windows. He rubbed an island clear of steam and peered through. They were in a small square surrounded by low buildings. A door was thrown open in the darkness and a shaft of yellow light flooded out towards the coach.

'Everyone out.' Miss Roberts walked sideways down the centre of the coach. 'And mind your manners now.'

The lights of the village hall were blinding at first and David blinked and squinted his way down the hall. There were faces all around him, peering red

faces and eyes that followed him. He looked away and followed on up some wooden steps and on to a platform. There were two long benches and David found himself in the back row and Tucky slid in next to him. It was warm in the hall and from somewhere came the smell of tomato soup, red tomato soup.

It was thick and not too hot, and they were each given a great hunk of brown bread which they dunked into the white enamel cups. David ate his slowly, savouring the warmth. Every new mouthful sent comforting shivers down his body. He had hoped for some of Tucky's but clearly Tucky was feeling well enough now to finish his. Then there were cheese rolls, and they washed it all down with the sweetest cocoa David had ever tasted. The cocoa was too much for Tucky and he emptied his into David's mug, and David crouched over it warming his hands.

Down in the hall everyone had stopped talking and Miss Roberts was speaking. 'The boys have all had a very long day, and I think we should get them off to bed as quickly as we can. But I know they'd all like me to thank you kind people for our welcoming meal. It's a long time since we've eaten like that. Now most of you are having one boy to stay and some two or three. Do choose quickly. They're a good bunch of

boys, and I know you'll look after them as well as you can. You'll find their names and ages on their placards, so as soon as you've chosen the one you're having, please register with Miss Evers at the table by the door. That way we'll know where everyone has gone to. It wouldn't do to lose anyone now, would it? Take the first row first and then the back row will move forward.'

The crowd of faces in the hall moved in closer, looking up at them. The children sat sipping their cocoa and gazed back down at them. There was a lot of whispering and it was a long time before anyone moved. Then one of the ladies stepped forward and peered closely for a moment at Paul's placard. She smiled up at him over her glasses.

'Come on then, Paul,' she said, tapping him on the knee. 'Let's get the ball rolling. You come along with me.'

'Yes, miss,' said Paul and looked to Miss Roberts for reassurance. Miss Roberts nodded.

'Off you go then, Paul. And be good now.' Miss Roberts spoke kindly, and Paul got up and walked down the steps into the hall. The lady took his case and the two of them walked away towards Miss Evers' table at the back of the hall.

'Doesn't know what she's in for,' Tucky whispered from behind his cocoa mug. And David smiled for the first time that day. He sipped his cocoa and looked around the hall, trying to pick out a face he liked, but there were too many people and they were too remote to be real.

It was a smooth enough business after that. One by one the chairs on the platform emptied and soon the whole front row was gone. Miss Roberts beckoned the back row into their places.

Sam went. Billy Preston and Graham Watts went together, and gradually the hall was emptying. There was a small knot by the registration table, and Miss Roberts was with them. There was something wrong, David could tell that. Everyone kept glancing back up at the platform where David and Tucky sat side by side at the end of the front row. There was no one left.

'I'm sorry, Miss Roberts,' one of the ladies was saying. 'I'm sorry, but there's been an upset.'

'They have to sleep somewhere, don't they?' Miss Roberts sounded crisp. They were speaking in that urgent half-whisper that adults use when they don't want to alarm listening children.

'Tis Mr Reynolds out to Hamleigh Farm. He's not come in to collect. They were all told. Half past eight

he was told, like the rest. 'Tis past eleven now. Can't think where he's to.'

'But even with Mr Reynolds, that still leaves one boy unaccounted for,' Miss Roberts insisted.

'That'll be all right, you'll see, my dear. We'll find him somewhere. Poor little scrap.'

Tucky leaned closer to David. 'Davey. If they can't find anyone to look after us, will they send us home, d'you think?'

'Doubt it.'

'But what will they do with us then?'

'Miss Roberts will see us right,' David said hopefully.

'Don't worry, she'll see to it.'

'Davey. Why do you think no one chose us?' Tucky droned on in his flat voice.

'They didn't choose me, 'cos you were sitting next to me, and they didn't choose you because I was sitting next to you. And besides, we're not the prettiest in the class, are we?' He tried to joke it away, but he was hurt inside just as Tucky was. Time and time again people had looked him over and passed him by. 'Anyway,' he went on, 'I didn't much like the look of them.'

'Nor me,' said Tucky. 'Nor me.'

The arguing at the other end of the hall had

dwindled to an inaudible whisper now as they all realised the two boys might overhear them. But the longer it went on, the more obvious it became that the situation was serious. No one else seemed to have room for an evacuee, and it looked very much as if Mr Reynolds might not be coming at all. Finally Miss Roberts suggested they should give the boys a bed in the hall for the night, and someone went off to look for mattresses and blankets. Miss Hardy looked as if she would burst into tears at any minute, and Miss Evers kept throwing up her hands in disgust. Meanwhile David and Tucky sat alone up on the platform, too tired and bewildered even to care what happened to them.

They had pulled away the chairs to make room for the newly arrived mattresses and bedding when the hall door banged open. A huge, bearded man in a great woolly coat and knee-high gaiters strode into the hall followed by a rangy-looking black and white sheepdog. Everyone gawped.

'I'm sorry to be late, but I've come for a boy.'

'You are Mr Reynolds I presume.' Miss Evers' voice was stiff with anger.

'I am, my dear, and who may you be?'

'Mr Reynolds, these children have been up for

over fifteen hours now.' Miss Roberts took Miss Evers' arm to stop her, but Miss Evers would go on. 'They have travelled nearly three hundred miles. You keep them waiting for another two hours or more and all you can say is you're sorry.'

Mr Reynolds looked down at Miss Evers. 'Lady, I've said I'm sorry. There's nothing more I can say if that won't satisfy you.' Then he looked up at the platform and walked towards the two boys who had stood up by this time. The dog followed and sat down by Mr Reynolds' feet, looking up at them.

'Sorry to keep you,' he said, looking from one to the other. He had bright blue eyes and the lines on his face disappeared into a beard that was flecked with white at the chin. There was wet mud down the front of his coat and David noticed a broad gold wedding ring on his hand as he ruffled the dog's neck. 'Twas the mare that did it. She foaled just half an hour ago, and I couldn't leave her. She had a bit of trouble, always does, this one. But we managed between us, and 'tis a good-looking foal, another colt though. Five foals she's had, and not a filly among them.'

'Filly?' said Tucky. 'What's that?'

'Horse, my dear,' and Mr Reynolds face creased





into a smile. 'Filly's a girl horse. Colt's a boy, like yourself.'

'Mr Reynolds,' one of the village ladies came up beside him. 'Mr Reynolds, which one will you have?'

'Which one?'

'You put yourself down for one, Mr Reynolds. You said you only had room for one.'

'You want me to choose between these two boys, is that it?'

No one replied. He looked from David to Tucky and back again to David. 'Tis just like market day,' he said, shaking his head.

'Mr Reynolds!' Miss Evers stamped her foot in fury.

'This one's the fatter,' Mr Reynolds went on, looking at Tucky, 'but then this one's taller.' He reached out and gripped David's arm. 'He's a bit skinny, you know, not much meat on him.'

'Mr Reynolds, this is a serious matter,' said Miss Evers.

'You're right, lady, no doubt about it. 'Tis a serious matter. I'm supposed to look at two young lads, face to face mind you, and then pick out one and not the other. Right enough, that's serious. 'Tis revolting that's what 'tis. And what happens to the one I don't

choose, eh? How d'you think he'll feel?'

'As a matter of fact,' said Miss Roberts quickly, 'we don't know what will happen to him.'

'You don't know!'

'Apparently there's been a mistake, a muddle over numbers, and one of these two boys has nowhere to go, not yet anyway. I don't suppose you'd consider taking them both on, would you? They're great friends at school, and we'd be very obliged.'

'Friends, are they?' Mr Reynolds considered the two boys carefully and read each of their placards slowly, stroking his dog all the time. 'I'll tell you one thing for certain, it'll be both of them or neither. There'll be no choosing. What about asking them? They might not like the look of me – have you thought of that?' No one said anything, so he asked them direct. 'Well? What d'you think? I'm a farmer, forty-two years old, married, no children. My name's Jerry Reynolds, I run ninety-six acres – barley, sheep, milking cows, a few beef cattle and since the war began a few acres of potatoes. 'Tis only a small cottage, and you'll have to share one bed and do your bit about the farm. Well? What d'you say?'

Tucky looked at David and David looked back at him. It was the first good moment of the day – each

understood instinctively what the other wanted.

'We'll go with you, mister,' David said.

'Mr Reynolds, my dear, that's what you'll call me. And I'll be glad to have you both. Now take those things off around your necks and get down here. You've given me a crick in my neck talking up at you like this.'

'Thank you, Mr Reynolds,' said Miss Roberts, shaking him by the hand. 'I've been their headmistress up till now, and they'll do you proud. You won't regret it.'

'I hope not,' Mr Reynolds said. 'Come on then you two, we'll be off. Haven't had my dinner yet. First the lambing then that confounded mare – quite put me out, it has.' The dog followed them towards the door.

'Mr Reynolds,' it was Miss Evers again. 'You must register before you take them.'

'Register?'

'It's regulations,' said Miss Evers icily. 'We have to know where the children are.'

'But you know that already, my dear,' Mr Reynolds smiled down at her. 'They'll be staying with us at Hamleigh Farm. Now you put that in your register, my dear. Goodnight to you.' Anyone who

put Miss Evers in her place was all right with David and Tucky.

It was cold outside and drizzling, and the boys pulled their coats around their legs inside the van and huddled together on the front seat. The van smelt like an animal, and as Mr Reynolds banged the door and got in beside them, they heard a rustle behind them. David twisted round in his seat and peered into the darkness.

'One of my orphan lambs,' said Mr Reynolds. 'Mother died this morning and I can't persuade any of the other ewes to take him on. He keeps warm in the back there – plenty of straw.'

'That dog,' said Tucky. 'Where's that dog?'

'Jip? He never comes in the car, doesn't trust it. He'll follow along behind – he always does.' The van started up with a rattle and a roar. 'Comfortable?'

'Yes thanks, mister,' said Tucky.

'Tis Mister Reynolds, Tucky. Can you remember that?'