

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

hyphenated lights. They watched it as if it were a display. It was all a long way away, very different from the London raids they had both been through. Here someone else was being bombed, not them.

'Tucky!' David whispered, grabbing his arm.

'What?'

'Listen! Can't you hear it?'

It was clear enough now, the deep throb of aircraft engines, punctuated by spluttering. They leaned farther out of the window and craned upwards, scanning the night sky. It came from over the moor, and they saw it at the same time, a red flicker first, and then three more lights floating down through the



sky above the moor. But the throbbing and coughing had stopped now, and there was silence.

'The searchlight,' said David. 'Why doesn't it come this way? They'll miss it.'

But the searchlight was carving up the sky above the village at that moment, and the boys followed the lights as they fell lower and lower until they disappeared behind the moor.

'It's gone,' said Tucky. 'It's a German, wasn't it, Davey?'

'Crashed, must've crashed. It was going down all the time.'

'There'd have been a bang, an explosion or something,' Tucky pulled his head back inside.

'Could have landed,' David was thinking of the flat valleys on the moor. 'Could have, you know. There's places where a plane could land out there.'

'In the dark? With no engines? Come on, Davey. It's gone behind a hill. That's all.'

'Then where is it, now, eh? Gone behind another hill? What goes down must come up. If it doesn't come up, it's crashed or it's landed; one or the other.'

Tucky saw the sense in that and they both kept watch, searching the darkness where the lights had vanished. And that's what they were doing when

they heard Mr Reynolds' van splashing through the mud by the front gate.

Tucky was downstairs first and threw open the kitchen door. Ann was standing there, taking off her scarf.

'We saw a bomber, Ann. German bomber. We heard it and we saw it. There were lights, Ann, and Davey thinks it's gone down on the moor. There were lights, and they were coming down all the time, then they stopped. We saw it, honest we did, an' the engines were chugging and popping.'

'Tucky, Tucky,' Ann put an arm around him and brought him back into the light of the room. 'Don't be so excited, Tucky. How often do I tell you you must wear shoes on a stone floor? You catch cold that way.'

'What's up, Ann?' Mr Reynolds came in behind her.

'A plane's crashed,' said David simply, getting in before Tucky could start up again. 'It must've been one of the bombers.'

Mr Reynolds smiled. 'I been on searchlight all evening, my dear, and we saw them bombing around Plymouth, but we never saw a plane. No one saw a thing.'

'You missed it,' David said. 'It was out over the

moor and your searchlight was up above the village.'

'Are you certain, Davey?' Mr Reynolds had stopped smiling now. 'Tis got to be for certain, y'know.'

'We heard, Mr Reynolds, honest we did,' Tucky said, feeling left out by now. 'It sounded just like the bombers used to sound in London. Just the same.'

Mr Reynolds and Ann looked at each other.

'And the engines were popping, just like Tucky says,' David could see they believed them now.

'Popping?' Ann said. 'What does it mean, this "popping"?''

'Must mean the plane had engine trouble of some sort,' said Mr Reynolds, looking from one boy to the other. 'Could've been hit. Was there any flames? Did you see any flames coming out of her?'

'Just the popping,' Tucky said. 'Then nothing and the lights went out.'

Mr Reynolds bent down and pulled the boys in towards him so that he could look into their faces. 'If there's been a plane down. I'll have to report it. There'll be the army and the police and they'll be wanting to ask you questions, lots of questions. Now think clearly, my dears. It must be for certain.

Was there a plane?'

'We saw it, Mr Reynolds,' David said.

'And you're sure it came down over the moor?'

The boys nodded.

'It was there, Mr Reynolds,' said Tucky. 'I promise.'

'They're good boys, Jerry,' Ann said. 'They would not lie.'

'I know that, my dear,' said Mr Reynolds, standing up, 'but the army doesn't know that and neither do the police. They're the ones we'll have to convince. You did well to spot it my dears, and I'll be off back up the village to report it. There won't be much they can do till morning, and they'll be bound to want to see you then. So get off to bed with you both.' Ann went upstairs with them and they watched the glow of the fires on the horizon as Plymouth burned. She made them hot milk and sat on their bed while they drank it.

'It's a terrible thing they do,' she said sadly, gazing out of the window. 'When I was young I watched fires burning in my country, too. It's a terrible thing they do.' She spoke as the boys had never heard her before.

'You're not English, are you, Ann?' David had

wanted to ask her that for a long time, but the moment had never been right.

'I'm French,' Ann said. 'I was French until I married Jerry. Now I am English like you; but I still think of France as my country. Like you, Davey, I know what it is to lose a father in war.' She took their mugs and left the room quickly.

'Now I know why she hates the Germans,' Tucky said quietly, as soon as her footsteps had reached the bottom of the stairs. And later when they were in bed Tucky could not help thinking about it. 'You're lucky.'

'Lucky?'

'If my dad was killed, I'd tell everyone. I'd be proud.'

'I am proud, Tucky. Ann's proud too, but it's better to have a father alive than be proud 'cos he's dead.'

'Depends on your father,' Tucky went on. 'And people like you if your father's dead, like you more anyway.'

'Do you like Ann more 'cos her father's dead?' David said. 'And me? What about me? We were friends years ago.'

'S'pose so,' said Tucky soulfully; and then he thought about the plane again. 'Davey, if that plane crashed like you said, then there'll be men on board.'

There'll be Germans. D'you think they'll find them?'

'I hope they're dead,' David said. 'They must've killed hundreds of people in Plymouth tonight. I hope they're dead. They deserve it.'

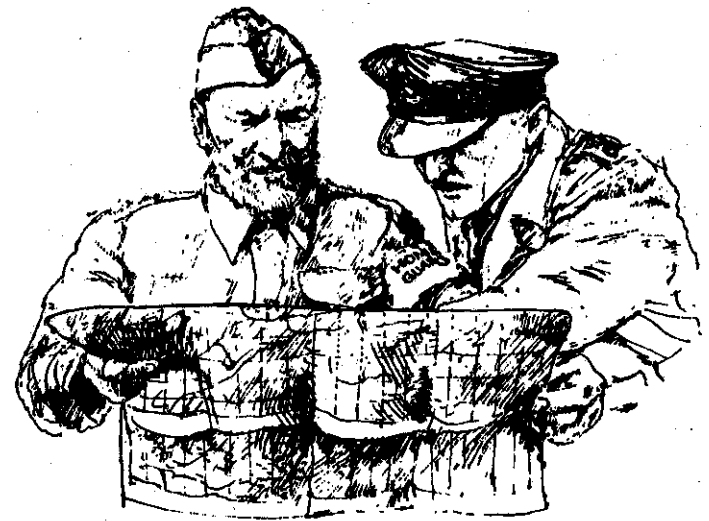
Neither of them slept much that night, and they heard Mr Reynolds coming back in his van some hours later. David thought of getting out of bed and asking about the plane, about what was being done, but he heard Ann and Mr Reynolds talking together down in the kitchen and somehow he didn't want to see Ann again that night. Tucky got out of bed and tried to listen through the floorboards, but he couldn't make out what they were saying. Then a floorboard creaked and he scrambled back into bed.

It was still dark when Mr Reynolds woke them. He was in his Home Guard uniform. 'The army's downstairs. They want to be out on the moor by daybreak and they want you to come along and show them where it was where you saw the plane. Quick as you can, my dears. We can't go till you're ready.'

The kitchen was full of uniforms, police and soldiers, and they all stood watching them eat down their porridge that Ann insisted they must have before they left. David looked up occasionally from

his plate of steaming porridge and recognised some of the faces behind the uniforms. They looked tired and disbelieving. Mr Reynolds was bending over a map with a tall soldier in a peaked cap and a wet macintosh. 'Twas out of the bedroom window, sir,' he was saying, 'so it must be in this area here somewhere, almost for certain.'

'But Reynolds,' the officer took off his cap and



shook it, 'there's two observation posts between here and there. Surely if there had been a plane someone else would have spotted it?'

'Not if they were following the searchlight, sir. The boys say the searchlight was sweeping over the

village itself at the time.'

The officer turned to face the boys. He had a mean face with a thin moustache that barely covered his top lip. 'You say they're evacuees, Reynolds?'

'That's right, sir. And fine lads they are too, sir. Been with us for three months now. If they say they saw it, then you can be sure they did, sir.'

'Quite so, Reynolds,' said the officer, but he did not sound convinced.

Outside it was a drizzling grey dawn. There was a whole convoy of trucks blocking the lane, and the officer gave the order to get started. Ann wrapped them up in scarves and then they followed Mr Reynolds and clambered into the back of a jeep at the head of the column. The officer with the thin moustache clambered in front and nodded to his driver. 'I hope they're right, Reynolds. There's thirty Home Guard and a whole company from the barracks on this search. I hope you're right.'

David looked up nervously at Mr Reynolds who smiled and winked down at him. And Tucky was beginning to wish he'd never told anyone.

Ten times that day the convoy halted and the



soldiers spread out over the moor and disappeared over the hilltops, their rifles hidden under their capes to protect them from the driving rain. The two boys were left behind with the trucks and drivers; and each time the soldiers came back empty-handed they felt worse. The officer kept asking them about the shape of the hills they had seen as the plane came down; he kept pointing up at the hillsides and asking them if they recognised the hilltop. But to the boys all the hills looked alike, and anyway they couldn't remember the hills from the night before, they hadn't even noticed the shape. The officer looked less and less pleased.

The rain cleared a bit after lunch and a spotter plane circled above them all afternoon. The soldiers, some of whom had been quite friendly to start with, now made little attempt to hide their feelings. It was clear what they thought of the 'townies' story.

For David and Tucky it was a nightmare. They knew there had been a plane, and they were almost certain it had come down; but each time a search failed and Mr Reynolds clambered wearily back into the jeep shaking his head, they began

wondering if they had been seeing things that were not there.

By the time the convoy passed the cottage that evening and dropped them off, they knew that everyone thought they had invented the whole story. Even Mr Reynolds seemed dejected.

'Here you are,' said the officer as they jumped out. 'If it was a day off from school they wanted, Reynolds, then they certainly got it.'

'He didn't believe us,' said Tucky rather obviously as the trucks sped off up the lane.

'It's not your fault,' said Mr Reynolds, putting an arm round each of them. 'Maybe the plane wasn't as low as you thought, perhaps it managed to pull up.'

'We could have looked in the wrong places,' David said. 'The moor's a big place.'

'Course we could have, my dear,' said Mr Reynolds, ushering them in the door, 'but I don't think we did.' He didn't sound disbelieving or sarcastic, just weary.

'There was a plane, Mr Reynolds,' Tucky said as they were saying goodnight. 'We saw it, honest we did.'

'Course you did, Tucky. We both know you did,

don't we Ann? Off you go now; it's been a long day, you're tired, I'm tired and Ann is certainly tired. She's done the farm all by herself today. Let's think no more about it.'

But they did think about it; they thought about little else all week. Everyone in the village had heard about the search and at school the 'townies' were not allowed to forget about it. Everyone had made up his mind: the 'townies' had got themselves off school for a day by calling out the Home Guard, the army and a spotter plane on some cock-and-bull story about a bomber coming down on the moor. Tucky was not the warlike type, but he very nearly got himself in a fight when someone suggested it might have been a flying saucer they'd seen and that they'd all better keep their eyes open for little men from Mars. Mr Cooper stopped it just in time, but none the less people laughed about it openly, and for the first time since they came to the village David and Tucky felt alone again and separate from the other children.

Time and time again they went over what they had seen that night, and time and time again they convinced themselves it had been a plane, that the

engines had been spluttering and that it had been going down when the lights vanished. But every time they had to reconcile all that with the fact that no plane had been found, and all the reasoning in the world could not change that.

Ann tried hard to console them at home, explaining how easy it was to make mistakes, how often eyes could deceive.

'But we heard it as well, Ann. Both of us did,' said David.

Mr Reynolds stood up from the tea table and put on his hat. 'You still think there's a plane up there, don't you?'

'I know there is,' David replied.

'But we searched all day, Davey. There was nothing there.'

'Can't we try? Tucky stood up. 'Can't we go and look for ourselves? I think we went too far away with the soldiers. It wasn't that far away. We heard those engines as if they were just over the cottage. I remember the windows shook.'

'Please, Mr Reynolds,' David added his support. 'Just one last chance, please.'

'All right, my dears, but I'll not be able to come with you. I've left the farm for one day this week,

and there's still a mass of work to catch up on. Farm doesn't work itself y'know and I can't leave it all to Ann now, can I?'

'It's Saturday tomorrow,' said Ann. 'It is lovely on the moor when it's fine, like it was today, and even if you don't find your plane, it would be a good walk anyway, no?'

'Only if it's fine, mind,' Mr Reynolds added, 'and you're not to go anywhere we haven't been together already. You'll have to turn around by midday. I don't want to call the army out again to come looking for you two on the moor. They may not be very keen to find you anyway.'

'Will they be safe, Jerry?' Ann looked worried.

'We've been up there often enough, I think. If the weather's right, they'll manage. I've told them and warned them often enough. 'Tis summer now, there's not much can go wrong if they stick to the tracks.'

It was fine again the next day, and the final search was on. It was still wet under foot as they tramped across the fields, but as soon as they reached the lower slopes of the moor, they felt the spring of the turf under their boots, and the higher they climbed the drier it became.

They navigated by following the line of the highest tor they could see from the bedroom window. The plane had vanished somewhere in line with that. 'Yes Tor' Mr Reynolds had called it.

Tucky was stronger and went on ahead, setting a fast pace, while David kept him going in the right direction from behind. They climbed rocky river valleys following the streams, but always when they had struggled up one valley there was another beyond, and Yes Tor seemed to have come no closer. At every hilltop they paused to catch their breath and search the vast emptiness of the moor. There were sheep enough, and they recognised the red mark of Hamleigh Farm they had marked Mr Reynolds' sheep with. Occasionally a group of sturdy brown ponies came in close to them but moved away as they approached them. But there was no aeroplane and no German pilots.

Sweaty and tired, they sat on top of a cairn eating the sandwiches Ann had made for them. The early optimism of the morning had gone, and the flies would not leave them alone. David looked at the watch Ann had lent him.

'After eleven already. An hour more and we'll have to give up and turn round.'

'Not worth going on,' said Tucky. 'We'll never find it, because it's not here. It never did crash. They're right, there's nothing here. Let's go back and forget about it.'

'One more hour, Tucky, that's all. Then we'll turn back, all right? We've come this far, we might as well finish it. There's a chance.' David was just as dejected as Tucky, but the thought of those children at school laughing at them next week, the thought of the look on their faces if they did find something – that was enough to drive him on.

At mid-day, under a blazing sun, having nothing but a few lizards in sight, they finally turned round and headed back towards the farm. Both of them had given up now, but David was still not going to admit it. As a matter of course they still searched the valleys and hills around them, but they were just retracing their steps and all hope had gone. They wanted only to get off the moor and forget the whole business.

As far as possible they followed the same tracks, but they took some short cuts as they trudged back down the hills, recognising landmarks ahead and making straight for them across country. On the way out they had kept close to the paths Mr

Reynolds had shown them, but on the way back nothing seemed to matter any more and they just wanted the quickest route home.

David was leading by now, and Tucky trailed behind him, dispirited and silent. But it was Tucky who suggested that instead of following the river to the stepping stones at the foot of the valley, they might as well cross higher up and cut off over the moor.

Tucky was first in the water, holding his boots and socks up above his head. 'S'easy,' he said. 'Come on, you can do it.'

'Too fast for me,' said David, watching the water foaming furiously round Tucky's legs. 'I'll go on down to the stepping stones and cross there, like before.' David wasn't scared, it was just a feeling that the water looked too fast as it whipped round the rocks. Tucky was jumping from stone to stone, and when he got to the middle he turned round and waited for David to join him. David managed it to the middle and they stood on the rock and looked at the gap they had to jump.

'I'll go first,' Tucky shouted over the roar of the water. The gap yawned wide, frothing and swirling, but Tucky leapt and landed easily enough on the

plateau of rock on the other side. He turned, balancing precariously, and beckoned David. David screwed himself up for the jump, trying not to look down into the water.

'Jump upwards,' he said to himself. Once he nearly went but he held back at the last moment.

'Come on, Davey. You can do it. Just jump.'

David took a deep breath and jumped, but his foot slipped behind him on the rock and he fell forward into the water. He heard Tucky shouting, and looked up to see his out-stretched hand. His feet struck out in panic and the water pulled him away. His fingers reached out for the rock above him, but then the water closed in over him and he was dragged irresistibly downwards. He tried to cough the water out of his lungs, but more was coming in all the time and he couldn't seem to do it. He came up once into the brightness of the sun and Tucky was running along the bank screaming something at him. Then the water whisked him round, his back thudded into a rock and he was underwater again, and his boots seemed heavy.

Then he remembered he could not swim, and it came to him coldly that if he could not swim, then he would drown. He screamed in his terror and the

water poured into his mouth cutting him short. The more he kicked the deeper down he went. He came up again, arms flailing. Tucky was standing there watching, his mouth wide open.



An arm was around his neck and another under his shoulders, and he was being dragged back against the force of the water. He struggled, but the grip tightened fiercely and he was pushed under the water. I'm drowning, he thought, and Tucky's just standing there. He can swim, I've seen him at Birchington. Why doesn't he help me? Why doesn't Tucky help?