

LONDON PRIDE

Seven-year-old Ben is the hero of this book, which gives a remarkably realistic picture of life in the London raids.

by Phyllis
Bottome

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BY PHYLLIS BOTTOME

OLD WINE
PRIVATE WORLDS
INNOCENCE AND EXPERIENCE
THE MORTAL STORM
DANGER SIGNAL
MASKS AND FACES
MANSION HOUSE OF LIBERTY
LONDON PRIDE



LONDON PRIDE

BY PHYLLIS BOTTOME

WITH DRAWINGS BY RAFAELLO BUSONI



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London Pride

I

Mrs. Barton was making rather heavy weather over her fifth. While she was charring, a few days ago, she had slipped on a banana skin left on the stairs by one of her young gentlemen from the Insurance Offices; and it hadn't done her any good.

Nurse leaned over her and said, "Hark! There's Big Ben striking—just you hold on to him! Long before he gets round to six o'clock, you'll be having your baby! Just you keep working away!"

Mrs. Barton, with the perspiration pouring off her pallid brow, gave the young nurse the ghost of a tolerant smile—what she didn't know about how to keep working it wasn't likely this young girl could teach her. "Pore young lady," Mrs. Barton thought to herself, "telling a woman wot's in labour to 'old on to a clock! Fanciful that's wot young ladies are; and 'ave the time for it seemingly! But this 'ere nurse, she's a proper one an' no mistake, not like the run of 'em 'ereabouts—that 'as 'earts of marble and thinks of nothing but their lipsticks! A nice figure too, this one 'as! 'Ow they can marry once they've seen wot goes on in this Ward—Gawd, 'E knows—nor 'E won't split on a pal!"

Big Ben went on striking, each stroke full and yet clear—six o'clock of a wet September evening in 1933.

There was a sort of music in the firm steady strokes. If you were as fanciful as the yellow-haired nurse, you might even think it was the voice of London speaking to her children.

Mrs. Barton had often given Big Ben a nasty look on her way to the offices; but there, she assured herself, a clock can't help it, even if it does rub it in to you—that by getting your eldest-born a decent breakfast in time

for his work you'll be late for your own. Mrs. Barton didn't bear Big Ben any malice for these bleak reminders.

The long punctual hours tossed her to and fro, till near midnight the House Surgeon hurried in, followed by half a dozen boy students. They didn't know where to look—poor young fellows, just the age of her first-born Bert. Mrs. Barton could have told them not to worry! She didn't mind them learning what they could by looking at her—not with her fifth she didn't; and not with these last pains that seemed to be tearing her into fragments. She'd had one whiff of chloroform already; and she knew the end was near. The House Surgeon was trying to ease her with his strong skilful hands.

There was that clock again, but now it seemed as if it struck inside her. Was she part of the clock? One of those heavy notes felt like her own heart—hammering its way on into Life itself. Each child she'd had was like a single note: Bert—Flossie—Alfred and Vi'let—striking their way out of her heart, hard and clear, just as this one was doing; then each in turn was snatched away from her into a separate and unknown future. Only for a few weeks or months would the new child be really her own, wholly dependent on her; and then like the others it would begin to thwart and worry her. It would get into trouble; cost money; and go its own way.

The chloroform swept Mrs. Barton into a deep blessed pause.

The next sound she heard was that strange indignant bleat of a baby fighting for its breath, in a world where at least this much was expected from it—to fight for something even from the first.

The words "A big fine boy!" floated from somewhere over her head, and were a distinct relief to Mrs. Barton, because boys got off your hands sooner; earned more money; and could rough it better than girls. But boy or girl, it hardly seemed to matter much to Mrs. Barton at the moment, for she was tired of Life itself. She felt that she had had enough of it. She did not want to grapple any more with all those cold stone stairs, nor the cigarette ash her young gentlemen spread everywhere, without thinking who had got to brush it up. Not that she blamed them for it—after all, it was what she got her money for—sweeping up their leavings; but still, she had grown tired of mops and pails, the pains in her knees; and only twenty-five shillings a week at the end of it; not going nearly as far as she'd expected it too, either—what with all the children's boots!

Mrs. Barton tried to turn a deaf ear to this new penetrating claim—"You brought me into the world!" bleated the new baby. "I need you! Stay with me!"

"What'll you call him? He's such a dear little chap!" the friendly young nurse whispered proudly. She too had fought hard to open the wearied, stiffened gateway into Life, for this new wayfarer. She did not want to see him pushed out unaided, into an empty world.

"Ben," whispered Mrs. Barton, with a faint proud smile. "I'll call 'im after that there clock!"

There it was again—that tireless music of the Next Hour, calling her on; and there was the baby, his dark and downy head placed for a moment close against her breast!

The House Surgeon injected something into her arm, and gave her a playful slap across the buttocks. "There, you're a brave woman!" he said heartily. "You've made a grand fight of it! Don't duck from under now, when it's all over but the shouting!"

Mrs. Barton felt rather as a knight must have felt receiving the accolade from his overlord. He had acquired merit—but he knew the toughest of his battles still lay ahead of him.

Still, it wasn't often a busy doctor stopped to hearten you up like this, when it was all over—and that yellow-haired nurse, too—washing her baby and letting her see it, before she'd had time to say "Jack Robinson"!

"Thank you, sir! Thank you, miss!" Mrs. Barton whispered—and decided that, in so friendly a world, perhaps—after all—she'd better go on living.

II

When Ben was six years old, his mother took him for a birthday treat into St. James's Park. They went across Westminster Bridge, and when they reached Big Ben his mother pulled him under the clock and said, "There, that's what I called you after—that there clock! 'E struck midnight as you was born! On the tick you were—and so was 'e!"

His mother said this with a strange sort of pride; but she did not attempt to explain this feeling. Nor did Ben need explanation. He was accustomed to reading his mother's heart. She was often irritable and sometimes violent, but it didn't mean anything to Ben because of her far more constant kindness. In a tough and dangerous world, his mother's kindness was the one thing Ben had learned to believe in. To-day for instance she was giving him a fourpenny ice for a birthday treat; and he knew what fourpence meant. He stopped to eat the ice, in the convenient standing room beneath the clock itself. It might have been arranged on purpose for him; and after what his mother had just said, he thought perhaps it was.

"There, you *shall* 'ave yer birthday treat—war or no war!" his mother said firmly. Ben licked his way solemnly through the pink ice-cream, not too fast, for this would both freeze his tongue and shorten his ecstasy; but not too slowly either, for ice-cream on a warm September day melts rapidly. Then suddenly, above his head, this new partner of his existence began chiming.

It was a loud and startling sound, but Ben was not afraid of it; he even felt a mounting sense of importance as if what was part of his personal property had functioned to do him credit.

He looked up at the clock's face with a proud sense that no one else had this dignified and stately godfather.

Cautiously he licked the last pink drop of his ice-cream—and let the casket of his treasure fall into the gutter.

Mrs. Barton, holding him firmly by the hand, stepped towards the oncoming traffic with the swift measuring eye of a practised Londoner.

It was one of Ben's most thrilling moments: not to cross tamely, when the whole traffic halted to obey Mr. Belisha's coloured hints; but to cross at

your own risk, facing a whole rocking and screaming fleet of motor buses, lorries and unbridled motor cars, your hand held by an omnipotent mother who often jerked you forward, with the very hiss of death in your ears, on to the safety of the opposite pavement.

“War!” he heard his mother repeat to herself, while glancing at a placard that he could not read. “Well—I should ’ave thought once bitten twice shy, myself—but that’s men all over! Whether it’s beer or whether it’s war, they don’t none of ’em know when they’ve ’ad enough!”

After these mysterious and yet reasonable comments on the part of his mother, “war” became to Ben an ordinary and senseless subject, like any other platitude, without direct bearing on a child’s life, that sounds upon the lips of grown-up people.

He was both a lively and an intelligent child. When hit, he reacted quickly and hit back—unless his adversary was obviously beyond his powers, when he would lie low like a ’possum and pretend to be far more badly hurt than he was. He had never played in green fields, nor wanted to play in them. Had Providence given him the choice between the open country and the close roaring traffic of the Commercial Road, he would instantly have closed with the latter. He thought a lot about his food, as all children do who haven’t had enough of it.



To look at, Ben was obviously undernourished, and when he wasn't dirty, a pasty white; but behind his looks there lurked a gallant and tough adventurer of an Elizabethan type, wary and the master of his fate.

Ben did not care much for his father, who was a Docker and felt that his children's existence deprived him of beer and cigarettes; nor did Ben feel any great affection for his eldest brother and sister. Bert and Flossie were practically grown up, and earned money. Once Bert had taken him to a circus; and Flossie sometimes demeaned herself by presenting Ben with a

woolly muffler, or even on rare occasions a new pair of boots. Flossie and Bert were in a social hierarchy far beyond either of their parents, or their younger brothers and sisters.

Alfred and Vi'let were ten-year-old twins, a surprise packet to their parents, who had never made up their minds whether to be proud or shocked by their simultaneous appearance; but they were known to Ben simply as strong and familiar enemies.

The baby—Mabel—was his very own. She was only a year old and spent the greater part of her eventful life with Ben. Sometimes he snatched her from sudden death; sometimes he took her to the nearest Park and dumped her under the trees, while he played at a safe distance with boys of his own age.

Occasionally she obstructed his life with his contemporaries; and Ben sometimes hit her or even deserted her. But on the whole Mabel had every right to look upon him as an old-fashioned heroine regarded her lover—in the light of a Protector and Preserver. Ben certainly protected and preserved Mabel far more often than he hit or deserted her; and woe betide any other child—even twice his size—who dared to touch a hair of Mabel's head.

What Ben really disliked most about school was that he had to leave Mabel in the hands of a "minder," a grimy lady in the next street, who carried out her functions in a desultory manner—and was usually found expending the sixpence a day she charged for "minding" Mabel on gin, in the nearest public house. Otherwise Ben would have tolerated school. His teacher was no more irritable or incomprehensible than most overworked and underpaid teachers are likely to seem to a little boy of six years old. Ben didn't get wet in school or unduly cold; he even sometimes got a free cup of cocoa and a biscuit; while in the playground he had every opportunity of outwitting other boys and procuring their marbles.

Every opportunity he found, Ben took.

On Sundays the streets were emptier than usual; and grown-up people stayed longer in bed in the mornings. There was usually more to eat; but this blessing, as it included his father's company at meals, was to Ben a doubtful treat.

Ben was aware that there were buildings called churches, and other buildings called chapels, open on Sundays; nor would any member of his family have stopped him had he evinced a desire to attend their services; but no one ever suggested that he should; nor had the desire to do so ever occurred to Ben.

Slowly he mastered the unwritten laws of the Street. Well-dressed people were, he found, to be avoided. Policemen, tax collectors of all kinds, and anyone who looked like an official were his natural enemies. Doctors and nurses on the other hand were definitely friends, and even assets. There was an old gentleman in a strange black garment, neither a coat nor a nightgown but partaking of the qualities of both these garments, called “Father,” who sometimes had sweets in his capacious pockets—and was known to have got people out of holes. No moral laws had ever been taught Ben except not to get into the way of grown-up people, and not to steal what belonged to those who might find out that he had stolen it. It was, however, distinctly meritorious to slip out at dawn with an empty sack, and, carefully evading sleeping watchmen on the Docks, to return before the light showed him up, with the sack filled to the brim with coal or other useful substances. Then, particularly if it chanced to be a Saturday or Sunday morning, Ben’s mother would let him share the wage-earner’s breakfast—rashers of bacon; kippers; or tinned-salmon fishcakes.

There were still other pleasures in Ben’s full life—the river for instance, and all that was in it, or on it; other children; and animals. There were no high-class domestic protected animals in Dockland, but, besides an occasional thrill in a shop window of a parrot or a monkey fresh from a ship, there were gaunt housetop cats and friendly mongrel dogs. There was a good deal about even the lowest animal that Ben liked. Young animals were much the same as Mabel, only less trouble. When you didn’t want them, you could get rid of them. A mere kick, a prod, the flight of a pebble—and they were off.

Life, to Ben at six years old, was like an April day; it wasn’t all sunshine, but, on the other hand, the rain didn’t last long and the wind had none of the winter’s bitterness. How could he dream that the dull and distant word “war” was going to launch him out of this normal round of medium trials and pleasures and plunge him into hell or heaven? Big Ben struck just as usual and even his mother began to think that Hitler’s war might prove to be an improvement upon the Kaiser’s.

III

Lurking well under the kitchen table, where he had safely secluded himself, without his mother's or her visitor's being aware of his presence, Ben listened with the careful suction of a vacuum cleaner, and drew down into himself, for future sorting, anything of direct interest let fall either by the visitor or his mother.

The visitor smelt like a flower shop and looked like a large golden fruit upon a kitchen plate. She sat in the best chair, which had four legs, and quite a lot of seat. Ben gathered that his mother did not consider this delectable Vision wholly in the light of an enemy. There was no hostility in the way Mrs. Barton leaned against the table, rather than sat down in the presence of so much dignified luxury. He saw that his mother felt uneasy, but only because she didn't want to do what the Lady suggested should be done—and yet didn't like saying that she wouldn't do it.

If she *had* disliked the Lady, Ben knew, his mother would have leaned on nothing, and simply said “No”—before she'd had time to listen to what the Lady said. Ladies said a good deal. They knew how; but Mrs. Barton also knew how to say “No.”

“You've no idea,” the Lady went on persuasively, “what a comfort it is to know that your children are safe! I *do* know how hard it is to part with them, because you see I've parted with my own! I've sent them to Canada. I shan't see them till the war is over; but I know that they are safe! Yours would be nearly as safe in this country—without having to cross the sea either—if you'd let them be evacuated. You could go with them yourself if you preferred, as your youngest is only a year old, and the Government will help you financially. I mean money—you'd be given enough!”

“'Ow much should I be given?” Mrs. Barton asked dubiously, for she rightly doubted if any Treasury official knew as much about finance as a charwoman, with a family of nine people to keep tolerably warm, clothed and fed, on three to four pounds weekly. The Lady did not realize that she was speaking to a financial expert, and went on rather vaguely, as if the brain confronting hers was the brain of an anxious idiot who had only to be lulled into acquiescence by the easy maxims of a Higher Sphere.



“You’ll just have to put down on the Form,” she continued, in a voice that Ben thought a blend of sunshine and honey, “exactly how much your husband and the two eldest children earn weekly—and you yourself of course; and then the official will know just how much to allow you and the children if you decide to go to the country. I will help you about their clothes myself! You shall start with everything you need for them!”

The Lady looked at Mabel as she spoke, as if she thought she might very well begin on her. Mabel was dressed in a scanty garment of pink flannelette reduced by countless washings to a wisp of cotton. She sat on a small and

frayed piece of rug in front of the kitchen fire, and was using a piece of coal as a lipstick.

“They’ll be so clean and healthy in that lovely air,” the Voice went on after a pause for inspection. “I promise you they’ll find a really good home for the children—and for you and Baby as well, if you decide to go with them.”

“And wot’s ter ’appen to Mr. Barton and my Bert and Flossie while I’m away?” Mrs. Barton sharply demanded. “’E’s as good a ’usband as if ’e wasn’t one! ’E bring in all ’e orter of wot ’e gets. ’E ’as to ’ave somethink for ’is beer, ’is fags and ’is papers, ’asn’t ’e? Nor you don’t never know with Dockers wot they earns! They get stood off reg’lar, ’alf a week like as not—their reg’lar week’s wages bein’ more than they wants ter pay ’em. That’s wot Mr. Barton and Bert say! My ’usband expects ’is meals and ’is ’ome, for wot ’e brings in—an’ it’s only right ’e should ’ave ’em! My two eldest—they give what they ’ave to according to the Law. But their ’ome’s their ’ome, Govern-mint or no Govern-mint—an’ the little things they get done for ’em—well, I am their muvver, ain’t I? It’s only fair I should give ’em a ’elping ’and now an’ again—whether they need it or not!”

Mrs. Barton became suddenly belligerent. She felt vaguely that her maternity was being attacked by this strange Lady who sent her children across a sea invaded by German submarines. Who was she, to give advice or reproof to a mother who would have died where she stood to have saved her children from such a risk, and her own heart from such a parting?

“But it’s to keep them *safe*!” the Lady pleaded, as if she read the sharp unspoken protest in Mrs. Barton’s mind.

Ben had never seen anyone with so much sympathy before. She seemed sparkling with virtues bred from early morning teas, the use of daily baths, and deep comfortable armchairs. She was soft, but she was also kind and good. Only she didn’t know what partings meant when you couldn’t afford journeys, or telegrams, or even too many stamps. The music of her voice went on, and Ben listened with a fresh intentness when it reached the actual question of whether the Twins, himself and Mabel were to go to the country or not. Ben had spent a day once at the seaside—a crammed, succulent, exhausting day.

Now he might have to go again, for an indefinite period—not to return triumphantly in the evening to the familiar friendly smell of his own street where he could boast of the day’s adventures to an admiring and envious world.

If he went now, he would have to stay in a strange empty place—without a home to come back to—even perhaps without his mother or Mabel.

Suddenly his head came out from under the linoleum tablecloth, rather like the sudden frontal excursion of a tortoise. “Gawd!” Ben said hoarsely. “We ain’t ’oppers!”

The Lady, checked in a long poetic flight, of other formless benefits to be derived from the country, started back nervously; then she smiled as if she were swallowing something nasty and pretending that it was nice.

“It’s only day dirt,” his mother explained half proudly and half apologetically as her eyes followed their visitor’s to rest upon her favourite child. “That’s my Ben, ’e’s just turned seven. ’E’s a fair terror, Ben is! I can’t do nothink with ’im!”

Ben scowled ominously. It wasn’t true, what his mother said, and it put him into an unfairly responsible position. If she had had more time, more soap, and Beulah Street had been a cleaner background, she might have done something with him.

The Lady’s large blue eyes filled with friendly amusement.

“Oh, I see *now* what he means,” she explained. “*Hoppers!* You mean you’re not a Hopper, and you don’t want to go into the country to pick hops—or fruit or anything! But you see, my dear—you don’t have to! Nobody wants you to do jobs you don’t like! They want you to go into the country to *live!* That’s what I’m telling your mother! You can go with your own teacher from the school; and you’ll have your school and your holidays in the country—just think of it! Fields full of cows, and lambs—or perhaps the sea! We were thinking of Devon or Cornwall, you know, Mrs. Barton, for this next batch. I’m quite sure the children will love it!”

“Coo!” Ben said, putting into this prolonged expletive the mistrust of a lifetime. “Coo—’ow’d yer know we’d love it? *You* ain’t our muvver!”

The apricot Lady hesitated. After all, was she so sure what this undersized, lean and dirty shaveling, with his intelligent eyes and mysterious habits, would be likely to love?

She was really a kind-hearted woman, and tears sprang to her eyes—for she knew that a child of seven ought *not* to look like a midget of seventy.

“You’ll be so free,” she ventured after a pause, “and you’ll have heaps of good nourishing food. There’ll be rocks and cliffs—and birds in the hedges. When the summer comes you’ll be able to swim and paddle on the beach!”

Ben made a gesture with his thumb in the direction of the Docks. "We got the river any'ow," he told her. Still, he was impressed. Mabel had never been to the seaside or the country. Battersea Park had been the best he could do for her; and it had taken him all of two hours to get there.

At this psychological moment, as if to draw attention to her claims, Mabel gave a shrill peacock scream, flung down the piece of coal with which she had been making up her face, and exposed the whole of her pink behind to the fascinated gaze of the visitor.

There was no real reason, Ben told himself defensively, for her wearing knickers in the house. Still, he hastily dragged her under the table and smoothed her down with expert hands, while telling her sharply, "Be've yerself!"

The Lady returned speculatively to a heap of Forms in her lap.

"The boy is Ben, isn't he?" she asked. "And is the—er—the little girl, Mabel? Then I see there are twins—Alfred and Violet? We do hope you'll send the three elder ones—or bring them with you, and the baby, if you decide to come too!"

"Yes, that's right—'e's Ben, an' the biby's Mibel," his mother explained. "I 'ad 'im called after the clock at Westminster—'im being born as it struck like—an' the 'orspital close by. Mibel, she's that wrapped up in Ben—I wouldn't like to part 'em. Alfie and Vi'let—that's different. I *might* let them go. Tho' where they are now—those as know best, ask least! What mischief one doesn't get into, the other does! *One* pair of legs I 'ave got, but if I 'ad as many as a caterpillar I couldn't git after those two! Nor I shouldn't know where to look for them! Ben might know. 'Ere Ben, you come aht from under that table an' tell the Lady where your brother and sister are."

Ben shook his head and retired further against the wall, dragging Mabel, gurgling with joy, back with him. He knew of course where the Twins were, and knew that his mother knew that he knew; but she couldn't prove it. Not to know was safer. If Alfie and Vi'let wanted to see visitors, they would not remain invisible.

He realized that his mother had made up her mind. She wouldn't go away from London. She was rooted, she and Ben and Mabel. Ben lifted the tablecloth and met her eyes, signaling to her his deep complicity. She might count on him. He would give up the country for Mabel and himself without undue reluctance. Such vast nameless spaces were all right for those that liked them; but where were the streets—the shops—the Docks? Where were

the noises, the smells, the fatal accidents, the hairbreadth escapes? What was life without the jostled sensations of humanity?

The apricot Lady said reasonably, "You will have to think it over, of course, and consult with your husband. I'll leave all the Forms for you to show him. You see, we can't expect—since France has fallen—that we can prevent London from being bombed; and bombed cities are no place for children, Mrs. Barton! Try to take my word for it. They will be in dreadful danger!"

"Well—there was all that talk last September when the war began," explained Mrs. Barton apologetically, "'alf our neighbours *did* send their children orf, but 'Itler never 'as bombed nothing—except down the river 'ere and there! An' when the children came back—which most of 'em in our street 'ave done by now—granted they looked better an' 'ealthier, but that's all worn off—they didn't get on so well in their own 'omes as they used to! Always turning up their noses at things they was satisfied wiv before! Wot I says is, 'Let yer children go away onct—an' they comes back strangers!'"

Mrs. Barton spoke with spirit, but not in actual condemnation of this other mother who had let her children go—as far away even as to Canada. Poor little mites, she thought, driven out across the haunted seas! But the Lady meant well by them no doubt. With ladies it was different. Their children would only go to places where there were other ladies to take care of them. They would still have all their old comforts and securities; but once let *her* children go, Mrs. Barton told herself fiercely, and anything might happen to them.

"I'll think it over," she agreed, wiping her hands on her apron, "and I know you mean kindly, and Teacher did drop in and explain about the money. But whatever you do, it costs a lot! More'n what the Govern-mint fancies. What you've got in yer 'and—well it's there till you've spent it—if you know what I mean! Flossie, that's my eldest girl, she's a good child of course, but yer don't leave 'em at seventeen if you can 'elp it. I don't interfere with 'er now she earns 'er own money, in a manner of speaking. But I *do* know when she comes in of an evening—and 'oo she goes abaht wiv! An' my old man—well I ain't ever left 'im before. Nor you don't know what goin's-on 'usbands mightn't be up to behind your back, do you?"

"But this bombing," the Lady pleaded—"it's a matter of life and death, you know, Mrs. Barton—an Air War is so terribly *dangerous*!"

"Lots of things is dangerous if it comes ter that!" said Mrs. Barton tolerantly. "'Itler's only one of 'em! Let's see wot 'e can do first—that's

all!”

Ben felt that his mother had put the whole problem in a nutshell. He did not really know who Hitler was, and in a confused way wondered—since the sky seemed to be the place to look for trouble—if Hitler might not be a new and more aggressive type of God. God, even the less aggressive and more agreeable kind, had never come much Ben’s way before; but he had heard vaguely of Somebody in the Sky who could interfere, but rarely did, with what went on in Beulah Street.

The Lady was evidently very much afraid of this indefinite Person. Her eyes filled with a strained and anxious kindness. She held out her beautifully gloved small hand to his mother and said, “Well, if it gets bad—if they do start bombing London this autumn, I shall come back and ask you again! Meanwhile, do at least send Alfred and Violet! Good-bye, Ben! Here’s half a crown to buy something for Mabel and yourself!”

Since all immediate danger was over, Ben had come right out from under the table—Mabel crawling on all fours after him. The Lady patted Mabel a little distastefully, but turned back to smile at Ben once more from the doorstep.

“Coo!” said Ben radiantly, regarding the great and undeserved good fortune that lay in his black little claw. This was a different “Coo” from his first. There was no mistrust in it. He knew it was a good half-crown.

A car drove up for the Lady, one of those great, soft luxury cars that Ben knew he would never see more of than its polished shell. She stepped into it, and was borne away to that secure world belonging to her—but with a heart far more anxious for their safety than were the hearts she had left behind her.

“Well there,” said Mrs. Barton with astonished pride, “that *was* a Lady, Ben—an’ no mistake! It might ’ave been the Queen ’erself from the clothes on ’er; but bless you—it’s wot I always tells yer father—they don’t mean no ’arm by it!”

IV

Ben's father was a big powerful man, who had not been given the education he wanted and so had to use what nature gave him in the way of brawn and muscle, rather than his unfurnished wits.

Since he was unsatisfied with bread alone, he had taken to politics of a vitriolic nature. Perhaps not surprisingly, he had become an extreme Red with a revengeful turn of mind.

Had he not been so deeply preoccupied with his class wrongs he might have been a more engaging parent. As it was, Mr. Barton regarded his children darkly—in the light of impediments upon an already obstructed path; and although he accepted responsibility for their existence, he was apt to consider them as mere excrescences of Mrs. Barton.

He had lost all faith in her as a comrade when she took to daily charring and was too tired to accompany him to meetings after she got home. Mrs. Barton shared his wrongs; and except for a weak affection for the King and Queen and the two Princesses, she agreed with his opinions; but this was not enough for Mr. Barton.

"The trouble with you is," he would mutter gloomily while she was washing up the supper things and giving her home the dregs of the energy she had been using all day long upon the homes of others, "you're not *active* enough!"

Mrs. Barton's chief interests outside her home were flabby compared with Mr. Barton's. What he wanted was Blood; and he spent all his free time planning whose, and how best to shed it. Whereas Mrs. Barton spent her spare time upon the greyhounds—Bert and Flossie having roused in their mother a feverish week-end excitement over their racing proclivities. One Sunday a month at least, they all three went to the races—Mrs. Barton with a next-door neighbour of her own age, Flossie and Bert with the boy or girl friend of the moment; but they compared notes; and it sometimes struck Flossie and Bert that it was odd their mother, on such a poor educational basis, should reach such successful greyhound results, Mrs. Barton's betting being on the whole more on the right side than the wrong.

"Ah," she would say when her luck was pointed out to her, by her somewhat envious offspring, "what I've learned on *you*—is what I practise

betting on them dogs! 'Umans and animals is much the same. I bet on the dogs as run straightest—it's orl you've got ter go on!"

Their father disapproved of all forms of sport, but especially of greyhound racing.

"Dorgs," he would assert sardonically every Sunday, "that's where the country's going to—fast enough—you don't need to bet on it!"

Mr. Barton had been passionately anti-Nazi for several years, and found himself rather awkwardly placed when at the last moment Old Joe plunged into the German Pact.

Bert and Flossie, who were at the age when peace was definitely advantageous to their private lives, backed the Munich Surrender. "Why fight Hitler," they demanded, "when all he wants is National Socialism everywhere?" Wasn't it as near as makes no matter to what all the Workers of the World wanted—and the sooner they got it the better?

Vi'let and Alfie took the view that almost any Revolution was better than none—since it would break up school life, for the moment at any rate; while Ben's mother—being a mother—felt that almost *no* Revolution was better than anything.

Ben hardly knew enough about any fixed principle, but he had taken a deep personal dislike to the name of Hitler, and was determined never to allow Mabel to soil her lips with it when she started talking.

Family discussion, though free and vivid, only took place at dinnertime on Sunday, since this was the only hour in the week when the family were united under the same roof for the same purpose.

One o'clock on Sunday was the peak hour of Mrs. Barton's crowded life, since she could give each member of her family, simultaneously, something that they liked—and watch them enjoying it.

On Saturday nights she and Ben, armed with two string bags, tooth-combed the Radcliffe Highway. They observed, they compared, they turned over and cautiously prodded, the exposed vegetation of the British Isles, and the stronger forms of nourishment supplied by cleverly portioned-out dead animals, or somehow or other even *more* dead fish. They hovered about, postponing doubtful decisions, or rushed in at the nick of time, not to be defrauded of actual bargains. What they didn't do with the few shillings they had to expend before ten o'clock in the evening it is doubtful if the Chancellor of the Exchequer could have done as well for them.

When the Sunday meal was ready, they couldn't all sit down to the table because there were not enough chairs, but Ben and Mabel managed just as well on the floor.

The Sunday after the Vision had called, Mrs. Barton brought up for the first time the Evacuation Question.

She had decided to part with the Twins; but she couldn't very well send Vi'let and Alfie off to the country without their father's knowledge; and this seemed to her a favourable moment to apply for his consent.

Mr. Barton was feeling at his best. He had read his newspaper; and said what he thought of the Government. He had eaten a heaped plateful of his favourite food—tripe and onions. There was boiled apple pudding to follow.

Mrs. Barton described the visitor briefly—with the purpose of her visit—and stated the amount of money the Government was prepared to lay down. On the whole it seemed to Mrs. Barton, and to Bert, who had interpreted the Forms to her, that if the Lady was as good as her word, and provided clothes, the family would be considerably better off without Vi'let and Alfie than with them.

Vi'let and Alfie, Ben observed from his point of vantage on the floor, looked heated and glum. Their first instinct had been to dislike being disposed of; and it might have remained their final instinct had not their father thumped the table and glared at them. Were they, he demanded, his own flesh and blood, to become parasites of the Rich? Hadn't he—besides expending far too much of his hard-earned money upon them—brought them up to know there was nothing about them not sounder, better, and more independent than Kings wobbling upon their unsteady thrones? And now, were *his* children (he usually referred to them as Mrs. Barton's) to be stolen and corrupted by sanguinary capitalists—fed perhaps from their very tables, with food inconvenient for them both spiritually and physically?

Vi'let, Ben saw with interested eyes, deliberately kicked Alfie under the table. That kick, Ben rightly deduced, meant: "If it's really going to be anything like that—close with it!"

Alfie grew redder and redder. This physical reaction was partly due to the sharpness of Vi'let's kick, and partly to holding in his mouth more, and hotter, pudding than even that tough and elastic cavern could conveniently hold.

Mrs. Barton waited to reply to her husband until she had placed his apple pudding in front of him; then she said: "Well, as to its being the 'ouses of the

Rich—we can't rightly be sure! Mrs. Green, from over the way, told me her children's Fosters were plain people like ourselves, who kept chickens and a pig they was fattening for Christmas. The children might come in for the pig, Mrs. Green thought, and then come 'ome afterwards if they fancied. And the Fosters voted Labour any'ow."

"Labour in this country . . ." Mr. Barton began, and then went off down a well-worn path, unsoftened by suet—from which Ben gathered that Labour in this country wouldn't do Alfie and Vi'let any good. Mr. Barton's stream of consciousness, out of which expletives reared themselves like submerged rocks, flowed back into comparative serenity over Old Joe; till Bert and Flossie completely tore it by dragging in their self-interested preference for Hitler.

There seemed nothing left for Vi'let and Alfie, after that ill-omened name, but to remain where they were and take their chance on bombs with the rest of the family.

Vi'let chose this disastrous moment to slip down from her chair, a glint of determination in her hard blue eyes. "I'm goin' ter fetch Dad's beer!" she announced airily. Light-footedly she danced out of the door, with sixpence pressed into her palm by her watchfully approving mother; and light-footedly she returned, bearing the beer on high with the full foam of its white head, untouched by her marauding lips.

If Mr. Barton *had* a favourite child, it was Vi'let. Vi'let had a mop of thick golden hair, a turned-up nose; while the vigilantly delusive innocence of a kitten shone in her wide blue eyes. Besides being easy to look at, Vi'let caressed her father as if she liked it, and expected him to like it. None of his other children was demonstrative or showed any pleased anticipation of affection on their father's part. Mrs. Barton had forgotten how.

Vi'let watched the slow successful way in which the simple and luscious beverage slid down her father's throat. No crumbs obstructed it. An expression almost definitely pleased stole over Mr. Barton's countenance.

"Dad!" Vi'let said breathlessly. "Dad! I ain't ever goin' ter be anythink *but* a Red—an' if I goes ter the country, I'll git redder and redder! I will—honest! An' Alfie too! an' we'll write onct a week an' tell you about everythink!"

"If one of my children was ter grow clarss-conscious," said Mr. Barton bitterly, "it 'ud break my 'eart!"

Vi'let's hands clasped her father's great heavy paw, her eyes fastened themselves as it were through him, until they reached a desire he was hardly conscious of himself: to gratify, without personal expenditure, the wishes of this sympathetic child.

He looked across the table at Mrs. Barton as if asking for assurance. Something, well at the back of his mind when reached, depended upon his wife's judgment.

She was an unassertive woman, who never riled him if she could help it; and when she made a decision it often turned out better than the more frequent and aggressive decisions of her husband.

"What I feel is," Mrs. Barton now announced in an unprovocative and impersonal manner, "that if anythink was ter come of this 'ere 'Itler's bombs, the Twins 'ud be aht of it any'ow!" Her eyes moved uncertainly, with pain in them, from Vi'let to Alfie. Ben realized that his mother was giving the subject the full benefit of her divided heart. She wanted Vi'let and Alfie to be safe; but at the same time, how could she think they would be safe—away off in some unknown place with doubtful strangers? They were a bad age, since they were no longer a part of her own being, as Ben and Mabel still were, and not yet old enough to take full responsibility for themselves, as Bert and Flossie were.

But suppose the whole of her family were to become the direct object of this strange monster, Hitler's hate? The visitor's true concern for her children had reached Mrs. Barton's heart. She knew this other woman minded—and minded with an intelligence nearer the sphere of fact than Mrs. Barton's own. Perhaps the danger was as real as this stranger's anxiety! So far it was quiet enough still, except in the lower reaches of the Thames estuary. There were noisy nights down there. You could hear the guns and shouts in the distance. They might spread farther up. They might strike houses as well as ships. Mrs. Barton's eyes met Ben's. He was her most constant and most loyal counsellor; he had shared the strange experience of their beautiful Visitant. It was perhaps Ben who decided the fate of his older brother and sister. He didn't want either of them in the house. They interfered with his actions and his wishes. They curtailed his control of Mabel. Although he had no real knowledge of the nature of bombs, he thought it might be as well to have at least two of the family beyond their reach.

Ben often rebelled against, and even hated, the Twins, but below these terrifying passions he was sometimes aware of a startling respect. They

were, to their younger brother, enviable and admirable children. Ben thought that probably no other children in the world of the same age, and with the same opportunities, could ever be their equals.

He watched with awe Alfie's boot kicking consent into Vi'let's artificial silk stocking. Vi'let never moved a muscle of her face although Alfie's boot was a far heavier instrument than her own.

"Well," said Mr. Barton consideringly, "I 'ave 'eard that in the country they're people that 'asn't so much as 'eard of Stalin. An' you and Alfie cud let 'em 'ave the troof, strite from the 'orse's marf, as it were!"

"That's right," agreed Mrs. Barton, feeling that for once the Dictator of Russia had played into her hands.

"So they can—an' Bert, before you and Flossie go aht ter the Pickshures, I'd be glad if you'd 'elp me fill out those there Forms! There's somethink abaht Forms that I can't rightly 'andle. Sounds as if they made sense till you begin thinkin' *wot* they mean—an' then they doesn't! An' onct signed, where are you—in a manner of speakin'?"

There was still a moment's peril for the Evacuation scheme, when it seemed as if Mabel had inadvertently eaten the Forms. But Ben finally retrieved them from some other part of her anatomy none the worse for having had some of their corners chewed away.

It was a responsibility to get the Twins off, Ben felt, as he put the Forms safely into his mother's hands; but it was not the first time that between them they had met and shared such a responsibility, without claiming any recognition for the part they had played. Mr. Barton and Vi'let carried off all the honours of war, and no one suspected for a moment that the issue had been decided before either of them had begun to fight.

V

Ben woke up to find Alfie's elbow in his stomach, and the knobbly legs of Bert, who was a football player, pushing him against the iron rim of the bed they shared in common.

A delicious smell of frying bacon rose up the stairway. The sun shone powerfully through a bedroom Ben had no reason to suppose was greatly outclassed by any other bedroom in Beulah Street. He could not think for a moment why his heart should be suffering more than the rest of his anatomy. Then he remembered: this was the day Alfie and Vi'let were to be sent into the country. Ben firmly believed that he hated the Twins. They were too old to be met on equal physical terms, and too young to be vulnerable to sympathy. Lighthearted and ferocious, they had been the main obstacles to freedom in Ben's young life. Why then should he feel as if the future without Alfie and Vi'let stretched before him in savourless insignificance? Was it because, although the source of many dangers in themselves, Alfie and Vi'let had been a protection against all other dangers? No other child at school, no teacher even, could safely attack Ben while the Twins remained passive.

The Twins too had taught Ben the lore of the Street. They held the key to the savage and unknown inhabitants of the great city; they had found out how best to deal with them, or to avoid them. It was true they frequently led Ben into danger; but they also frequently helped him to escape from the dangers into which they had led him. If by some pleasant and adventurous trick they roused one of the dread minions of the Law, how expert they were in losing themselves and Ben, by tripping up old gentlemen or ladies as booby traps under the policeman's feet, while they melted behind trams or motor buses! How light their fingers were in touching off fruit from street barrows! How piteous their tears, how credible their stories, if they actually fell into the clutches of authority while one of these adventures was as yet incomplete! Ben had not, till now, grasped the fact that it was upon the emergency wits of the Twins that his whole personality had hitherto leaned. Now once again, they had shot far ahead of him in the race of Life. They were going to be evacuated; and it no longer seemed to Ben like being sentenced to a stretch or becoming the victim of a press gang.

When the Visitant had made her suggestions, Ben had overlooked her offer of new clothes. She had been as good as her word. She had sent them; also full instructions for their journey, their tickets, and a new, and just sufficiently large, suitcase to contain their new treasures. A list accompanied the garments; and they were to be checked and examined before starting, by an Evacuation Officer whose business it would be to see each individual child, with its label tied round its neck, its gas mask and Identity Card, safely into the train. Alfie had received, as his share of the spoil, a brand-new suit and two pairs of almost everything that comes in pairs; and the whole outfit was fittingly crowned by a scarlet pullover from Sioux City, Iowa.

Pure scarlet—even Mr. Barton was pleased at his favourite colour being so dramatically applied to his son. Alfie's stomach, back and arms would now match the fiery visions of his father's brain. Vi'let too was agreeably, though from Ben's point of view less interestingly, clad; and Ben had nothing at all. Alfie's cast-offs, having already been Bert's, were of merely dust-heap value. A brimless cap and a pair of almost seatless trousers stared Ben in the face. Not for him was the scent of bacon wafted up the stairs.

Mrs. Barton had not been able to resist the joy of presenting the Twins with bacon and coffee for their last home meal; but by no stretch of the maternal instinct dared she extend this costly send-off to the Stay-at-Homes. Like the father of the Prodigal Son, she would have felt bound to say to Ben: "Son, thou art ever with me, and all that I have" (or in her case, didn't have) "is thine."

Ben had to pull on the rags of yesterday and sit down with his mother to Quaker Oats. Nevertheless his mother told him that he was to be an "also-ran."

One of her "ladies," stepping up suddenly, by her act, into the ranks of "real," had not only given Mrs. Barton a morning off, but had actually added several shillings to her pay.

"I know what *I* should feel," this candidate for Paradise had remarked, "if the children were mine."

"Which they couldn't be at her age," Mrs. Barton thoughtfully recounted to Ben; "seeing she is turned sixty if a day—and anyone can see at a glance she's been an ole maid from the cradle up! An' why *should* she marry seeing as 'ow she 'ad a 'ouse an' an income left 'er by 'er payrints; an' all she 'as ever 'ad to do with children is second'and as it were through 'er cat. Sambo's a puss that's fourteen years old, an' 'as 'ad to my certing

knowledge seventy-four kittens—eating like a 'uman through it all! So you can come wiv your pore brother and sister to the station, Ben, an' see them took away—an' it's only right you should!"

If it was difficult for Ben to reconcile his passionate envy of the Twins with this new disturbing sense of loss at their departure, it was practically impossible for his mother to reconcile her joy at getting at least two of her children out of reach of bombs with her anguish at having them taken from the temporary safety of her own roof. Nor did she attempt to reconcile these conflicting emotions. She talked as if she were attending the Twins' funeral, while placing more and more succulent rashers upon their swiftly emptied plates.

It was a lovely July day and beginning to grow hot, though it soon grew hotter with all the things Mrs. Barton reminded herself and the Twins not to forget. Their gas masks; their sandwiches; their Identity Cards; their tickets; their suitcase; the labels round their necks; the loose change in Alfie's pocket; and an addressed post card—stamped, and optimistically entrusted to Vi'let.

Last but not least came two new handkerchiefs, upon which they must not dream of blowing their noses, should the need arise—since they were merely there to show other and less well-endowed children from what high social circles the Twins had sprung.

When they had reached the bus stop, Alfie discovered that he had left a much-prized and indispensable pocketknife behind. They might have missed their train had Mrs. Barton not started two hours earlier than was necessary, in order not to miss it.

It became obvious to Ben, and made him feel hotter and more desolate than ever, that his lifelong suspicion was correct—his mother loved the Twins more than she loved him. Did she not want them to be safe from bombs, while exposing Ben and Mabel to every German in the sky? *They* had had no parting bacon, no Aladdin's wardrobe. They were to be left high and dry upon the hot pavements of Beulah Street, while Vi'let and Alfie soaked themselves in the cooling brine of the Atlantic Ocean. The Twins were going to Cornwall near a place called Bude, where there were rocks and prawns.

Ben might have been cheered and would most certainly have been surprised had he guessed that Vi'let and Alfie were just as sure as he was that their mother's love was unequally bestowed—only in their minds, Ben and Mabel had more of the commodity, while they had less. Was their

mother not keeping her favourite children safe at home, under her own wing, while—garlanded, feasted, and to the sound of Mabel’s mouth organ—the Twins, like sacrificial lambs, were being led towards the slaughter?

They were ten years old, and it was in their volatile natures to make a song and dance out of their worst fears; so that they managed to conceal all that they felt at parting, under a façade of strident buoyancy.

When they arrived at Paddington, Mrs. Barton, almost before the Evacuation Officer had finished his fatherly inspection, bought them boiled sweets, a bar of chocolate each, and their souls’ choice of picture papers.

Vi’let and Alfie shrieked with hollow exultation, stepped on the toes of fratchy old gentlemen while on their way to automatic machines, returning to their mother’s side with bulging cheeks and pockets—but with aching hearts.

They tyrannized relentlessly over their ominously obedient mother, and cruelly derided the home-staying Ben; but their spirits, had Ben but known it, were sunk fathoms lower than his own.

Long before the train had any idea of starting, the Twins had procured for themselves corner seats, and platform windows.

Their suitcase was on the rack above their heads; and Mrs. Barton had more or less satisfied herself, by asking three porters and a smart young naval officer hurrying to catch his own train in the opposite direction, that Alfie and Vi’let were headed towards their rightful goal. They would have to change at Exeter and Okehampton; but they were in the train for Bude; and at the moment there was no other. Mrs. Barton, having cleared this question up, settled down to giving contradictory suggestions to the Twins, from the platform. They did not listen to her, but they would have been more frightened and desolate had she not been there. Their conscious minds were taken up with other things; but their hearts stayed themselves upon the stout admonishing figure of their mother.

Alfie immersed himself in watching trains coming and going, while sucking his chocolate bar and swaying his legs so as to hit those of Vi’let across the carriage.

Vi’let was apparently wholly absorbed in her picture paper; but suddenly she showed that she was not. She did a dreadful thing. She thrust more than half of her bar of chocolate into Ben’s hand, and said in a voice she had never used to him before: “’Ere—eat it!”—and Ben eating it found that it was made of tears.

Fortunately a whistle sounded; porters began to slam doors; an official, with Buckingham Palace written all over him, waved a white wand; and in the effortless and velvety manner common to London trains leaving their terminus, the *Cornish Riviera* slid softly away towards the West.

Vi'let flung down her paper, Alfie wastefully swallowed an enormous chunk of chocolate without time to appreciate its flavour; both their heads leaned at a dangerous angle out of the window, while they madly waved their new white pocket handkerchiefs towards their mother and Ben. Mrs. Barton and her youngest son hurried along the platform after the vanishing train, ignoring any human obstacles upon their path. Their hearts and eyes were fixed upon the fast receding Twins; and slowly, limpingly, a little as if Fate itself had trodden upon them, their empty hearts came back.

Mrs. Barton made a terrible sound, something between a sob and a snort, such as Ben had never heard anyone make before. It was the sound of a grown-up person who, before the tyranny of Time and Space, finds himself as helpless as a child.

Rachel, weeping for her children because they were not, has gone down into history for just such a cry; but Mrs. Barton knew that nothing of this kind was ever likely to happen to her, whether or no she saw her children again or not; so, gathering up the forces of her resolute stoicism, she remarked: "Well, wotever 'appens to the Twins—we'll 'ave a lemon soda and a Bath bun before we go back 'ome."

Ben's sorrow, if not his mother's, faded rapidly under the administration of these unforeseen delicacies. A soldier, too, talked to them at the Buffet, in a highly pleasant and informative manner, about the Beaches of Dunkirk, where he had spent—apparently involuntarily—several nights in June; not, Ben hoped from his description, the kind of beaches that Vi'let and Alfie would soon find themselves upon; beaches which it seemed this kindly soldier would not soon forget. Not that he described them to Ben and his mother in terms of terror, only Ben gathered a good deal of overcrowding had taken place, and the homeward journey had been unnecessarily delayed and obstructed by torpedoes and bombs. The idea being, as the soldier rather humorously put it, that "wot didn't git yer wet, got yer 'ot."

The soldier followed the story up by presenting Ben with two valuable picture coupons from cigarette packets. Both Mrs. Barton and Ben agreed, upon their homeward way, that you couldn't find a more agreeable man than this one, not if you were to hunt from Westminster to Balham.

The day had grown much hotter and smelled of bad bread and butter soaked in petrol.

The soda portion of Ben's lemonade made a point of racing up and down his nose in a petrifying manner.

They walked part of the way home, in order to have a squint at the West End shops—and choose what they would buy each other if they were rich. Ben pressed upon his mother a sewing machine, a Rolls-Royce car, and a parrot with pink and green feathers who put his head on one side and said “Heil Hitler—I don't think!” through an open window.

Ben's wants were less easily satisfied and it was doubtful if an army of motor lorries could have contained them by the time they reached the Marble Arch.

Above their heads, in the milky-blue azure of the noonday sky, those new and pleasant silver dolphins—the balloon barrage—idly chased a pale slice of the daylight moon. Lorries and motor buses swung to and fro round Oxford Street into Park Lane; a few smart private cars pressed in and out of the continuous stream; but on the whole, on this hot July morning of 1940, London as the Fortunate knew it was empty. A few old ladies sauntered, accompanied by somnolent dogs, round the neat squares of Kensington. But mainly only those who served London moved about her vast and intricate spaces upon their lawful occasions. None of this latter group, to which Ben and his mother belonged, dreamed that anything could change the secure and homely outlines of their boundless city.

Yet London was only to have a week or two more of her long and uninterrupted history unharassed and unharmed.

Ben and his mother hurried a little when they reached Westminster; they were only just in time for the full round of Big Ben's music upon the stroke of noon.

The tall clock gave them no warning of the coming hours. It struck with the steadiness of long survival, as if it knew that what it symbolized could not be interrupted by mere storms and furies in the heart of man.

Listening to the slow even strokes, Ben felt strangely comforted. Vi'let and Alfie were probably by now safely embarked upon tinned-salmon sandwiches. They would come back one day; or perhaps better still—who could tell?—Ben, his mother and Mabel might one day join them upon those distant beaches, without a single torpedo or dive-bomber to disturb their serene and happy days.

VI

Ben was roused from a deep and dreamless sleep by an imperative swelling clamour, falling to rise yet higher, as if Mother Earth herself had become afraid for her threatened children and was giving them a final warning.

His mother had told him what the noise was: "Thet's the C-rain!" she had said. "The Prime Minister 'e sets it orf, for us ter git inter the nearest Shelter before that bloke 'Itler drops 'is bombs!"

Ben sat up in the spacious double bed in which he could now wallow in solitary glory until Bert came in. The curious wail spread and contracted over and over again. Ben *had* to listen to it, though he reminded himself that there was no need to do anything about it. Suddenly the little house, the bed on which he sat, and his own heart began plunging wildly to and fro; and all the little houses of Beulah Street shook together. There was a roar like the bang of a gigantic paper bag, bursting against a wall; and after it, once more, that long queer trembling of the bed.

Mabel, in the next room, woke up and cried out. Ben slipped from his room to comfort her. Bert and Flossie, with their respective girl and boy friends, were at the Pictures. Mrs. Barton, having done her weekly marketing, was having a half-pint nightcap at the nearest pub. Dad too would be in a pub, but probably a more distant one; and his evening was likely to be less staid, and a good deal more lengthy.

There was no one in Number 7 Beulah Street except Ben and Mabel.

"'Ush!" Ben said not ungently to the terrified baby. "It ain't nuffin' but one of them German bombs! That's orl!"

Reassured by this comforting statement, Mabel stopped crying directly Ben got hold of her; but pandemonium burst forth to contradict him. A strange hard coughing filled their ears, savage and continuous; cries broke out in the Street. It wasn't pitch-dark yet; so Ben went to the window and looked out, with Mabel festooned loosely over his shoulder.

The sky was a grand sight—from end to end of it ran strange multicoloured ribbons. They met together as a fan is furled; and then unfurling, straightened themselves out against the background of the dark.

The searchlights seemed more multitudinous and in a greater hurry than Ben had ever seen them.

It was as if the sky were trying to hide itself behind a latticed barrier of coloured stripes. Ben leaned out of the window to see exactly what Beulah Street was up to. People on both sides of it were spilling out of their little houses, like ants from a threatened ant-heap. He heard the words “Bombs!” and “Shelter!” shouted over and over again. A few hundred yards away, at the Docks’ edge, there was a Shelter. The Twins had looked in, and described it fully to the family, in all its stages of preparation. Ben himself had once peeped in beneath their shoulders, and had not liked the look of the Shelter even in daylight. He liked the thought of it still less in the dark. It was a long semi-surface basement with an earth floor, more or less cleaned out.

The air of Beulah Street was strangely full of dust and flying particles of something Ben could not see, but he knew it was heavier than dust. He drew back and shut the window.

It was no use making Mabel sneeze; and if things were really going to fall out of the sky, it would be best to put her where they could not fall on her.

“’Old yer nose!” he told her briefly and pushed her well under the bed.

Another crash sounded close by, accompanied by a roar of wind that ran in front of it. The glass of their own bedroom window danced back into the room. Ben dived under the bed, and joined Mabel.

That was what had been flying through the dusty air, he told himself: glass—nasty, vicious, sharp-edged glass! Fortunately all the glass their one window contained was now upon the floor. Ben pushed his head out cautiously, but nothing seemed stirring except dust and flakes of plaster from the ceiling, so he hunted about for his mother’s slippers. It was rather like putting on flat-bottomed barges, but by shuffling along in them he could at least avoid the glass until he had found his own.

“You—stiy where you are!” he ordered Mabel roughly. “Don’t yer *dare* come aht till I fetch yer!”

The glass from the bedroom window slithered and crackled under his feet; but as soon as he had got his own shoes on, he hurried back to Mabel. He had only Alfie’s torn nightshirt between him and nakedness, but it was a summer night; and the air itself had a feeling of hurry.

He covered Mabel, head and all, with a blanket. “Carn’t ’elp it if yer do smuvver,” he told her savagely. “I carn’t see yer bloody ’ead cut ter pieces, can I?”

Holding her tightly across his shoulder, Ben proceeded downstairs. The front door was blocked by the umbrella stand, a small bamboo affair much prized by his mother, but difficult to disentangle while pieces of plaster kept falling down on him from walls and ceiling.

There was nobody stirring in the Street near by. Most of the doors were open; and some people were lying flat on the pavement so that Ben had to step over them; but it was quite easy because they never moved.

In the next street, a little house was burning hard, bright as a great candle. The air was bitter with smoke and very stifling. Mabel had stopped crying and adjusted herself to breathing through a blanket.

From all the little streets beyond came cries and shouts of frightened people, but far louder than the brittle voices of human beings roared the inhuman shocking voices of the guns.

From time to time Ben could distinguish, quite plainly, the crash of something being dropped with shiftless irregularity upon vulnerable objects. After each of these sodden blows, there would be a brief but perceptible pause, as if sound itself was shaken into silence by the destruction of a living Thing. The few people who flitted past Ben on their way to the Shelter weren’t talking. Speech is too dear and wise a substance to be used while human butchery is going on.

Ben didn’t like the darkness, or the roaring sounds; and still less, the strange hard things flying by him through the heavy air; but he plodded resolutely on; and no one tried to stop him—or to help him.

This was the first air raid in the neighbourhood; and people still thought first of themselves and their children.

Ben felt guilty because he had left his home, and his mother would surely go there first—and find it empty. But it was better to go on; she would soon guess where Ben would have taken Mabel. By now he could see the large reassuring silver “S” of the Shelter; and a moment later he slipped through the doorway. Mabel could be allowed to breathe now, so Ben withdrew the blanket from her flushed features, spread it out on the floor, and sat her down on it. He found then that his legs and arms were full of cuts. A deep cut on his forehead was bleeding hard, all over his nightshirt, and dripping to the floor. Their neighbour, Mrs. Higgins, whom his mother

didn't like, but whose face had looked very friendly coming out from the vast circle of strangers, leaned forward and began to bind Ben up, with strips that she tore off her own garments. Even though she did the best she could for him, Ben couldn't help bleeding on the blanket as well, although he was as careful as possible.



They had hardly got comfortably settled down, when his mother burst in, whiter than any linen she had ever washed. When she saw Ben and Mabel, she just opened her mouth, shut her eyes, and sat down heavily beside them,

on the blanket. She hadn't fainted; because she continued to sit bolt upright with her eyes shut, and her mouth open. She was just winded; partly with the intensity of her relief; and partly with hurrying so soon after her half-pint.

Ben explained that he was sorry to have upset her, but the house shook so he thought he had better get Mabel out of it. To his surprise, his mother did not scold him, not even for dripping blood on the blanket—she seemed to have reached a new dimension where scolding was inadequate. She kept saying over and over and under her breath, "It was only me Saturday 'alf-pint! 'Oo'd 'ave thought that 'Itler would 'ave started bombing us—on a Saturday night too! Crool, I calls it!"

After a time, Mrs. Barton began to make friends with Mrs. Higgins for binding up Ben's forehead.

Mrs. Higgins was their Next-Door. She had only two young children: Em'ly, who was nine years old, and the baby, Sam, who was the exact age, to a month and a day, of Mabel. Sam had less to show for his intelligence than Mabel, but he was stronger on his feet. Of course the two women already knew most of the facts about each other's lives, since they had lived side by side for several years. Still, these facts had been blotted out more than a year ago by an unpleasantness caused by a milk bottle's having been taken in from the wrong doorstep.

It took the undergarments of Mrs. Higgins, bound about Ben's forehead, to restore their relationship; and at the same moment—their memories. It was now the milk bottle that was forgotten.

Ben and Em'ly had been told never to speak to each other again. Now they were told to make friends—as if they had never met before. They exchanged a long look of conspiratorial blankness. They knew each other already wonderfully well, since they were intimate enemies.

The Twins had started the Feud. They hated Em'ly; and Em'ly returned their hate with interest. Hitherto she had bracketed Ben with Alfie and Vi'let, but now she was not quite sure whether she might not reconsider him upon his own merits.

The Twins were no longer there to give point to her hate. She knew all about their being evacuated; and thought the less of them for it, being partly devoured by envy, and partly by a spurious patriotism. Ben, too, had a feeling that his future life, being denuded of the Twins, might be enriched by Em'ly. She was resourceful. She was a head taller than Ben. Her nails were long and sharp, not inconsiderable as weapons. She was tight-lipped in disaster. She protected her brother Sam in much the same way that Ben

protected Mabel, only more brutally, because she was a little girl and therefore less cautious in her treatment of the human young than a mere male—she knew their limitations.

Em'ly said nothing, when ordered by her mother to make friends with Ben; but after that long communicative look had passed between them, and she felt assured that Ben, like herself, had kept all the secrets of their hit-and-run past inviolate, she gave a cautious grin in his direction, and, hunting about in the depths of a filthy pocket, produced two boiled sweets, which she shared with him. Ben accepted the sweet, feeling that their friendship was now sealed.

Mrs. Barton drew his attention back to the family. Where, she demanded, was his father? What did Mr. Barton want to go so far afield for—on this night of all nights? Why not do his drinking nearer home? As for Flossie, she wasn't ever going to hear the last of it—leaving her poor little brother and baby sister all by themselves in an air raid! And Bert—where was he? And that silly proud little Piece he'd taken up with! Only the Twins, Ben gathered, were a source of unmixed blessing to their parent at the moment. With every bomb that dropped, Mrs. Barton's conduct in sending them away became more fully justified. Their safety was a halo round their heads. They became more and more dazzling children; till they far outclassed the sleepy little Ben with his bandaged head, leaning against his mother's shoulder.

Flossie was the first to break the circle of her mother's fears. Her young man had left her in Leicester Square to get home as best she could, through the horrible coughing of the guns and the murder-thronged streets. She wasn't ever going to have anything more to do with him. She wasn't sure if he wasn't a Fifth Columnist—behaving like that to his regular girl—and not even lending her his flash lamp!

Then Bert turned up, morose and monosyllabic. Probably his young lady hadn't reacted too pleasantly to air raids either; but no one would ever know anything about it from him, if she hadn't. He smiled, however, when his mother told him how Ben had carried Mabel into safety. "Cor! Not 'arf bad for a nipper!" he remarked, sending Ben's heart soaring higher than the shaken house-roofs.

At last, after Mrs. Barton had exhausted her whole vocabulary of reproach and fear, her husband entered—stark sober, and inclined to think that there had been altogether too much fuss made about an air raid. What, he exclaimed contemptuously, were a few bombs dropped, compared to Clarss Warfare? Wait till *that* came—then they could all begin to talk!

Still, Mr. Barton did a highly curious and unprecedented thing; he sat down on the edge of the family blanket and drew Ben into his arms.

“Mibel’s enuff for you, Mother!” he said good-naturedly to his wife.

Ben curled close against the big protective shoulder, till his head rested against his father’s heart. He felt each slow, firm beat strike through him, as strong and steady as Big Ben’s long reverberating notes. The guns began to sound farther off, and Ben fell asleep and dreamed that he and Mabel were inside the clock, which was full of sand like the seaside; someone gave them spades and buckets and they began to dig; only Em’ly came in suddenly and took their spades away from them.

An A.R.P. looked in, to tell them that he thought everything was quieting down; and that he wouldn’t wonder if they were to hear the All Clear before long. Ben gazed at this helmeted angel with awe and did not go to sleep again after he had left. Instead he lay in the curve of his father’s tremendous arm, and watched all the strange and yet friendly people under the little blue lights.

Em’ly watched them too, and glanced across from her corner to Ben’s from time to time between her naps; and when she caught his eye, she slowly and solemnly winked.

Nobody could sleep for very long at a time, because the floor grew cold; and they hadn’t had time to bring anything to lie on; or to lean against. Some people propped themselves against the walls; and some just prowled round the dim outskirts of the lighted space. The great warehouse basement stretched away upon all sides into a vast spacious darkness. The ground beneath them heaved and shuddered every now and then; but Ben did not hear any more crashes with the silences after them. Only far away—or suddenly drawing closer, like a pack of hounds nearer, or farther off, the scent they followed—the guns barked, all night long, until the dawn noiselessly stole up the river, as if ashamed to look at what was left of London.

VII

Ben woke up, with a curious stiff feeling, to find himself still in the crook of his father's arm. Mr. Barton was asleep and snoring heavily, but he had not relaxed his grip upon his youngest son.

Mrs. Barton and Flossie were already awake. Flossie was applying a pocket comb to her hair with one hand, while expertly shifting a small glass in the other. She could not wash because there was nothing to wash with, but she intended to fall back upon face powder and lipstick. By the time she left the Shelter, she looked much as usual, Blitzkrieg or no Blitzkrieg. Bert, having had his best suit on the night before, was wishing he hadn't. Mrs. Barton was wondering whether her roof was on or not; and how she would feed her family if it wasn't. She had almost decided not to go to work, since in a sense this morning her work had come to her; transport was a difficult problem, and middle-aged ladies of her size and appearance were more seldom offered lorry rides than their young and pretty daughters.

Mrs. Barton's eyes, as usual when in doubt, sought those of her most intimate colleague—Ben. When she saw that he was awake and stirring, it seemed to make the day's work easier. Ben extricated himself skilfully from his father's arm without waking him, and picked up Mabel. Mrs. Barton got up, shook the dust off her skirt, and with it the memories of the night's raid; and tiptoed towards the street with Ben, leaving her husband to sleep himself out. Ben could come back and tell him what had happened later—if it had happened.

Nothing—so to speak—had happened to Number 7 Beulah Street. The roof was on; the walls were chipped, but intact. The rooms were full of fallen glass and plaster—still, they were obviously rooms. The water supply, electricity and gas were all cut off. The house next door but one had ceased to exist; and so had another on the opposite side of Beulah Street. Lilac Grove, just behind it, had lost the backs of half a dozen houses, neatly shaved off, so that you could see right through them. Twelve people had been killed right off in Lilac Grove, but only three in Beulah Street. There was a huge crater at the corner where the Co-operative Stores had stood.



Em'ly, who had left the Shelter two hours earlier on spec, had been one of the first to discover, and to profit by, this destruction.

In her mother's larder stood ten tins of Boston baked beans; two of tomatoes, and five of tinned salmon; a lunch sausage, and three meat loaves. There would have been more had Em'ly possessed a less skinny person upon which to secrete hard and tinny objects. Fortunately it had been a misty dawn, with few and extremely weary policemen about.

As an act of new-found friendship, one meat loaf and one pot of raspberry jam stood, to Mrs. Barton's pleased surprise, upon her kitchen table.

Mrs. Barton, except for small pieces of coal or portions of railway sleepers, was scrupulously honest and had brought up her family, as far as possible, in her footsteps; but after a prolonged and wary glance at these windfalls, she failed to report them to the police. Could they not be accepted in the light of manna from on High, or as the Prophet Elijah in the wilderness unquestioningly swallowed meat brought, without explanation, by such anti-social birds as ravens?

There they were, anyhow; and Mrs. Barton said no more about them. Having no gas, she managed to raise a fire from a few sticks and two shovelfuls of coal. Fortunately she had as usual left a full kettle. Em'ly kindly looked in to mention that as her next-door neighbours were dead, they could not possibly want an extra bottle of milk standing upright in their meat box; so she divided the milk with scrupulous fairness between the needs of Sam and Mabel.

The bottle mysteriously disappeared after the division was made; and if the milkman was alive to claim it, he knew better than to try.

When Mr. Barton, Bert and Flossie assembled half an hour later, they had for breakfast meat loaf, bread and butter, raspberry jam, and cup after cup of scalding tea. All the loose glass and plaster had been brushed up by Ben, and deposited in the dust-bin. The dust-bin had not been upset by the blast from the nearest bomb, but its lid had been lifted off, and now reposed upon the chimney-top of Mrs. Higgins' house; and Mr. Barton put in a claim for a new one, before going off to the Docks.

Em'ly, hovering about, succeeded, as a return for the milk and other anonymous favours, in being granted permission for Sam to share Mabel's pram. Sam took up more room than Mabel, for he was a portly child, with a remarkable resemblance to Holbein's portrait of Henry the Eighth.

All four set out soon after breakfast, Ben wheeling the pram, to look at what had happened to the neighbourhood. Mrs. Barton was too busy to mind very much where they went or what they did—provided she did not have to have Mabel under her feet. Until she knew what shops were still there and what fundamental needs could still be supplied, it was a bit awkward. More than “awkward” one of Hitler's severest onslaughts did not appear to be, either to Mrs. Barton or indeed—with the exception of those actually injured or homeless—to anyone else in the neighbourhood.

This was the way in which London took the *Luftwaffe*; and as the people of London had not yet learned that there was anything at all creditable in the manner in which they accepted this new handicap to living, there was nothing self-conscious or unusual about the moral atmosphere of Dockland. Later—when the Prime Minister said what he thought of the City—Londoners could not help adding to their accustomed stoicism a faint flavour of pride.

To Ben and Em'ly there were things about the Blitz almost too good to be true. There was no school; and the world seemed full of exposed treasures, "Perfect as upon the First Day of Creation"—while the misfortunes of others stretched before them in an unending and thrilling manner like the best type of film, without their having to pay for it.

Em'ly had long been thirsting to tell Ben of her discoveries. There were treasures to be picked up all over the place, sometimes buried under rubble, sometimes lavishly flung—like the dust-bin lid—practically into their laps. They had the pram too, as a container, and could place, over anything that turned up, the substantial forms of two perfectly good and innocent babies.

What could be better, as a camouflage for stolen goods, than a baby? Not that, Em'ly hastily explained, from her point of view such acquired goods *were* stolen. Even the Catechism has put "picking" in a different category from stealing; and though Em'ly had never been in direct contact with religious literature, she would have applauded the milder definition. What *she* called the picking up of unconsidered trifles was "putting away"—securing them, as it were, from the unkind directness of the light of day.

"What's bombed, don't belong to no one—no more," Em'ly kindly explained to Ben. "An' yer carn't see it laying abaht—no good ter nobody. Stan's ter reason you carn't—don't it?"

What they must do first was to seek the shopping district nearest them and find out, with a little ingenuity, where were the best places to do a little uninterrupted poking. Em'ly was willing to admit that, however clear a moral case she could prove to herself and Ben, Bobbies, with their jaundiced eyes, might view the matter differently.

"Nosy Parkers," Em'ly said contemptuously. "They're too 'eavy-'anded ter lift things themselves—that's wot gives 'em such a dahn on us!"

"But ain't wot's bombed—someone else's," Ben persisted, "wot might come back an' want ter 'ave 'em, in a new 'ouse?"

“Not if they’re dead, they don’t!” Em’ly replied with flawless logic. “Besides, silly—they don’t orter leave val’ables lyin’ abaht all h’over the plice! See! Rine—thet ’ud spile the ’ole bloomin’ lot, wouldn’t it? Then ’oo gits anythink aht of it? D’you want ter stuff them Bobbies’ pockets? Garn! the Govern-mint piys them any’ow—don’t it? Tike wot yer sees—an’ don’t siy nuffin’ abaht it—that’s the wiy ter make a livin’!”

Ben plodded on, through the seething broken streets, pushing the pram ahead of him, in silence. He had been brought up by his mother to think it stealing to take from anyone in the same class as himself anything they stood in need of—and that was anything they had. His father for instance would have died rather than take so much as an onion from a neighbour’s allotment; and would have tried to kill anyone who attempted to take an onion from his. Having no religion, he was if anything more moral than Mrs. Barton, who stood in awe of religion but took a strictly utilitarian view of ethics; but Ben had his own code as well. Perhaps it was more fundamental than those of his parents; he thought that where people were in trouble, you shouldn’t add to it.

Yet of course, as Em’ly pointed out, “If they aren’t dead, they’re any’ow buried right enuff”—and it might seem a little priggish not to profit by what only a niggardly Providence could expect you to overlook.

Ben had already seen a perfectly good orange floating down a gutter, and on the other side of the street, bulging from the remains of a small green-grocer’s torn-out door, a banana; and there was Mabel—her teeth (what there were of them) well into the banana, and Sam squirting orange juice beatifically round him, as if there were no such Law extant as private ownership.

Ben had always longed for Mabel to possess a Teddy bear, his mother a sewing machine, and himself a pair of roller skates. In broad daylight, Em’ly admitted these imposing objects had better be passed by; the thing to do was to slip out of the Shelter just before dawn, if the Blitz was still on, and then try for them.

“One of us,” Em’ly brightly suggested, “cud pick up the pram, an’ the other cud lug one of the bibies ter push in it! An empty pram they might cotton onter—but there ain’t a Bobby nor an A.R.P. thet ’ud think ter look for stuff under Sam or Mibel’s be’ind—Gor’ blimey if they would!”

But here Ben unexpectedly put his foot down.

“We ain’t er goin’ ter tike no biby aht into no Blitz!” he said with a firmness Em’ly could not dislodge; and to her astonishment all her feminine

charm and enthusiasm failed to remove this moral obstacle.

“Well,” she gave way finally, “the first time maybe, we’d be freer on our own! A pram in a blackout ain’t any too easy ter work, wiv a biby inside it; an’ if it was ter yell, like as not one of them softies ’ud tike the lot of us ter one of those new Rest Rooms. They’re women in Rest Rooms—and they mightn’t be so good! Women looks under babies’ be’inds as often as not!”

“I ain’t er goin’ ter tike no biby into no Blitz!” Ben merely repeated stubbornly.

They had by now approached the shopping quarter. It was curious to see their familiar and now battered High Street in the broad light of day. It was like seeing a Saturday-night drunk wandering about on a Sunday morning, with half his front teeth missing.

The fires, still smouldering, ran with colourless low flames close to the pavement. Water poured from trickling hoses, into the raging streams of the gutters. A boy stood whistling inside a shop window, intact and shining, polishing the glass, although the neighbouring shops on either side of him were a heap of smoking rubble. Here and there the road was marked off by rope, because of unfilled craters, or unexploded bombs. Once the pram was held up by a policeman, and the children told to keep quiet, because there were thought to be people still alive beneath a ruined house. The rescue party was listening to catch the faintest sound of tapping beneath their feet. Ben too listened; the hot and listless summer morning listened with him; but there was no sound, and after a minute or two the policeman moved them on.

Ben knew approximately what his mother wanted for the day. She had given him two shillings with which to buy it; but he was glad of the assistance of Em’ly’s highly developed wits, which functioned just as well in the duller fields of common honesty.

All the shopkeepers who had not been bombed out were in a generous and exalted mood. There was tragedy in the air, and sometimes on their very doorsteps, upon a scale so novel and so wholesale that there could not fail—as Em’ly had already observed—to be profits to extract from their roused emotions.

Em’ly set to work immediately to extract these profits. To Ben’s surprise, he learned that their home was in ruins; no one knew where their mother was; she had last been seen putting a rabbit accompanied by carrots and turnips into a brand-new cooker; the cooker had flown out of the window, and the rabbit stew was wasted on the ceiling. All four children belonged to

the same vanished mother; but whether the Missing Link actually belonged to Em'ly, or was supposed to be his own, he failed to gather. Their father had been drowned a month earlier, in a minesweeper sunk by a German submarine.

They were practically given two cabbages at this shop; and, overheard by a fishmonger next door, they were presented with a magnificent cod's head, to which quite a large piece of body still adhered.

Every shop they called at was shaken below its prices by Em'ly's tragic story; but the more fastidious Ben was not altogether happy about these cheapened treasures. The tears in the eyes of some of Em'ly's listeners made him feel uncomfortable. He found himself wishing for the Twins. They would have known immediately what were meanly acquired possessions, and what were just skilled achievements. They had a code of their own, although it was elastic. Besides, they were ten years old—they *knew*! At seven, one's moral sense was necessarily more circumscribed in its outlook.

Perhaps Em'ly *did* know best. Certainly Ben had never seen two shillings flow out in so many successful directions before. The pram was choked to the brim when they arrived home, with lawfully provided objects, so crammed that both Sam and Mabel, although they had *not* been used as camouflage, felt far too uncomfortable to sleep, in spite of the fact that after the disturbed night they had lived through they would have taken almost any kind of nap.

Nor did they return home until late in the afternoon, having marked down various shops at suitable distances which, should they be bombed, might give the best yield to careful loiterers. It was not, however, a day upon which anyone had missed them. Mrs. Barton had been to the nearest Claims Office to say that her windows were out. She had telephoned to her employers that she couldn't "get along," and her Kensington ladies had been most unsympathetic about it. They had said that surely, even if buses weren't running and the Circle *was* held up, Mrs. Barton could manage to come somehow!—but had omitted to say by what means, since she hadn't a private airplane or a Rolls-Royce, she was to manage it.

"With my very-close veins an' all!" Mrs. Barton mournfully retailed; "an' it being fifteen miles each way if a inch! An' 'er not offerin' ter piy fer a taxi—wot 'ud 'ave cost 'er well on to a pound, I grant you—an' me workin' me legs orf for 'alf a crown—when I got there!"

After the Office, Mrs. Barton had to go somewhere or other to find water, and if possible wood or coal or methyated spirit for an old Tommy's

cooker that Bert's young lady had obtained for her. Bert's young lady had changed overnight from a Stuck-up Young Piece to an Angel from Heaven; and Bert's spirits had gone up accordingly.

He and his father, Mrs. Barton told Ben, had joined up for rescue work, so they wouldn't be at the Shelter tonight. Mr. Barton had pretended that he was prompted by nothing but a desire for more money, and distrust of the Shelter provided; but the truth of the matter was neither he nor his son could stand some of the sights of the evening before. They were unwilling to describe what they felt; but they just hadn't liked it. If people were going to be buried alive, or cut to pieces in the street by falling glass, they weren't going to sleep in a Shelter close by, and do nothing about it.

"It ain't British!" Bert had said darkly to his father on their way to the Docks. "Thet's wot I don't 'old wiv—we got ter do something abaht it!"

To Bert's surprise, his father did not remind him that Moscow was the place to look for orders; he actually repeated his son's words as if they had reached a similar chord in his own breast.

"Yus!" Mr. Barton grimly echoed. "It ain't British! Nor there's no mistake abaht it—I'm goin' ter sign on too!" "Mind you," he added darkly after this ceremony had taken place, "it don't mean thet I 'old wiv the Govern-mint nor any of them blood-gorged capitalists; but them little 'ouses goin' dahn like a pack o' cards, an' burnin' up wot's inside 'em—thet's yer own flesh and blood in a manner of speaking! You've *got* ter stand by them, Left or Right; why, I'd 'elp a man aht of it—if he was the Prime Minister 'imself!"

Mrs. Barton was naturally put out by their decision; but though she complained of being left without a man to help her, there was a note of pride in her disapproval.

In spite of all she had had to do, she had managed to hear the tragic histories of everyone who had suffered in her immediate neighbourhood.

She had been minding all day, for love, a sick baby of a few weeks old, shaken and unnerved by having swallowed more dust and plaster than at his early age he could appreciate. The baby had lived, in a blue and shaken manner, in Mrs. Barton's arms on and off all day; while its mother, part of whose roof had been ripped off, went with three other children to make her report to the Claims Office—standing in an endless queue, to get what help she could for the night to come. The baby died at twilight. Its mother had returned just in time to hold it, till the end; and when Ben came back she was still in the kitchen, drinking a cup of tea.

When the mother saw Mabel being lifted out of the pram, it was too much for her; she went home, Flossie helping her to carry the dead child.

They had told Mrs. Barton at the Office that she was fortunate to have at least one room left that had a ceiling; it was unlikely this would fall in upon them during the next night; later on they would do something for both her and the children. Mrs. Barton had offered to keep her and the baby overnight. She could share Flossie's bed now Vi'let had gone; but she had her husband to think of (fortunately her sister had taken the other children) —he'd take on terribly when he heard the baby was dead—it was their only boy! So she thanked Ben's mother very earnestly, and went back to see what she could get for her husband's supper.

"Seems like I'd known 'er all me life," Mrs. Barton explained to Ben; "but there—I 'adn't, come ter fink of it, even got rahnd ter askin' 'er 'er nime! She'd called the baby 'Christopher'—she bein' a Catholic, an' 'er 'usbung a sailor on leave, an' Christopher one of them Saints as Catholics believe keeps yer from being drowned—not that the pore mite got much aht of that—'e bein' smothered by swallowin' plaster—Saint or no Saint!"

Mrs. Barton was so full of the dead baby and its mother that she barely glanced at what Ben had brought back for her, though it did seem more than anyone had a right to expect for two shillings. Any food was enormously welcome. The gas wouldn't function for a week—if then; but Mr. Barton had brought her a whole sack of coal, actually given him by his foreman. These moral miracles kept taking place, even on the part of the authorities.

Mrs. Barton had been given ten shillings on the spot for her windows; and her address and name were taken as if she were a Duchess—with a promise to board up her windows, while leaving her something to look through them with at the same time.

The whole life of Dockland had changed in twenty-four hours. Notices were pinned up on schools, halls, or any likely building, telling people what to do, under a list of new and extravagant emergencies, and—more strange still—who was to help them, when owing to these emergencies they needed it. A.R.P.'s became more and more human and approachable. They looked through broken windows and walked through absent doors. They gave advice which was generally good, and promises of help which sooner or later were carried out. The Mayor, wearing his chains and robe of office, but moving about like a live torpedo, opened a big feeding centre; and you could buy hot food there for practically nothing and take it away in paper bags, or on plates—if you had any.

Policemen almost ceased to be danger signals and could be treated, after an Alert had sounded, like human beings. They were specially kind to any child they saw, as if they were a little ashamed of seeing children in Dockland, unless of course the children looted under their very noses. Em'ly knew a trick worth two of that. A policeman, who should have been removed from the Force for congenital credulity, actually gave her a shilling when he found her in tears for a hypothetically dead little sister, suspiciously close to a newly bombed sweet-and-cigarette shop.

This was Em'ly's method of plucking the "flower, Safety" out of that "nettle, Danger." It was not perhaps a very pretty way, but it must be confessed that the moral and physical conditions under which the Higgins family lived were not particularly pretty either.

What was the nicest part of this transaction, and Ben's last memory of a full and startling day, was the way in which Em'ly stuck a stolen peppermint ball into Sam's cheek, before filling her own.

VIII

Em'ly thought it "goofy" of Ben to sit on his Shelter Claim, hour after hour during daylight, just to have it safe for his grown-ups when they hurried in at dusk after the Alert had sounded.

Nor could Ben explain to her that just at the moment his family had assumed a quite surprising importance to him. It wasn't only that the Twins' absence ached in Ben like a hollow tooth; somehow the whole family seemed nearer together because of their threatened home.

Ma had always been important to each of them, though peculiarly so to Ben, because she was always doing something for them—cooking their food, mending their clothes, or giving them a piece of her mind or a cup of Ovaltine, whichever she thought they needed. But now his father and Bert had also assumed a new importance. On the nights his father and Bert were out with their digging party, Ben found that he did not sleep nearly so well; he missed his new nest, tucked securely against his father's shoulder.

Until the Blitz threw them together, Ben had never thought of his father at all, except as a kind of minor Blitz to be avoided by all sensible children. But now when his father was not there he noticed the guns more; and when the near crashes came, followed by the eerie silence of disaster, Ben caught his breath till his chest ached, he so much wanted *not* to hear the crackling sound that came a moment later to tell him that a house was burning—perhaps their own. But if his father was there, he just snuggled closer against him and knew that, since the regular quiet beats of the heart he was leaning against did not change, there wasn't much to worry about. Both Bert and Flossie had become much more genial to their family under fire. Bert seldom kicked or cursed his little brother now; and when Ben ran to greet him as he was returning from work—the whole length of Beulah Street—Bert sometimes said with affectionate, if reluctant, pride: "'Ow's things, Nipper?"

Flossie too looked less smart and more intimate. She actually sometimes helped Ma in the house. She had given up the young man who left her alone in Leicester Square without a flash lamp during a Blitz. "If I can't get someone to go about with better than that gutter-hearted snipe," she told her family with a toss of her yellow self-made curls, "give me Gerbells!" For

Flossie was so highly educated that she almost knew how to pronounce the name of the Minister for Propaganda in Berlin.

Bert's young lady, who talked in a more refined way even than Flossie, usually had been considered "lousy" by the family; but ever since bombs began to drop about the home of her lover she had come out trumps, actually spending her evenings in Dockland, so as to be near him in danger. She lived in Golder's Green, where her evenings could have been spent in comparatively perfect safety. Bert took this so much to heart that he arranged to have a large lock curl across the centre of his forehead, just to show Fan how greatly he appreciated her courage. Only Ben, who shared his room with Bert, knew what it cost his elder brother to produce this ornamental lock—Nature having given Bert the kind of hair that likes to rush up in a stiff cowlick rather than to bend gracefully in a drooping curl.

The family were united in the anxious interest with which they awaited the Twins' first letter. It came a week later than a printed card announcing their arrival.

When Ma broke open a dirty pink envelope scrawled over in violet ink, which had acted as a picture puzzle upon the mind of the Bermondsey postman, everyone listened, and even Mr. Barton laid down his knife and fork.

"Dear Ma," the epistle ran: "Hope you are all in the pink as it leaves Alfie and me at present. We have enuff ter eat but not fish and chips which is funny as fish grows in the sea and there's lots of it abaht. The sea goes up and down in a funny way; and yer have to be keerful where it does it. There aren't any streets only muddy roads, an' animals on grass mostly. Things is funny all over in the country. Houses is clean inside an' we 'ave ter be as well. Our Foster 'as washed me feet twice orlready since I bin 'ere. Pa and Ma Foster don't know much I'll say, but they don't find fault much either. Alfie's got a tame rabbit aht of them. Cornish pasties are good to eat—meat inside is tasty. Devonshire cream 'as been stopped by the Govern-mint but we git it on Sundays just the same. If you was ter come erlong with Ben an' Mibel we might like ter stay 'ere, but if not we'd like ter come 'ome. We go ter chapel Sundays. Las' Sunday Alfie laid a row of tacks erlong the Sunday School children's seats, so when they sat down, it wasn't ser bed. You 'ad orter 'ave 'eard 'em yell. I come ercross a little girl on the sands yesterday. 'Er nime was Daisy. She said, 'Yer only a Evacuee!' an' I says 'Garn—Evacuee yerself!' after I'd 'it 'er. I made 'er nose bleed but mine didn't. Love to all an' Ben. VIOLET. P.S. There are buses 'ere but they don't git nowheres."

Ben noticed that Ma looked quite different after she had read Vi'let's letter. She didn't seem to mind any more about the gas being cut off or all the windows still out. She kept the letter in her apron pocket all the while she was working. But she waited to say what she really thought about it till she and Ben were alone in the kitchen, with only Mabel asleep in her pram by the stove.

"You can tell them people they're with is orl right,—carn't you?" she demanded anxiously,— "or they wouldn't have given young Alf that rabbit. Still, fussy I call them, making pore Vi'let wash her feet twice in one week! When the Twins come 'ome I'll try me 'and at them pasties Vi'let speaks of. Don't sound no better than hot dog to me—still, it won't do no 'arm to let the Twins see their own mother can cook as well as any Foster! I shall tell them both off properly for them tacks they laid down in chapel. Vi'let 'ad a 'and in that you bet! It's only one of her try-ons, putting the blame on Alfie! Still, it shows they're tryin' ter keep their sperits up, pore lil' things—doesn't it?"

Astonishingly, Ma sniffed and drew her apron across her eyes. Why pity the Twins? Ben asked himself. They had sand; they had rocks; they had cream, meat pasties and security. Even a tame rabbit! And what drama they needed, the Twins were quite capable of supplying for themselves.

It puzzled Ben to understand why his mother should consider their enviable fortune with tears in her eyes. His own destiny was far darker, but he did not ask her to cry about it. Daily, since the Blitz began a month ago to take its nightly toll of Dockland, Ben sought out in broad daylight a good Shelter spot, dumped what bedding the pram could take, including Mabel's person, and then sat on it through the long hours till the evening Alert sounded. With the help of Em'ly he had by now sampled every Shelter in their immediate neighbourhood. There was no question as yet of bunks and tickets; there was only the chance of getting in somewhere and sticking it.

The only safe Shelters were the Tubes, and they were not handy. There were, however, the Arches, not too far off and quite comparatively secure; but apart from the damp, there were carhorses as well as people sheltering under them; and, though otherwise good and patient neighbours with quite a lot of warmth about them, carhorses were liable to become clumsy when frightened by loud uncertain noises.

Their own Beulah Street Shelter was dryer, warmer, and nearer than the Arches—but it was a good deal less safe.

The aristocrats of Dockland had Anderson Shelters, because they had yards of their own in which to put them. These Shelters, having been built on purpose for the Blitz, had special advantages—but none that the Bartons and their neighbours could make any use of, since they had no yards. However, Ben had often noticed that even these well-off people lavishly blessed with Andersons often preferred to use them to store coal and wood in, while seeking a nice big sloppy Shelter containing hundreds of their fellow beings, like the Beulah Street warehouse.

In a crowd you felt you were less likely to be specially picked out by Hitler. It was more fun—if nothing happened; and you might always be a survivor—if something did.

The whole of Beulah Street, Ben included, always thought of air raids as being personally conducted by a less lovable caricature of Charlie Chaplin, poking his nose over Buckingham Palace, or racing up and down their river to attack the Docks—which were their means of livelihood. But let Hitler and his merry men just *once* go a little too far, and the Prime Minister, now affectionately known as “Winnie,” accompanied by the boys of the R.A.F. and the whole Waterside, “wouldn’t ’arf give them a telling-orf.”

Ben spent the long dull daylight hours—while he sat on the family’s bedding companioned only by Mabel, who slept much more than he could—indulging in these dreams of dramatized personal encounters. He played a modest part in them himself, but his father and Bert often successfully outranged the entire German Air Force.

When the Alert sounded, a nightmare reality took the place of his pleasantly successful vision. People, his own among them, began to troop into the Shelter; and the German Air Force became less vulnerable to dreams.

Ma arrived first, with Ben’s supper and Mabel’s in a paper bag. Flossie and a girl friend with whom she was marking time followed. Then Bert and his young lady; and finally Dad himself—unless it was one of their rescue-work nights, when Dad and Bert both failed to put in an appearance altogether.

As the night wore on, the Shelter became as good as a Picture House to Ben. One rich family from another sphere brought orange boat-cushions, and tried to read Penguin thrillers under the faint blue light, just to reassure themselves by murder on a small scale—rather than by remembering the comprehensive wholesale murder they had sought the Shelter to avoid.

Sometimes people had free fights over the spots they had selected earlier in the day, and found poached from them by latecomers. Actual criminals were rare. Either they preferred the more evasive precincts of the Arches, or they went to West End Shelters, where opportunities for their professional skill were more likely to arise. But sometimes a criminal strayed in, and Ben would guess his social status by the way he hovered, alert but unobtrusive, on the edges of the friendly crowd, seeming not to want any real human contacts—only a chance to tackle the unwary as prey. Animals were not allowed, but Ben had often watched canaries being smuggled in—and once even a parrot. No one had guessed, when the bombs began to drop near by and a voice barked out “Curse ’Itler to ’ell!” each time a crash sounded, that it was not a mere human reaction, but the heartfelt wish of an intelligent parrot. Cats often slunk in casually by themselves; and if there was a bad raid on, and a devoted owner wouldn’t come in without his dog, the Marshal, who had a dog of his own though he always left it at home with the window open, turned a blind eye on them. Ben thought it funny that none of the animals did any harm to each other while they were in the Shelter even though they were natural enemies. Cats never as much as glanced at canaries; dogs relaxed cheek by jowl with the most offensive alley-cats. All any of them wanted was to get into the darkest part of the Shelter and keep perfectly still. They seemed to feel that there was danger enough all round without their adding to it. In that way, Ben thought they were a good deal nicer than criminals, who *did* want to add to the danger, if they could themselves profit by it. Invalids came in, seated in Bath chairs or carried on stretchers; and everyone gave them the best places they could find, often calling out, “Cheerio Grandad!” or “Clear the road for Gramma!”—and when tea was going, which happened when the Marshal could get enough kettles going, the invalids and the mothers with the most babies always got helped first.

When everyone else had come in for the night and the Shelter had settled down with uncertainty, Em’ly managed to eel her way slowly but surely in Ben’s direction until she could keep her roused and keen brown eyes, rather like illuminated peppermint balls, well within signalling distance. Em’ly’s dynamic presence doubled, for Ben, the fun of anything that happened. Even when the bombs began dropping nearer, trying to straddle the Docks, Ben did not feel quite so menaced. It was a queer sight in the Shelter; all the men and women and children throwing themselves face downwards on the earth, as if they wanted it to rise up and cover them. Hot and cold chills ran up and down Ben’s spine, just as if he were like both the hot- and cold-water taps in a bathroom turned on at the same time. But Em’ly took his mind off this

shivering terror, by drawing his attention to the ribald side of it—her gestures became funnier and more indecent as the bombs grew closer. She had all the uncanny glamour of the Twins without their disagreeable contempt for a younger brother. She often did things Ben considered wrong. She knocked Sam about too much, for one thing; but when things were at their worst, Em'ly was perversely at her best. It was not that she liked bombs any better than anyone else liked them. Being shaken blue by blast, or choked with plaster, wasn't her idea of a picnic. But Em'ly's hard and shallow heart never gave way to terror. She fought it tooth and nail—as if she were an alley-cat and Danger were another cat, and the odds even as long as you went on fighting. As soon as Ben raised his terrified eyes, after the crash hadn't struck them, he would fix them on Em'ly—to find her chin well up, and her tongue thrust out derisively in the direction of Hitler.

IX

The voices of the guns, like village dogs when a stranger has just gone out of reach, barked at longer and longer intervals. Mrs. Barton slept with Mabel in her arms, guarding Flossie by her expansive form. Between herself and the wall Flossie had, Ben considered, almost too protected a position.

Em'ly, with the ease and stealth of a night animal, slipped in and out of the groups between her and the door. An A.R.P. stood in the blast doorway; but Em'ly already knew his position, and grasping Ben firmly by the hand, she pulled him round the A.R.P.'s legs with masterly celerity. The A.R.P. felt a rustle and a draught, and hoped it was not a rat; but when he clicked on his torch, he saw nothing but his own boots.

The night was chill with river damp, and there was a curious feeling in the street as if the air had stretched itself taut till it could stretch no farther. What sounds there were had a hollow and inhuman ring. But the sky was wonderful. It was like the bursting of a thousand fireworks. Here were coloured balls drenched in emerald and bright flame-colour; and there were open umbrellas, wonderful in their vast silky tissue slipping softly down through the darkened city—not to protect, but to destroy whatever they illumined.

There was no traffic, though here and there, in shadowy doorways, a tin-hatted shadow awaited a closer emergency.

Far off, like a murmur from another and more active world, fire engines and lorries were moving about their errands, while ambulances rang their urgent bells. Dockland was empty. The distant sounds and sights were muffled by the river fog.

“The West End ’as copped it ternight,” Em'ly explained. “We’ve got ter git up there. Shops’ll be ’alf-emptied into the streets—Gawd, we shan’t ’alf git pickin’s! I got two sacks wiv me—tied rahnd me middle, under me coat. We can ’itch-’ike ter ’Olborn an’ walk up to the Circus. I ’unted up a lorry yisterday—may be a bit on the slippery side, ’cos it’s fish, but that don’t matter onct yer git well in—orter be easy ter make it with this fog an’ all!”

The Leader-Principle is infectious, and although Ben’s teeth were chattering partly with cold and partly with fear, he plodded on beside Em'ly

lit with adventure. Still, in this hard and invisible battlefield, he felt somehow very small and soft.

Anyone else who happened to be out on such a night at least wore a tin hat and had the moral protection of a uniform.

“Where we goin’ ter find our lorry, Em’ly?” he whispered breathlessly.

“Fishmarket!” Em’ly replied. “I ’eard ’em say they’d start moving up ’Olborn wiy, abaht four o’clock. ’Ere’s the turnin’. Nah, Ben: if I say ‘ ’Op!’ you ’ops it, but if I says ‘ ’Op it!’ you scoot—see wot I mean?”

Her firm hand had been clenched protectively upon his arm, but now she withdrew it and Ben felt suddenly alone in the dark. He couldn’t see. He could hardly breathe. As long as Em’ly was with him there was adventure, glory, mutual fellowship. Without her there was nothing but fog.

A tiny thump above his head restored life to the listening world. It must be Em’ly; and she must have arrived safely inside the lorry. Ben stretched out his hands, feeling carefully round the high wet sides till at last he came on a gap. A whisper slid towards him out of the blackness. “ ’Op!” it commanded. A wiry arm steadied his upward plunge. It was a horrible nerve-racking leap, for the edge of the lorry was as uncertain as the dark; and after Ben had climbed over it, blocks of ice surrounded the sacks of fish and made but a slippery handhold. A tiny point of light flickered about the yard, accompanied by gruff male voices. Ben caught a glimpse of their tin-hatted driver, before the engine began to warm up and slowly bump its vehicle over the cobbled yard. It was a cold and jerky drive. There are better travelling companions than frozen fish; but Em’ly had not chosen wrongly for their purpose. The lorry ran straight and fast up Holborn; and by the time they had reached Oxford Circus, the traffic lights made their descent one of comparative safety.

There was a light in Oxford Street stronger than daylight. A wall of sheer flame stretched into the sky. What was once a huge department store was now a fiery cavern, out of which smoke swirled—streaming off over London as if to hide, behind its heavy pall, the wound at its core.

Bombers had just passed over, splitting open this great shop and many homes in its vicinity, shattering human hearts and emptying human pockets at the same time.

A cordon of police held back, or guided on, the passers-by—people crawling out from débris; people shocked out by blast; people standing-by to

rescue; and those strange anonymous people that spring up in London, at any hour of the day or night, in moments of disaster.

Half-frantic householders were begging to be allowed to remain close to their bulging walls and crumbling roofs, to save what was still left of their treasures. A.R.P.'s were trying to shepherd them towards First Aid Posts or Rest Rooms, explaining to those who had relations beneath the burning walls that the rescuers were doing what they could. But how could fathers and mothers believe it was safer to leave their buried children to be dug out by strangers? Would not their own hands tear their children out beneath burning bricks—or from under crumbling walls, at any risk, and with a passion stronger than any stranger's, however expert? Little groups of already dug-out people, dazed and protesting, were being led away to safer quarters. Ben thought they looked as if they were being arrested and had committed crimes.

To run away from home is an adventure, but to have your home running away from you is something of a disgrace. Ben found that he had a lump in his throat that he could not swallow. At the sight of the bombed-out people, all the charm and excitement of the adventure fell away; white-faced and offended, where were they going—and what would they find there? A chair and a cup of tea, and a Form to fill in—and then what? The houses of friends and relations as poor and threatened as themselves?

Em'ly did not share Ben's feeling. "Garn—yer goofy!" she exclaimed scornfully. "There ain't anythink in it fer us! Wot we wants is ter git near that big store burning!"

She pulled him by the arm, while Ben swallowed his lump and turned his back on the scattered groups of the stricken.

The side streets close to the fire were scorching hot and full of acrid smoke, but Em'ly led Ben relentlessly forward. The pavements burned beneath their feet; their eyes smarted and watered. Sometimes they had to stop and brush the sparks off each other. Once they passed a recently dropped incendiary, the size of a cat, made out of flaming emeralds.

Cautiously they drew nearer and nearer to the great wall of flame. The fire was sweeping upwards to the sky, and burning merrily in spite of all the engines focused on it and the army of black silhouetted figures fighting it at close quarters. The sky behind them was a rose-coloured glory. Ben watched with enchanted eagerness the men flitting about on burning walls and crossing unsubstantial spark-menaced roofs. Their wheeled ladders stretched upward like the antennae of an insect, cautious, watchful, joining up

together so as to reach higher and higher against the fragile walls. The hoses slung here and there poured out a steady stream of rescuing water, beating back the oncoming flames until they sank, spluttering and dulled at last, into a hissing silence.

Ben had never seen such a sight before. Indeed, there cannot have been many such sights even in the stricken areas of smaller cities while their hearts burned out. This fire in the vastness of London looked as solid as the blocks of buildings through which it ate its close rapacious way. Inside the roofless store the light between the shattered clefts of walls, and from the split roof above, held the whole contents of the great shop in one last orgy of advertisement. Thousands of garments of all shapes and colours shone for a last time in a burst of glory, before—licked black by flames—they sank into dust, or filtered into sour smelly ashes. In the radius of surrounding streets were dropped flying treasures, driven by the wind of the fire itself or blown out by blasts from exploding bombs.

Em'ly found a dark corner behind a heap of smoking rubble where she placed the empty sacks. She wasted no time staring at the greatest crime in history. Briefly, she informed Ben of the part he was to play. She would do the actual looting. Ben must stand in an unexposed but handy corner, midway between Em'ly's field of operation and the sacks. Em'ly would transfer the spoils to him; and he must return to the sacks, fill them, and find his way back to Em'ly. Policemen and A.R.P.'s would be mostly where the fires were worst; and at least half their attention would be fixed upon the fire itself. Victims, ambulances, firemen and rescue workers could be reckoned on to divide the rest. Em'ly's attention, on the other hand, was individual and wholly fixed upon the loot itself. She darted in and out of attacked buildings, between flame and shadow, with the swift adjustability of a lizard. To hover, swoop and snatch came to her as naturally as breathing. For a moment she would stand blotted against the dark mass of the crowd, as invisible as a caterpillar on a leaf of its own colour—and then suddenly shoot out for a bare instant under the arms, or through the legs of authority itself, pounce upon her prey; and just as the Law became aware of her predatory errand, Em'ly was gone. The dark shadow of a friendly wall hid her, or part of a building near by swallowed her up.

Ben felt no sense of remorse over this part of the business. He was heart and soul with Em'ly against the Law. There were no visible Owners; and the gay apparel appeared to encourage rather than to wince away from its fate. This dance of bright and lovely things lit up by flame, or garnered by the light-fingered Em'ly, had about it the quality of ecstasy. There had never

been enough of these precious substances to clothe more than the privileged few, but in their last hours they were giving pleasure to half London.

Ben could not see Em'ly now; but suddenly he heard behind him her knife-like tones: "'Ere, you ole star-gazer," she said sharply, "catch 'old of wot I've picked up! Look slippy too—gettin' 'em into the sacks! Mind you don't let no one see wot yer up ter! A night like this—there'll be bad men abaht! Nor I wouldn't put it past 'em to watch just 'ow we work, and take our stuff, onct we git erway with it! You wouldn't 'alf believe 'ow wicked these 'ere thieves is in Lunnon!"

Em'ly was out of breath and streaked with soot. Her hands were scorched with digging in hot rubble, but her voice, though harsh, was triumphant. Six pairs of silk stockings, two pairs of gold dance slippers, a blue fox fur, a quilted satin dressing gown, and a whole box full of crepe de Chine scarves and handkerchiefs was not a bad beginning.

"I don't serpose yer can tike 'arf of 'em at a time," Em'ly said consideringly. "'Ere, I'll sit on the rest till yer git back, see! I've got ter git my bref any'ow; nor it won't do no 'arm for them narks ter forgit wot struck 'em!"



She wound Ben round and round with trophies, dragged his coat as near as possible to cover them, and advised him as to the safest route.

“Nah! ’Op it!” she whispered urgently.

For a moment Ben stood as still as a baby rabbit pretending to be a leaf. Then he melted against the nearest wall. He was—and he knew it—the active pack animal of Looting, and if the Law came across him loaded down with swag, they would haul him off to the nearest police station. If this disaster occurred he must know nothing whatever about either Em’ly or the

sacks. Fortunately he was not without experience of evasion. For at least a year he had acted successfully as coal-and-wood stooge for the Twins. He had learned the kind of corners to lounge round, where and when to sprint, and how to let his feet follow his eyes without a moment's interval backwards or forwards. Half the side streets near the fire were light as day, but in the other half the shadowy depth of the blackout was hardly thinned by the dawn. Alert and insignificant, Ben flitted from corner to corner until at last he arrived at the spot where the sacks were hidden. With trembling hands he filled and rehid them; and then, feeling as light as air, and as free as a ransomed soul, Ben strolled back towards the fire.

He took a different route, less cumbered with heat and flying particles, but whichever way he turned the great store in Oxford Street flung its fantastic death-dance against the sky in the face of all beholders. Em'ly was pleased at Ben's safe arrival, though she grumbled a little at the time he had taken. Once more she packed him up, and sent him flying; then she herself took a deep long breath, and plunged anew into the danger zone.

Em'ly's gift for being invisible amounted to genius. A faint light crept gingerly down from the sky to meet the fire. When Ben returned, his task achieved, he saw by the movements of the police that they were aware of looters. His whole heart—racing as it had never raced before—was concentrated on Em'ly's safety. If only Em'ly escaped he was willing to give up all his private fancies, even the Teddy bear for Mabel.

There had been a fierce joy in his personal adventure, whatever actually came out of it. It had been marvellous to dash head-on, through merciful gloom, piled high with loot; scenting afar any threatening wayfarer; slowing to a crawl whenever the flames sent their lighted torch in his direction; obliterating himself in friendly areas; dodging through a mews—or blind alley—while all the time his heart beat like a windmill in a gale. He relived all these thrills, waiting for Em'ly in a doorway, but he would have given up all of them for her safe return.

The cold dawn stalked him; and now the blackout ceased to hide the shape of living things.

Flushed with triumph, half blind with smoke and soot, Em'ly at length rejoined him, with her last haul safe. More police, she explained, had turned up. The cordon was now practically impregnable.

“Gawd, Ben,” she murmured. “I’m ’ot an’ sweaty—the light’s coming up too from the river—we gotta get goin’!”

Em'ly possessed the final gift of a true artist. She knew when to stop. Softly and silently she followed Ben through the smoking, stifling side streets with their shaking walls. The sacks were still where Ben had hidden them. Em'ly took the heaviest, and lifted the lighter sack onto Ben's shoulders. They bent double under the weight—and trusted to whatever luck there was. Em'ly led the way, wary as a cat, and almost as agile. The pallid dawn drew them back to the river.

“’Ullo!” a Postal Sorter on his way home from a long nightmare vigil shouted suddenly at them. “Wot ’ave you children got in them sacks?”

“Soot!” Em'ly replied without an instant's hesitation. “Look at my fice, carn't yer? ’Ain't 'eard there's a war on, p'reps? We're working for a chimbly sweep—that's wot we're doin', mister! I suppose Scotland Yard 'as lorst itself an arsked *you* ter fahnd it!”

This was a hint that the Postal Sorter was not slow to grasp. He had no right to question the children since he was not a policeman; and London children know their rights. Even the suspicious sacks were dirty enough to bear out Em'ly's claim. Her own face was a perfect testimony—soot stretched from ear to ear. The Sorter had had no sleep and wanted his breakfast. He looked round for a policeman or even an A.R.P., but none were visible. Em'ly put out her tongue at him; but not until she saw that he had decided to let the matter slide.

As soon as he was out of sight, however, she admonished Ben to hurry. “That lousy barstard might send a Copper arter us yet,” she explained, “if 'e ran into one. We better git ter the river!”

In five minutes the white milky fog of their old confederate the Thames spread its shelter over them.

Em'ly drew a long deep breath of relief.

“Ben,” she told him, “I'm agoin' ter sell this 'aul, and giv' yer enuff dough aht of it ter buy wot yer want for Mibel, an' the roller skates fer yerself as well. I ain't forgotten wot yer wanted—but it don't do ter be choosey in yer lootin'!”

Ben gave her no spoken thanks, but from henceforward he loved her. No matter what the Twins felt,—no matter what Em'ly herself subsequently did, or failed to do, that was doubtful as to morals or dangerous to life,—in Ben's capacious heart she had taken root, and grew with all the flourishing propensity of a upas tree.

X

The mist protected them till they reached Beulah Street, then it drew back; and standing in Ben's open doorway they saw the figure of their Shelter A.R.P.—looking straight at them.

Inside the doorway stood Mrs. Barton, her apron over her head, while Flossie, with an arm round her mother, was crying bitterly. Mr. Barton and Bert stood stiffly behind their womenkind as if they were having their photographs taken—and didn't like it. Mabel was seated with her back to them, on the pavement. She dragged herself slowly and absorbedly up, by the help of the A.R.P.'s kneecaps. When she was on her feet, she saw Ben for the first time—gave a peacock scream of joy, and, overbalancing herself, fell on the flat of her back, her screams changing from joy to woe, in the act of falling. But nothing that Mabel could do in the way of noise and fury equalled Em'ly's dramatic stunt. From the moment Em'ly caught sight of the A.R.P. she knew the game was up. Nothing could be done about it; it was a fair cop. All that could now be saved from the wreck of the night's work was a little personal security.

"We are but little children weak" was obviously the best card to play; and for all she was worth, Em'ly played it.

Her heartrending sobs actually shook her own family out of the house, where they had been concealed behind some sacking in the front window used as a blackout, watching to see whether it was worth their while to join in or not.

A good story pieced itself together between the volleys of Em'ly's resounding sobs. A kind lady had given her the sacks and begged her to save what she could from the Hun. Gutters were running with spoiling treasures; winds blew crepe de Chine undies straight at them; there was practically no way of avoiding the accumulation of stray goods. Listening to the way in which Em'ly and Ben had come by sacks full of undamaged specimens, one might think that the inanimate objects themselves had had an adhesive quality and had clung to the children for protection. It had been sufficient for Em'ly and Ben to open a sack for some perishable and hunted treasure to run into it. Meanwhile Em'ly's family acted as a supporting chorus. Em'ly had always been a good child, they averred,—an honest child,—in fact the only honest child in Beulah Street. You could strew her path with diamonds,

and she would return them to you as if they were pebbles. Ben was the real culprit—if culprit there was. He was a small child, but older than Em'ly, and well known for a dreadful little thief if ever there was one.

“That’s a lie!” Em’ly suddenly stopped sobbing to announce in her natural voice, to the consternation of her whole family. “Ben ’e’s seven, an’ I’m nine! It ain’t likely ’e took *me*—I took *’im*! We was both in it!”

“So I supposed,” said the A.R.P., giving Em’ly the man-to-man attention which she merited. “You may both be young but you knew well enough what you were up to, I’ll be bound! What you’ve got in those two sacks is loot. You’ve stolen it, and if you’d been a few years older, you’d have gone to prison for it. I shall take both these sacks back to wherever you took them from; and leave your own families to deal with you as you deserve. A good hard spanking is what I should recommend, and if you do anything like it again, you’ll get put away in a reformatory. Now which shop did these things come from? Don’t tell me the angels gave them to you, or that you picked them off gooseberry bushes in the Strand, because I shan’t believe you!”

A slow appreciative grin spread over Em’ly’s hardened countenance. Her sobs ceased with the automatic celerity with which a well-plumbed tap is turned off.

“John Lewis,” she admitted with a curt nod of her head in the direction of Oxford Street. “Coo—yer shud ’ave seen it burn! We only took what blew out of it like. Stan’s ter reason someone was goin’ ter tike it, don’t it?”

Ben sniffed drearily on. His was not the rôle of the young Premier—far from it—he was merely an “also ran.” He found in his small vocabulary nothing at all to say, either for himself or Em’ly. He saw that he had upset his mother and guessed that Flossie’s most unusual tears were for him. The males of his family looked ominous. Their anxiety was always expressed in terms of anger, and was likely to lead directly towards corporal punishment. If Ben had been missed, he would have to pay for it.

The A.R.P. regarded him with a certain tolerance. “I leave him to you,” he said to Ben’s family. “You did quite right to notify me of the children’s disappearance. If you hadn’t, I might have supposed you were responsible for the expedition, as I *am* inclined to suppose your next-door neighbours were! They never let me know that honest little girl of theirs was missing! But I can’t prove anything, so you all escape the Law this time. Get the punishment stage over as soon as you can, and then give the children something to eat and put them straight to bed. Keep an eye on them another

time in the Shelter—raids or no raids; and if you'll take my advice, get them all off to the country. Dockland just now is no place in which to bring up the young!"

The A.R.P. then went off with the sacks as if they belonged to him, and with them went Ben's chances of a Teddy bear, roller skates and a sewing machine.

Mabel put her tongue out at Ben just to cheer him up, before being dragged away by her mother, who muttered, rather cryptically from a moral point of view, "If you'd 'ad any sense, you'd 'ave come 'ome earlier!"

Mrs. Higgins hit Em'ly even before she'd got her inside the house, and considerably harder than Mrs. Barton would ever have hit Ben. Property, Mrs. Higgins considered, behind acres of thick glass windows was one thing; and property flung upon the trackless air was quite another; but in either case, if trouble were brought home from tampering with property in any form whatever, the bringer of it deserved all she could take.

Mr. Barton's sense of discipline was far more morally confused.

"'Ere," he said dragging Ben between his knees and looking down at him with a strange mingling of pride and annoyance, "wot yer been an' gone an' done is stealing! An' like it or not, you got ter tike a 'iding! I'm not saying that capitalists like them John Lewises 'ave any right ter wot they got! As I see it—they 'aven't! But when it's taken away from 'em, it's got ter be by all, for all—see? Why—yer might be a bleeding capitalist yerself goin' rahnd sneakin' sackfuls of luxuries—an' bringin' 'em back ter yer Ma!"

Ben nodded dolefully. He did not understand what his father meant but he was sure that the less said the sooner anything unpleasant would be over—and he wanted it over. It had been a long night. His feet were aching; his eyes were inflamed and felt full of sand.

Mr. Barton put his small son methodically across his knees and smacked him good and proper, while Mrs. Barton looked on with set lips, jerking herself backwards as if each blow fell on her, before it reached her offspring. She thought her husband was acting rightly; but she didn't like it. Bert thought his father was foolishly mild. He had to think of his young lady, and of how high she stood, and expected him to stand, in the ranks of human respectability—though he loved Ben, he would have smacked him harder. Flossie began heating up some cocoa in a saucepan. She thought the whole thing great nonsense, and had the children got away with it, she wouldn't have said "No" to the crepe de Chine undies herself. Mabel, when she saw

what was happening to her beloved protector, threw herself face downwards on the floor and roared the house down.

As soon as Mr. Barton had fulfilled his parental duty, he handed Ben over to his mother. Mrs. Barton took him straight to bed; and Flossie brought him up the cocoa.

Ben was being treated like a lord; and he knew it. Only after he'd drunk his cocoa and described his night's adventures did Mrs. Barton remember her moral duty as a parent. She sat down heavily on the bed beside him and said: "Wot you done, Ben, wasn't right. Now, a bit of coal is one thing, or it might be an old sleeper, or if you was ter be dahnright 'ungry with food lying abaht the way these odds and ends were—I wouldn't 'ave thought none the worse of you for takin' it; but crepe de Chine knickers and furs and such—well, that's quite another! Where I works, there's lots of them things abaht—wot I could take as easy as winkin'—an' there's chars that do! But I ain't ever touched nothink! Nor it wouldn't be honest, would it, Flossie?"

Flossie tossed her head and sniffed. "A whole sackful like," she agreed disparagingly, "as if you'd done it on purpose, Ben—downright *low* I call that! But it was that young Em'ly that put you up to it, of course. It ain't the Nipper's fault, Ma, it really ain't! You oughtn't to have let him go about with her."

Bert and his father creaked their way upstairs to join the family council.

"Yus, don't yer go near that young Em'ly again no more," Bert earnestly advised Ben. "That kid's an 'oly terror! Gor' blimey if she ain't! There's no knowing where she'll end up—hangman's rope as like as not! *She* won't live to be drowned—not *her*!"

"There's Gawd too!" added Mrs. Barton anxious not to overlook any moral auxiliary at her disposal. "My mother used ter say ter me, 'Don't forget, Sarah—the Eye of the H'almighty is never off of yer!'"

"'Oo's Gawd?" Ben demanded belligerently. He felt that the dragging in of this Distinguished Stranger so late in the day was more than he should be asked to bear.

There was a moment's awed, and awkward, silence while the family took in the depths of his ignorance. Who *was* God? Mr. Barton was the first to recover his punctured wits.

"As far as I knows on," he said earnestly, "there's no sich a Person! Leastways there ain't any of us that's ever seen 'Im! Religion sounds like a capitalist invention to me—an' always 'as! But yer 'ad orter 'ave 'eard, of

Gawd, my boy—at your age! Whether you believe in 'Im or not! Sairey, why ain't yer ever told 'im?"

Mrs. Barton looked helplessly at Ben and back again at her husband. "'E *must* know abaht Gawd," she muttered apologetically. "'E's just let it slip 'is mind, that's all! Ain't it Ben? I went ter Sunday School as a chile regular meself. Strite I did Dear! That was in Reading where I was brought up—Chapel it was, but we 'ad Bible readings, 'ymn singings, sermons—an' all. Flossie and Bert—they went to a Sunday School when they was kids, or the clergyman wouldn't 'ave taken them all the way to Margate and back, if they 'adn't gone ter church four Sundays runnin' *first*! The Twins too—they got somepin' out of it! A Baptist Christmas tree they went to—you remember the wheelbarrow our Alfie 'ad, Ben—wot he wouldn't never let you 'andle? Vi'let she came 'ome with a cuckoo clock and a pink muffler onct—good people they was—but the chapel burned down the next year, an' ain't been rebuilt since."

Ben remembered both the wheelbarrow and the cuckoo clock. He nodded his head. If these were to be taken as proof of the existence of God, he was now at least partially convinced. His mother went on still more apologetically, addressing Ben and his father by turns: "I ain't never 'ad the time ter get Ben all dressed up on a Sunday ter go ter church—nor 'e ain't ever 'ad the cloes I'd a liked ter 'ave seen 'im in neither! But Ben Dearie, you must 'ave '*eard* of Gawd some'ow or other?"

Ben shook his head obstinately. The name was familiar to him; but nothing much beyond the name, and that was generally used in a passion about something else.

Flossie came to her mother's rescue. "It's ignorant," she said coldly, "not to know about God. He's in the sky, where you'll go after you're dead, if you've been a good boy. Then there's Jesus Christ. He was born on this earth two thousand years ago on purpose so we should all know about God properly. He's God too, and He was crucified—that's hung up on a cross of wood, by his hands and feet—crool I call it—to save us from our sins; and on Easter Day He rose from the dead—same as everybody else will one day. Lots of people pray to Him to get what they want."

"Do they get it?" Ben rather naturally demanded.

Flossie looked put out, and hesitated; but her mother could now go on upon a firmer foundation. As she said afterwards in private to her husband, the moment Flossie started off about Jesus Christ, it had all come back to her.

"Flossie 'as told you the 'ole thing lovely!" Mrs. Barton asserted soothingly. "You think it all over, Dearie, before you drop asleep—an' don't go round tellin' people again you ain't ever 'eard of Gawd—it sounds bad! Why—there's 'Our Father chart in Heaven' people say when they goes inside a church, and at a the-a-tre or a Pickshure Show, they sing 'Gawd save the King'—which they wouldn't do, would they, if there wasn't no such Person?"

Mabel, who had been left out of the discussion and whose legs were not yet firm enough to negotiate the stairs unaided, now set up a doleful howling from the kitchen.

"Bless the child," Mrs. Barton exclaimed, not unwilling to bring the subject to so natural a conclusion, "she ain't 'ad no breakfus yet! I forgot all abaht 'er!"

Ben, however, had no intention of letting so good a subject for nonplussing his elders get past him. "'As *anybody*," he repeated fiercely, fixing his eyes on the uneasy Bert, "ever got wot they wanted when they asked Gawd for it?" Flossie giggled but Bert tried to meet Ben's difficulty squarely.

"There's some as thinks they 'as," he said slowly, "an' some thinks they 'asn't. Arter all, Ben, if there is a Gawd, and lots of people thinks there *is*, even if Dad doesn't, stan's ter reason 'E's got ter know a lot more'n we do about most things, an' 'E ain't likely to see eye to eye with what the rest of us asks 'Im, is 'E? You carn't blame 'Im for that either!"

"Whether there's a God or not," Mr. Barton said, feeling that at this juncture he ought to assert his parental authority, "there's the police! An' don't you forget it!"

This made a good exit; and Mr. Barton took it. Bert and Flossie lingered. For nearly three hours they had been searching in Shelters and under Arches for Ben—dreading to hear or see that he had been struck by falling masonry, or buried under a collapsing house. They had not known how much they cared for him before; but now they knew. What they couldn't at the moment find was any effective way of showing it. But Ben had guessed their secret. He could never remember having been paid so much attention by his family before. Even the beating his father had bestowed upon him had been a token of importance, in however regrettable a form. He felt deeply flattered by the uneasy lingering of his eldest brother and sister, though he wished at the same time that they would leave him to sleep in peace.

“Ser long, Nipper!” Bert said at last, with a kindly smile. “You keep orf that young Em’ly and you’ll be all right!”

Flossie was the last to leave him. She tucked Ben up, and, stooping over him, kissed him. “Don’t you fret about those things you took, Ducky!” she whispered. “Yer ain’t done any real harm by it—nor none of us thinks the worse of yer for it! Flying about like that outside a shop and all! Now go to sleep!”

Ben clung to her for a moment. Her cheeks were so soft and she smelt of some pleasant scent vaguely reminiscent of flowers. Ben felt suddenly that he had a kind and satisfactory family, nor did he mind adding God to them if necessary. . . . But however kind his family were, or however important this new Distinguished Stranger in the sky might turn out to be, one thing in Ben’s heart was fixed beyond the reach of any blandishment—he was not going to give up Em’ly to please anybody.

XI

The feud between the Bartons and the Higginses was reopened; the happy interlude of Mrs. Higgins' camisole, used to staunch Ben's wound, forgotten—except by Mrs. Higgins, who was not likely to forget since it was the only camisole she had.

As a family, the Bartons were a shade more respectable than the Higginses; and undoubtedly far better parents. Mrs. Barton could not overlook the fact that Ben had been endangered and his good name blackened. The Higginses' grudge was deeper. The two sacks, wantonly carried off by the A.R.P., were their own personal property. Nor had they been in any anxiety about the absence of their enterprising child. Perhaps they cared less for Em'ly than the Bartons cared for Ben; or perhaps they had a well-earned confidence in a certain tough and eelish quality in Em'ly herself. At any rate they felt that the Bartons, by their appeal to authority for their missing child, had acted as troublemakers.

Mrs. Higgins told Mrs. Barton exactly what she thought of her; and Mrs. Barton exposed *her* thoughts about Mrs. Higgins, while all that was left of Beulah Street listened breathlessly. Both ladies prefaced their most telling phrases with the statement "If this was the lars' word I ever said . . ." without showing any intention of letting it be the last word.

Nor did they confine themselves to mere words; blows followed.

Mrs. Barton, being the stoutest and most easily overheated by the violence of her own temper, subsided soonest.

Mrs. Higgins knocked the breath out of her, scratched her face, and gave Mrs. Barton a black eye; but the honours of war were not unequal, since a well-aimed blow from Mrs. Barton deprived Mrs. Higgins of a rather badly decayed front tooth.

Ben and Em'ly were sleeping off their overnight excesses and so missed the entire drama. They awoke refreshed and excited, about teatime, to be told they must never meet again. They appeared appalled by this sentence but actually neither of them took it very much to heart. Half their lives had been spent in tackling and overcoming obstacles; so that unless disaster was upon an overwhelming scale, they merely withdrew into themselves,

presented a poker face to the world, and pitted their wits against the immediate problem.

They had any amount of leisure with which to plan and execute their designs, since a Molotoff bread-basket, scattering its crumbs over the school, had put it entirely out of action.

However much their parents hated each other, they had to go to work—and therefore had not much time to see to it that the separation of their children was translated into fact.

Ben started out after tea with Mabel in her pram. Em'ly timed him from the window, slipped out by the back door into Lilac Grove, with Sam over her shoulder, and caught up with Ben once the pram had passed well beyond the reach of neighbouring eyes. They had the rest of a late summer afternoon and early evening to spend together; and between them sixpence to expend upon a meal. Sam and Mabel had bottles of milk inside the pram and only shared "token payments" from the meals of their elders. All four children were overexcited and undernourished, but in all other respects well up to the slum child average—and therefore felt none the worse for having been up all the previous night.

"It ain't no good nah," Em'ly said gloomily but without passion, "thinkin' we can 'ook it aht of them Shelters at night no more. They'll be watching aht for us; an' even if we wos ter manage that there A.R.P.—getting round his legs in the dark agine the way we did before—cops would 'unt the 'ouse 'fore we 'ad time to 'ide our swag. It ain't as if I wos a reg'lar 'and at it any'ow—or knew where to stow the stuff. Them men wot puts swag away fer you rake-off somepin' awful, Ma says; and sometimes they're no better than Coppers' narks. It don't do talking to no one you don't know, abaht nuffin'! You're strite, Ben, an' so am I—but 'oo else is? Even yer own fambly ain't much 'elp when yer come right dahn to it. Look at the way they carried on this mornin'! Your Dad 'e 'its you 'cos you took them things we picked up—an' my Ma she 'its me 'cos I didn't get awiy wiv it! An' if we 'ad got awiy wiv it—wot say they wouldn't 'ave taken our pickin's? Search me if they wouldn't of!"

"Did they tell you—*Gawd* knew what we'd bin an' done?" Ben asked with awed interest. "I ain't ever 'eard much of '*Im* before lars' night—'ave you, Em'ly?"

Em'ly nodded; and pulled up short before a man selling roasted chestnuts. The "bombed-out" theory did not work with him. He merely said with weary unconcern, "A ounce for twopence." The price, he further added,

had gone up; and soon there wouldn't be any more chestnuts. Em'ly and Ben reluctantly parted with twopence, and sat down on the doorstep of a house that consisted merely of its doorstep, with a mantelpiece from next door behind it.

The chestnuts were piping hot and, as the early autumn mists were coming up from the river, comfortable to roll about in their hands before eating.

Ben insisted on giving a peeled chestnut to Mabel; but she promptly choked it up; and not to waste it, Ben took over the cast-up fragments.

"There ain't much ter Gawd," Em'ly said reflectively, with a chestnut bulging-out her cheek, like an inserted tennis ball, "when 'E turns up, it'll be time enuff ter 'ave ter settle wiv 'Im!"

"An' all that Flossie said," Ben ventured, half relieved and half disappointed, "abaht Jesus an' 'im bein' pinned up like, on a wooden cross—so 'e could 'elp us git ter 'eaven after we're dead—'e bein' a pilot in the R.A.F. like as not—d'you think *that's* all lies too, Em'ly?"

Em'ly transferred the chestnut to the opposite cheek before replying. "Chicken food!" she then said, referring to the story of the Crucifixion, with deep contempt.

Ben, however, could not give up the heroic story quite so lightly. Flossie had told it him straight. She'd said it was cruel; and she had minded. Ben was only seven but he had discovered that people do not mind what they are lying about. Besides, Mrs. Barton and Bert had backed Flossie.

"If they *did* pin 'im up like," Ben ventured, "'adn't 'e any mates? I wouldn't 'ave let *you* 'ang like that, Em'ly! 'Uns, them people must er been wot did 'im in fer trying ter 'elp them!"

"When you say 'Jees'—yer mean 'im," Em'ly volunteered, "but 'e's dead any'ow, donkeys years ago too! Wot say we goes ter the river and eats winkles off a barrer fer the rest of the fourpence?"

They turned the pram swiftly in a new direction, and when they reached the last few relics of houses, by the river's edge, they came upon a treasure beyond the dreams of avarice. It was almost a whole house; and it was empty. The doors were blown open, the windows were only partially boarded up; the rest of the street was unoccupied because it had—except for the heaps of rubble—as a street ceased to exist. But this house had only a small hole in the roof, with its counterpart in the bedroom below, and an almost ladylike crater in the kitchen. The two back rooms were entire. It

could be taken over by the children as their very own. Here they could meet. Here they could take shelter. Here was the Play House of all children's dreams! A house that could be used for their special needs and no one else's . . . The tireless instinct of nesting birds, of feverish beavers, of excited rabbits newly acquiring burrows, possessed their whole consciousness.

They dumped Mabel and Sam to practise rival acrobatics on the floor, and were off with the pram like the wind. Mist and the dusk were on their side. Nothing human moved in the broken row of roofless devastated houses.

"Their own people," Em'ly explained, "if they wasn't struck dead themselves *inside* 'em, gits money from the Govern-mint ter go somewheres else. So they don't rake rahnd as much as yer'd think. It's diggin' under the rubble thet you fahnd most. I got a 'ole tinned tongue diggin'—as good as a cut off a joint, it was. An' onct I find two packets of fags, and my Dad 'e give me a orange right off the bat—strite 'e did, fer fahndin' it!"

They slipped through glassless windows, and ran out on crumbling walls, or swung on twisted girders, in a breathless spirit of adventure. Here and there they came on a whole, more or less furnished room lurching out of wall-less space, exposed to the open sky. These rooms were no longer approached by stairs, but they could often be reached by a certain amount of skilled climbing. Beds and sofas, damaged, but useable, were still part of them. There were chairs that could be precariously handed down from Em'ly above to Ben beneath. Curtains could be ripped off nails; bits of carpet prized up from floors; while under heaps of rubble it was quite astonishing how many valuable kitchen utensils, and even frailer household articles, could be discovered intact.

Em'ly filled the pram to the brim with cups and saucers, a cracked teapot, a frying pan with a hole in it, two bulging but efficient saucepans, tins of food and other precious substances; and Ben covered them cautiously over with a woolly mat, and a piece of turkey-red tablecloth.

Ben wheeled the pram, while Em'ly darted ahead and signalled to him, like an active destroyer guarding an important convoy. The last part of the way they were directed towards the deserted babies by the yells of Mabel. Sam, when they reached their port, was stretched out upon the bare floor, peacefully asleep, his head upon the hearthstone; but Mabel, brought up to expect rather more of life, was frightening herself into a frenzy. Ben took some time soothing her, while Em'ly disposed of their booty.

Then the frantic swelling warning of the Alert drove them swiftly back towards Beulah Street. They could hardly see their way, over heaps of bricks, through lifeless tottering walls; but they were river children, and when they couldn't see, they smelt and sensed their way through into safety. The happy day had gone, and in the air was that strange hunted feeling, as if above and around them, something moved—inimicable and dangerous. Perhaps thousands of years ago, in Pompeii, people fled from Vesuvius through the shaking streets full of suffocating darkness, with just such a sense of doom upon them.

The siren dwindled and crept off into a whimper. Em'ly, seizing Sam out of the pram, swung him over her shoulder and vanished suddenly into Lilac Grove. Ben drove Mabel faster and faster, towards the Beulah Street Shelter.

He did not really mind the affectionate cuff he received from his family for arriving late. Their anxiety had its protective side; and within his heart Ben's dreams flourished, unhindered by momentary discomfort. He had not told Em'ly, but while she was surveying the practical aspects of their waterside Palace, Ben had climbed up through the bomb-hole out onto the roof.

Holding on to the chimney, he could see London Bridge, dimly spanning its king-river; and the round dome of St. Paul's, rather lonely now since the little streets surrounding it were only gaps, leaving the great church free against the sky. If the mist had not lain so deep along the river, Ben could almost have caught the towers of Westminster.

"It must be near seven now," he thought—and suddenly the air filled with the long reverberations of Big Ben's heavy notes. Serene, unruffled, regular, Ben listened to the half-remembered, half-imagined voice. It was not just a clock speaking from a tower—surely, surely, he told himself—it was the Voice of God speaking to his people? The worst would soon be over, the solemn Voice proclaimed, the best had not yet begun.

Ben had climbed down to answer Mabel's cry, but before he had climbed down his heart had grown serene. He need ask no more questions. This was the Secret of the Universe. Big Ben must be God, and little Ben safely a part of Him. A great awe and joy together filled Ben's silent heart; and no sooner was he settled in the Shelter than two wandering singers with an accordion came to seal his new faith with music.

They were tired men and a little uncertain of their welcome, but they played to hide the cruel senseless barking of the guns; and Ben slipped from his father's arms, to get nearer to them. There was an open space just

beneath the dim blue light, and Ben began to dance, the elation in his heart setting his whole being into rhythm. He tap-danced; he jitter-bugged; swaying and tossing himself, like a regardless lamb, into the air. He was in an ecstasy—music driven—and all who watched him shared his ecstasy.

The Shelter Marshal smiled his approval. Ben's own family, far off but protective, swelled with pride in him. Ben's heart nearly burst with speed and joy. Suddenly his father's arms swooped over him, and picked him up. Perhaps it was time to stop, because Ben felt half wild and very sleepy. Ma said, "Now, you've danced enuff—you'd 'ave been on yer 'ead in a minute!" She drew out of her string bag a bottle of milk, a thermos full of black tea, and several stout well-filled sandwiches. The guns shrieked and splattered above their heads. Every now and then a crash shook the Shelter from end to end.

People had been glad of the dancing child. His sublime unconsciousness had taken their attention off the raid. As Ben leaned against his father's shoulder, biting deep into tinned salmon, he saw smiles and friendly glances all about him. It was as if all London sat there, sharing this gigantic picnic.

Ma, leaning forward to stick the teat of the milk bottle firmly between Mabel's lips, voiced this friendly feeling for Ben. "Quite a 'appy family," Ma said, looking appreciatively into the pallid, crowded dusk, "ain't we, 'Erbert?" Mr. Barton growled reluctantly what may have been assent; and then the two musicians struck up "Home, Sweet Home" and all the Shelter sang it with them, with great simplicity and gusto, most of them knowing at least one line of it and humming the rest.

It was true that they might find no homes, sweet or otherwise, to return to, when the dawn came; but it was a reassuring tune, to beat down the noisy fierceness of the night.

Walls might go, roofs might go, the prized possessions of a lifetime might be burned or broken up, but something within the people's hearts grew stronger through the harsh and noisy hours. The feeling, upon which all homes throughout the world should surely be founded, stirred some of them for the first time in their isolated lives—and grew greater in those who already felt it. They felt that those who shared their danger with them—were their brothers.

XII

At nine years old, one short misty hour is very like another, and so on a dim October evening at play in their forbidden home, Em'ly, the family timekeeper, made a serious mistake. She thought it was only five o'clock, and just time to hurry both the babies in the pram and make off for the Shelter, when it was already six. She had just strapped Sam safely inside, and got the pram pointed towards the doorway, when the siren started with a heart-shuddering yelp, as if London were a dog that had been suddenly stepped on by a Prussian boot. Ben put out the oil stove just before a monster bang shook the house upside down.

All Ben saw before the darkness shut him in was Sam's face when the blast caught him—and carried him out, pram and all, to meet the bomb itself. He was sitting erect in Mabel's pram, his mouth slowly opening to scream; and that was the last anyone saw or heard of Sam.

Mabel was within reach of Ben's arms and as the bomb exploded he rolled her straight under their newly acquired half-sofa. She was the only one of the three who for the first few moments made a sound. Mabel's mouth was not full of dust and plaster, and though outraged and shaken by the suddenness of Ben's onslaught, she was unhurt.

Ben too, after a short dazed pause, realized that nothing much had happened to him. He was only buried by a fall of lath and plaster; his lip was slightly cut; his mouth and eyes were full of dust; but none of his bones were broken. For the next few moments he simply had to spit out all he could and rub his eyes clear. Not that, having got his eyes more or less clear, they were of much use to him, for he was still in pitch darkness. The house had simply fallen forward into itself when the bomb struck the road in front of it. Fortunately the bomb, a heavy high explosive, burned itself out in its own crater, and did no more than lick the bricks nearest it.

Within the house itself there was no danger from either gas or water, since these had long ago been disconnected. There was even a little air, through a chink in the broken rubble above their heads, though not large enough to let in daylight. If they had to be buried alive, the children—Ben and Mabel at least—had had luck. The fall of the front of the house had blocked windows and doorway, but it had left a cavern within itself, full of plaster from the ceiling, but large enough to move about in.

But Em'ly had less luck. At first Ben thought she was dead, for only Mabel's shrieks broke the silence. When Ben called "Em'ly! Em'ly!" nothing answered.

At last Ben heard a faint sound, between Mabel's intermittent screams, like that of a very small animal choking to death; and knew this must be Em'ly.

He left Mabel where she was, and crawled carefully over heaps of rubble, so as not to upset anything more, till his hand touched a piece of torn skirt and, on reaching farther down over the edges of broken bricks, a foot; and then he knew that he had found Em'ly. Bricks and a piece of ceiling had fallen on her. He must get her out, he told himself firmly, whatever had fallen on her. He turned a deaf ear to Mabel's screams, growing louder and louder as her shock decreased, and she felt herself deserted. He worked like a beaver, and soon moved away the rubble that lay over her face so that Em'ly could cough more freely, and breathe, in the extra space he had made for her, almost as if she weren't choking. But he couldn't lift the two great beams that had fallen forward on her; one across her legs, and one across her chest.

"Where's Sam?" she whispered.

"'E ain't 'ere!" Ben replied truthfully. "'E got ahtside in the pram—I seed 'im shootin' thro' the doorway. But there's one thing all right, Em'ly—there ain't no fire; or you'd 'ear the crackling!"

His own voice was hoarse and sounded strange to his ears, but not so strange as Em'ly's.

"The bomb went off like, just ahtside!" Em'ly replied, after a long pause used in choking. "Sam, 'e musta made strite for it!"

Ben had no easy comfort with which to meet this statement. If Sam *had* met the bomb, there was nothing to be done about it. If he hadn't, he was better off than they were—and even if he had, he wasn't much worse off than they were, since no one knew where to look for them.

Neither of them mentioned Sam again.

Em'ly, when she could get breath enough to speak further, said, "We got ter git aht of 'ere."

She was unable to concentrate wholly upon this problem, but with the strange tough fortitude of her nature she set herself to try to solve it.



Ben went on working to free her. He shifted, little by little, all that lay over her. He worked her neck and back freer, and stuck his coat under her head. She was eased from the weight of the beam across her chest. Now the beam only held her fast, and no longer pressed its full weight upon her. The beam across her legs was less flexible; but you do not breathe with your legs, and even frantic pain in a limb is less fearful than the mortal struggle of a threatened organ.

Em'ly could use her wits again, although at intervals everything seemed to leave her except pain.

Ben, listening to her voice growing less like that of a tortured animal's, felt his own panic receding. He was in the dark and couldn't get out, but Em'ly was full of ideas as to how they *might* get out; and Mabel was unhurt. Buried people always did get out, Em'ly told Ben stoically, sooner or later. Fortunately neither of them thought of what awaited them if they didn't.

Mabel's screams having by now become demoniac, Ben had to get back to find out what fresh disaster had befallen her. She had wet herself and did not like the feeling. Mabel was only a slum child, but civilization had laid a restraining hand upon her; and she felt rather more, than less, responsible for giving way to the wants of nature.

"Don't yell, Mibel, you've gotta take it!" Ben advised her, making her as comfortable as he could under the circumstances.

Then he returned to Em'ly, for her to make further suggestions towards their escape.

"Climb up wot yer can climb up," Em'ly advised. "Maybe you'll find a 'ole or a near 'ole, if yer scrabble abaht enuff! Then we'll all be O.K."

Ben set forth upon his black adventure with an equal mixture of determination and distaste. He had begun to feel sick with shock, his throat was sore, his eyes smarted, he had a headache and his legs trembled; but he allowed none of these symptoms to deflect his search.

"Yer know yer right 'and from yer left," Em'ly admonished him, "so say out loud, so's I can 'ear, wot everythink you touch is, fust on yer right 'and, an' then on yer left. You can start orf wiv me feet. I know me 'ead's ter where the 'ouse fell in." Em'ly stopped suddenly. She was going to say, "or I'd've got back to Sam," but this she couldn't say—and Ben, understanding her silence, refrained from comment.

He crawled forward from Em'ly's feet, and found nothing on his right hand but a substantial hunk of caved-in wall. Only a few lone bricks had been jarred out of its surface, and there were no footholds by which to climb. The kitchen and the staircase had caved in on themselves and refused to be got at. The back room they were in was filled with loose rubble. The ceiling above them appeared to be intact, except for lath and plaster, though, as there was a little air coming from this direction, there was presumably an invisible hole somewhere. There was the unweakened portion of the sofa under which Mabel had been rolled; and a piece of stuff that turned out to be a looted blanket was extractable from beneath a fall of brick on the floor.

If Ben had not always been interested in looking after Mabel, he would have given up the blind, endless, feel-over search far sooner than he did.

But he felt responsible, doubly responsible now, both for Mabel and Em'ly.

He had felt certain doubts of Em'ly when she was intact and vigorous and the leader of the group; but now these doubts had been transformed, and from the moment she was helpless Ben felt nothing else but anxious affection for her. He just went on feeling about, hour after hour, till his hands became like eyes. From time to time, Em'ly made fresh suggestions. He could stop searching and shout, for instance. So Ben shouted. This occupation was even more exhausting and equally fruitless; it made his throat so sore that he could scarcely whisper.

"Shud you think it was night, Em'ly?" he asked at last in a hesitant voice.

There was rather a long saddish sort of pause before Em'ly answered him.

"Yus!" she said at last, as if she didn't want to think it was night, but knew that she could not evade the issue, since she was no wish-dreamer. "It 'ad ought ter be night by now! You try ter git ter sleep now, Ben, with Mabel —it ain't no use shouting any more onct it's night!"

Ben had put Mabel's coat and his own under Em'ly's head; and now he covered her with the blanket. He liked to think she had the use of all these treasures since it was all he could do for her. He and Mabel could keep each other warm enough curled up on the sofa.

Ben wasn't kept awake by the thought of Em'ly's pain for he did not know the nature of pain; nor had Em'ly mentioned that she had any. But he knew that a good deal was wrong with anyone lying under two heavy beams who couldn't move hand or foot.

As for Em'ly, she knew that it was no good making a fuss. For a long time she tried to comfort herself by saying over and over to herself her favourite fancy, "She wore a pale pink satin dress." That was what Em'ly herself had always wanted to wear.

Sometimes the agony in her legs was so acute that she moaned. But she moaned under her breath, as it were, so as not to wake the other two. Sometimes all the pain seemed gone; and an awful numb weight took its place—a weight worse than any pain—till a fresh stab reminded her that even numbness had its advantages. By and by Em'ly ceased to be able to

choose what to think. If Sam had not been done in by the bomb, her relentless wits told her, he would have put up a roar so loud that surely some passer-by, in a more frequented street within earshot, must have heard him. Otherwise, they stood a very poor chance of being rescued.

As soon as she heard Ben stirring, Em'ly told him to start calling again.

She herself had no voice beyond a murmur. Was the darkness growing deeper? Or were her eyes growing dim? Had she any eyes left? She could lift her hand a little, but not enough to reach her face; and somehow or other she did not want to ask Ben if there was any light. Oceans of time ran over her tortured body, and nobody interrupted it. It was such an agony to swallow that Em'ly had to keep on doing it to prove to herself that she could do it still, and so strangely difficult to breathe that she hurried the process and made it more difficult.

That queer thing that banged against her side, and fluttered in her throat — was it her threatened heart?

“Em'ly?” Ben whispered at last. She could hear him moving cleverly and quietly over the rubble. Suddenly his small hot hand rested on hers.

“Em'ly—you cold?” he demanded.

She was not nearly so cold now that she could feel his live fingers close over her heavy ones.

“Ben,” she whispered, “you go on shoutin'! Never you mind nuffin' else now—jes' shout!”

Ben shouted till all the voice he had was a little uneasy croaking like a frog's.

Then Mabel woke and cried on a high whining note that neither of them had ever heard in a child's voice before. Perhaps no child had ever needed to use such a note before; but this child needed it.

When Ben scrambled back to her and rocked her in his arms, Mabel stopped her dreadful high-pitched cry, but when he had to leave her to go back to Em'ly, she began again.

Em'ly had grown more silent and less restless. She hardly moved at all now, not even as much as she could.

After a while she stopped telling Ben what to do, even in a whisper; but she still murmured his name when he reached her.

Mabel called “Ma! Ma! Ma!” for a long time, and then she forgot how to talk, and just continued the high animal droning cry that tore at Ben’s heart-strings.

Every now and then, he would move off his pathway between them, and try desperately once more to tear the wall down with his cut and bleeding hands. The air was heavy and full of dust; and when he moved, it grew more choking; and yet if he couldn’t get them out, nobody could—for who else was there? He tried to carry Mabel over to where Em’ly was, but he couldn’t stand up with her weight in his arms. Em’ly was breathing faster, and didn’t even whisper any more, but she was glad when Ben touched her, and always gave his hand an answering pressure that was as good as a word.

As there was no light, there was no time. Days and days might have slipped past them, or only hours. No sound penetrated from the world above them except an occasional Alert or an All Clear—and every now and then the sharp intermittent fury of the guns.

The singing earth might have had no other sounds.

“Fortunately no one’s alive in this desert now,” an A.R.P. said to his mate, as they looked down the deserted cul-de-sac. “That’s where that bomb dropped two nights ago—see the new crater. There was actually a house left standing close to it when I passed last time; but it was only a shell of a house. I knew that the next blast was sure to bring it down. We must send a Demolition Squad along to-morrow to cart off the bricks.”

“Didn’t I hear a cat mewling somewhere?” his friend asked.

They paused to listen. A peculiar cry rose close to them, longer and more querulous than a cat’s.

“That’s no cat,” the first A.R.P. said uncertainly. “It sounds like the voice of a very young child—I’ve got one myself. Only this sounds as if it were a—senseless child!”

“If it’s been under this heap long enough—and *is* a child,” his friend said grimly, “the chances are it *has* gone raving mad!”

The first A.R.P. started running towards the nearest telephone booth, while the other leaned close to the heap of bricks, and started calling. Mabel’s high thin cry never checked or altered; but the man bending down and listening, as if with his very blood, heard a faint rustling sound beneath his feet; and then a hoarse resolute croaking whisper that sounded like the word “Help!”

“All right!” the A.R.P. called down eagerly. “All right! We’re coming! Help is here! Knock if you can understand what I say?”

He shouted again after a pause, “Get hold of something and knock!”

A faint far-off sound, like a young woodpecker practising on his first tree, answered him.

“We’re coming! We hear you!” he shouted wildly. “Keep your hearts up!”



The blue dusk of the October day closed in. The silvery river swept its way into darkness. There was no more knocking. Had the whole thing been an illusion? Even the thin crying had stopped. Was the image of buried children just a hallucination of overwearied tragedy-crammed men? Or had they heard a ghost—a ghost that might well whisper its unforgotten grudge, through the wrecked streets of bombed cities?

The A.R.P. who was himself a father came running with a pick and shovel.

“They’re coming,” he gasped, “but let’s get at it—till they do!”

The two men fell upon the little heap of rubble, and cautiously picked their way down into it. Every now and then they paused to shout encouragement, and ask for a fresh sound. It seemed an age before they heard a knocking—quite unmistakable this time, under their very feet. The Rescue Squad arrived with its crane and began their skilled and patient digging. An ambulance shrieked warning of its arrival. A doctor sprang out and kneeled close to the first chink, peering with a flash lamp into the prisoned darkness. A very small grimy hand became visible.

Ben hadn’t been able to believe they were real men until the doctor leaned over and touched it.

“Listen,” the doctor asked slowly, “how many of you are down there?”

“There’s only Em’ly,” Ben’s faint croak told him, “an’ Mibel—she’s the biby—but she ain’t ’urt like Em’ly. An’ me—I’m Ben I am, and I ain’t ’urt at all!”

“Now move your hand towards where they are,” the doctor went on firmly. “You shall have something to drink in a moment after you’ve told us where the other two are. We don’t want any stuff to fall in on top of them or you.”

Ben’s mind felt quite clear suddenly—only urgent. He could follow every order the doctor gave him, because the doctor said only a few words, and those plain ones—words that could reach even a child’s mind, beating like a bird’s in a closed space, through clouds of panic longing.

The moment the chink was large enough, the doctor handed down a feeding cup. Ben was close to Mabel, so he held her against his shoulder, and just as the doctor told him, wetted her lips first; then moistened her tongue; and next stuck his fingers into the milk for her to suck them. After this, he was able to slip the spout of the feeding cup between her dry lips. She swallowed by mistake as it were, the first time; but then she got her lips

firmly round the spout and swallowed properly on and on, till the doctor said, "Now stop! She's had enough!"

Ben obediently tore the cup from Mabel. She cried of course, but like a real child, so that the doctor and Ben both knew that she was saved.

Now Ben had another cupful to take to Em'ly. The hole got larger only very slowly, but it was now large enough for the travelling light to show him Em'ly—and that her eyes were shut.

"Em'ly," Ben whispered, crouching above the cruel beams that caged her. "Em'ly, we're rescued! Drink!" But when he tried putting the spout to Em'ly's lips, the milk came out between, and spilled down her chin. Ben whispered again urgently, "Em'ly, drink!" Suddenly he began to cry. "It ain't no good!" he sobbed hoarsely. "It ain't no good bein' saved if you won't drink nuffin'!"

The sound of his hard and bitter sobbing roused Em'ly. He could feel her stir, and when once more he pushed the spout between her lips, she held the liquid in her mouth.

"Damn yer ter 'ell!" she had the strength to whisper after she'd swallowed it. "Drink yerself, carn't yer?"

Ben, feeling greatly heartened by the tartness of Em'ly's order, drank the rest of the feeding cup and staggered back for more.

The hole behind them was big enough soon for the doctor to slip through. He let Ben hold his flash lamp while he stuck something into Em'ly's arm.

One of the men had got Mabel out already, and handed her over to a nurse.

"Now *you* nip out!" he said to Ben, "and leave the other child to the doctor—he'll see after her!"

"I ain't ergoin' ter leave Em'ly," Ben told him fiercely. "'Ere you blinkin' barstard, put me dahn!" he shrieked as a firm hand picked him up from the floor.

This was no way to speak to the Arm of the Law, but Ben had passed into a region beyond authority. Only the respect and confidence given him by a fellow man could reach him.

"Steady, old boy," the doctor said, turning his eyes reassuringly on Ben's straggling form. "I'll bring her out to you, when we've got these beams off

her! I promise she'll be brought to the same hospital they'll take you to! Cut along, boy, and look after your baby!"

Ben stopped shrieking and trying to bite like a cornered rat; for he recognized the familiar responsibility of Mabel. In the very act of getting his teeth into the arm of the man who was lifting him out, he fell asleep suddenly, with his head against his enemy's shoulder.

"This is the most damnable thing I've seen, since the Blitz began," said the doctor in a low voice, looking down at Em'ly.

XIII

When Em'ly realized that they were being rescued, she stopped dying. It was not only Ben's voice that recalled her to life, although she heard his hard sobbing cry.

"That's *his* trouble!" she said to herself a trifle caustically—feeling that she had enough of her own. But since the rescue had come, exactly as she had foreseen it might, it would surely be a mug's game to die in its face! The gleam of a flash lamp showed her she was not blind for she could see the doctor's face bending over hers; great beads of sweat were on his forehead.

The doctor rubbed her arm with something, and then stuck in a needle. It was wonderful what happened afterwards. A slow, ponderous peace stole over her whole body.

Em'ly waited quite calmly for the beams to be sawed through. She was an economical child. Nor did she ever do for others what they could be induced to do for her. Since she was no longer responsible for what happened to her, she ceased to fight. There was no need for her now to bother about what happened to Ben, or Mabel either. If she were saved, so were they. Nor did she allow herself to think that Sam had *not* been saved. All such extraneous ideas were an unnecessary burden upon her part; and she gave them up. The blessed stream of the morphia relaxed her long agony, inch by inch. She was not unconscious. She watched, with interest, the men sawing through the beams that held her down. It was still difficult to breathe, but the doctor made a sort of air round her from an oxygen tube, and put a light mask over her face, so that nothing more could fall into her eyes or mouth. She did not know when she was free. Her body had no feeling at all now except weight.

Em'ly did not answer the doctor when he spoke to her from time to time. She had no intention of making any fresh efforts even for him; but she trusted him. This was an astonishing fact, for it cannot be truthfully said that Em'ly had ever trusted anyone before. It was not gratitude that she felt for him, but it was perhaps the highest spiritual form that human recognition can take—it was confidence.

She was too ill to notice where she was taken, although after a time she noticed movement; and once again she was in darkness, but a sweeter

darkness. The movement ceased; and someone gave her something heavy to breathe, under a big blue light.

When she woke, she found she was crucified like Jesus Christ. Her leg lay in a cradle; and one arm and shoulder were pressed out upon a board. It hurt her less than she had supposed being crucified could; but no doubt Em'ly thought, being used to tricks, there had been some kind of trick about the Crucifixion.

There was no sign of Ben or Mabel in the big room where Em'ly lay. There were other children lying very still, and some of them moaning a little. Daylight came slowly into the Ward and Em'ly noticed how quiet daylight was, after the long storm of the night. She was thirsty; and it hurt her to drink, although she longed for it. She had pain now, but it was not atrocious; and ladies, nicely dressed like angels, but still ladies, kept doing things to help her. A strange doctor in a long white linen coat came to see her, and after a long time, when it was evening again, her own rescuing doctor looked in with the other one. He had the same firm, stubborn look she had seen in his face by the flash lamp, when he first bent over her. He bent close to her again, so that it was easy for Em'ly to understand his words, but no one else besides her—neither the starched Sister nor the other doctor—could hear what he said.

“Look here,” he told Em'ly, “you can get well if you want to get well. You won't like it, but you've got to do what you're told! You'll have a lot of pain—and you'll have to stand it. It's up to you! I'll promise you one thing. If you do what you're told, and stand the pain, you'll not have to lose your leg, or your arm. You'll get right as rain. Now, will you make a go of it?”

Em'ly understood. It was a bargain. As long as she wanted to get well, she saw no reason why she should not pay for it. She nodded her head. She had never yet had anything free—except of course what she had stolen; but curiously enough, from this man she had no wish to steal. Suddenly he smiled down at her. The doctor looked at Em'ly as if he liked her; and all the sternness went out of his face. He stood up, straightened his broad shoulders and spoke to the Sister. The Alert sounded, and he went out with the Ambulance Service to which he was attached, to look for other Em'lys.

“That's not your *real* doctor, you know,” one of the ladies told her with insufferable kindness. “He is our ambulance doctor. He came in, to enquire after you!”

Em'ly just didn't put her tongue out at her. She knew that she would never have another doctor who was more real.

When Ben woke up in the long populated room, full of white cots, sunshine, and low-voiced ladies, he thought nothing in the world could be so beautiful or so satisfactory.

There was plenty of food and drink; other children; Mabel in the cot next to him still sleeping soundly; and nothing to do with his aching body and throat, but rest them. But as his strength came back to him, and other shorter days and nights took the place of the first blissful long one, Ben began to feel that hospitals had crabs to them.

Why, for instance, should you do as you were told? Why be woken up when asleep? Why be washed? Why obey wants of nature before nature herself hinted at obedience?

All these things seemed senseless to Ben. He was a slum child whose chief authority left home sharp at 7 A.M. six mornings in the week, and did not return before 5 P.M. at night. Nor was Mrs. Barton, when on the spot, a strict disciplinarian.

She had never been able to give her children most of the things that mothers like to give their children, such as security, good and constant nourishment, warm unpatched clothes, toys or regular amusements; so she had given them instead—unless too inconvenient for their elders—their own way. Sometimes of course, she had smacked them when they took it. But there had never been anything but superficial irritation behind her blows; nor had they ever had the effect of reasoned discipline.

Mrs. Barton was a good-humoured woman without spite, and with no desire to dominate her household. There were things she didn't like, as her family knew; and she could be formidable if these few prejudices were flouted. But Ben never remembered being ordered about unduly, or finding himself hampered by petty restrictions.

In the hospital, almost everyone ordered him about. The younger nurses were nice girls rather like Flossie. He had no great objection to meeting the more reasonable of their wishes, though they seemed to have a great many of them. There was a really lovely, more important Staff Nurse, with turquoise Irish eyes and shining black hair. She had a wonderful smile with dimples; and Ben agreed to her demands with alacrity. She had a special smile for each child, to greet the new day, and to help it forget the long hours of the night. She gave orders, but they got mixed up with her dimples. They were more like appeals than orders, Ben thought; and he never looked upon carrying them out as in the nature of a defeat. Washing his teeth, for

instance, was no longer a pernicky obstruction, but a creative act. She appeared to be grateful to him for every thrust of this superfluous small brush into his aching jaw. She helped him to gargle too, and told him that he gargled farther down, and more systematically, than any boy of his age whom she had ever nursed. Ben could gargle, when his throat got better, the first two bars of “Roll out the barrel,” so that everyone within hearing laughed and applauded. But not when Sister Job was anywhere about.

Sister Job was the real boss—a Blight, Ben considered, of the very first order. She had more starch inside her than outside her; and that was saying a great deal. She wore her spectacles as if they were weapons. She was, Ben thought, extremely old but painfully vigorous. She moved about the Ward with a cold swift vigilance that was absolutely terrifying. Whenever she spoke to the younger nurses, they dropped something. All the nurses said “Yes, Sister!” “No, Sister!” “Of course, Sister!” as if they were trying to appease Hitler or Mussolini in one of his most chin-throwing moments. Young doctors minded their steps for her; students trembled at her frown; even the House Surgeon did no more than just hold his ground. The Consultants alone looked upon her as an equal. She knew her place with them; but she also knew theirs—and saw that they kept it.

When the children cried—as they mostly did—from fury, boredom, or a desire to attract attention, Sister had only to look at them for them to stop with the sudden promptitude of taps turned off at the main. But when children cried from pain, or because their hearts were broken, or as Mabel did when she first came into the hospital, because she was not quite sane, Ben noticed that Sister behaved quite differently. Even if she did not exactly unbend, she would go up to the cot where the child lay, and touch it with a firm, cool hand, looking down into its eyes as if she had a voiceless message of reassurance for it; and the child had generally taken Sister’s message before she moved away again.

Still, Ben did not like Sister Job.

When Ben said “Nerse I want ter see Em’ly!” she looked at him with grim disapproval.

“You should call me ‘Sister,’” she told him in an icy voice; though anyone less like Flossie, Vi’let, or Mabel Ben had never seen. “And if the Emily you speak of is not in this Ward, you cannot see her; even if she *were* in this Ward, you would have to ask to be allowed to speak to her at the proper time, and in the proper way.”

"If she was in the bloody Ward, I'd 'ave spoke to 'er any'ow," Ben told Sister Job defiantly, but something in her frosty blue eyes made him add, "Sister!"

"You had better do what you are told, and speak when you are spoken to; and I will not have the word 'bloody' used in my Ward!" she told him acidly before she turned her back on him.

The first thing, Ben concluded from this conversation, was to find out where Em'ly was. This he did while one of the nurses cut up his dinner. Any children, the young nurse told him, who were not in this Ward were either severe cases on the ground floor in Number 7, or they were older children—over twelve—and would be found in the Men's or Women's Ward according to their sex. Em'ly, being only nine, was presumably downstairs in Number 7. There was no visiting allowed between the Wards except with special permission. Sister would have to be asked first; and even she would then have to consult the Home Sister or the Matron.

There were only four ways of getting to Number 7—the front stairs; the back stairs; the lift; or the outside fire escape.

The front stairs and the lift Ben crossed out immediately from the list of possibilities. Authorities of all kinds sped through, or brooded over, these principal exits. The back stairs gave more chance, especially at night; but because of the raids, would probably be guarded by at least one Porter or an A.R.P. The fire escape could be got at from the door next the lavatory. Each Ward had such a door, carefully blacked-out, but in a dim passage you could, Ben thought, slip through this door without exciting outside notice. Ben decided therefore upon the fire escape, after the night rounds of doctor and Sister should have taken place.

He had not asked whether his mother was coming to see him; because he had known she would. He had found out the visiting hours from the Staff Nurse, Sister Rosamund. He lay and thought of his mother's coming quite peacefully. The face he anticipated was not like one of these Picture Ladies moving about the Ward; but it was worth waiting for.

Mrs. Barton, considering what her surroundings were, and some of the facts of her existence, had a pleasant face. She had never wanted to do anyone any serious harm, except—quite recently—Hitler. It cannot be said that she enjoyed getting up at six o'clock, rain or shine except Sundays, and cleaning down two offices before she caught the bus that took her to the residential flats of her ladies. Small objects of an edible nature only, known to Mrs. Barton as "perks" (short for "perquisites"), sometimes left these

premises with her, in a large black linoleum-sided bag. Teetotallers might have objected to her liking, nightly, a glass of beer; and upon Saturday nights, even two glasses. But none of these things seemed other than virtues to Ben. Mrs. Barton had, besides, constant good humour, courage of no mean order; and a love for those that were her own, that nothing human or inhuman could have shaken out of her. All her family accepted this fact. Her husband hardly ever thought of her, and never in connection with the girl he had chosen and been chosen by, in his dim faraway youth; but if she had been taken from him, not even Stalin could have filled the void. Bert, who was her first-born, knew that his slightest wish was her law, even when she hadn't the means to carry it out. Flossie realized that her mother not only lived her youth over again in her, and for her, but in some curious and often resented fashion, *was* her—pulling Flossie away from what she wanted to do, when it was what she shouldn't; and urging her towards what she *should* do—and didn't want to accomplish. The Twins Mrs. Barton looked upon as if the Marx Brothers had inadvertently become her own; and when she gasped “Fancy that nah!” or “’Oo could ’ave thought it?”—or even “They’re up to no good—or they wouldn’t be ser quiet abaht it!”—the pride that seethed beneath her temporary criticisms could hardly be exaggerated. When it came to Ben himself, Mrs. Barton had a wholly different feeling. All her children, including more especially Mabel, were parts of herself as a mother; but the tie between Ben and herself was not only that of nature. Ben was her friend. They saw eye to eye, and heart to heart. Ben had not dared to think about her while he was buried under their pleasure-house. He had never had a secret from her before; and he knew that if it had *not* been a secret, somehow or other his mother would have found him and got him out. At last, though it was two days after he had reached the hospital, he saw her tiptoeing her substantial way across the Ward.

She had a purple hat on the back of her head, and a blue serge coat and skirt. One of her ladies had given her a blouse of cerise satin; and she carried a bag of boiled sweets for Mabel in one hand, and Ben's favourite picture papers in the other.

Sister Job, who seemed to have swallowed inside the starch she was swathed in without, took the sweets away from her.

“You ought to know,” she said severely, “that it is not allowed to give food to the patients without special permission.”

Mrs. Barton paused for a brief moment. She became easily belligerent when excited; but upon this occasion she needed all the time there was to see her children, who had been dead and were alive again; who had been lost

and were found; so she handed over the sweets with nothing more provocative than a slight snort.

Mrs. Barton had the large ungainly feet of women who are on them all day long; but the spirit in them carried her swiftly straight to her children's cots. Mabel was asleep; and Mrs. Barton did not wake her. As she stood at the foot of the cot looking down at her baby, her face became fiery red and she swallowed a lump that was trying to choke her. It was Mabel all right. She had purple creases under her eyes; and a blue-white face; but she was sleeping peacefully; and next to Mabel's cot was Ben's.

He was sitting bolt upright, propped up by pillows, to help his choked-up lungs to clear. His eyes, fixed on his mother, were very bright. He was a good deal cut and bruised, and both his hands were bandaged up to his elbows. His voice was like an old door creaking. He just said, "'Ullo, Ma!"; and Mrs. Barton replied, "'Ullo, Ben!"

For a moment or two there seemed nothing else that they had to say to each other.

Nurse Rosamund put a chair close to Ben's bed, and smiled encouragingly at them.

"He hasn't got much voice yet," she explained to Mrs. Barton, "but it'll come back all right when he's rested it. *You* talk to *him*!"

"Arrh!" said Mrs. Barton without taking her eyes from Ben's face. She intended to have no truck with nurses.

"'Ow did yer get under that there 'ouse, Ben?" she demanded as soon as Nurse Rosamund had left them. "You 'adn't no call to be under a strange 'ouse, 'ad yer? You wasn't alookin' abaht fer things that didn't belong ter you with that young Em'ly agine, was you?"

"Not erzac'ly," Ben explained, "it wasn't no reg'lar lootin' ner nuffin'—we jes' picked up what was rahnd us like—left by folks as was dead themselves or gorne awiy ter their frien's'. They 'adn't no need fer wot we took. It was jes' a gime, thet 'ouse wos. Only we stayed a bit too late, and 'Itler 'e got onto it—and 'it us!"

He didn't mention Sam; just at the moment he did not want to spoil so perfect a reunion.

"Mibel, she'll be orl right," he said reassuringly. "An' Em'ly—well, she's in the 'orspital too, but I ain't erseen 'er yit."

“Nor don’t need to,” said his mother with the hostility that Penelope must have felt when she heard that Ulysses had to be tied to the mast, to keep him from the Sirens.

“Nor you ain’t ’eard wot ’appened to *us* yit! Your Dad, Bert and Floss—they’re orl right. But the ’ouse an’ everything in it—but jes’ wot I stan’ up in—well—it’s gone up!

“S’elp me—clean gone—one of them oil bombs it wos—burnin’ like ’ell! An’ when we come back from the Shelter—thank Gawd it bein’ Sunday, we orl had our best clothes on—ter git brekfus’—well—there wasn’t any ’ouse, nor any stove nor nuffin’! Most of the Street’s gone too, an’ Em’ly’s family copped it good an’ proper. They was drunk at the time—an’ asleepin’ it orf—ser they overlooked the C-rain. They wos jes’ blown ter bits; an’ wot’s them—an’ wot’s Lunnon—it ’ud be ’ard ter say!”

Mrs. Barton was not without sympathy for the Higginses now that they were dead; but she enjoyed telling the news of their dramatic finish; and she had supposed that Ben would enjoy hearing it. The completeness of their taking-off had been money-for-jam to what was left of Beulah Street. But she saw to her consternation that Ben did not share the jam. His eyes dilated with horror and his lips shook.

“Wot—all of ’em?” he demanded incredulously. “*All* of Em’ly’s fambly, Ma?”

“All, as far as is known,” replied Mrs. Barton darkly. “’Oose arms an’ legs ’as gone off like fireworks all over the place, no one carn’t rightly say—but they seems ter be all of them missin’!”

Sam’s end—if it was his end—stuck in the back of Ben’s mind, and would not be brought out. He said at last: “Mibel’s pram—wos that anywheres rahnd when we wos dug aht?”

“No,” said his mother, “nor no one ever looked fer it, I don’t expect. I’ll mention it to the A.R.P. next time I sees ’im. It was a good pram—corst me five pounds it did—saved over eighteen months, afore and after the Twins come. But there, you wouldn’t believe ’ow the Govern-mint’s paid up ter ’elp us! We’re ter ’ave twenty pounds ter furnish new rooms wiv; an’ that Red Cross from America—it’s sent us clothes thet ’ud do for the Royal Family! If I was ever ter ’ave another child, which I certainly ’ope *not*, at my age, I shud call him ‘Roosevelt’—thet’s wot I shud call ’im—an’ ‘Elenore,’ if she was a girl! Even yer father’s pleased by it, tho’ ’e do say that they’re only doin’ it ’cos they’re afraid of Stalin!”

“Coo!” Ben murmured.

“Thet was Sunday mornin’,” his mother went on after a gratified pause to let her news sink in, “an’ up till then, yer father wouldn’t believe any ’arm ’ad come ter you an’ Mibel; but I didn’t wait rahnd much onct I see the ’ouse wos gorne. I went strite ter the Perleece; and then to our A.R.P., ’oo ’as turned out quite the gentleman I mus’ say! An’ then I went an’ looked fer you—in all the ’oles I cud find!”

His mother wiped the back of her hand across her eyes, and her lips worked.

“We wos orl right, Ma!” Ben said reassuringly. “There must er bin lots worse ’oles than the ’ole we wos in! It don’t seem ’ardly ter matter about the ’ouse now we’re all safely aht of it—does it?”

“Yer right!” said his mother with sudden firmness. “As long as you children an’ yer Dad’s safe, there ain’t nuffin’ that’ll git me dahn—’Itler or no ’Itler! Still, it ’as bin wot yer might call a fair do, over the week-end, ’asn’t it?”

Ben nodded. He felt that “a fair do” described it.

“Forms!” his mother said darkly, after a pause. “They do tike it aht of yer, Ben, an’ no mistake! The *howers* an’ *howers* me an’ your Dad ’ave sat erlookin’ at them Forms—thet don’t mean nuffin’—no matter ’ow yer look at them—and yit yer ’ave ter fill ’em in some’ow or you don’t get nuffin’! See?”

Ben nodded again.

“An’ then come Monday mornin’,” his mother went on. “I ’adn’t the ’eart ter go lookin’ fer rooms ner ’ouses ’cos there wasn’t no word of you and Mibel! Flossie, she went aht ahuntin’ fer you wiv yer father. Bert an’ I—well, we jes’ sat in one of them Rest Rooms you’ve ’eard tell abaht. They lets you sit—an’ you can git a cup of tea—an’ that’s abaht all there is to it—tho’ yer shouldn’t grumble. Ladies doin’ what they can on oil lamps with the gas turned off. Then late in arternoon, our A.R.P. he barges in quite excited-like an’ says, ‘Don’t let your ’opes be raised unduly, but we believe we may have found the children!’” Mrs. Barton had suddenly changed her voice to a very creditable imitation of the Announcer’s voice on the B.B.C.

“We ’ad ter answer a lot of questions as to ’ow old you were an’ wot yer looked like, and when you were seen last, like in them detective stories our Bert’s ser fond of—an’ then it got ter six o’clock like, an’ the C-rain went orf, an’ they said as it was you orl right an’ as ’ow yer wos all three safe in

'orspital, an' we'd better git into the Shelter, an' come erlong ter the 'orspital at the proper visitin' hours ter see you! The A.R.P. 'e shook 'ands with us—an' so did everyone else in the Rest Room, wot 'adn't 'ad the luck we'd 'ad! An' you can believe it or not, Ben, but the moment I was aht in the streets, I 'eard Big Ben er-singin' awiy—jes' as if 'e wos in on it! I swear I 'eard the clock give 'is tune an' strike—as clear as I'm speakin' nah! An' when I got into the Shelter, I slept."

Mrs. Barton was silent for a moment. She hadn't said before that she had needed sleep. But Ben suddenly knew that she hadn't had any—for two long nights and days—until she heard that they were found.

"I went ter see my ladies on the Tuesday," Mrs. Barton went on after a pause. "Nice as nice could be, both of 'em wos. The one wiv the cats, Miss Meldrum, said I could 'ave a pair of blankets an' a piece of carpet. An' the other one, Miss Becket she is—an' isn't ser rich—she jes' 'ands me a five-pahnd note without a word! Five pahnds *is* five pahnds—you could see she 'ad a feelin' 'eart well enuff, couldn't you? My offices let me orf two days—an' one of my young gentlemen 'e met me on the stairs, while you was missin', an' says 'e was sorry—an' cursed 'Itler 'e did, good an' proper! It 'eartened me up a lot ter 'ear 'im—an' 'e guv' me a 'alf-crown—which 'e don't get many of 'em 'isself—so I thought the more of 'im. Wot I says is—yer can always tell yer reel frien's when yer in trouble, carn't yer?"

Ben held her eyes. "Em'ly's in trouble," he said in a strained voice.

"Pore child!" his mother admitted. "They weren't much by way of a fambly, if you arsk me—still, they wos all she 'ad! Them Waifs an' Strays you've 'eard tell abaht—they'll look after 'er—if she gits over wot she's got!"

There was a long silence. Ben's eyes still held his mother's. She shifted uneasily in her chair; and let her own eyes wander towards the ceiling. At last Ben said in a curious voice: "Ma—if you an' Dad 'ad bin done in, would yer 'ave wanted Mibel an' me ter go ter the Waifs an' Strays? No matter what?"

His mother shuffled her feet as if her corns hurt her. Ben was her friend. She knew what he meant. At last she said in desperation, "Ben—yer father'd never 'ear of it!"

Ben did not take this up. They both knew it was an evasion. The Home was Mrs. Barton.

“The Twins—” his mother added reproachfully. “You did orter think of ’ow they fair ’ates that child—ortn’t yer?”

“If Em’ly ’adn’t bin buried wiv us, Ma,” Ben argued, “we wouldn’t ever ’ave got aht. I took dahn a lot of them bricks becos of ’er.”

His mother didn’t say that it was Em’ly’s fault that they were buried at all; perhaps if she had been better off, or had not just been saved the loss of her own two children, she might have hardened her heart against the intrusion of Em’ly.

Sister Job came up while her decision *not* to harden it was still rising up very slowly from the bottom of her heart.

“That child is feverish,” Sister Job said sharply, “and he’s talked quite long enough!”

Neither Mrs. Barton nor Ben so much as glanced at Sister Job. Once more, their eyes were riveted on each other’s.

“Lyin’ there,” Ben said earnestly, “wiv them two beams across ’er, she kep’ tellin’ me wot ter do!”

“Well—I won’t say ‘Yes’ an’ I won’t say ‘No,’” his mother said at last. She got slowly to her feet, still looking down at Ben, without knowing that she had already committed herself.

Ben knew it, for all the anxiety faded from his eyes.

“I am certain his temperature *has* gone up,” Sister Job said crossly, “and no wonder! He has no voice to speak with!” But perhaps she did not feel as cross as she sounded. “If that’s your little girl,” she added to Mrs. Barton, “she’s waking up. You can have another five minutes or so with her, if you like!”

Mabel opened her eyes and stared accusingly at her mother. The power of words suddenly came back to her. “Ma!” she exclaimed, “Ma!” Mrs. Barton hastened to her side.

“Damn yer eyes!” Mabel said with extraordinary distinctness.

“Did you ever ’ear the like?” Mrs. Barton cried with inappropriate pride, to the scandalized Sister. “An’ she not turned two yet! She do talk wunnerful for her age, don’t she?”

XIV

As soon as Mabel began to recover, she became a prime favourite. She was a pretty child and accustomed to being the family pet. Ben always encouraged her in the adventure of pleasing; and when she was given a large if slightly battered Teddy bear to play with, he encouraged her more than ever.

“You ’old on ter that Teddy!” Ben advised Mabel with sharp intensity, when authority was beyond earshot. “You ’owl, Mibel—’owl yer ’ardest if anyone tries ter tike ’im from yer.”

Perhaps Mabel might have done this even without Ben’s counsel, but when evening came she put up such a fight to keep the Teddy with her that Nurse Rosamund said: “Poor little dear, let her have it. I expect she’s still frightened, and she mustn’t cry or she’ll start that dreadful choking again!” So Mabel fell asleep clasping the Teddy bear; and when her sleep was heaviest towards dawn, Ben gently removed it.

Since he had been washed by a scrupulous V.A.D., his own hair resembled that of the Teddy; and Ben skilfully adjusted the bear into his place in the cot, pulling the bedclothes realistically over him with only an inch or two of yellowish wool showing. The Night Nurse was making herself a cup of tea in the kitchenette leading out of the Ward. She had the door into the Ward wide open; but she did not hear Ben slip noiselessly out into the passage.

When he had last gone to the lavatory, Ben had explored the door to the fire escape. It was kept unlocked; and he let himself out in a flash, closing it noiselessly after him. He could just see the first iron rung, but, perhaps fortunately, nothing at all beneath it. Gingerly he let himself down one rung at a time, holding on to the one above him, counting the rungs every time he found himself on a fresh platform. He went on like this until the faint blue light of the yard beneath showed him he was nearing the ground. Getting from the fire escape into the Ground Floor Ward was distinctly a feat, requiring great skill and tenacity, and a blind courage less available in daylight. But Ben had trained himself over walls and wharves, and even over shifting barges, all his walking life—so that he was not easily put off by the difficulties of either space or darkness. He was a small wiry child, and could have given tips to a cat burglar. Wherever Ben could go—he got.

Eventually he managed to squeeze himself through a partially boarded blackout, round a thick curtain, into the Night Sister's private sitting-room. The Night Sister was making a final round, and had just gone upstairs. The number was illuminated over the door of the Ward, so that it was a matter of no difficulty to find Number 7. The Night Nurse, like the one above her, was making herself a last cup of tea.

Ben found Em'ly quickly enough because her dark boot-button eyes were fixed upon his entrance. She was indeed expecting him—and had been expecting him for some time.

“’Oo said we’d git aht of it? *I* did, didn’t I?” Em’ly demanded triumphantly when he had reached her. “Sit on yer arse—t’other side of the bed by the window. Then she won’t see nuffin’ when she gits back. Ever so many of them burned kids talks and squeaks in their sleep, so she won’t think nuffin’ of our talkin’ if yer keep awhispering on one note!”

Ben obeyed Em’ly and prepared to dive under the bed if need be.



None of the other children paid any attention to them. Some of them were awake and crying softly to themselves, for they were very badly burned and could not be given strong enough sedatives wholly to relieve their pain; and many of them were delirious and did not see Ben when they looked at him.

“Visitors come this artemnoon,” Em’ly informed Ben in a voice she tried to make light and indifferent. “See any of *your* fambly?”

“Ma came in,” Ben admitted.

Em'ly sniffed in a hostile manner. "She'd find you aht if you wos dahn a drain!" she said contemptuously. "Goofy—she is about you—yer ma! Reg'lar ole mother-cat!"

Ben did not retaliate, because he knew that Em'ly felt that she had lost face by having no visitors. But she wouldn't have lost it, he reminded himself, had she known that all her family were dead.

"My ma," he said cautiously, a slight tinge of pride creeping into his whisper, "she's been bombed aht—while we wos awiy. Saturday night that wos. They comed back from the Shelter, Sunday mornin', dressed in their best clo'ses 'cos they'd gone ter the Picshures first—an' there wasn't nuffin'. No stove—no breakfus'—no roof—nuffin'!"

"Gor' blimey!" muttered Em'ly softly. "Ben—my 'ome's next door to yours!"

"Well, it isn't nah!" said Ben accurately but flatly. "They was orl in the Shelter too I 'spect!" Em'ly asserted warily, fixing Ben with gimlet eyes. Ben shook his head.

"Was they ter 'ome?" Em'ly whispered. Ben nodded.

Em'ly gave a queer little gasping sound. The Night Nurse came quietly up the Ward to the bed; but Ben had slipped under it before she turned her head.

"Do you want anything, Dear?" the Night Nurse asked kindly. "A drink or something?"

"No thanks Nerse!" Em'ly said with unusual politeness.

"It'll soon be morning!" Nurse said encouragingly.

Em'ly did not contradict this pleasant statement; but she did not look encouraged.

Nurse hovered beside her for a moment adjusting her pillow, and the arm and shoulder that were held so rigidly to their board; then a delirious child called out loudly, so she left Em'ly for this more dire need.

"Your muvver," Em'ly whispered down to the outstretched head of Ben just beneath her, "did she know what 'ad 'appened to 'em?"

"Well—she thought they was all dead!" Ben admitted after a pause.

"All of 'em?" Em'ly repeated softly. Ben nodded.

“Did yer muvver—’as anybody seen the pram?” Em’ly asked after a longer pause.

“It don’t mean nuffin’ if they ain’t,” Ben consolingly asserted. “Anyone, passin’ by like, might ’ave taken the pram to one of them Perleece Stations!”

“Garn!” Em’ly replied contemptuously. “If anyone ’ad been passin’ by when thet bomb went orf—they’d be in the crater erlong of the pram!”

Ben found nothing to oppose this painfully probable theory; and both children were silent for a long time. At last Em’ly said dispassionately, and without self-pity, in the tone of one who sums up his chances in a difficult game, “Then I ain’t got nuffin’—nor nobody.”

“Yus yer ’ave Silly!” Ben whispered eagerly. “Thet’s wot I come dahn that fire escape ter tell yer! You ’ave got somepin’! My ma, she says we’ll ’dopt you! That means yer belong to my fambly nah—you’ve got the Twins—and Mibel—same as me!”

“Yer ma said that?” Em’ly demanded incredulously. “Garn, yer mike me tired—yer makin’ up a bloody tile—thet’s wot you are!”

“Gawd’s troof, I ain’t,” Ben whispered back earnestly. “Strike me pink, if I am! It’s jest what Ma says—an’ no lie neither! When you leave this ’orspital you’re ter come erlong of us—fer keeps!”

At last Em’ly believed him. Curiously enough, it upset her, as nothing else had hitherto upset her. Two large astonished tears rolled down her cheeks. She said: “Thet’s like yer ma! Onct, on Vi’let’s berf-day, yer ma guv’ me a ice-cream—strite she did—I ain’t ever forgot it! Vi’let ’ad one, an’ Alfie, an’ then yer ma sees me—an’ she ahts wiv anuvver fourpence! It ain’t as if the Twins was frien’s of mine neither—they fair ’ated my guts—an’ I ’ated theirs!”

“They won’t now,” Ben said reassuringly, “not after you was bombed an’ buried an’ all!”

Em’ly turned this wish-dream over in silence, unconvinced. She realized that she was much the same Em’ly as before those incidents had taken place.

Suddenly the Ward door was flung wide open. Any child in the Ward fit to be startled was startled. Sister Job stood in the doorway.

Legally speaking, as she was the Day Sister of the Children’s Upstairs Ward, she had no business to be at night—or at any rate early morning—in the Children’s Downstairs Ward. But the Night Nurse, having lost her head

when she found Ben missing, had telephoned Sister Job—since she was more afraid of her than of anyone else in the Hospital.

In five minutes Sister Job had washed and dressed herself into action.

It was a pity that, at the moment Sister Job made her entrance into the Danger Ward, the Night Nurse of Number 7 should have been making up her face. It was a pretty face and she was in love with the House Surgeon, who might slip in early in the morning to see some of his worst cases. Neither of these facts was of any value to her at the moment.

“When you have time,” Sister Job said, advancing rapidly up the Ward, and throwing the words at her with the continuous velocity of a machine gun, “to leave your mouth alone and attend to what are supposed to be your duties, perhaps you would not mind ascertaining, for me, if you have a child too many in your Ward?”

Nurse dropped her lipstick on the floor and said, “Oh, no, Sister Job, I’m positive there isn’t!” which was the worst possible thing she could have said, for, even as the words left her newly-freshened scarlet lips, the keen eyes of Sister Job had lit upon the crouched form of Ben under Em’ly’s bed.

“Ah,” she said. “On the floor under the bed by the window, I see something extremely like the missing boy! Do you *dare* to tell me he is one of your patients?”

The Night Nurse didn’t dare. She cried out feebly, “But how ever could the child have got there?”

“Presumably on his feet—owing to the combined slackness of the Night Nurse in Job Ward upstairs—and the Night Nurse in Number 7 on the ground floor. I shall report you both to the Matron for gross neglect of duty, Nurse Stanton! As you are in charge of a Danger Ward at night, *you* are the worst culprit. The least you can do under the circumstances is to prevent any unauthorized person from entering your Ward and interfering with your patients!”

Sister Job then turned the fire of her wrath upon Ben. She pulled him out from under the bed, and onto his feet, with one powerful jerk of her arm—and looked sternly from him to Em’ly.

“’Ere,” whispered Em’ly, “’oo d’you think yer are, Gawd-almighty?”

A peculiar change passed over Sister Job’s repellent features, and her voice when she spoke again was wholly without rancour.

“Are you Emily?” she demanded.

“Oh, yeah!” said Em’ly, with all the scorn this simple phrase has won for itself.

Sister Job transferred her attention to the trembling Night Nurse, who now stood at the foot of Em’ly’s bed. “Attend to your patient,” Sister Job advised her acidly, “and be thankful she is still alive. She needs an immediate heart-stimulant.” Then she swept out of the Ward, pulling Ben by the hand, rather as if she were a highly efficient vacuum cleaner with a piece of undigested dust whirling along behind her. Sister Job did not, however, as Ben had expected her to do, smack him. She merely pushed him into a big wooden lift and they moved slowly up to the top of the hospital in it, side by side, in total silence.

When they reached Job Ward, Sister Job deposited Ben in his own bed, and told the shaken Night Nurse to bring him a glass of hot milk. “And see that the milk *is* hot!” said Sister Job.

“You got out by the fire escape,” she then remarked to Ben grimly. “Well, you won’t do that again, young man, for I shall have the door locked—raids or no raids! And I hope after tonight, *some* nurse will be on the premises who is accustomed to keep her eyes open.”

Sister Job stood like a statue at the foot of Ben’s cot, looking down at him, till the warm milk came. Then she picked up the Teddy bear lying on the foot of his bed, by her finger and thumb, and handed it over to the Night Nurse.

“You know perfectly well,” she said, “that the children are *never* allowed to retain their toys at night. You *quite* deserved the trick this very naughty little boy has played upon you! If he gets pneumonia, as is highly probable, you—and you *alone*—will be responsible for it! As for you, Ben, you must learn to do what you are told. Since you have been disobedient as well as deceitful, your baby sister will *not* be allowed to play with this stuffed animal to-morrow!”

No punishment that Sister Job could have devised would have hurt Ben worse than this vicarious and sadistic sentence; but when she gave it, Sister Job had forgotten the glass of milk.

Ben took careful aim and hurled it at her; and it was hot.

There always seems to be more liquid in a glass used as a weapon rather than as a container; and at least some of the starch was taken out of Sister Job’s uniform.

Ben stiffened himself to meet condign punishment. The Night Nurse made a sound that was an indefinable mixture of a sob and a giggle.

Sister Job merely gave Ben a look that penetrated to his marrow.

“A very bad-mannered little boy,” she said with freezing calm. “Pick up *all* the pieces of glass, please, Nurse! Since the children in this Ward appear to have acquired the habit of walking about at night barefoot, it is more than usually important to see that nothing remains on the floor that is likely to cut their feet!”

Somehow, although she left the Ward a moment later drenched in scalding milk, it seemed as if the Night Nurse and Ben were the retreating parties.

XV

When Ben broke the fact to Em'ly that she no longer had either a family or a home, it was not the same shock to her that it would have been to most little girls. Still it gave her a curious cold feeling at the pit of her stomach. She had agreed to go on living against great physical odds; but she had not expected to have her whole family blotted out into the bargain.

Mr. and Mrs. Higgins had been uncertain quantities as parents. They had often hit Em'ly, and still more often cursed her. They sometimes grossly underfed and neglected her; but they were faithful to her in their fashion.

When they had cash, they gave her a treat. Occasionally they praised her for a skill that might in the future prove a family asset. They always fought her battles either with her, or for her. While they had a roof, Em'ly shared it. Now she was without a roof—or sharers.

A cold sharp doubt rose in Em'ly's lucid mind. Had she been wise to make such a one-sided promise to her friend the doctor, and would it not be more sensible even now to give up this dull unaided business of living?

But when Ben informed her that she was adopted into the Barton family, Em'ly felt that something had after all been done to help her meet this new emergency. The Bartons were a nicer family than her own, with distinctly better prospects. They had lived next door and therefore Em'ly knew them as thoroughly as if she had made them. She preferred Ben's companionship to that of any child in Beulah Street. Hitherto she had considered him in the light of a confederate rather than a friend. She had despised him for being younger than she was and for showing—every now and then—useless moral scruples. But she remembered that he had let Sam share Mabel's pram. Ben had also shown considerable speed and shrewdness upon their looting expedition.

When they were buried under the house of their dreams, he had made no complaint, and had not turned upon Em'ly as a useful scapegoat. He had cried every now and then of course, because he had something to cry for, but his tears had not prevented him from carefully carrying out all Em'ly's instructions, as well as producing several useful ideas of his own. The truth of the matter was that, in some curious and hitherto alien way, Em'ly now discovered that she liked Ben for himself, and no longer regarded him

merely as a tool, to be used in carrying out her wishes. She would continue to get everything out of him that she could, of course; but in a definitely more friendly way; and having considered her own interests first, she would begin to plan for Ben's. An eye for an eye, or a tooth for a tooth, had hitherto been Em'ly's whole programme; so that it was a distinct step forward, morally, when in the gloomy coldness of a November dawn she decided that a peppermint ball should be met by the return of a peppermint ball.

If the Bartons had not adopted her, Em'ly would have had to be a Waif and Stray. No doubt she would have been materially far better off under the sway of this highly beneficent society; but she would, according to Beulah Street standards, have lost face. A family was a prestige question. Nor could she, as Em'ly would have preferred, live a life of her own, since at nine years old she would have been definitely interfered with, by authority. A boy might have got away with it, running about with newspapers under his arm, and if questioned, calling himself fourteen. But Em'ly was without illusions about her own sex. People were kinder to little girls than to little boys; and this meant you had to pay for it sooner or later, by your freedom. Em'ly could live on her wits when she was past school age; but not till then.

All these ideas moved shapelessly through Em'ly's active mind, while she lay listening to Ben's offer of a home—and before she had given that succinct nod which was her answer.

Now that she was alone, and feeling slightly stronger, through some kind of dope's having been jabbed into her arm by the terrified Night Nurse, Em'ly considered the whole question over again even more carefully, studying each member of Ben's family, one by one.

Mr. Barton was easy to take in, but not particularly kind. Mrs. Barton was less easy to take in, but kinder. Flossie and Bert were, from Em'ly's point of view, not desirable allies, but too old to be at all intolerable. In the course of quite a short time, probably they would get married and go off elsewhere.

Em'ly had grave doubts about the Twins. They were a year older than she was and there were two of them; but with Ben on her side, if they could not be overcome, they could at least be parried.

Em'ly had never really liked Mabel. She considered her a pampered child, taking up far too much of Ben's time and attention; but somehow or other, since that sudden and apparently final disappearance of Sam, Em'ly found herself regarding Mabel with more tolerance. You could have too much of any baby, she considered, but there were moments when you quite

liked them, and even scored by having them. Goofy people in Parks often bought you ice-cream if you were accompanied by a baby; but if you were on your wild lone, they merely said you were a dirty child and why weren't you at school.

Last but not least, Em'ly thought of Ben. When she thought of him, she ceased to bother about making up her mind, for she found that her heart was sufficiently decided to do without any further mental process.

Em'ly made no effort to stand by Ben when Sister Job led him ignominiously away; but only because she knew herself momentarily helpless. With her leg in a cradle and her arm on a cross, there wasn't much she *could* do, except to be so ill that no one would dare to be down on her. Em'ly had always played life as a game of skill. Even bad cards, she knew, had their value; and since at the moment she had no card but ill health, she played that for what it was worth—and rather more.

She realized that she was in a curious place, whose ways and values she felt too ill to master but not, except at intervals, too ill to observe. So she held her tongue and settled down to observing them.

The odd part of it was that, after the first moment of shock, Em'ly felt none the worse for the loss of her home and family. On the contrary, when the morning came, and with it a nice cup of tea and a piece of bread and butter, Em'ly felt far more like a human being than before. She knew of her loss. She was still very ill, and in extreme discomfort; but she was in a world she was already beginning to enjoy.

These starchy women were, after all, but women—and so easy to scandalize that it would be a pleasure, Em'ly felt, to show them what there was to be shocked about.

When Sister Enoch, the Day Sister, told her that Ben had been a very bad child to dare to leave Sister Job's Ward in the middle of the night—a less moral hour for adventure, apparently, than any other of the twenty-four—and that Em'ly ought to have called the Night Nurse in order to remove him instantly so that he might be replaced where he belonged, Em'ly simply put out her tongue at Sister Enoch. She did this with impunity because she was far too ill to be punished or even scolded. She had heard a V.A.D. tell another one, only the evening before, that it would be a miracle if she pulled through; and you don't, Em'ly felt, reprove miracles.

Sister Enoch pretended not to see the furred expanse of Em'ly's tongue; but no doubt thought her—as Em'ly hoped she would—a most vulgar and unpleasant little girl. But Em'ly soon realized that the Staff Nurse liked her,

and so did the V.A.D.'s. They belonged to a generation that preferred toughness to good manners. They liked Em'ly because she did not cry. She made no fuss at all when she had to be hurt, but she used language; and when she wasn't being hurt, she used even worse language.

Sister Enoch immediately removed a contemporary, on the farther side of Em'ly, who might be contaminated by her evil ways, and put an innocent baby in the contaminable little girl's place. The baby had not yet reached the stage when it could talk, or even listen; but it greatly enjoyed watching Em'ly put out her tongue.

XVI

When Ben woke up he confronted a moral earthquake. Even if his throat hadn't been dry with dust, it would have been dry with terror. What would Sister Job do to him now it was morning? Would doctors in their white coats, armed with fearsome knives, enter, accompanied by Sister Job, to do him in?

Or worse still, would the hospital drive him back and bury him under the ruins from which they had rescued him?

Nurse Rosamund, the Staff Nurse, came in first. The Ward might have been freshly created to match the sunshine, from the smile on her face.

"Nurse!" Ben whispered, nerving himself for the ordeal of confession. "Nurse, 'ave you 'eard wot I done?"

Nurse Rosamund shook her head; one dimple stood at its post, the other promised to join it. "Slept, I hope?" she answered. "Haven't you?"

"I throwed my 'ot milk at Sister Job—strite I did!" Ben whispered hoarsely. "She 'ad it in fer me' cos I got aht in the night ter look fer Em'ly! I 'ad ter find Em'ly! 'Ow was I ter know she 'adn't 'ooked it? I fahnd Em'ly—an' Sister Job; she took awiy Mibel's Teddy, so I ups an' frows me 'ot milk at 'er!"

There was a long uncertain pause.

"That's not what hot milk is for," Nurse Rosamund said at last, holding herself very straight, while Ben regarded her anxiously. The dimple had not vanished, her eyes still sparkled. She took his pulse and temperature; wrote up his chart; just as if he were not a guilty pariah, but the same badly shaken little boy he had been yesterday. Ben was washed; his bed was made; his breakfast was brought him on a tray; and yet nothing happened.

Trackless hours passed by, and then at last the dread moment came. Sister Job entered, preceded by the doctor in his linen coat. Tense and quivering, Ben awaited his doom. Sister Job looked like the Day of Judgment jellied into starch. The doctor stood at the foot of Ben's bed and read his chart. He smiled at Ben in the usual man-to-man way of doctors in a Children's Ward.

“Don’t seem to have done you much harm having a house on top of you!” he observed cheerfully. “Carry on with the treatment, Sister, please; increase the nourishment—get him as clear of lath and plaster as you can, and re-dress his hands. Let’s have a look at his throat before we’ve done with him.”

Sister Job made no adverse comment, upon his behaviour, to the doctor. It was as if Ben had no behaviour. It was as if he were not a little boy at all; but just something in a bed that had to be looked after.

A vague resentment took the place of Ben’s agonized anticipation. Sister Job and the House Surgeon went down the Ward together. They vanished. Toys were given out. Mabel did not get the Teddy bear of yesterday, but she got a rabbit; and with her rather lax attitude towards zoology, seemed not to see much difference. What she wanted was a soft woolly animal, and that is what she had.

Perhaps, Ben told himself, when Sister Job came back alone, the blow would fall; but she came back alone, and still nothing happened. The V.A.D.’s who dropped things dropped them again; and were flayed alive by Sister, as before. But Ben, Sister Job simply ignored. As the day wore on, Ben realized with deepening resentment that there was going to be no punishment.

This was just *not* the place where you threw hot milk about—or got punished for it.

For the first time in all his rowdy, blithe, devil-take-the-hindermost existence, Ben found himself at the Mercy of Law and Order. He hated the Mercy almost as much as he hated the Law and Order. You could not get the better of Mercy; you could not get round Law; you could not—where it was so strong and peaceful—upset Order.

These strange spiritual substances were functioning on him; and for him. Things had to be done whether he liked them or not. They were done; firmly, gently, inescapably.

No one explained anything to him; no one gave him any warning or afforded him any choice. But let him try to do something that was against the Law, or wasn’t in Order, and even the sloppiest of the V.A.D.’s rose up in arms against him. He *must* put his bedroom slippers on to go to the lavatory—that was what they were provided for. He must wait his turn. He must come straight back or be brought back. He couldn’t have Mabel on his bed. She had to stay on her own; and he had to stay on his. He must not put what food he did not want, at the moment, under his pillow. Above all, he could

not go and see Em'ly; but he managed to interest Nurse Rosamund in Em'ly. Before she went off duty, she actually and incredibly brought him a message from Em'ly.

"Ask 'im," Em'ly had managed to whisper, "if 'e don't fink it's bloody awful 'ere?"

Em'ly had the gift of expressing exactly what she felt, but she must also have shared in Ben's feeling for Nurse Rosamund, since there was an absence of camouflage about this message which showed that she had trusted the messenger.

Em'ly, Nurse Rosamund added, was doing very well indeed, considering. Her temperature had dropped two degrees. She had a fractured femur, three ribs broken, and a badly dislocated shoulder—not to mention lesser injuries; but she was going to get well.

She had made up her mind to live, and any other part of her, no matter how badly injured it was, just had to follow suit.

The long, crowded, neatly punctured days slid through several noisy, but innocuous, nights. The hospital routine ignored air raids as far as possible; but from the moment the siren sounded, coloured lights by the door in the Ward signalled what was happening overhead. Blue light was normal; green meant an Alert on; orange meant "Make all preparations short of Evacuation"; and a bright red light meant "Evacuate immediately." All the children knew what the lights meant although nobody was supposed to have told them. Ben knew even more, because he and Em'ly had taught themselves to distinguish the varying sounds: plane engines; anti-aircraft guns; the noise of dropping bombs; the fall of masonry; the crackle and roar of burning houses.

Ben was not exactly frightened of these nightly raids; because nobody else seemed to be. There was a nurse within call all the time; and he had a night light between his bed and Mabel's. Hospital nights were less inexorable than days. Sister Job was off duty; and authority took a milder turn. The Night Sister swept through the Ward once during the night, but only lingered if one of the children needed special attention. She had a kind, rather anxious face; and did not find fault unless it was necessary. Ben was usually awake when she made her sweep, and if she caught his eye, she smiled at him. But Ben did not try to go down the fire escape again to visit Em'ly.

One night the guns grew louder and louder. Nurse looked up from her knitting, and fixed her eyes upon the light by the door. It was already orange,

and while she and Ben looked at it together, it blinked into a strong scarlet.

The Night Nurse was young and had not got used to air raids. She turned very white and said under her breath, “Oh, God—please help me!”

Ben, who was far more used to raids, scooped Mabel up in a blanket, and shot under the bed. He thought he had better do what helping was needed himself, and not leave too much to God, whose methods were uncertain.

He found himself strangely pleased to see Sister Job, who had slipped over from the Nurses’ Institute, standing in the middle of the Ward. Now everybody knew what to do—and set to work to do it. The right children were carried first to the door; but an orderly looked in to say the lift was on fire; and Sister Job marshalled them all off afresh down the back stairs.

When she came back into the Ward, there was no one left but one little girl who had been operated on that morning and a baby with a severe head-injury.

Ben crawled out from under the bed, with Mabel over his shoulder.

“You went down the fire escape before,” Sister Job said with grim composure; “now you can do it again! The fire’s caught the top of the stairs; but the others will get down safely.”

The noise of the guns was furious and sounded straight overhead. The hospital rocked. Sister Job tied Mabel on Ben’s back; and the little girl on her own. She picked up the baby in her arms.

They were on their way to the fire escape, when Sister Job said sharply, “Under the bed!” and Ben fell flat on his face and crawled under the nearest one. A huge, black, burnished Thing tore through the ceiling and the floor. Smoke rushed up into the Ward. There was a scream—but not a human scream—the scream of a high explosive reaching its goal.

The hospital swung from side to side. There were so many different sounds of cracking ceilings, and tossed furniture, and licking flames, that it was difficult to know what stood or what had fallen.

But Sister Job was still functioning, for she said in a sharp dry voice, “Get out now—onto the fire escape.”

There was no door, but the wall of the room had not gone, and the little iron platform of the fire escape still stood.

Out of doors the wind was less than the blast that had rushed through the Ward, although half a gale was blowing. The air was full of rolling smoke and leaping flames; but the sky was empty round the dome of St. Paul's. Ben could see the cathedral quite plainly between the rungs of the ladder.

Sister Job went down first, the poor little girl on her back screaming terribly; but the baby with the head wound made no sound at all.

"Just put one foot down after the other," Sister Job shouted up to Ben, "rung by rung!"

Ben could see her head bobbing beneath him, like a large black cherry; and sometimes a gleam of light on her spectacles.

An enormous open umbrella was floating in the sky. It was a wonderful rose colour, and lit all the air around it. Sister Job had fastened Mabel securely in her blanket, on Ben's back, so that both his hands were free. Still, it wasn't as easy going down the fire escape as last time, because the smoke blew in his face, and from the inside of the hospital flames leapt out into the dark; and whatever you looked at never lasted more than a moment.

It was Sister Job's voice that kept Ben safely on the ladder. It didn't really matter what she said, but it sounded—if you *couldn't* go on doing what you were doing—as if you could do something else instead.

She mentioned once, halfway down the fire escape, while it was shaking in the wind as if it would come off the hospital altogether or as if the hospital was going off it, that Em'ly was already safe in the Shelter downstairs.

The knowledge that Em'ly was safe, and somewhere awaiting him down below, made Ben hold on harder than ever.

The voice of the guns rose louder and louder, as if London were being caught by the throat and were screaming back at the Monster that had caught her. Every now and then, Ben caught a glimpse of London. A flash of the river leapt up at him, with the Bridge across it; once suddenly out of the smoke, with a great orange glow behind them, sprang the towers of Westminster. They shone for a moment red as the blood from a severed artery, and then great clouds of smoke swallowed them.



Ben's breath began to fail him, and Mabel weighed on him as if she were the Dome of St. Paul's, and not just a baby he was used to carrying.

"Only one more floor!" Sister Job called up at him. Perhaps he could just do one more floor without breathing. He pushed his thin legs down and down, his hands clenched on the rung above him; but it is difficult to move for long without breath.

A firm hand gripped his shoulder. "You're down now," Sister Job told him. They were standing in a pond; a screaming, bawling pond, full of

firemen rushing about in rubber boots to the hips, under a pall of smoke.

A gigantic white “S” splashed itself at them out of the swaying darkness.

“We’ll go in here,” Sister Job said, as if there were plenty of other equally salubrious spots to choose from.

Sister Job seemed to be paying no attention at all to the awful screams of the child on her back, or to the silent baby folded against her shoulder; but they were still—as Mabel was to Ben—securely fastened on.

A faint blue light showed Ben that they stood at the top of a flight of stairs. Down below was what looked like another hospital. Tier after tier of light steel bunks stood against whitewashed walls. There was a kitchenette, well-marked lavatories, and even an operating table in a carefully screened-off bay. There was Nurse Rosamund, as lovely as ever—both her dimples showing, carrying a tray full of steaming hot cups of tea.

Overhead, evil and destruction held their dishevelled way; but it seemed to Ben as if this little pocket of serene and orderly refuge was stronger than the outer forces of flame and steel raining down upon it.

Sister Job handed over her baby with a sharp injunction to a V.A.D. not to drop it—and proceeded to make the little girl on her back lie flat on a bunk and stop screaming. She ignored Ben, who was picked up—Mabel and all—by a friendly orderly and swung into an upper berth. But Ben’s eyes had first found Em’ly. It must have been hard for her, he thought, to have been moved in the cradle her leg was in, and with her shoulder tied to a board; but Em’ly gave him a friendly grin as if whatever there was of her had remained intact.

Ben unfastened Mabel, who wasn’t crying at all. She was rather pleased than otherwise at this unusual method of passing a night. Soon Ben’s cold and shaking hands found themselves fixed round a hot mug of tea. He did not have to do anything more for Mabel, because one of the nurses was feeding her out of a feeding cup. He did not have to do anything at all about anything. The disciplined serenity of the hospital functioned all round him, seeming—Ben thought sleepily—to come out of Sister Job’s cap-strings. Her apron was torn to ribbons; she had blood trickling down one side of her face, and a black smudge across her nose. She was giving the little girl she had carried down a morphia injection, while telling her coldly that she was making a fuss about nothing. Then she disappeared into the lavatory, and when she came out of it, a few minutes later, she looked exactly as she usually looked when she swept through the Ward every morning.

Matron came in, from the hospital itself, having been the last to leave it; and the two most redoubtable women in the great Dockland hospital nodded unsmilingly at each other, as if something necessary, but not surprising, had been accomplished.

“That means,” a young doctor standing beneath Ben said to a passing nurse, “that everything’s safe and cosy! You wouldn’t see the two of them here together unless they’d got the cat out!”

XVII

Mrs. Barton had been, ever since she woke, in an ecstasy. There are many women in comfortable circumstances who would not have felt it any particular pleasure, after six hours' manual labour, to start out afresh in the rain to visit a London hospital some distance away, on their feet—and with rather tight boots on. Yet weather, stone stairs dirtier than usual, kettles delaying to boil, a husband's temper deteriorated by adding rescue work at night to Dock labour by day, the sharpness of tongue and slowness of imagination of superiors, did nothing to rob Mrs. Barton of the thrill of triumphant joy coursing through her, whenever she reminded herself that at three o'clock in the afternoon she would be standing by the bedsides of Ben and Mabel—not caring in the least how many corns stabbed her.

She must not buy them sweets, but Nurse Rosamund had kindly told her that small white grapes off a barrow were not forbidden; and if small white grapes, Mrs. Barton reasoned, why not tomatoes? Ben loved tomatoes; so with paper bags of each, protected from the rain by Mrs. Barton's umbrella, against the stem of which she pressed both bags between her finger and thumb, Mrs. Barton set forth to visit her children.

It was the right day, the right hour, the right place; but where—when she reached the spot—was the hospital?

What she saw before her was a roofless, roomless, hollow ghost. There was a great pile of faintly smoking rubble. There were high rusty girders swinging in the wind. There was the entire Casualty Ward grimly intact and black as ink; but the hospital itself was like the wreck of a paper bag that has once held some leaking substance.

Mrs. Barton's heart turned a complete somersault—and then felt as if a giant's hand had caught it and was pinching it to pieces. She rubbed her eyes; she changed her weight from one painful foot to another; she *would* not believe it! There must be some mistake; but her body went on believing it. Mrs. Barton's body had never been given in to, or held secure from pain; and it therefore accepted the truth, shorn of all wish-dreaming. Her mouth grew dry. Her legs turned to jelly. Her eyes clung to the guttered oil-bombed ruin, and forced her mind to take in what the ruin implied.

Before her glazed eyes an enormous policeman swayed, glistening with wet mackintosh, through the curtain of rain.

“Don’t you take on, Mother,” he told her, “the children’s safe—every man Jack of ’em! Was one of yours inside?”

Mrs. Barton’s heart escaped the pinching hand, and functioned normally again, if still a little on the thumping side.

“Two,” she said drawing a deep breath. “My Ben, and the baby! They was buried under Swell Cottages, south by the river, lars’ week, and dug aht agine Sunday night. You wouldn’t ’ave thort that ’Itler *still* ’ad a dahn on ’em, wud yer?”

“Arrh!” guardedly remarked the policeman. “You never knows with ’im! Still, none of the patients was ’urt ’ere—two nights ago. No doubt you’ll git a notice jes’ as soon as the Post functions. The Orfice in the district copped it—sime as the ’Orspital. The Lady Almoner, she was killed—an’ three of the nurses in the Nurses’ Institute; but I saw the children got orf in a fleet of ambulances into the country—with me own eyes—at six o’clock in the mornin’. ‘Roll aht the barrel’ they wos singin’, lively as crickets! So yer can set yer ’eart at rest, Ma, an’ go ’ome an’ mike yerself a nice cup of tea!”



Large tears of relief and gratitude rolled down Mrs. Barton's cheeks. Never again would she hear, unchallenged, a word against a policeman in her presence. This man was a Messenger of God—and well and truly had he announced his celestial message.

"Thank you, Orficer," she said with deep gratitude. "Then I'll wait till I 'ear." And, clutching the tomatoes and the white grapes harder against the umbrella,—since they must do now, she decided, for Bert and Flossie's supper,—she turned home, almost as happy as and even more grateful than

if the hospital had been standing. Once more her children who were dead—were alive again!

Mrs. Barton couldn't help asking herself, while nimbly dodging between a 'bus and a tram, how many more times their precious lives would be threatened, and what, if anything, she could do to help preserve them.

After she got home to the scantily furnished new rooms they were lucky to have crushed themselves into, she had barely had time to change her clothes and relax when Flossie came charging up the stairs, and dashed in as if pursued by wild elephants.

Flossie wore a scarlet oil-silk mackintosh, and a hood that went with it. Her shoes had very high heels, and her silk stockings were wringing wet. She carried a neat little despatch case that looked like leather. Usually her lipstick, if striking, was immaculate; but to-day it had run in stripes down her chin, and she had taken no steps to retrieve it. Her bright brown eyes looked larger than ever; her lips trembled. She caught her mother by both wrists and shook her, as she used to shake her when she was a frightened little girl.

"Ma!" she cried, instead of "Mother!" "Oh, Ma! Cook's is gone! They was burnt out last night—the whole shop—an' all round us is something awful! We bin sorting what was saved, and dry; an' eating off a Mobile! The Manager says it'll be weeks before we can get into new premises—and the nightwatchman, 'e was burnt to death! Oh, Ma—what shall I do without me shop?"

Flossie, who was the most sensitive to disaster of all Mrs. Barton's children, fell back into the nearest chair and began tapping on the floor with her heels.

"You won't get nowhere by that, my girl," Mrs. Barton rather drily told her. "Wot you want—an' wot I'll get for you as soon as I've time to turn rahnd—is a good 'ot cup o' tea."

It was not until she had seen her daughter fortified to the brim with this universal panacea for all the troubles of the poor that Mrs. Barton told Flossie about the bombed-out hospital and the children's escape.

"Of course it would be nicer," Mrs. Barton admitted, "if we knew where they wos. Still, you carn't deny we 'ave been lucky, Flossie. Not one of us 'as been killed, an' your father an' Bert earnin' good money, the Twins costin' us nuffin', an' Ben and Mibel livin' in the country on the fat of the

land as you might say! Wot we reely 'ave ter think abaht nah, is whether ter 'ave them back or not!"

"Cor, Ma, you ain't reely thinking of evacuating Ben and Mibel, same as the Twins, are you?" Flossie asked incredulously. "Why, what ever would you do without them?"

"I shud 'ave ter do wivout 'em if they was killed, shudn't I?" Mrs. Barton replied with grim accuracy. "You don't know, Flossie my girl, wot comfort I've got aht of 'avin' them Twins in Cornwall! Seems as if I'd felt years younger ever since, an' onct I got used ter the *idea* this artemnoon of Ben an' Mibel bein' Gawd knows where—but not under them ruins—well I did fin' meself wonderin' wot ever's the use of 'avin' them back agine! I did reely!"

Flossie, when not too interested in her own affairs, was a gold mine of wisdom and comfort to her mother; and she now put some of these riches into execution. The nervous horror of her own day's work faded out of her eyes. After all, if she didn't get back into her own shop, she could get into another. There were plenty of places short of good "show girls" at the moment; and Flossie was a good "show girl," and knew that she had a right to a first-rate testimonial. She was far more shaken than she would have admitted, even to herself, at the risk to Ben and Mabel.

She considered the whole question thoughtfully, drying her silk stockings on her legs in front of the fire so that they shouldn't shrink, and sipping at her third cup of tea.

Suddenly an idea occurred to her, shaking her to her foundations. It was worse than when her young man had left her in the Blitz without a flash lamp.

"Oh, Ma!" Flossie cried in inconsolable anguish, "you wasn't meanin'—Oh, you wasn't meanin' you'd go wiv 'em?"

Mrs. Barton had had no such intention; indeed such a notion had never even crossed her mind. Respectable married women, in Dockland, whose husbands are reasonably faithful and temperate, as Mr. Barton was, do not leave them. They do not leave unmarried daughters either just at an age when, without appearing to pay the least attention to their mothers, these young daughters most need them.

Mrs. Barton's eyes met Flossie's and rested on her with astonished tenderness, for Flossie was no longer a grand and intelligent young lady earning good money and with the *savoir-faire* of a duchess. She was a little

girl who wanted her mother; and like a little girl, she cried out, "Oh, Ma! Don't go away an' leave me!"

Mrs. Barton had never been so thrilled by any spoken word as she was by this sudden plea on the part of her daughter. Could it be possible that Flossie loved her? It was one of those miracles that in a drab and flat existence spring like a rainbow from horizon to horizon, scattering their golden light over a colourless earth. That children should be loved by their mothers was only in the natural order of things; but after they'd ceased to need you, Mrs. Barton had reason to suppose that all emotion upon their part became centred upon the outside world. That was, after all, their business. Could this sudden cry on Flossie's part mean that she felt her business with the outside world had failed? Not her work-life—that, Mrs. Barton felt sure Flossie had the sense to realize, she would regain—but was it the loss of that young man in the Blitz? She had never told her mother that she minded the high-mettled parting. She had sung about the house; gone out every evening with a girl friend; curled her hair as carefully; and been just as excited as usual about the summer Sales. But now Mrs. Barton wondered. Had Flossie been so happy after all? He had been Flossie's first serious young man—flash lamp or no flash lamp. Mrs. Barton sent her mind down the long pilgrimage of the years to recapture her own first memories of love.

There had been a young man in Reading, who worked in Huntley and Palmer's biscuit factory, before Mrs. Barton met the far more forcible Mr. Barton.

Charlie was a nice young man—quiet-like. He went to chapel; and had signed the Pledge at twenty-one. There was something about a young girl's tender pride in loving, and being loved for the first time, that did not come again.

Mrs. Barton remembered that she had walked out with Charlie for four Sundays before he got the measles and she met Mr. Barton at a dance. Supposing Charlie hadn't had the measles, or that his mother hadn't snubbed her when she called to enquire how he was? Hadn't she in fact felt that Charlie might have got over the measles a little sooner if it hadn't been for his mother; and that if he *had* returned in time to claim her, Mr. Barton, however forcible, might not have had it all his own way? Mrs. Barton remembered, with a sigh, the civilized mildness of Charlie's blue eyes.

Young people take these things to heart, she told herself. Flossie's dignity, her fine security in the possession of a regular young man so soon after leaving school—well, it had been rather too suddenly swept from her!

And there hadn't been any Mr. Barton to take the young man's place! Flossie might make a mistake if she were left alone now.

"I 'adn't thort to leave you, and your Dad, Flossie my girl," Mrs. Barton said with unusual tenderness, "but I 'ad thort—when I seed all them smokin' ruins alyin' abaht close ter the Bridge—that I might 'ave ter let the children go into the country, like that Lady said."

The terror and the pleading faded from Flossie's eyes. She became once more the Flower of the Family, sophisticated, mature, the condescending centre of Home education.

"I dare say the Lady was right," she told her mother. "London isn't the place for children. But perhaps you don't realize—you'd have to keep Mabel—or go with her! She's under two. Ben you could send off—to join the Twins, if you wrote to the Lady and asked her. I have kept her name and address, like she told us to—'Lady Strangeways, Silver Fountains, near Painswick, Gloucestershire.' What's the matter, Ma?"

Mrs. Barton's jaw had suddenly dropped, and her eyes darkened; but she wasn't going to upset Flossie, so she turned her back on her and refilled the kettle for the men's supper.

"Nothing much," she said in her usual voice; "I was only thinkin' little Ben, 'e'd take it ter 'eart, partin' with Mibel, like. I'd 'ave ter leave 'er too, all day long wiv a minder, an' she wouldn't like that!"

"Well, you can't have everything, can you?" Flossie, now calmer and a little less sympathetic, answered. "Ben would be safe, and Mabel would have to take her chance like the rest of us."

Her mother did not answer her. In a way it was a comfort to think that she wouldn't have to let Mabel go. The Government stepping in, and saying she wasn't to send away her youngest, took from her all responsibility; at least it took away the responsibility about her youngest; but not all her responsibility. There was still the question: Would Ben go without Mabel? And if she forced him to, would she lose him as a friend—just to keep him alive as a child? And supposing she *did* go with them both after all, what would then become of the proud, sensible well-educated Flossie who was now making up her face in an adequate and orthodox manner? What would Bert feel—young lady or no young lady; and what would be the reaction of Mr. Barton himself? "You ought to think of your children!"—that's wot they say ter me," Mrs. Barton told herself grimly, "but which children—or wot yer got ter think abaht them—*that* they carn't tell yer—nor the Govern-mint neither! When all's said an' done, yer 'ave ter find that aht fer yerself!"

XVIII

Flossie didn't wait for her father and Bert to appear. She finished making up her face, flung on her scarlet mackintosh, and adjusted the hood very becomingly over her brown curls, pausing for a moment at the door to give her mother an affectionate wave of the hand. She always went to the Pictures with a girl friend on Wednesday night; Bert went with his young lady; the Twins had gone together; Mr. Barton never went at all; and Mrs. Barton went with Ben when they could get someone to give an ear to Mabel.

Not even on this shaken day had it occurred to Flossie to change her regulation arrangement. Mrs. Barton would have liked to go to the Pictures with her daughter—her mind and body, primed for the treat they had been denied, were crying out for some form of entertainment; but not for the world would she have said to Flossie, "I want to go with you!" There might be people who would think that Mrs. Barton did not have good manners; but she had the best manners—the manners of the heart, that never take a liberty with the rights of the beloved. After all, she told herself, Mr. Barton and Bert might have felt disappointed too, if they'd come home and not found their kippers ready for them.

It was not long before she heard their footsteps on the stairs, and she saw by their faces that they had already heard about the hospital. Bert came straight up to her, and laid his hand on her shoulder; and her husband looked at her with curiously kind eyes and called her "Sairey"—not "Ma," as he usually did.

"'Eard the news, Sairey?" he demanded with a falsely casual air. "Children are orl right—but the 'orspital's dahn!"

"I seed it!" said Mrs. Barton. And then because it was such a comfort to feel her first-born's hand on her shoulder—and to meet her husband's warily protective eyes—she sat down heavily on the chair next to the fire and burst into tears.

"Gawd A'mighty," said Mr. Barton crossly, "I *tole* you—Ben an' Mibel wos orl right—didn't I? Wot yer 'owlin' abaht—bricks an' mortar? Then yer'd better cry yerself inter yer grave—for there's enuff bricks an' mortar dahn—orl over Lunnon—as would mike kindergartens for all the children in the world!"

This unusual burst of picturesqueness on her husband's part instantly dried Mrs. Barton's tears, and she set to work upon the kippers.

Bert had good news for her—or so it seemed—for, after he had taken off his cap, attended to his slightly chastened lock, and put a draggled muffler over the guard to dry, he proceeded to inform her that he actually knew where the children were. His young lady had rung him up in the dinner hour to tell him that there was a picture of the Lady who had called on Mrs. Barton, in the *Tatler*, and of her great place in the country, which she had turned into a hospital for injured and bombed-out Londoners; and their very own hospital had gone there two days before in ambulances after the raid. There were deer in the Park, let alone rabbits; and Ben would have been sure to make himself known to the Lady.

This cheered up Mrs. Barton considerably, and she waited to let them have the bad news about Flossie's shop until they had finished their supper. While she was waiting, she observed one or two rather strange and disquieting symptoms about Bert. He insisted upon her sharing supper with them. He got up and brought the kettle over to make their second cups of tea. He told her that the white grapes and the tomatoes were grand. This was his evening for taking Fanny to the Pictures, but where was Fanny? Mrs. Barton was eating her kipper; and no mention had been made of Fanny—after Bert had retailed the news that she had telephoned about the children. Since Fanny had telephoned at midday, it was unlikely that they had quarrelled; for if she'd upset him, Bert would have paid no attention to his lock. As it was, he had carefully combed it in, and reset it, before sitting down to his supper.

"Bert," asked his mother suspiciously, "what's wrong with you?"

"There ain't anythink wrong," Bert said, scratching his head, and smiling sheepishly, "I ain't done nuffin', leastways not more'n wot my mates 'as done—Bill Spence an' Archie Badger an' me—Well, we've signed on for the Navy. We jes' thort we might as well as not—if you know wot I mean! May be, Ma, the Govern-mint will keep us where we are, any'ow! But we jes' felt kind of tired of turnin' ships rahnd—an' not goin' orf in them, to 'ave a go at the 'Un! That there 'Orspital—well, I sees it in me dinner hower too, an' it fair got my goat. It got Dad's too, didn't it, Dad?"

Mr. Barton said "Arrh!" and took up his pipe. He wished his wife hadn't turned as white as a sheet again. He couldn't help noticing it. She opened her mouth as if to speak, and then shut it, as if she found speech too difficult. Not that Bert was really any safer where he was. Perhaps he wasn't as safe,

working at night in the blazing streets—working by day in the threatened, blasted Docks; but he was near. She could see him twice a day at least. She could feed him, and look at him, and say to herself, “That’s my Bert.”

The sea wasn’t so far away, just down at the mouth of the estuary—but it was full of mysterious underwater dangers; it was haunted and exposed; storms shook it; and you couldn’t be sure that any ship would come back—once it had sailed away.

“May be the Govern-mint wants ’im where ’e is,” Mr. Barton said with unexpected kindness, “’e’s in a reserved occupation any’ow. ’E’s only jes’ put his name dahn like, Sairey; it mayn’t come ter nuffin’!”

“Flossie’s shop’s gone,” Mrs. Barton replied gloomily, “an’ o’ course we do know where the children is nah! But if we gits them back agine—then where’ll they be? An’ this sink gets blocked up! I’ve poured boiling water dahn it time and agine—it don’t mike no diff-rence—the water won’t run awiy proper, do what I can!”

Mr. Barton actually rose to his feet and looked at the sink; he did something with his finger and thumb which momentarily released the water, and with a triumphant “Arrh!” came back to his seat again. Mrs. Barton was so touched by this act of partnership that she refrained from telling him that she too could produce, by the same method, a temporary release of water, and had already done so. She just said, “Thank you, ’Erbert!” and sniffed in a subdued manner.

Bert, having successfully broken his news, felt it a good moment to leave for the Pictures; Fanny, with infinite generosity, having agreed on this occasion to meet him at the Ticket Office after supper, at nine, so that he could break it to his mother in privacy.

His father, too, was playing up in a way no one could have expected of him. He made no move, when the door banged behind his eldest son, to follow him. He rammed down the tobacco in his pipe, lit it, and leaned back in the new armchair, or rather the new secondhand one Mrs. Barton had bought with the Government’s money—almost as if he were in his own public house.

“Well, Ma,” he said in a highly consolatory manner, “they’re all alive, aren’t they?”

“So far, ’Erbert,” Mrs. Barton, indulging in the unprecedented relaxation of a little gloom, replied dully. “So far—they all *is* alive—an’ I’m thankful for it! But wot I asks meself is—’ow long is they goin’ ter stiy so!”

“Well—I don’t know ’oo yer thankful to, or why yer thankful to anyone,” interrupted Mr. Barton belligerently. “We’ve ’ad one roof orf—an’ all we owned bust up—an’ there’s no sayin’ we aren’t goin’ ter lose this one too, though I took it as far from the Docks as we could git, conveniently. But as for thankfulness, well it’d take a woman ter be thankful! You ain’t ’alf a Communist, Sairey my girl!”

Mrs. Barton let this difference of opinion slide. She was far too relieved to have Mr. Barton share her troubles with her to bother him with any political back-chat. She just said, laying her hand on his knee, “’Ave you thought, ’Erbert, of *not* ’avin’ the children back agine? Or not Ben anywiy? Seemingly if I don’t go wiv ’em, Mibel must stiy along of us. ’Ave you thought this might save ’im?”

Mr. Barton hesitated; he had thought of it. More than that, he had discussed it with Bert. Neither of them had envisaged Mrs. Barton’s leaving them; but they had thought of evacuating Ben.

“The Nipper—” Mr. Barton said, removing his pipe from his mouth—“I ain’t sayin’ that ’e ’asn’t ’ad enuff of it, but ’e won’t take kindly ter leavin’ Mibel be’ind ’im, will ’e?”

Mrs. Barton said, “Thet’s just it! ’E won’t—nor she won’t tike ter bein’ left by ’im, neither! Thet’s wot I’m afraid of—they might fret themselves ter death! But there’s one thing, ’Erbert, I ’ave thort of—that pore lil’ girl, that Em’ly! She’s ’urt somethink crool—an’ all her fambly dead into the bargain—and Ben, ’e thinks we ’ad orter ’dopt young Em’ly! Maybe ’e’d go more willingly like, too, if it was ter save ’er!”

“Wot—that low lil’ thing next door?” Mr. Barton indignantly demanded. “Why her payrints wasn’t much better nor criminals, Ma, were they?”

“I’ve known criminals,” Mrs. Barton replied truthfully, “as I’d take to a lot more than I took to Kathleen Higgins. She lied as she breathed—and wot she didn’t git aht of you one way, she took—another! Still, seein’ as young Em’ly ’as lors’ ’er ’ole fambly, an’ she wos our neighbour like, an’ is only nine years old—I jes’ don’t like ter fink of ’er bein’ turned into a Waif an’ Stray—I don’t reely!”

“If she was a Russian,” Mr. Barton remarked, “that chile wud be no worse orf than one with both payrints an’ grandpayrints—better orf, if you arsk me!”

“Well—that’s jes’ wot I was thinkin’!” Mrs. Barton skilfully amended. “We—bein’ Communists in a manner of speakin’—mightn’t we make things

a bit easier fer the chile? One mouf more ter feed—wiv eight orlready—don't mike ser much diff'rence like. An' we might get a 'lowance fer 'er if she was evacuated erlong of Ben!"

Mr. Barton let his pipe grow cold. Rage filled him; and worse than rage, a faint prick that might have been his conscience added to his discomfort. "'Dopt that young thief," he shouted, "wot 'as led ter orl the trouble! Why, they wouldn't er got buried if it 'adn't bin fer 'er! Wot's got yer, Ma? Yer dopey—thet's wot you are! An' 'oo said our Ben an' Mibel were ter be evacuated? I ain't ever given my consent yet ter no such a plan! The business of the Govern-mint is ter keep orf 'Itler—not ter rob the pore man of his chile 'cos it carn't keep 'im orf!"

Mr. Barton looked outraged; but Mrs. Barton knew why he was outraged, and felt the kinder to him for it. He had grown to enjoy taking care of his children in the Shelter. They meant more to him since the Blitz began. He prized them as a man prizes, suddenly, threatened possessions which he has taken for granted all his life. But there was a deeper way of prizing children, as Mrs. Barton very well knew—not for what you got out of them, nor even for what they got out of you; but for themselves alone.

Mrs. Barton's mind was made up. The children, including Em'ly, had got to be safe. Even Mabel, if she could get her away, must be got away.

Still, she felt a very friendly feeling for Mr. Barton's sudden explosion of wrath. "Communists," she said a little uncertainly, "they 'ave a sayin' wot you've always tole me, 'Each for all, an' all for each.' Well, I ain't ever rightly took it in afore; but I do now. Seems ter me, it means when a chile—like Em'ly—loses orl it 'as, you got ter share wiv it. An' when the only way ter keep yer children alive is ter let them leave you—well then, yer got ter let them leave yer!"

Mr. Barton stared with indignant astonishment at his wife. What did she mean by quoting his own wisdom against him in such an aggravating manner? And why did she put it so well, when as a rule she was as hopeless in putting her thoughts into words as he would have been assembling ingredients for a pudding?

"You're mixed," he said with an angry snort, "that's Christianity, not Communism, you're torkin'. Wimmin's 'eads carn't stan' up against these air raids—thet's wot it is!"

"But 'Erbert," Mrs. Barton plodded determinedly on, "it don't make no great diff'rence wot yer calls things, does it? If Christianity and Communism both says, 'Look after children in wot wiy yer can—an'

anyone's children that's got no one else ter do fer 'em,' why then, it's the same thing, ain't it—an' yer got ter do it, wotever you call it—there ain't no wiy er gittin' aht of it! Believe you me, 'Erbert—if I could git aht of partin' wiv Ben an' Mibel—or not takin' a chile that Kathleen Higgins said was 'er 'usban's, but I ain't ever believed it, fer both of 'em's got blue eyes an' Em'ly's eyes are as black as ink—I'd git aht of it! But I don' *see* no other wiy, thet's orl!"

There was a long pause. Mr. Barton gave up his pipe altogether, and put it down on the kitchen table. He looked at his wife in a baffled but not malevolent manner. She wasn't crying, and she wasn't in a temper. She just sat there opposite him, twisting her apron between her work-worn hands. His eye fell on the gleam of her wedding ring. She had never taken it off. He had spent ten shillings on it; and it was as good as ever. He didn't believe in marriage—but to please her, he'd married her. Twenty-five years ago—well, there it was! You did these things when you were young; nor had he any great reason to regret it. She had been faithful to him. She had given him his meals well—and properly cooked; she had never grudged him his paper, his smokes or his meetings. Beer too—she hadn't ever asked him to drink less beer; and now what was she asking him to do? She was asking him to live up to his principles—as well as being prepared to live up to his principles—whether he was willing to or not.

"Politics is one thing," Mr. Barton said cautiously, "religion is another."

Mrs. Barton went on looking at him. Her silence contradicted him, not her words.

"I ain't anythink against the chile," Mr. Barton at last murmured uncomfortably, "not *as* a chile, I mean! As a Comrade—she's bad—cudn't 'elp bein', I suppose you'd say. Well, there it is, Sairey, you can 'ave it yer own wiy I serpose. But it's a risk—an' wot'll the Twins siy? They fairly 'ates 'er guts!"

"She might learn," Mrs. Barton hesitantly contributed, not feeling quite sure what—of an improving nature—Em'ly *could* learn from the Twins, even if she were disposed to acquire the knowledge.

"She's only nine; an' Ben, well, our Ben's always been a steady chile. I don't fink she'll do '*im* any 'arm. She treated that pore lil' Sam rough; but she'd 'ave fought 'erself to a finish rather than let another chile liy a 'and on 'im. We'll 'ave ter see wot that Lady can do ter 'elp us abaht keepin' them together. She was nice-spoken and 'ad a feelin' 'eart. I'll tike a Green bus

and go an' visit 'er, an' the children, 'Erbert. If we 'ave ter git them all three awiy into the country, wot say but we'd be doin' right?"

Mr. Barton snatched up his pipe, rammed his cap well on the back of his head, and set out for the nearest public house. It was not a moment, he felt, for anything *but* beer.

He paused at the door, and looked back at his wife.

"'Ave it yer own wiy—then!" he said, not without a muffled feeling of admiration for her. "Right or wrong—it's wot it always comes ter, in the end, wiv wimmin!"

XIX

Nurse Rosamund lifted Ben out of the ambulance into Fairyland.

It was eight o'clock of a ripe November day. The grass sparkled under a spray of diamonds. Pigeons, with feathers white as new-fallen snow, stuck their pink claws deep into mossy tiles—and bowed to each other with ceremonious monotony, cooing their loud content into the silent sunny air.

As far as Ben's eyes could see, there was space and light. Under a group of far-off trees, deep in rusty bracken, he saw a herd of deer flicker with the speed of light into shadowy distances.

A great grey house stood in front of him, with long thin windows; and on its steps, looking younger and more gracious in white, with a red cross, was the Vision—the self-same Vision who had visited them in their Bermondsey kitchen, in that other reasonable peaceful life before the Blitzkrieg struck them.

Ben stumbled towards her, blinking, as if his eyes denied the reality of what he saw. But his heart claimed her; he seized her by the hand and announced hoarsely: "I'm Ben! You remember I seed you, when I was under the table, an' you guv' me 'alf a crown."

The Vision's eyes flashed into recognition. She drove something out of them that might have been pity, for what she saw was a tousled object in a torn nightshirt, bandaged head and arms, a hollowed face blackened with smoke and soot—but shining up at her like a ransomed soul at the gates of Paradise.

"Of course I remember you," she told him, "and as soon as everyone has found their places, we'll have a good talk together!"

And then more ambulances drove up, and somehow or other Nurse Rosamund managed to get Mabel into a cot beside Ben's. They were in a ballroom full of cots, with a shining parquet floor and vaguely dawn-pink walls. They weren't quite out of doors, although the great room was so full of air and sunshine that it seemed as if it were almost part of a smooth and spacious lawn leading into the deep bracken where the deer were as much at home as Ben was. Beyond the Park was a long line of blue hills; and as soon as the Ward had filled with quickly disposed-of children—hastily cleaned by

twos and threes in spacious tiled bathrooms so as to fit the spotless beds awaiting them—Ben became conscious of the immense amount of silence the green Park held. It was a cup filled to the brim with light and silence. Only robins broke the soundlessness by singing small, sudden happy songs. The sky was empty, and a misty blue. It did not look as if anything cruel had ever been dropped out of it.

Ben had a grand breakfast: bacon, a whole egg that tasted nicer and more milky than any egg he had yet tasted, and after that, bread and honey—a breakfast such as kings and queens ate.

Suddenly Ben fell asleep. He forgot to find out where Em'ly was. He even forgot to see if Mabel had got safely off first. He felt so safe that he knew *they* were, so that he could well afford to sleep.

When the evening came, the Vision sat by Ben's side, just as she had promised. The birds were quiet, the curtains drawn; and the pink-walled room looked like a rosy cloud for children to lean against.

The Vision had a curious direct quality shared only by Mrs. Barton. She seemed to understand immediately what Ben wanted to convey. Other grown-up people had ideas of their own all the time—often of an extremely complicated kind—and tried to put anything you told them into their own pattern. It never fitted; but the Vision and Mrs. Barton emptied their minds to listen, so that whatever you said found room to be at home in. They seemed to have no pattern.

"Oh, of course," the Vision said, "Em'ly—that's your friend next door—I'll find out just where she is, and you can see her to-morrow. I'll arrange all that with Sister Job."

Curiously enough, the Vision seemed to have a lubricating effect upon Sister Job; and when Sister Job talked to her, she seemed to grow a little less tall.

However, Ben's principal problem was: Did his mother know what had happened to him and Mabel? She was going to come and see them again in the hospital, and from what Ben had last seen of the hospital, it did not look as if much of it would be there, to be seen.

The Vision cleared up this difficulty too, at once. A young girl with a notebook, and hair curled as well as, if not better than, Flossie's, took down from Ben his mother's new address; and the Vision said: "We'll send her a telegram, where and how you are—and your love—and that she's to come and see you in the first Green bus she can catch!"

Finally, Ben found himself explaining to her his lifelong wish for Mabel to have a Teddy bear of her very own—not just a Ward bear, to be shut away from her at bedtime, or transferred, at the will of inimical human beings, to other children.

“She ’ad a rag at ’ome,” Ben explained, “I dunno ’ow yer shape a rabbit, but I shaped it fer ’er as well as I cud, an’ we *called* it a rabbit. But Mibel, she seed a Teddy in a shop winder—one of them gran’ shops it wos, in the Wes’ End—orl toys an’ such; an’ she sort of took a fancy ter ’im. An’ she ain’t ever cared ser much fer that rag-rabbit since! Still she took it ter bed with ’er at night reg’lar, an’ now she ain’t got nuffin’. That Sister Job, she says it’s un-high-somepin’-with-jean-in-it! She’s a fair caution, that woman is! Still, she ain’t ser bad on a fire escape—I will say that for ’er!”

The Vision accepted his criticism of Sister Job without reproof or support, but the girl with the notebook gave him a friendly grin, and wrote something down which resulted in the Teddy bear.

It swung into the line of Mabel’s vision at the exact moment when she’d made up her mind to howl till she was taken into Ben’s cot. The Teddy had a ticket with “Mabel” written on it, tied round its neck—a ticket that Mabel unfortunately chewed off almost immediately. Still, the Teddy was not removed from Mabel’s bed; and Sister Job, tucking her up for the night before she went off duty, appeared to have overlooked it.

It was a whole week before Ma came. She had to arrange for a friend to take her offices, and a day off that would suit her ladies; and the Green bus had to be paid for, and what with one thing and another, it all took time; but she had got the telegram and kept rereading it at intervals throughout the day’s work.

Ben was allowed up now; and bandages or no bandages, was just as active as ever. He showed her everything. First, the great sun parlour where the orthopaedics were, with one wall all glass that could be opened every morning, letting in almost the whole of a rose garden at once. Em’ly pointed out the roses with as much pride as if she had made them. She knew all their names already, from the gardener.

“If they wos jools,” she told Mrs. Barton, “we wouldn’t ’alf git some pickin’s aht of ’em!”

Mrs. Barton, seeing Em’ly so cradled and crucified, firmly believed she wouldn’t live to grow up; so she decided to let her remain as immoral as ever, though she pointed out to Ben afterwards that to talk like that about

robbing such a Lady as the Vision, of her poor innocent “flars,” was Kathleen Higgins all over again!

“Bites the ’and as feeds ’er, an’ thinks nothin’ of it,” Mrs. Barton said gloomily; but Ben was not greatly affected by this criticism of his friend since Mrs. Barton had been kindness itself to Em’ly and actually told her that she was “’dopted” and could join up with the Barton family wherever they were, and share any roof that happened to be over their heads.

“All you got ter do is to get well fust!” Mrs. Barton told her, looking down with incredulous pity at the instruments of torture in which Em’ly appeared to be encased.

“It ain’t ser bad as it looks,” Em’ly told her with unexpected truthfulness. “Yer get the fidgets—but it don’t ’urt. When they ’as ter muck yer abaht, they sticks stuff into yer as takes the pain orf like. In Lunnon I used ter pretend ter be ’urt—ter git a orange; but ’ere yer git the orange any’ow—so I don’t pretend nuffin’!”

Ben took Ma away soon, because she had to be shown everything; and a little of Em’ly went a long way with most grown-ups. Ma had to see the swans in the lake; where real rabbits popped out in the dusk; where the deer sometimes ran, and sometimes stood as still as if someone had painted them into the bracken and made them out of cardboard.

But what Ben found his mother enjoyed most was London itself spread out over the Park. Huts had been put up, and rows of tents; and here were men, women and children who’d been bombed out, or blasted across streets, or just buried and dug out again, but not too badly hurt to be up and about. Mrs. Barton never got tired of sitting down near them on a bench or a fallen tree, and listening to their stories. Some of them she even knew by sight, since they had shared the same Shelter. A few were dazed, and looked as if they lived inside themselves, swamped in a pity they couldn’t emerge from, even to enjoy the present. But most of them seemed to feel as if they were off upon a great adventure. They were not hopeless, although they had no resources and no plans; nor had they any particular worries, since they had their lives—and never had had much more than their lives over the lengthened period during which they had shared the bare earth’s crust.

Now for the first time in their lives, something was taking care of them. People of a kind they had never met were acting to them like friends. For this short irresponsible interval between one hard struggle and another, they hung suspended in a strange irresponsible bliss. They were fed with Manna from Heaven, and waited upon by Angels. They knew it wouldn’t last and

that they would soon find themselves back in their old hand-to-mouth existence—a little grimmer and blacker than ever; but meanwhile, they had been recognized and unbelievably aided. People of Power and Riches had acted as if they had a right to exist—to exist safely and comfortably when misfortune struck them. Hitherto, they had had misfortunes enough; but no such right—no such safety had ever been suggested to them.

“It ain’t only the cocoa—not to speak of the good sit-down meals yer get free times a day,” one of these women confided in Mrs. Barton and Ben—all three sitting together on a fallen oak in the sunshine; “it’s the kindness! They don’t seem ter mind wot they do fer you! With their own ’ands they does it too—not only the servants, stickin’ up their noses in the air whenever their People ’ave their backs turned—I know servants! Why, I was one myself onct—used ter ’ave ter tike the Butler’s early mornin’ tea up ter ’im, stuffy ole bloke—not ’alf a Tyrint, ’e wasn’t! But there’s somethin’ abaht this bombin’ as seems ter mike the worst of ’em more ’uman like, if yer know wot I mean!”

Mrs. Barton did know, and said, “Arrh!” with the deepest sympathy and understanding.

Ma was satisfactorily struck by all the treasures Ben showed her, but in spite of her being duly awed and impressed, Ben had an uncomfortable feeling that not even deer, rabbits, butter and jam for tea, or Mabel’s Teddy bear, quite reached something troubled and unsure at the very core of the day itself. It didn’t go right—after the first leap of the heart. He had seen Ma and caught hold of her in a flash—and then in spite of her solidity, she seemed to become unsubstantial on his hands. It might have been understandable if the whole place had turned into a dream, with Ma as the only reality. But to have the place stay real, and Ma become a dream, was truly disconcerting. It wasn’t the kind of thing you could ask about, but it took all the elastic out of Ben’s legs.

Sister Job miraculously, if coldly, allowed Mrs. Barton to have tea with her own children in the sacred precincts of the Ballroom between their cots; and afterwards Ma was invited to go to the housekeeper’s room to have a talk with the Vision. Ben was not supposed to be present at this interview; but he wangled it somehow out of Nurse Rosamund, while Sister Job had gone to her own tea.

No one else was there. The housekeeper had a lovely, rich-looking room, with a wood fire burning; in a way it looked to Ben fuller and richer than any room in the house. Mrs. Barton sat in an armchair on one side of the

hearth, with Ben on a footstool close to her; and then the Vision came in and sat on the other side of the hearth.

There was light enough for Ben to watch both their faces.

“Ben is getting on splendidly,” the Vision said kindly, “all his cuts are healing up; but we think he ought to have another week’s rest before he travels. Mabel needs *quite* that. The younger they are, the more shock affects their bodies rather than their minds. Of course, Em’ly must stay in the Orthopaedic Ward under our special surgeons for some months at least. She couldn’t be doing better, but she has been very badly injured. I hear you are actually thinking of bringing her up with your own children—we do think it’s grand of you, Mrs. Barton!”

Mrs. Barton worked her hands together nervously. “It ain’t nuffin’,” she said with embarrassment, “seein’ the pore chile ain’t got no one. My man, ’e ’ad ’is doubts, on account of the Twins not likin’ ’er. Nor her people weren’t much if yer arsk me—but there, where they is—if anywhere—it’ll be overlooked p’reps—on account of the sudding way they was taken orf. Not ser much as a by-yer-leave, but up thru’ the ceiling an’ orl abaht the sky! Wot was bricks an’ wot was Kathleen Higgins—nobody knows!”

The Vision paused for a moment to follow the flight of Kathleen Higgins in respectful silence; then she said, “What I really wanted to ask you, Mrs. Barton, is what you intend to do *now*? I feel sure you won’t want to have Mabel and Ben back in Dockland again—with the conditions what they are? It was a Mercy of Heaven they were twice saved, but we can’t count on further miracles.”

“Yus, they do siy as ’ow the third time is fatal,” Mrs. Barton agreed with apparent calm, “an’ yer carn’t count on nuffin’, that’s true too. Reg’lar as clockwork, those C-rains go orf up our way. I tell you strite, it *is* in my mind that the children orter be somewheres else! I wudn’t send them over the seas—where I cudn’t git ter them, no matter wot ’appened—but I don’t mind sendin’ of ’em to Cornwall. The Twins is orl right there seemingly.”

“There’s one difficulty about sending the children alone,” the Vision said reflectively. “Mabel can’t go without you. She’s too young. You see, in the Government scheme, children must be evacuated *with* their mothers unless they are school age. You see the sense of that, don’t you? Now, if you’ll all three go, I think I could get a cottage where the Twins could join you—near where they are now.”

Ben pressed his mother’s knee with his hard fist. His eyes worked themselves into her troubled face like gimlets. Surely—surely, she could but

agree to this perfect plan—she had only to stop being troubled? Hadn't he a right to her—to his own mother—hadn't Mabel—and the Twins? Didn't people always say, "Children first," if there was a shipwreck; and hadn't they had what amounted to a shipwreck?

The Vision too, was on his side. Ben knew that; he could feel her wanting it.

Mrs. Barton's lips worked. She put her hand over Ben's fist, and held it so tight that it hurt.

"It's this way," she said painfully, "your children—well, they need you any'ow, don't they—young or old they need you! An' you've got ter think of 'em all rahnd like. The older ones—my Flossie and Bert—they ain't got no one else ter see after 'em, if I'm not there. Nor they wudn't take anythin' in the way of looking after, from no one else. Not that they'd take it from me always—but you know wot I mean! They do *look* to their mother! But the young ones, my Ben and Mibel, an' the Twins—well, there'd be people ter see after them! Whether or no, they *git* looked after! You yourself, Lady, you'd be all aht ter 'elp children fir's, wudn't you? An' there's my ole man too! 'Ow's 'e goin' ter break anyone else into 'is wiys? A man like my 'Erbert—'e 'as 'abits; an' 'e 'as a right ter them, 'asn't 'e? 'E's worked 'ard orl 'is life! 'E ain't ser young any more—turned fifty 'e 'as; an' 'e needs someone ter study 'im. 'E gits them brownkill colds every winter, an' 'oo's ter look after 'im then? Flossie, she 'as ter 'ave 'er fun like any other young girl. You carn't tie them up to their payrints—sick or well—an' I wouldn't want ter! I've thort it orl aht, Ben, ser it ain't no use yer squeezin' my weddin' ring into me flesh—like a Demon! I want ter go erlong of you, with Mibel, jes' as much as yer wants ter 'ave me! But fair is fair—yer carn't git awiy from it. The way I see it is—I *got* ter stiy with Flossie and your Dad, an' keep the 'ome goin'!"

It seemed to Ben that Ma was being both stubborn and wrong. She sat there as red as a beetroot; and there, right in her lap as it were, lay a wonderful new life for all three of them, free from bombs and terrors—and she wouldn't touch it! She wouldn't take her children and go and live in a cottage with nothing to hurt her—and where there was nothing to hurt Mabel. Ben frowned savagely at her. He would have liked to hit her. "If you goes, I go," he told her truculently, "an' if you stiys, Ma, then Mibel an' me stiys wiv yer! Yer carn't stop us!"

The Vision looked pained at this complete repudiation of authority; but she said nothing. She was a sensible woman, and perhaps she realized that

the bond between this mother and her son was of so deep a kind that rough words did not shake it. Nor—except in the last resource—would his mother use the weight of authority upon the will of a child so deeply loved and trusted.

“Mrs. Barton, *it is* a very hard choice,” she said at last, gently. “May I say just what I think about it, before leaving you to talk it over with Ben? If you decide to take Mabel, I can really get you all together, and all safe—except of course, the three grown-up workers, whom you will have to leave behind. But you do leave them behind together, don’t you? Mustn’t they learn to be unselfish too? And reasonable? They cannot go—but you can! Would they really like you to risk your life, and the baby’s, because they can’t stand a few months—or a year or two—of loneliness and inconvenience? Your husband and son should learn to protect your daughter; and she should try to take your place and see after their comfort. That, at least, would seem to me the fairest plan, and in the long run—the happiest for you all! Sometimes an outsider like myself can see plainer than the person involved. You feel pulled both ways; and you want to sacrifice your own security—and your baby’s—just for their comfort! That hardly seems, to me, right to any of you!”

Mrs. Barton’s eyes filled with slow tears, but she said nothing. She just shook hands with the Vision, who was preparing to leave them.

Ben knew that Ma still liked the Lady; she even felt there was sense as well as deep kindness in what she said; but it was no use thinking that his mother was convinced. She was merely shaken; and Ben knew that his mother could be shaken every which way without being convinced.

Still, as their hands met, their hearts met too. Ben saw, with deep approval, that for one strange moment they even looked alike.

Then the Vision was gone and Ben was alone with his mother. She ceased to be moved in quite the same way. She sank back into the armchair, and relaxed. She put her arm round Ben, who leaned against her as if he were a baby, and not a big boy of seven years old.

“You got ter see it the wiy I do, son!” she told him gently. “It’s Flossie—it’s ’er bein’ a young girl like—that’s lost her fust young man—an’ ’e er Steady as we orl thort! An’ now there’s ’er shop bombed aht! Yer farver, ’e means well by orl ’is children. I ain’t arsked ’im, but I know ’e’d let me go—if I *did* arsk! ’E’s agreed to our ’doptin’ young Em’ly! ’E’s agreed ter sendin’ you an’ Mabel awiy—but wot’ll ’e feel like left alone? Flossie—’oo’s she—ter know when ter keep ’im in, in the winter when ’is cough’s

ser bad, an' when not? Nor 'e wudn't *stiy* 'ome fer Flossie if she *did* know! There's Bert too—'e's goin' inter the Navy. Well, that's O.K. by me if 'is 'eart is set on it. But I'd like ter be 'ome fer 'is leaves—even if 'e does spend the most of 'is free time with 'is young lady. Yer see 'ow it is, Ben, these rich folk like this lady—they're good ter their famblies, but it comes easy-like. They *can* be—an' if they ain't, there's their 'ouses going on sime as usual with meals an' all; or they can piy fer 'otels—or 'ave friends ter *stiy* wiv. It's wunnerful wot money will do—one wiy or another! I ain't blamin' 'er! You can see she's turned 'er own 'ome into a 'orspital fer orl them pore bombed-aht people as gets 'urt! Well, thet's orl right—'er mind's full of things as mine isn't. I only got my fambly. I sorter fink it's *diff'rent* for 'er! Wot she says *sounds* sense—an' it may be sense for 'er—but it don't come raw out of 'er 'eart! You can see that, carn't yer, Ben?"

"Well—wot abaht Mibel?" Ben asked with quivering lips and a rebellious spirit. "I don't want Mibel ter git buried agine—an' me not there neither! An' wot yer goin' ter do wiv Mibel while yer at work?"

"I thort of that!" Mrs. Barton told him. "I thort Flossie'd take 'er there mornin's, seein' the shops is later openin' than my offices, and I'd fetch 'er 'ome when I leaves my ladies. There's nersery schools they calls 'em, nah—where mothers *can* leave their babies while they goes ter work. Wunnerful good places fer babies they do siy. An' there's one not too far orf—wot I went ter see—cots, an' gimes, an' nice ladies too—lookin' arter them. Mibel'd not 'ave ter be with that minder no more—she got killed any'ow lars' week, in the pub at the corner she wos—sime as usual—*not* mindin' the biby she was pide ter mind! Thet's enuff of minders fer me! But these nersery schools *is* diff'rent, Ben, they is reely!"

"Arrh!" said Ben darkly. "An' Em'ly an' me—we've got ter go wiv' aht *you*, Ma! I won't tike it! If Mabel stiys, I stiyl!"

Mrs. Barton understood all that was going on in his rebellious mind. There was a very well authenticated fear of how the Twins would behave to Em'ly for instance. How could Ben, at his age, hope to stop their cruelty? How could he use tact, where tact was possible; or force—if tact were not possible?

He said nothing of his fear for his mother and Mabel—nor of his essential loneliness. It was not to Em'ly—it was not to the Twins—it was not even to Mabel that he most belonged.

It broke his mother's heart to repudiate him. "You'd 'ave ter go," she said, "'cos Ben, there ain't no use in yer stiyin'! An' wot's more, there's

some things I *can* stand—and some I *carn't*. Mibel, I can pick up an' run wiv —she won't get killed if I can 'elp it! Them air raids aren't nuffin' by day. But I jes' carn't stand 'avin' *you* buried one moment an' bombed aht the next! I've 'ad enuff of it!"

There was a long silence. She was the first to break it. She said tentatively, "Well, Ben, 'ave you figgered it orl aht fer yerself—the wiy I said?"

He buried his head against her arm and muttered through hot tears, from the depths of the heart she had built up like her own, on love and courage: "Orl right, Ma, I'll go 'lone—if yer want me to!"

XX

Ben remembered the seaside as a place of soft yellow earth, covered with people and paper bags. In front of them had spread the largest pool he had ever seen, with white lace edges that came up and up, and then went down and down. The beach people did nothing but amuse themselves and eat. In fact they behaved as every sensible child would like to see grown-up people behave all the time. But this seaside place was wholly different. On the edge of a rough grassy hill, interrupted by grey stones and bracken, stood a small windswept stone farm, with a few stubborn little outhouses and a cobbled yard. There were no people at all—not at any rate, visible people; nor was there any sea. This was the Foster-parents' home.

It was not till Ben walked up to the top of the hill next morning that he saw the sea, and then it was not the quiet pool with lace edges that he had expected, but grim Atlantic waves hammering against iron stone cliffs, with “wild white fingers snatching at the sky.”

The air was full of flying gulls, and their brief mocking cries. Instead of soft yellow earth, there were the teeth of jagged rocks. When the Twins dragged Ben down a precipitous pathway to the shore, he was confronted by immense battering waves, with an occasional ridge of wet hard sand between rock ridges. The rocks were strewn with seaweed, fringed pools full of the most exciting sea-life—animals that shrunk when you poked them, and became fringed flowers when you didn't—not to mention crabs.

When the tide went down, the Twins explained, there was a lot of wet sand, and you could catch prawns. But you had to be careful all the time and keep looking at the cliffs to see that your way back was not cut off by the sinister tricks of the incoming tide. Here, the tide did not come up straight in front of you in an orderly row of ripples; but stole up behind rocks and then bounded out at you—swept you off your feet—and would carry you out to sea as soon as look at you—perhaps sooner.

Time was as important to remember, down on the rocks, as if Ben and Em'ly had to reach an air raid Shelter before the siren went off. Only there was nothing that dropped on people from the sky; and the sea meant no harm; it came up just so far and no farther every six hours, whether there was anyone to be drowned or not.

Before Ben left the hospital, his heart had been relieved of at least half its load of anxiety. Mabel had gone to stay with Mrs. Barton's sister, on the fringe of a Yorkshire moor. Ben's aunt had married a surly but famous rock gardener. He lived in a Lodge on the estate of people who thought they owned the rock garden. It had never occurred to Mrs. Barton that Mr. Brattle, who was childless, as well as harsh, would dream of allowing an evacuated baby to stay with him and his wife.

But Mr. Brattle had suddenly developed a fixed idea, and this was that he didn't hold with bombs being dropped on babies. When told by his wife of Ben and Mabel's hairbreadth escapes, he put his foot down—for once in a most humane direction—and informed his wife that she *must* invite her sister's youngest for the duration of the war. Apparently, Mr. Brattle *did* hold with bombs being dropped on small boys, for when his wife suggested to him that Ben might accompany Mabel, he said, "Certainly not!" and flew into a passion.

A pleasant V.A.D., returning to her home for a brief holiday close to where Mr. Brattle allowed an occasional visitor to be shown his rock garden, dropped Mabel on his doorstep. In spite of his temper and his rock garden, Mabel made short work of Mr. Brattle. He soon became Mabel's uncle, and nothing else but Mabel's uncle, for the remainder of her war-long visit. Ben needed to have no further anxiety on the score of Mabel; but he was alone.

Another V.A.D. with a car had taken him to Bristol, and put him into a train that seemed to stop oftener than it went on, but which had at length arrived at Bude.

It was dusk when Ben stepped out fearfully into the warm, windy darkness, but the Twins with a flash-light lamp fell upon him simultaneously; and tore his suitcase and his loneliness away from him.

As soon as he reached the inside of the Fosters' farm, Ben saw that the Twins had changed. If they had not called him a "blasted muffin" on the drive back to Moorwinstow, he would hardly—even from their conversation—have known they were the Twins. They were larger, stronger and redder, physically, than he had ever seen them; but they were something else as well. They were curiously and pleasantly milder. Their silent Fosters—large, rather heavy people something like cows—had in some strange way affected the Twins; or perhaps all the cream they had eaten throughout the summer had had a softening influence upon their dispositions. They, too, had become a little like cows—greatly to their advantage.

Their welcome to Ben had been both kind and enthusiastic. Mrs. Barton had written and told them very unmistakably and graphically what would happen to them if they failed to be kind and careful with their little brother, who had been buried alive for two days and nights, and then bombed out of a hospital, and only saved from being burned to death by climbing heroically down a fire escape with his baby sister on his back. These were the honours of war; and the Twins were prepared to allow them to him; but Ben possessed, without knowing it, the honours of peace as well. He represented Home to Vi'let and Alfie. The Twins were—though they would have died rather than admit it—homesick. Good food, strong air, virtuous Fosters, healthy moral and mental surroundings, reinforced by riding ponies barebacked, were all very well in their way; but they were not London; and Ben *was* London. He had not only escaped from it—he had escaped *with* it. He was crowned with the halo of his capital's stubborn heroism.

They examined all his scars with excitement and delight, and pointed them out with lavish pride to the Fosters. They helped Ben undress by candlelight, shrieking with rapture as they discovered fresh bruises, old to Ben, but still reflecting all the colours of the rainbow. Mrs. Vickary was called upstairs several times to share the Twins' excitement. She had large vague blue eyes that filled readily with kindly tears; and had she not been a little strict and sniffy about pursuits for Sundays—as all good Methodists are—she would have been a perfect Foster. Ben quickly realized that he had only to appear at the kitchen door for her to go to the oven and present him, in silence, with something succulent. It was her idea of conversation; and there have been many worse.

Mr. Vickary had never been altogether sure of the Twins; nor had there been any real reason why he should be sure of them. Pigs, Mr. Vickary thought, his very best and fattest pigs, moved faster than they had moved before the Twins came. Cows kicked that had never been known to kick before. Hens, always used to expostulate about their private problems, expostulated far more loudly and continuously, in such a way that Mr. Vickary strongly suspected that the Twins had supplied them with new and even more intricate problems.

But when Ben said with a gasp of joy, "Not a pony—not a *live* pony?" before the Twins pushed him into the cart, in the seat of honour next to Mr. Vickary, Mr. Vickary had known instantly, from the peculiar quality of Ben's gasp, that this was a child who had the right feeling for animals. They would never have to move quickly, or make agitated noises when Ben was about; and indeed Ben soon became a highly valuable aid to Mr. Vickary. He

understood, from the first, everything that Mr. Vickary meant, though not for at least a fortnight anything that Mr. Vickary said in his soft sing-song drawl, rather like the wind itself when it was in no particular hurry. However, as Mr. Vickary spoke very little, and meant a great deal, it was probably better that Ben *should* understand his meaning rather than his words.

Moorwinstow is a small and secret village and it was not until Ben had been there for some time that he was told about the dead poet-clergyman, who used to write his poems in a little shelter he had made in the face of the cliffs, above the intemperate seas.

It was there also that the Vicar of Moorwinstow used to look out for wrecks, and stop them from becoming wrecks if he could. If he couldn't, he would try to save anyone who came off them. Moorwinstow, while he lived, had had divided feelings about this dynamic Cleric, though after he was dead they became unanimously proud of him. They had always admired him in the pulpit; but they had disliked him on the cliff. Both the Twins and Ben understood why. He wanted to save too much. There were things—"perks," as Mrs. Barton would have called them—that came up from the sea, out of wrecks. The Vicar thought that Moorwinstow did not dislike wrecks enough, and indeed did not always make enough effort to prevent their being wrecks. Sometimes the people of Moorwinstow thought it wouldn't terribly matter if a few shipwrecked mariners *were* drowned. But they stood no chance with the Vicar; and what they took off wrecks, the Vicar restored to their owners; and he even went down on the shore and dragged the half-drowned people out of the waves himself.

Ben, if not the Twins, heartily agreed with this part of Mr. Hawker's programme. They, too, would have saved the shipwrecked people; but they sympathized with Moorwinstow about what the waves threw up. This was Loot; and the part about Ben's adventures in the Blitz that the Twins liked best was the expeditions led by Em'ly through raided districts. It was hard for the Twins to have missed the spoils of Oxford Street! Nothing they had found to do in Moorwinstow—of however lawless a character—could make up for it.

Apparently the Twins had changed their mind about Em'ly. They agreed with her adoption and even looked forward to seeing her again. A child such as Em'ly, they felt, though a superfluity in Beulah Street, would be an asset in Moorwinstow.

The second of Ben's anxieties was thus relieved; but not the third, and greatest of them all. He was without his mother; and he knew very well what

danger she was in. The Twins did not realize why Ben, every day, wet or shine, asked to be taken to the taproom of the nearest pub in order to listen to the radio news. Mr. Vickary saw that he got it; and listened to it with him. It was the London Blitz Ben listened to hardest. Every night there was a raid on. They weren't told which part of London; but sometimes one of the Wren churches was mentioned—St. Clement Danes; St. Mary-le-Bow; St. Bride's; All Hallows, Barking; and then Ben would know exactly how near the fires were likely to reach towards the Beulah Street Shelter, where Ma and Flossie still spent their nights.

The church at Moorwinstow stood four-square to the cliffs, fronting the sea; and it was there that Ben found the path that took him to the old Poet's Shelter. The Twins had already been there—for different reasons. They could not quite believe that even a clergyman would have so overlooked *all* the chances of a wreck as not to have collected something. Wasn't it probable, they asked each other, that his undue anxiety to keep the loot from his parishioners was not wholly disinterested? Virtue as a smoke screen has its uses, and Hitler has not been the first (though perhaps the worst) human being to discover this fact. There are such things as buried treasures; and it was in the Poet's look-out Shelter that the Twins—quite fruitlessly—had looked for them. They therefore saw no sense in going again with Ben.

“You won't find nuffin' ,” they genially informed him; “batty, the ole nut must er bin, sittin' there lookin' at the sea an' not gittin' even wot 'e cud git aht of it!”

A late autumn gale had blown itself out, and sunk into moist mildness. The wind blew towards Ben full of a strange sweet scent—the ghost of dead honeysuckle, crumbling bracken, and the tonic wildness of the sea.

The sky was a pale, clear blue with little tufts of rosy cloud floating about in it. The fields Ben crossed to reach the cliffs were empty, but not dead. The waves had sunk into a wrinkled stillness. The gulls flew to and fro above his head, calling sharply to each other. Ben loved to watch them poise and drift. They caught the faintest draught of air as if they had learned how to use everything—even emptiness—to further their perpetual flights; the storms were harnessed to their wings.

A tiny path led to the cliff's edge. It looked to Ben as if the path had stopped, with nothing at all under it but the distant sea; yet when he reached the verge, the path went on; and Ben went on with it. Down and down the path plunged, towards the nearing ocean, till suddenly Ben found himself on

a tiny shelf of earth-covered rock. The path stopped here; and Ben stopped with it, for he had found the Poet's Shelter.

An overhanging rock was its roof, and there was nothing in it but a wooden bench, and a table clamped against the rock. Straight beneath it moved the wrinkled sea. A last gold light flickered over the dark water, so that the waves shone up at Ben as they must often, long ago, have shone up at the poet, Hawker.

Slowly, the light spread to the horizon's verge, forming a pathway of beaten gold. A pale primrose star slipped out into the clear dusk. If only, Ben thought, he could have Ma with him, to sit down and rest. They would not have to hurry back to the farm for supper; because the Fosters never did hurry; and there was always supper. Cows gave their milk and butter, hens their eggs, and, perhaps rather unwillingly, pigs their bacon.

There was no sound at all, except the long low murmur of the sea, gently heaving itself against the cliff's side—and then slipping back again, into itself.

It was the hour when, every evening, London was shaken to the core by the harsh thunder of its guns, or those worse and wilder sounds of falling masonry, and the devouring crackle of the flames.

Ben blinked his eyes. Suddenly he could no longer see the golden light across the waves. It was as if he saw, instead, his own river Thames, flowing between two measureless darknesses of sea and sky. Above the river's silver floor shot up the towers of Westminster. These were the palaces of Freedom, the halls of kindly kings, the Abbey of a merciful God. Flames and vampire bats tried to drag down these towers night after night; but Ben saw them again, standing there in placid security, as if nothing could ever shake or destroy them. He had only to listen, to hear within his heart the long reverberating strokes of Big Ben. Time was on his side. Time was always on the side of what lasted and was beneficent.

London had been made for people—and by people—like Ma and Dad, Flossie and Bert, and even Em'ly. For Em'ly had the courage of those ancient towers. London had not sprung from its great buildings; it had made them, out of its shabby, arrogant, defiant, hopeful and astute old heart.

Ben felt a little frightened, all alone with the night coming on, looking over the poet's precipice at the sea. He did not know that he too, sitting there—like the old poet of Moorwinstow—was making poetry. But he had a mysterious and happy feeling that he might take something back to London.



The wild clamour of guns and flames, now closing down on London, had no real part in the life of earth or sky. The noisy hate of dropping bombs lasted no longer than shipwrecks or the havoc of great storms. Any sea gull, Mr. Vickary had told Ben, could ride out a gale—and often make use of it.

Slowly, while Ben watched, the light faded, and his vision of Westminster sank into the sea. The dusk moved on into the friendly night. It was time to go home to supper; and with a little sigh, Ben started to climb

the steep cliff pathway back to the farm. The fields were mysterious and dark, but Ben felt strangely unafraid of their darkness.

He found Mr. Vickary, leaning on the gate, smoking his evening pipe. He was on the look-out for his new Foster son; but he did not tell him so; he only swung open the gate wide enough for Ben's little figure to slip through, and reach his side.

“’Tis a quiet night,” Mr. Vickary said, casting a cautious but approving look at the invisible sky, “seemingly.”

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

[The end of *London Pride* by Phyllis Bottome]