



## 1. Meeting

‘YES,’ said Tom bluntly, on opening the front door.  
‘What d’you want?’

A harassed middle-aged woman in a green coat and felt hat stood on his step. He glanced at the armband on her sleeve. She gave him an awkward smile.

‘I’m the billeting officer for this area,’ she began.

‘Oh yes, and what’s that got to do wi’ me?’

She flushed slightly. ‘Well, Mr, Mr . . .’

‘Oakley. Thomas Oakley.’

‘Ah, thank you, Mr Oakley.’ She paused and took a deep breath. ‘Mr Oakley, with the declaration of war imminent . . .’

Tom waved his hand. ‘I knows all that. Git to the point. What d’you want?’ He noticed a small boy at her side.

‘It’s him I’ve come about,’ she said. ‘I’m on my way to your village hall with the others.’

‘What others?’

She stepped to one side. Behind the large iron gate which stood at the end of the graveyard were a small group of

children. Many of them were filthy and very poorly clad. Only a handful had a blazer or coat. They all looked bewildered and exhausted. One tiny dark-haired girl in the front was hanging firmly on to a new teddy-bear.

The woman touched the boy at her side and pushed him forward.

‘There’s no need to tell me,’ said Tom. ‘It’s obligatory and it’s for the war effort.’

‘You are entitled to choose your child, I know,’ began the woman apologetically.

Tom gave a snort.

‘But,’ she continued, ‘his mother wants him to be with someone who’s religious or near a church. She was quite adamant. Said she would only let him be evacuated if he was.’

‘Was what?’ asked Tom impatiently.

‘Near a church.’

Tom took a second look at the child. The boy was thin and sickly-looking, pale with limp sandy hair and dull grey eyes.

‘His name’s Willie,’ said the woman.

Willie, who had been staring at the ground, looked up. Round his neck, hanging from a piece of string, was a cardboard label. It read ‘William Beech’.

Tom was well into his sixties, a healthy, robust, stockily-built man with a head of thick white hair. Although he was of average height, in Willie’s eyes he was a towering giant with skin like coarse, wrinkled brown paper and a voice like thunder.

He glared at Willie. ‘You’d best come in,’ he said abruptly.

The woman gave a relieved smile. 'Thank you so much,' she said, and she backed quickly away and hurried down the tiny path towards the other children. Willie watched her go.

'Come on in,' repeated Tom harshly. 'I ent got all day.'

Nervously, Willie followed him into a dark hallway. It took a few seconds for his eyes to adjust from the brilliant sunshine he had left to the comparative darkness of the cottage. He could just make out the shapes of a few coats hanging on some wooden pegs and two pairs of boots standing below.

'S'pose you'd best know where to put yer things,' muttered Tom, looking up at the coat rack and then down at Willie. He scratched his head. 'Bit 'igh fer you. I'd best put in a low peg.'

He opened a door on his left and walked into the front room, leaving Willie in the hallway still clutching onto his brown carrier bag. Through the half-open door he could see a large black cooking range with a fire in it and an old threadbare armchair near by. He shivered. Presently Tom came out with a pencil.

'You can put that ole bag down,' he said gruffly. 'You ent goin' no place else.'

Willie did so and Tom handed him the pencil. He stared blankly up at him.

'Go on,' said Tom, 'I told you before, I ent got all day. Now make a mark so's I know where to put a peg, see.' Willie made a faint dot on the wall beside the hem of one of the large coats. 'Make a nice big 'un so's I can see it clear, like.' Willie drew a small circle and filled it in. Tom leaned

down and peered at it. 'Neat little chap, ent you? Gimme yer mackintosh and I'll put it on top o' mine fer now.'

With shaking fingers Willie undid his belt and buttons, peeled off the mackintosh and held it in his arms. Tom took it from him and hung it on top of his great-coat. He walked back into the front room. 'Come on,' he said. Willie followed him in.

It was a small, comfortable room with two windows. The front one looked out on to the graveyard, the other to a little garden at the side. The large black range stood solidly in an alcove in the back wall, a thick dark pipe curving its way upward through the ceiling. Stretched out beneath the side window were a few shelves filled with books, old newspapers and odds and ends and by the front window stood a heavy wooden table and two chairs. The flagstoned floor was covered in a faded crimson, green and brown rug. Willie glanced at the armchair by the range and the objects that lay on top of the small wooden table beside it: a pipe, a book and a baccy jar.

'Pull that stool up by the fire and I'll give you somethin' to eat.' Willie made no movement. 'Go on, sit down, boy,' he repeated. 'You got wax in your ears?'

Willie pulled a small wooden stool from a corner and sat down in front of the fire. He felt frightened and lonely.

Tom cooked two rashers of bacon and placed a slab of bread, with the fresh bacon dripping beside it, onto a plate. He put it on the table with a mug of hot tea. Willie watched him silently, his bony elbows and knees jutting out angularly beneath his thin grey jersey and shorts. He tugged

nervously at the tops of his woollen socks and a faint smell of warm rubber drifted upwards from his white plimsolls.

‘Eat that up,’ said Tom.

Willie dragged himself reluctantly from the warmth of the fire and sat at the table. ‘You can put yer own sugar in,’ Tom grunted.

Willie politely took a spoonful, dunked it into the large white mug of tea and stirred it. He bit into the bread but a large lump in his throat made swallowing difficult. He didn’t feel at all hungry, but remembered apprehensively what his mum had said about doing as he was told. He stared out at the graveyard. The sun shone brilliantly, yet he felt cold. He gazed at the few trees around the graves. Their leaves were all different colours, pale greens, amber, yellow . . .

‘Ent you ’ungry?’ asked Tom from his armchair.

Willie looked up, startled. ‘Yes, mister,’ he whispered.

‘Jest a slow chewer, that it?’

He nodded timidly and stared miserably at the plate. Bacon was a luxury. Only lodgers or visitors had bacon and here he was not eating it.

‘Mebbe you can chew it more easy later.’ Tom beckoned him over to the stool. ‘Put another spoon of that sugar in, boy, and bring that tea over ’ere.’

Willie did so and returned to the stool. He held the warm mug tightly in his icy hands and shivered. Tom leaned towards him.

‘What you got in yer bag, then?’

‘I dunno,’ mumbled Willie, ‘Mum packed it. She said I weren’t to look in.’ One of his socks slid halfway down his