

CHAPTER 3

THE LAST LEG OF THEIR JOURNEY WAS BUMPY, noisy, smelly and draughty, but for David and Tucky it was the only enjoyable part of a long day. Now they were no longer going away, they were arriving. Every jolting minute was bringing them closer to a new home. They sat forward in their seat anxious for the first glimpse of the cottage, and then the thin beam of the headlights caught the glint of black windows ahead, and the car bumped off the road down a rough track and stopped.

Mr Reynolds clicked open the latch on the front door and had to bend his head as he went in. It was a long, low kitchen with a stove at one end and an oil lamp burning low on a table. It smelt of cooking and oil fumes. Mr Reynolds picked up the lamp and led

them up a narrow, winding stairway.

'I told you you'd have to be in together,' he said turning up the lamp. Shadows lightened and the room grew bigger. 'But there's good in everything. You'll be warmer this way. Your wash basin's on the chest, and there's a lavatory just outside the back door – through the kitchen. Don't forget to turn out the light before you go to sleep, will you?' He ruffled Tucky's hair and smiled broadly. 'You'll be all right then, my dears?'

'Mister . . . Mister Reynolds,' David corrected himself quickly. 'You said you were married, where's . . .?'

'In bed, my dear. Ann's in bed. We get up with the light here and try to go to bed when it's dark – same way as the animals. You'll be seeing her in the morning.' He turned to go.

'G'night,' said Tucky.

'Good night to you both, and never you worry. Us'll be all right together.' The door closed.

David tried the water in the wash bowl with the tip of his finger, but that was all the washing he did. Tucky didn't even bother to do that. He had his pyjamas on in a flash and was in bed before David had started to undress.

Once in bed the two of them lay staring up at the bumpy ceiling.

'Wonder what's happening to the others,' said David.

'S'pose we'll be like brothers, you and me, kind of anyway.'

'Something like,' David muttered, wishing he'd kept his socks on like Tucky.

'I like that Mr Reynolds,' said Tucky and he pulled the quilt up tighter to his chin to shut out the cold air.

'Wonder what she's like, Mrs Reynolds; Ann he called her, didn't he?'

'Be all right if she's anything like him,' Tucky said.

'What, beard an' all?'

'Get off, didn't mean that,' Tucky giggled. 'Turn that lamp down, like he said. Here, listen. You can't hear anything, and you can't see anything. Can you hear anything Davey? Davey? . . . David?' But David was asleep, and before he had time to worry about it, so was Tucky.

In the morning it was the smell that woke them, and they dressed as if the house were on fire. They opened the kitchen door quietly. There was the sizzle and smell of frying eggs, and the thick gluey bubble of simmering porridge. Mrs Reynolds was bent over

the kitchen stove with her back to them. She was small and slim and her dark hair was done up in a bun. The boys waited for her to turn and see them, neither of them wanting to make the first move. They stood transfixed by the smell until Mrs Reynolds turned with the saucepan of porridge in her hand.



'Morning, Mrs. I'm David and he's Tucky.' David came further into the room. Mrs Reynolds' eyes widened in shock and they saw the porridge saucepan jolt in her hand. She looked from one to the other, and then put the saucepan down slowly. 'You frightened me for a moment. I thought you would still be in bed. I was going to call you when Jerry

came in.' There was something different about her voice, and David noticed it immediately. Yesterday he had become used to the sing-song burr of the villagers. That was difficult enough to understand at times, and they did have some funny ways of putting things, but this was the halting accent of a foreigner. 'Of course, Jerry has told me about you. He said you looked like ghosts, no red in the face. And he was right too. A good hot breakfast and a day outside in the country air – that would be good for you, no? I am Ann, you must call me Ann, and you are David and Lucky.'

'Tucky,' said Tucky. 'It's Tucky. Tony Tucker, but everyone calls me Tucky.'

'Good. So you are Tucky and you are David. I'm right?' The boys nodded. 'Now, come and sit down at the table. Jerry will be in soon. He has to milk cows and feed the animals all before breakfast, you know.'

Breakfast lived up to expectations, and Ann fussed over them until they could eat no more. Just as they finished, Mr Reynolds came in.

'Feel better then, my dears? There's not a better cook in all England than my Ann. No doubt about that, no doubt at all.'

'My mum's good,' said Tucky.

'Course she is,' Mr Reynolds was pulling off his boots by the door. 'I forgot that. Let's say my Ann is the best cook in all Devon, and that with your mother Tucky and David's mother here the champion cooks of London, there's not a cook in the kingdom to touch them. Agreed?'

'Agreed,' said David, anxious to repair any offence Tucky might have caused. Tucky always said what he felt, and David was used to it by now.

Ann bustled over to Mr Reynolds now, prattling on happily in her strange accent. Everything about her was small, and next to Mr Reynolds she seemed even smaller and more delicate than she was. There was a gentleness in her eyes that was immediately comforting to David and Tucky; and whenever she smiled, and that was often, her whole face seemed to shine.

Tucky studied Mr Reynolds as he devoured his breakfast. 'Can I see that baby horse?' he asked suddenly.

'Baby horse! Baby horse!' Mr Reynolds roared with laughter. 'Did you hear the boy, Ann? I told you, my dear, 'tis a foal, not a baby horse. A baby's a small one of us. Never make the mistake of thinking animals are like us. There's names for animals and

names for us so that we can tell the difference. Animals are animals. You and me, Ann and Davey here – we're people, and that's different.'

'Baby horse or foal, Jerry,' Ann said, 'I think Tucky wants that he should see him.'

'And so he shall, Ann my dear, so shall they both, but after I've finished my breakfast – if they can wait that long.'

For David and Tucky it was worth waiting for. All that day and the next they saw things they'd never seen before as Mr Reynolds shepherded them around the farm. They watched him helping the foal born the night before, pulling him up on to wobbly legs. They discovered that the sheep on the steeply sloping fields were not wild after all; and the three milking cows, golden brown and white patches, wandered slowly towards them and did not attack. They watched Mr Reynolds delivering the early spring lambs, and helped him bring in the ewes that would be lambing soon. Then there were stakes to be driven in for fencing, water to be carried to the troughs in the fields and yards to be cleared. The two boys went everywhere with him, and Jip, the rangy black and white sheepdog, trailed along behind them.

By Sunday night David and Tucky knew their way

round the farm and felt as if they'd been there for months. They felt at home. Neither of them had given Islington or home a thought. They had been too busy for that.

In bed that night the boys lay in the darkness, whispering.

'Which do you like best?' said Tucky.

'Can't say,' David whispered back after a long pause.

'I wish my dad was like him,' Tucky went on. 'I've never heard him shout, not like my dad. My dad's always on at me.'

'My father never shouted, not often anyway,' David tried to picture him shouting and couldn't.

'Can you remember your dad still?'

'Course I can. He was only killed a year ago. Year ago last month. Course I can remember him.'

'Bet you hate them after what they done to your dad. I would.'

'Course I do, everyone hates them.' And David tried to imagine his father's plane crashing on the beaches, as he'd done so many times before.

'I think she hates them too,' Tucky whispered.

'Who? Ann?'

'I asked her if Mr Reynolds was going to go away

and fight, and she said he wouldn't be going. He's got to work the farm, and anyway he fought in the last war, wounded an' all. Then she asked me about my dad and I told her and she asked all about you and your dad, so I told her. She went white as a sheet, honest she did. Didn't say anything, but she hates them, I can tell.'

'You shouldn't have told them. That's private, just between us,' said David.

'But she asked, Davey. I had to tell her, didn't I? Couldn't lie, could I?'

'School tomorrow,' David muttered. 'Be funny, all of us together in a different school, with different teachers. Wonder how all the others settled in. Wonder what the teachers will be like.'

'Can't be worse than Miss Evers,' said Tucky, and he tugged the quilt farther over his side. 'You keep pulling it over your side. I was frozen this morning when I woke up.' And David tugged it back and buried himself further down the bed.

Ann sent them off early the next morning for the walk to school. 'Not far short of three miles,' Mr Reynolds had said. 'You'll do it inside three parts of an hour, no question.' It seemed more like ten miles.

Every bend brought another one and every hill a steeper one ahead. Jip came along with them, as far as the crossroads at the end of the lane, and then he stood looking after them, his tail drooping mournfully.

They ran the last half mile down into the village, their gas masks banging up and down on their backs. They had seen the village from the Reynolds' cottage. It stood on a hillside, a cluster of cottages with thatched roofs grouped under a tall grey church tower.

The village came upon them suddenly. They ran round a bend by a sign-post, and there was the school, just as Ann had explained. It was a long, low, gabled building built of purple-grey stone and grey tiles mottled with lichen. The playground outside was full – they were not late. Once inside the gate, they looked around for their friends from Islington and tried to ignore the inquisitive looks and huddled whispers of the village children.

'Where are they all?' said Tucky.

'P'raps they're late.' But the bell went as David was speaking.

The school was one big room on the one floor with a great black boiler at one end, and two long rows of desks, the row at the back on a raised floor so

that the children could all see the blackboard in front. There were only twenty or thirty children there, boys and girls.

Coats were hung up by the door and gas masks over the backs of the desks, and everyone sat down – everyone, that is, except David and Tucky, who stood bemused by the door clutching their lunch boxes and gas masks.

At the far end of the room, beyond the boiler, a door opened, and there was a sudden and immediate silence as an old man walked slowly and deliberately towards the teacher's desk by the blackboard. As he sat down, all the children stood up and chanted in unison, 'Good morning, Mr Cooper'.

'Sit down,' the teacher said quietly. 'Good morning, children. The roll call please, Angela.'

'They got girls,' Tucky whispered. 'Do you think this is the right school?'

'Did you say something, lad?' The old man had swivelled round in his chair and was looking at them over the rims of his glasses.

'We were wondering, sir,' David said. 'We were told to come to school here, but none of our friends are here, so we thought perhaps we were in the wrong school.'

'You're David Carey and Tony Tucker?' They nodded. 'Then you're in the right place. In this school we always call the roll first before we do anything else. Do you understand?' He spoke clearly and kindly.

Angela called the roll, and each child stood up in turn, and then last of all she called out 'Tony Tucker', 'David Carey'. Mr Cooper then stood up and shook both of them by the hand.

'Welcome to our little school. I am the one and only teacher and my name is Mr Cooper, though no doubt the children call me something else. I require you to be polite, honest and hard-working. That is all. I hope you'll be very happy whilst you're with us.'

'What about all the others?' Tucky asked.

'Your friends from London have all gone to Imberleigh school. It's bigger there and there's more room.'

Mr Cooper turned to speak to the class. 'David and Tucky are evacuees, children. I told you we might be seeing new faces soon, didn't I? Well, here they are. I want you to remember that they are away from home, and that we are all very strange to them. We must all look after them and make them feel at home.'

Their welcome from the village children was cautious enough at first. But in morning playtime they were crowded into a corner under a big elm tree and bombarded with questions about London, about their homes, about German bombers. For a few days they felt they were the centre of attention. Whenever either of them spoke up in class everyone listened, and they were invited to eat their packed lunches at every house in the village. But it soon wore off, and within a few weeks they had been accepted as two 'townies' who were part of the village school.

There was a new pattern to their lives, broken only by letters from mothers, and the occasional glimpse of Miss Roberts in her hat whenever she came to the village. David's mother was stationed on an ack-ack battery on the south coast and wrote once a month. Tucky's parents were still in London but hardly ever wrote.

There was the walk to school after breakfast, usually in the rain; then morning prayers and the first lesson always with the gas masks on, when they all sat sweating and trying to concentrate on Mr Cooper's voice. Unless the sun was shining they took their packed lunches to a friend's house where there was

always warm cocoa. After afternoon lessons there was the long walk home to the farm. Jip would meet them at the end of the lane by the crossroads, and they would race him home to tea with Ann in the smoky warmth of the kitchen. All that spring there were long walks on the moor that came down to where the farm ended. Mr Reynolds kept some sheep up there and the two boys came to know it well.

The war, London and Islington seemed to be in another world. Of course David looked forward to his mother's letter and kept every one under his pillow, and read and reread them whenever he could, but they seemed unreal.

There were signs a war was on. Mr Reynolds went off on Home Guard duty twice a week; there was a searchlight and an observation post in the village, and of course they still had their gas-mask drill. But there were no more bombs, and there was no more fear. They came to recognise Churchill's gruff voice over Mr Reynolds' crackling wireless set, and they noticed that Ann lost all laughter in her eyes whenever the war was mentioned. But it hardly ever was. Mr Reynolds used to say he was too busy to worry about the war.

Then one night in June the skyline of the moor

was lit up with gun flashes, and a distant crump of bombing miles away on the other side of the moor brought the war back to David and Tucky and shattered their new-found peace.

CHAPTER 4

DAVID AND TUCKY WATCHED FROM THEIR bedroom window. The single beam of the searchlight from the village circled the sky above them, hesitating and retracing as it patterned the darkness.

They were alone in the house that night. Mr Reynolds had been called out on Home Guard duty, and Ann went up the village with him to warm up the soup for them. It happened like that once a week and the boys were left to look after things on the farm.

'Like firework night,' said Tucky, resting his chin on his hands. And it was. There was the orange glow of fires, and the tracer for the anti-aircraft guns peppered the horizon with flashes and trails of