A Different World

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Chapter One

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It was pandemonium in the playground. Some of the children were using up their excess energy chasing each other, laughing and shouting; others were subdued, standing about looking bewildered. Heaped up against the school wall were their abandoned cases and bags. The summer holidays had ended a few days earlier than usual and though they had rehearsed this exodus several times in the previous term, Louise doubted they really understood what was to happen. How could they, when she hardly knew herself? The authorities must be very sure there was going to be a war and the cities would be bombed to have organised such a mass evacuation of the capital's children.

Miss Hereward, the deputy head, had the school bell in her hand and rang it vigorously, as five charabancs pulled up at the kerb outside the school gates. The children subsided into silence. 'Find your cases, children, and get into your class lines,' she called out. 'You should know the drill by now.'

Louise grabbed two of her class by their coat collars. 'Lead the way, Frederick Jones, and you, too, Margaret Gordon. The rest of you fall in behind.'

The other teachers were doing the same and slowly order came out of chaos and eventually five double lines of children faced the school gates, ready to move off. Their cases had already been opened and examined to make sure they had everything on the list which had been sent home to the mothers. The boys were supposed to have spare pants, socks and a clean shirt, the girls knickers, socks and a second gingham dress or a skirt and blouse. Both should have pyjamas, a hairbrush, flannel, toothbrush and toothpaste. In spite of the heat of the day, they were dressed in an assortment of coats which were easier to wear than to pack. Each child had a packet of sandwiches and an apple to be consumed on the journey and a tin of corned beef and another of sliced peaches to be given to their foster mothers. Labels were pinned to their clothes inscribed with their names, addresses and the name of the school from which they had come. Similar labels were attached to their baggage. They also had small cardboard boxes containing their gas masks hung round their necks with their names on those too. It was easy to write lists, Louise thought, but although Edgware was by no means a deprived area, it was not so easy for some mothers to comply. And had anyone thought how heavy that lot would be for small children?

She called the register of her class of eight-year-olds and found two were missing.

'They ain't coming,' Freddie Jones told her. 'Their mum changed her mind. She said to tell you if they're going to die, they'll die together.'

'The Bright twins haven't come,' she told Miss Hereward, who was ushering her own class into the first of the charabancs.

'They're not the only ones. We'll have to go without them.'

Louise turned back to her crocodile of children and realised that Tommy Carter had firm hold of a very small child with every intention of boarding the bus with her.

'Thomas, who is this?'

'My little sister. Mum says I'm to take 'er wiv me and look after 'er.'

'But you can't do that. There's no provision . . .'

'But I gotta.'

Louise looked about her, wondering what to do. On the opposite side of the road, lined up along the kerb, were a crowd of mothers and a few fathers waiting to see their children off. Some were in tears, some stoically smiling, some stood in dumb misery. 'Is your mother over there?'

'No, she's gone to work. That's why I've gotta take Beattie wiv me. Me Auntie Gladys always looks after her when Mum's at work, but she's took her kids to the country and there's no one to see to Beattie. She ain't really me auntie,' he added as an afterthought.

'What about your father?'

'He's in the merchant navy, miss.'

The bus containing Miss Hereward and the top class had already moved off; Louise could not ask her advice. She looked down at the little girl who was sucking her thumb. 'How old is Beatrice?' she asked.

'It's Beattie, miss, and she's four. She's a good girl. She won't be no trouble, honest. I'll look after 'er.'

Louise could not see how he could be expected to do that. There was no telling what faced them at the end of the journey, but she could not possibly abandon the child. 'In that case you had better get on the bus,' she said. 'And mind you do look after her.' Perhaps, when they arrived at their destination, she could ask Miss Evans, who taught the five-year-olds, if she would have the little one in her class. And she would write to the child's mother. The children had all been given stamped addressed postcards to send to their parents to tell them they had arrived safely and to pass on their addresses, but she ought to write to them herself to reassure them.

Theirs was the last bus to leave, the others were already out of sight. Louise climbed in behind the children and told the driver they were ready to go. They moved off with the children pressed against the windows waving to the watchers on the other side of the road. Looking back, Louise could see some of the parents had run into the middle of the road and were waving their handkerchiefs. She subsided into her seat beside Tommy and his sister. What lay ahead, no one knew. What lay behind her was her own parting with her parents.

Her father had been furious at her insistence on accompanying the children when the subject was first brought up earlier that summer. 'There is no need whatsoever for you to go with them,' he had said. 'There will be teachers where they are going. Your mother needs you here. You know she is not strong . . .'

'I'm all right,' her mother had put in feebly. She was so browbeaten by her domineering husband that she rarely ventured an opinion about anything without consulting him first. 'If Louise feels—'

'No, you are not all right,' he had snapped. 'And Louise will do as she's told.'

'I have been instructed to report with my class,' Louise said, being assertive for once in her life, though she worried about her mother. 'It's my job. It's what I'm paid to do.'

'You are paid to teach at Stag Lane Primary School, nowhere else. Goodness, I pulled enough strings with the local education authority to get you a post near home on account of your mother's ill health and I won't have that thrown in my face.'

'But I think the school is going to be shut down. I wouldn't have a job if I stayed behind.'

'Then you can stay at home and help your mother. She is finding the duties of a vicar's wife too onerous.'

'I'm sorry, Father, but I have duties too.'

'It is your duty to obey your father and mother. It is one of the ten commandments.'

'Honour, not obey,' Louise put in with a half smile. Her father was a stickler for exactitude and it gave her a tiny sense of triumph to correct him. She would not have dared to do it if she wasn't going away.

'Same thing,' he said. 'We won't split hairs. You will tell the school you cannot go.'

As far as he was concerned that was his last word, but for once in her life she had disobeyed him. She was twenty-three years old and the only time she had ever spent away from home was her three years at Homerton qualifying to be a teacher, and even then she returned home for every vacation and most weekends. But college had been her first taste of freedom. She had been nervous of going and it took her a long time to become used to

the free and easy way the students behaved, the way they drank and smoked and talked about boys. It had given her an insight to a world outside the repressive atmosphere of the vicarage. Now she had been given the opportunity to cut the apron strings and she meant to take it.

The scene at the vicarage two hours before when she had said goodbye had been one of anger on her father's part, fear on her mother's and determination on hers. Father had shouted until he was red in the face, Mother had wept and so had she, but she would not change her mind. 'I am an adult,' she had said. 'I make my own decisions.'

'Adult, pah!' her father had said. 'If you go and find yourself in trouble, don't come whining back to me. I wash my hands of you.' With that he had stomped off into his study and slammed the door.

'What does he mean, find myself in trouble?' she asked her mother.

'I think he meant – you know – young men.'

'That's ridiculous. As if I would. I am a grown woman and I do know how to behave. It's been drummed into me enough.'

'I know, dear, I know.'

Louise hugged her mother. 'You do understand why I have to go, don't you?'

'Oh yes, I understand.' She had kissed her daughter's cheek. 'Don't worry, I'll be all right. Your father will calm down after you've gone. Let us have your address as soon as you know it.'

Louise looked round at the bus-load of children, wondering what their goodbyes had been like. It must have been heart-rending for their mothers to let them go. She wondered if she could have

sent a child of hers to live with strangers, not even knowing where they were going to end up. It must have been a terrible decision to make, to weigh up the pros and cons of sending them to safety or keeping them at home to face whatever was to come. And how had Mrs Carter felt about giving little Beattie into the care of a eight-year-old boy? Louise looked down at the child still sucking her thumb, but apparently content, and could almost feel the pain of it herself.

'How long has your father been in the merchant navy?' she asked Tommy.

'Always,' he said. 'He's a stoker.'

'You said your mother had gone to work. What does she do?'

'She works at the Oaklands laundry.'

'Perhaps she will come and see you when you're settled.'

'Perhaps,' he said, but he didn't sound as if he believed it.

'When is Beattie due to start school?'

'When she's five.'

'When will that be?'

'Next June.'

'Oh, so there's a whole school year to go.'

'S'pose so.' He fetched a grubby handkerchief from his pocket and held it to Beattie's nose. 'Blow,' he commanded.

She obeyed and he wiped her nose and returned the handkerchief to his pocket.

'Do you often have to look after your sister?' Louise asked.

'Yes, after school and on Saturday mornings.'

'Do you mind?

'No, miss, she ain't no trouble. And Dad said I was to be the man of the house when he's away.'

'I'm sure you do it very well but you must wish sometimes you could go out and play with your friends.'

'I can do that when the jobs are done, but then Beattie comes too.'

Louise smiled, realising how restricting that must be, but apparently Tommy accepted his lot as something that couldn't be helped. The poor boy had had to grow up too fast. And now he was being given even more responsibility. If she could ease his burden a little, then she would do so.

The bus drew up outside Liverpool Street station and the children tumbled out to be organised into their crocodile again. When they had rehearsed it, they had simply reboarded the bus and been taken back to school. But today was different, today was the real thing. Louise marched them onto the station.

If it had been pandemonium at the school, the scene on the station was much more so. An engine with steam up and a string of carriages stood at every platform and hundreds, no thousands, of children were being herded into them by teachers, officials and station staff. And milling about in the concourse were hundreds of mothers, deterred from actually going onto the platforms to see the children off. It was bordering on panic as more and more children arrived and trains full to bursting were sent on their way. Louise supposed the scene was being duplicated at every main-line station in London. It had taken monumental organisation.

Louise halted her line of children and went to ask a man with a clipboard where the rest of the Stag Lane infants were. He consulted his list. 'They've gone. Went a few minutes ago. I suggest you get your children onto that one.' He indicated a train with the pencil he had in his hand. 'You'll catch up with them I expect.'

Louise returned to her group and ushered them into three adjacent rear carriages. Many of them had begun to realise that this adventure was not what they had expected. They didn't like the noise and the crowds and the absence of their mums. Some were crying, others, though dry-eyed, were feeling the tension that was all around them, even among the adults. A few were laughing or squabbling loudly about what they thought was going to happen. She settled them all into seats and stowed their small cases in the racks above their heads, then taking Beattie by the hand, found a seat for herself. The carriage doors were slammed shut by the guard, he blew his whistle and waved his green flag then hopped aboard as they began to move.

The station, the sidings, the dilapidated buildings beside the line were left behind as the train carried the children northwards away from the city and into the countryside. Where they were going, only the driver knew.

'They're late,' Mrs Wayne remarked to Mr Helliwell, the billeting officer. 'You don't suppose they're not coming, do you? We might as well send all these people home, they are getting decidedly restless.' Edith Wayne was the wife of the most prominent farmer in the village and a founder member of the local Women's Voluntary Service whose task it was to coordinate the homing of the evacuees. The village hall was the venue for prospective foster parents to meet the children they had agreed to take, some willingly, some reluctantly, but though the village women had turned up there was no sign of the London children.

'Wait a bit longer,' he said. 'It took heaven knows what to persuade some of them to come; if I send them away, I'll never

get them back again. I'll ask Mrs Johns to make some more tea.'

They had already drunk two lots of tea and eaten all the biscuits and were grumbling. 'I ought to go home and get my old man's tea,' Mrs Sadler said. 'He'll have done the milking and cleaned up ages ago.'

'And mine has to go to a meeting of the Farmer's Union,' Mrs Barker said, accepting a cup of tea from Mrs Johns. 'If they don't turn up in the next ten minutes, I'm off.'

But ten minutes stretched to twenty and then forty and Mr Helliwell was on the point of telling them to go home when they heard a bus draw up in the school playground. A few minutes later the door opened and a bedraggled, filthy, smelly collection of urchins trooped into the room, blinking like owls in the light, for it was pitch-dark outside. They were followed by an adult carrying a small, sleeping girl.

'Oh, my God!' exclaimed Greta Sadler on behalf of all of them.

'I am sorry they are in such a state,' Louise said. 'But we have been travelling all day and some of them have been sick.'

'And some have messed their pants,' Honor Barker added, wrinkling her nose. 'Hasn't anyone told them about lavatories?'

'Of course they have,' Louise said sharply, moving Beattie from one arm to the other. 'They are normally very clean, and are as unhappy about it as you are. It's been a trying and upsetting day for them. We left quite early this morning and they are all very tired.' She did not say she was exhausted too, that she had spent most of the journey holding children over the open window so they could be sick outside the carriage, taking some to the WC and trying to prevent the bigger boys peeing out of the windows,

but if the toilets were in use and they were desperate, what else could they do? It was a pity they had to make a game of it.

Mr Helliwell came forward with his clipboard. 'Walthamstow Juniors?' he queried.

'No, Stag Lane Infants.'

'Where's that?'

'Edgware.'

'What happened to the Walthamstow lot?'

'I have no idea.' Beattie was heavy in her arms. She sank onto a wooden chair with the child on her lap. 'I don't even know where we are. It was dark by the time we reached Ely. We stopped there for ages while they shunted another engine onto our half of the train. I could not see where we were going after that. When we stopped again, we were told to leave the train and board the bus.'

'Where were you supposed to go?'

'I don't know that either. We were separated from the rest of the school.'

'No matter,' Edith said briskly. 'One place is as good as another and I reckon Cottlesham is as good as any. It's clear you can't go anywhere else tonight, so let's get these children into digs and cleaned up. Honor, you said two boys, didn't you? And Greta two girls. Pauline, a girl. I don't mind which I have myself. I've got room for a family.'

Gradually the children were paired with their new foster mothers and were taken away. Louise watched them go with some trepidation; they looked lost and bewildered, so tired they were past crying. One or two who had siblings in the other classes were worried about what had happened to them and

what their mothers would say when they heard they had been separated. Someone had offered to take Tommy Carter, but he had steadfastly refused to go without his sister. Beattie had woken and was grizzling. 'Hush, sweetheart,' she said. 'We'll soon have you comfy and in bed.' But she wasn't too sure of that. Mrs Wayne had said something about driving them round the village knocking on doors. How humiliating to have to beg like that.

She was drinking a cup of tea when a very large man entered the room. He was in his early forties with a mop of pure-white hair and the bluest eyes Louise had ever seen. 'I'm not too late, am I? Couldn't get here before. Some of those RAF chaps are a bit boisterous and I didn't like to leave Jenny on her own.' He eyed Tommy and Beattie. 'This all that's left?'

Louise gave him a tired smile. 'I'm afraid so.'

'You their mother?'

'No, I'm Louise Fairhurst, their teacher.'

'Poor you.'

'It's not me who needs sympathy, but the children,' she said. 'Are you going to take these two? I must find digs for myself when I know everyone has been homed.'

'I'm not sure about the little girl.'

'I'm afraid it's both or neither. Thomas has strict orders from his mother to look after his sister.'

The man grinned. 'Right you are, then. Come along.' He took Beattie from her. The child squirmed and tried to reach back to Louise. 'Don't worry, little one,' he said. 'Your teacher is coming too.'

'Go along,' Mrs Wayne told Louise, as she hesitated. 'The other children will be all right tonight. I'll come and see you in

the morning and we can check on them together.'

Thomas, determined not to lose sight of his sister, was disappearing through the door behind the big man. Louise retrieved her suitcase from the doorstep where she had left it and went after them.

Her billet, she discovered after a short ride in a pony and trap, was a public house called The Pheasant. She had never set foot in a public house in her life and smiled to herself as she followed their host round the side of the building and in at the back door; her father would be horrified if he could see her. In his eyes, public houses were dens of iniquity.

She found herself in a large kitchen. A woman in her late thirties was washing glasses at the sink. She turned when they came in, dried her hands and gave them a smile of welcome. 'You must be exhausted,' she said to Louise, while taking Beattie from the man.

'This is my wife, Jenny,' he said. 'I'm Stan Gosport, by the way. We run the pub.'

Louise said 'How do you do,' and offered her hand which was taken in a huge clasp and pumped up and down.

Jenny laughed as Louise winced. 'Stan don't know his own strength.'

'I'm Louise Fairhurst, the children's teacher.' She put her hand on Thomas's shoulder. 'This is Thomas Carter and his sister Beatrice.'

'I'm Tommy, not Thomas,' the boy insisted. 'And that's Beattie. She's four.'

'Let's get you to bed,' Jenny said. 'Time enough tomorrow to learn your way around. Come along, young man.'

Jenny set off along a hall and up a flight of stairs, with Tommy at her heels. 'Have you heard the news?' she asked over her shoulder, as Louise followed.

'No. We've been on the move all day.' The strange smell coming from the front of the building was beer, she concluded, though she could no longer smell it by the time they reached the landing.

'Hitler has invaded Poland. I reckon that's put the lid on it. There'll be a war now, for sure.'

'Oh dear, I'm afraid you are right.'

The pub was a large one if the number of doors leading off the upper landing were anything to go by. In no time at all the children had been washed and put into night clothes and tucked into bed, and Louise found herself in a comfortable bedroom next door to them. For the first time that day she was alone and quiet and able to contemplate a day that had been like no other.

She was exhausted, but though she went to bed, she could not sleep; there was too much going on in her head. She could still feel the movement of the train, the rattle as it went over points, the whistle as it approached a station and ran through without stopping, the sudden silence as they sat motionless in a siding while a freight train rumbled past. She could still hear the children: 'Miss, I feel sick. Miss, Johnny's eaten my sandwich. Miss, I want to go to the toilet. Miss, where are we? Where are we going?'

Where were they? The name Cottlesham meant nothing to her, but she supposed they were in Cambridgeshire or Norfolk; name boards had been taken down from the railway stations and, being unfamiliar with the line, she could only guess where

they were. What had happened to the rest of the school? There had obviously been a mix-up, but would it be put right? The thought of taking the children on yet another train and having them looked over like so much cattle all over again was daunting. If they stayed where they were, she would have to make some arrangements about the children's schooling.

Added to that the news was grim. Mr Chamberlain had tried appeasement the year before and had given way to Hitler over Czechoslovakia, but the previous March the dictator had broken his promise not to try to extend his territory and had occupied the whole of Czechoslovakia, not just the Sudetenland. His next demand had been for the Danzig Corridor, part of Poland. Britain and France had promised to help the Poles if Poland was attacked and they could not go back on that. War looked inevitable, which was why the children had been evacuated and why the territorial army had been mobilised. She wondered what war would mean to the ordinary man and woman. The last conflict had been horrific: so many young men dead, wives left without husbands, children without fathers, parents without sons. Others had been so badly wounded or their lungs so irrevocably damaged by mustard gas they could not work again. Was that what they had to look forward to this time?

She slept at last and woke when Jenny knocked and came in with a cup of tea. 'The children are having their breakfast. He's a funny one, that Tommy. He's looking after his little sister like a mother hen with a chick.'

Louise sipped the tea, which was hot and strong. 'I think he's had to do a lot of that. His mother works in a laundry and his father is in the merchant navy.'

'Poor kid. What are you planning to do today?'

'I must try and locate the rest of my school and I must check on the children and find somewhere to use as a classroom, if we are to stay here. Where is here, by the way?'

Jenny laughed. 'Don't you know?'

'I believe the village is called Cottlesham but where it is and how big it is, I have no idea.'

'Cottlesham is a small farming village in Norfolk. The nearest town is Swaffham. That's where we go for most of our shopping and where the nearest railway station is. There's a bus that goes from the main road a couple of times a day. You can get to Norwich by bus too, if you want a day out.'

'I'd better get up,' she said. 'I have a feeling today is going to be busy.'

Tommy and Beattie, apparently fully recovered from their journey, had gone out to play when Louise went down for her own breakfast, a huge plateful of fried food which went a long way to making up for the meagre rations of the day before. She had barely finished when Mrs Wayne arrived in a battered Ford and breezed into the kitchen.

'I've come to take you round the village to inspect the children's accommodation,' she said. 'And we'll call in at the schoolhouse to see John Langford. He's the headmaster, you'll need to liaise with him. He lost a leg in the last war but he gets round pretty well on a wooden one.'

Louise realised that not only would she be the children's teacher but responsible for their general welfare as well, especially since she seemed to have lost the rest of her school and the more senior teachers. 'Thank you. I was thinking the same thing.'

'I checked all the accommodation with Mr Helliwell last week,' Edith told her as they set off. 'Some of the villagers were reluctant to take children and found all sorts of excuses not to have them. I didn't feel I ought to insist; it wouldn't be in the children's interests, but most of them were OK about it. Anyway, if we find we have misfits, we can always move them.'

Her cheerful no-nonsense attitude calmed Louise's nerves and she was able to look about her. The village was a typical country village with narrow roads and high hedges. There was a lovely old church and, tucked away up a long drive, Cottlesham Hall, the home, so she was told, of Sir Edward Dryton. Most of the houses were concentrated round the church, the school and a windmill, but further out were farmsteads and smallholdings.

'There's a post office and general store,' Mrs Wayne told her, indicating a shop on the corner. 'There's also a butcher, a baker, a smithy and a cobbler. Mr Chapman comes round once a week with his grocery van, a milkman does his rounds every day with a trailer and a churn on the back of his bicycle, and a baker delivers bread, also on a bicycle, but that's about it, I'm afraid. Not like London, eh?'

'No, but I expect we'll get used to it.'

'You have to go into Swaffham if you need anything the post office hasn't got.'

'I'm told there's a bus . . .'

'Yes, though let me know if you want to go, I might be going myself and can take you.'

'That's kind of you.'

Mrs Wayne pulled up outside the tiny school, beside which was a schoolhouse. 'We'll see Mr Langford first, shall we?'

John Langford was in his fifties and his wooden leg consisted of a peg on which he stumped around quite agilely. 'The kids call me old peg leg,' he told Louise, after they had been introduced. 'Only behind my back, of course.' He had untidy fair hair and a scar on his cheek which disappeared when he smiled.

'How many children do you have?'

'Eighty divided into two classes. I take the older ones and Miss Sedgewick the younger ones. Come, I'll show you.' He led the way from the schoolhouse, across a small yard and through a door at the side of the school.

Louise found herself in one large room with a pot-bellied stove in the middle surrounded by a mesh fireguard. There were rows of double desks, two teachers' desks and two blackboards. 'We divide the room with those curtains when we need to teach them separately' he said, pointing.

'It's clear you can't accommodate any more,' Louise said. 'What am I to do? I have twenty-four. Are there any other premises which might be suitable?'

'Can't think of anything offhand. There's the village hall, where you were last night, but that's in use a lot of the time, Women's Institute, Boy Scouts, Girl Guides, parish council meetings, and the doctor comes from Swaffham once a week and uses it as a surgery. I'm afraid we'll have to share.'

'If we are still here,' Louise said. 'I have no idea where the rest of my school ended up.'

'I gather there was a certain amount of confusion,' he said with a laugh. 'But I doubt they'll move everybody round again, it'd be like ring a ring o' roses. Besides, the government has more than enough on its plate dealing with the political situation to

worry about where the children are. As long as they have homes and an education, that's all that matters.'

'You are probably right.'

They returned to the schoolhouse. 'Do sit down.' He indicated a horsehair sofa. Louise perched on it next to Mrs Wayne and he took a dining chair. 'Let's thrash this out.'

After some discussion, they decided the village children would use the school from eight-thirty to one, and the evacuees from one-thirty to four one week and then they would reverse it for the following week. 'You will need to find your own books and pencils,' he said. 'Your own LEA should provide those.'

'Of course. I'll write to them.'

'If we find the children's education suffering, we could open the school on Saturday mornings,' he added.

Louise laughed. 'I can just imagine what the children will think of that.'

'Yes, but they will only be in school half the day during the week. Mind you, my lot will have to be given homework to make up for it.'

'And I must do the same.' She paused. 'We are making all these arrangements without having any idea how long it will go on. I thought there might have been a declaration of war before now. Do you think they are still trying to prevent it?'

'Perhaps, but they are wasting their time if you ask me, and in the meantime, Poland suffers, not that the general public feel very strongly about that. Half of them don't know where the place is.'

'Then I think geography will need to be part of the curriculum,' Louise said, then laughed. 'Oh, dear, that sounds pretentious and

I didn't mean it to be. I've only been teaching a couple of years and it's a huge responsibility.'

'I'm sure you'll cope, but if you need any help, don't hesitate to ask.'

'And you can call on me for anything to do with the children's welfare,' Mrs Wayne put in. She had been sitting listening to the arrangements without joining in the discussion. 'There isn't much I don't know about the village.'

'Thank you, both of you.' She rose. 'I must go and let the children and their foster parents know about the arrangements.'

He stood up, balancing himself on his peg leg. 'My children will come to school as usual on Monday morning, so I'll take mornings the first week,' he said. 'Is that agreeable?'

'Yes, perfectly.'

They shook hands and Louise followed Mrs Wayne out to the car.

'He's a good teacher,' Edith said as she put the car into gear and they drove off. 'Strict, but fair, and he doesn't put up with any nonsense. He got four children through the scholarship last term. They'll be going to Hamond's Grammar School in Swaffham next week. Now, I suggest we visit the nearest billets first and then work our way outwards. I live a couple of miles away, so we'll go there last and you can have a cup of coffee while we deal with any problems we've found.'

The children seemed to have recovered from the previous day's events and most had gone off exploring a countryside many had never seen before, so Louise did not see them. Their accommodation varied from the mansion home of Sir Edward Dryton, to substantial farmhouses and two-up two-down

cottages with no electricity, mains water or sewerage. Some were a great deal cleaner than others, but unless they were very bad and a danger to the children's health and welfare, their offer of accommodation had been accepted. 'I don't suppose a bit of dust bothers the children as long as they get enough to eat,' Mrs Wayne said as she drove down a narrow winding lane bordered by cow parsley, stinging nettles and blackberry bushes from which most of the fruit had been picked.

'I am grateful for all your work,' Louise said. 'I don't know what I would have done if I'd had to find homes for the children myself.'

'Happy to help.' She braked suddenly to avoid a sheep running in the road. 'How did that get out?' She came to a stop and left the car to catch the animal. Louise followed to help, though dealing with farm animals was outside the scope of her experience and she did no more than watch.

'It's one of Bill Young's,' Edith said when she had her arms round the ewe's neck. 'He's usually careful about shutting gates. Let's get it back where it belongs.' She bundled it through an open gate and shut it firmly, just as a man in his thirties came up the road on a bicycle. 'Your gate was left open, Bill,' she said.

'It's them pesky evacuees,' he said, dismounting. 'I ha' bin behind 'em all morning. Don't know how to go on, they don't.'

'I'm dreadfully sorry,' Louise said. 'They are not used to country ways. I'll make sure it doesn't happen again.'

He turned to look at her, appraising her from head to foot, taking in her tweed skirt, neat blouse and flat-heeled shoes. 'You in charge of 'em?'

'This is Miss Fairhurst, their schoolteacher,' Mrs Wayne told

him. 'Miss Fairhurst, Bill Young. He farms at Belmont Farm, just down the road here. He's taken Frederick Jones and Harold Summers.'

Louise shook hands with him. His grip was firm and dry. 'I suppose we've all got a lot to learn,' he said. 'But just you mek sure those childer of yours know how important it is to shut gates.'

'I will.' It seemed the children were all going to be lumped together and called hers. She felt a bit like Mother Hubbard. 'Do you think you could come to the school and talk to them about it?'

'OK. When?'

'The sooner the better. Monday afternoon, if you can manage it.'

'I'll be there at two o'clock.' He went over to the gate to check that all his sheep were safely in the field and the women continued on their way.

'You've made a conquest there,' Edith said. 'He's not usually so tolerant. As for talking to a class full of children, that really is one for the book. I wouldn't mind listening in on that.'

'You can if you like.'

Edith laughed. 'No, I'll leave you to it.' She turned in at a gate and drove up to the door of a substantial farmhouse. 'Here we are.'

The house was large and the kitchen, reflecting its importance, was vast. It had a scrubbed table in its centre which was scattered with papers. 'Sorry about this,' Edith said, gathering them up and dumping them on the pine dresser which occupied almost the whole of one wall. 'WVS business. Do sit down.' She set about making coffee with water from a kettle already on a black range.

With cups of coffee in front of them they talked about the

children, the billets they had been given and their individual needs. It was, Louise mused, far beyond the business of teaching for which she had trained. 'Mr and Mrs Young will have their hands full taking in both Freddie and Harry,' she said. 'They are two of the most mischievous in the whole class and egg each other on. Perhaps they should be separated.'

'I'm sure the Youngs are up to it,' Mrs Wayne said. 'Let's leave them for the moment and see how they go on.'

'I wonder what's going to happen,' Louise mused. 'If there's a war we're all going to have to make adjustments.'

'I don't think there's any "if" about it, do you?'

'No, not really.'

She returned to the pub to eat a midday meal with Mr and Mrs Gosport and Tommy and Beattie. Tommy was full of what they had seen in the village and their encounter with two village children. 'I couldn't understand them,' he said. 'I don' think they were talkin' English.'

'Course they were,' Stan said. 'It's just a bit different, that's all. You'll soon get used to it.'

Louise felt a particular responsibility for these two, but Jenny had been designated their foster mother and she was perfectly capable. Louise felt able to spend the afternoon in her room writing letters. There were a great many, one to every child's parents which she piled up with the postcards she had collected on her rounds that morning; and one to the headmaster at Stag Lane. He had elected to stay behind and teach those children who had not been evacuated. And, of course, there was one to her own parents in which she was careful to upgrade the pub into a very nice hotel. By the time she had finished, her fingers ached

and she was glad to walk to the post office and explore the village on foot.

Everyone she met gave her a nod and a 'Good day, Miss', which told her the village grapevine had already been to work.

It was not until the children had been put to bed and she sat down to an evening meal in the dining room of the pub that she met the other residents, two young men helping to build an extension to the airfield at nearby Watton. At about thirty-five, Alfred Lynch was the older of the two and was, she learnt, a foreman. He was of stocky build with massive shoulders and a thick neck. Tony Walsh, on the other hand, was only a year or two older than she was, slender but wiry. He had dark hair and amber eyes. He was a quantity surveyor. The two men had been working on airfields for a year, ever since it became obvious that war could not be put off forever and the government had begun a frenzied building programme. They obviously enjoyed each other's company and were full of jokes and laughter. Louise found their good humour refreshing.

'A Hawker biplane tried to land on the airfield this morning,' Alfred said. 'I think the pilot was lost and didn't know it wasn't operational. Got stuck in the mud. We had a fine old time digging it out. But it was the mud that saved the pilot, I reckon. Gave him a nice soft landing.'

'Was it able to take off again?' Louise asked.

'Yes, after we'd mustered all hands and a tractor with a tow rope and dragged it onto a bit of concrete runway we'd finished.'

'The pilot looked a bit sick,' Tony put in. 'I don't think he'd been flying long.'

'If that's what the RAF is turning out, God help us,' Alfred said. 'We'll be needing good pilots before long.'

'You reckon?' Stan queried.

'No doubt of it. Why d'you think we're building all these airfields?'

'Airfields or no, I've got to open up,' Stan said, getting to his feet. 'If you fancy a drink in the bar later, Miss Fairhurst, just come through.'

'Yes, do come,' Tony said. 'Talking to someone intelligent will be a change from listening to Alfred's nonsense.'

'Talking of nonsense,' Alfred said, grinning. 'Who was it said a couple of Jerry spies had come down by parachute dressed as nuns?'

'I was only repeating something I heard,' Tony said. 'Doesn't mean I believed it. I only said it to illustrate how gullible some people are.'

The men went into the lounge bar and Louise helped Jenny wash up before joining them. It was then she tasted her first glass of beer. She was enjoying the banter, the noise and laughter so much she didn't even notice her glass had been refilled. As she went up to bed that night, she was smiling.

It seemed her head had only just hit the pillow when she was woken by a loud rumbling which turned out to be thunder. She went to the window and drew back the curtains. Outside, lightning lit the sky, followed almost immediately by rolls of thunder. And the rain was lashing down, drenching the garden and the empty car park.

'A fitting end to my first day in the country,' she murmured before going back to bed.

* * *

The next morning the rain had gone and the sun was shining. She took Tommy and Beattie to church and it was there that she learnt Mr Chamberlain's efforts to avert war had come to nothing. The Reverend Mr Capstick told his congregation the news after he had finished his sermon. 'It is war,' he said, then offered a prayer for all those involved before giving the final blessing. Afterwards, as he stood in the porch shaking hands with everyone and discussing the situation, Louise introduced herself, knowing her father would expect her to do so. He would be bound to quiz her on what manner of man the incumbent was and his style of delivery. It was very different from her father's, being gentler, more tolerant; there was nothing of the fire and brimstone that characterised her father's sermons. He was younger, of course, not much older than she was, fresh-faced and smiling.

'I am very pleased to meet you, Miss Fairhurst,' he said. 'The village school is a Church of England school and I go there once a week to teach the Gospel to the whole school. I hope your children will join us.'

Louise explained about the arrangements for sharing which meant the London children would not be at the school as the same time as the village children. 'Some of them are Catholic,' she said. 'And I have one or two who are Jews.'

'No matter, my lessons are meant for all. I do not differentiate, but I leave it to you if you feel some should be excused. When you're settled, I'll make arrangements to come to your class separately. That is, if you agree.'

'Yes, of course, always supposing we are not moved again.'

'I do not think that is likely to happen in the near future, do you?'

'No. It is all very worrying. I feel so responsible. I don't want to let the children and the school down. I've only been teaching a year or two and am still groping my way.'

His smile was engaging. 'I am sure you will manage admirably, Miss Fairhurst.'

She hoped and prayed she would. Her life up to then, protected and dominated as she had been, was not the best grounding for the task ahead of her. But she was not the only one to be asked to step outside the comfort of the familiar. Every single person, man, woman or child, young or old, was going to have to adapt if this war was to be won.