

FIRE IN THE CITY: The wartime diary of Adam Blenkiron*by Vince Cross © 2025*

It was a very odd Sunday morning. I'd had a horrible cold for days and now it had gone to my chest. All I could manage was a painful croak. I was worried I'd be in trouble if I wasn't in my place in the choir at nine sharp. I'd never missed a service before. Not one.

"Adam, the Cathedral will have to do without you," Mum insisted. "I told Mr. Stephenson so yesterday. Even if it *is* the first Sunday back after the summer break. He said he was very sorry to hear you were poorly but the other boy trebles will have to pull their weight for once. He said keep going with the hot honey and lemon and please get better soon. He could do with you for Evensong next Saturday."

Mr. Stephenson is Coventry Cathedral's organist, choirmaster and all round good egg.

Mum and Dad had gone to the early morning service at Holy Trinity. I couldn't remember *that* ever happening before either. They were back by ten.

"This is important. I want all the Blenkirons to be there for the broadcast," Dad had said.

What broadcast? Why was it important? Something to do with the Germans – that's all I knew.

At eleven o'clock there we were, sitting round the dining room table in Thornton Road hugging our cups of tea, teeth chattering, and waiting for the wireless to crackle into life. Outside the sky was a cloudless, bright blue. It was going to be a lovely warm late summer day, but earlier there'd been a hint of frost on the back lawn. Inside no. 43 it was still really cold. According to Dad you should never light a fire until the beginning of October.

"I'm freezing," Pauly complained, and shivered melodramatically.

"What did God invent jumpers for?" Dad barked.

"I don't wear 'jumpers'," Pauly replied.

“The more fool you! Nice cup of tea! Drink up, young Pauly. That’ll warm you up.”

My sister Pauly’s sixteen. She’s very fashion conscious. She reads a lot of magazines and spends hours in the bathroom. I’m twelve. I don’t.

“Why are we doing this?” I moaned. “I’m bored.”

Pauly pinched her nostrils together with her thumb and forefinger and repeated what I’d just said.

“Don’t be cruel, Pauly,” Mum replied. “Adam’s been really bad with his sinuses this week. He doesn’t need any funny comments from you. And Adam, stop hitting your sister. Behave, the both of you!”

“This is very likely a historic moment,” Dad said, pompously. “It may be the worst thing that’ll ever happen to any of us, or it could be the only possible thing that could be done, but either way it’s history in the making. None of us will ever forget September 3rd 1939. I’ll tell you that for nothing!”

I looked at the clock. It was just after ten past eleven. Suddenly the music on the radio stopped. The announcer began to speak.

“Shut up everyone and listen. I can’t hear what he’s saying,” Dad said.

“That’s because you’re talking, Mike,” Mum answered back.

“...At 11.15, the Prime Minister will broadcast to the nation. Please stand by...”

There was a pause before the thin, creaky voice of Mr. Chamberlain broke through the hissing static. Dad twiddled with the knobs on the wireless, trying to improve the sound. Mum tutted. We must have missed a few sentences before we heard the Prime Minister say:

‘...This morning the British ambassador in Berlin handed the German government a final note stating that unless we heard from them by eleven o’clock that they were prepared at once to withdraw their troops from Poland, a state of war would exist between us. I have

to tell you now that no such undertaking has been received, and that consequently this country is at war with Germany.'

Dad sat back in his chair.

"There, what did I say?"

"That dreadful little man, Hitler!" Mum exclaimed. "Doesn't he realise the harm he's going to do? Doesn't he remember how many died in the last war?"

"We've only ourselves to blame," Dad chuntered. "Chamberlain's a fool. He and his friends should have acted years ago. Then maybe it wouldn't have come to this..."

Pauly began to cry.

"I'm scared," she said.

Mum threw an arm round her shoulder and drew her in close. Mr. Chamberlain was still speaking.

'...The situation in which no word given by Germany's ruler could be trusted and no people or country could feel safe, has become intolerable. And now that we have resolved to finish it, I know that you will all play your part with calmness and courage. May God bless you all.'

Dad turned off the radio. Mum got up and quietly gathered our teacups onto a tray. Pauly rubbed her eyes. I could hear a rushing in my ears and the ticking of the mantelpiece clock. Specks of dust revolved in the shaft of sunlight streaming through the curtains. Then the hairs on the back of my neck stood up as first one, no, two sirens began to wail, the sound rising in a blood-curdling, teeth-on-edge crescendo.

"Air raid sirens?" my mum asked incredulously, putting the tray back down on the table with a crash. "Already? Is that possible, Mike? What do we do?"

“Oh sorry, love,” Dad said. “Should have told you. Whichever way Hitler jumped, the high-ups decided they were going to do a test. Just to see how people reacted. You don’t have to worry.”

Dad’s something important in the Council’s Planning Department.

“Are you sure?”

“Well if you really want to, we can drag the dining room table under the stairs and cuddle up for a few hours. Or you can waste the morning walking into town to a public shelter. But me, I’m staying here to mend the kitchen door.”

“You can be very grumpy sometimes, Michael...”

“Grumpy? Me? Surely not. After all, we’ve just declared war on our next door neighbours. Nothing important!”

If the morning was strange, the afternoon was amazingly normal. We ate what was our usual Sunday lunch back then, roast beef followed by rice pudding, and then Mum went off to her monthly painting group in the church hall. Pauly pulled out the sewing machine to finish a dress she was making, and I stuck a few stamps in my new stamp album. Under the postmarks I could see the words *‘Deutsches Reich’*. They were German. I studied them with a magnifying glass, and tried to make sense of what I’d heard on the radio. Dad found his favourite chisel and a plane and started attacking the kitchen door, to stop it sticking. After a while I closed the stamp album, and hovered by his side. Dad looked up.

“What can I do for you, son?” he asked.

“Will they make you go into the army?”

He put down the chisel.

“No Adam, they won’t. For one thing, I’m in what they call a ‘reserved occupation’. It means they can’t do without me here in Coventry, at least not for the time being.”

He gave a laugh.

“And also, as things stand, it seems I’m too long in the tooth. They don’t want old codgers like me slowing them down. They’re not going to call up anyone over forty-one. But I daresay that’ll depend on how long the war lasts.”

“How long *will* it last?”

“Depends when everyone recovers their senses, I suppose. Germany’s armed forces are very strong, especially their air force and tank divisions. Cutting them down to size won’t be a quick job. A year maybe? But that’s what we thought last time, and we were still fighting four years later.”

Dad never talks about the Great War of 1914 to 1918. Nor Mum. I know the two of them met when he was in the army. And I know at some point Dad was sent to France. There’s a medal or two in his desk. But that’s *all* I know.

At six o’clock we were gathered round the wireless again, this time to listen to the King’s posh, hesitating voice. King George finished by saying:

“...I ask you to stand calm, firm and united in this time of trial. The task will be hard. There may be dark days ahead, and war can no longer be confined to the battlefield. But we can only do the right as we see the right, and reverently commit our cause to God.”

“I just wish they’d stop telling us to keep calm,” Mum said. “It’s all right for them sitting in their safe gilded palaces eating caviar and smoked salmon. They’re not the ones who’ll suffer. The rich never do.”

“Hold on, Daph,” said Dad, tapping out the bowl of his pipe. “That’s a bit unfair! If Hitler invades, the royal family will be first for the high jump.”

I could see the fright in my mum's eyes.

"You *would* tell me, wouldn't you Michael?" she said. "If ever there was anything important I needed to know. However awful..."

Dad looked straight at her.

"Of course I would, love," he said.

And that was how the war began for us Blenkirons.

Next morning was the first day of the school term. My best friend Roly Kenyon couldn't stop talking about what had happened.

"Did you see about *The Athenia*?" he asked the moment he saw me.

I hadn't. A copy of *The Times* comes through our front door every morning. Dad's always telling me a boy like me should be reading it every day before school, but there's too much else to do in the morning.

"Merchant ship. Sunk by a German sub," Roly went on. "Lost with all hands. My dad says Jerry'll probably invade by the end of the week. What's to stop him? They've closed all the cinemas, you know."

I said to go on and cheer me up, what was the connection between those two things, and I wasn't sure he was right about us being invaded. Roly tapped his nose, as if to say he knew something I didn't. Roly fancies himself as a reporter on the local paper when he leaves school.

Roly and I were now in Form 3 at Coventry's famous *Henry VIII School*. Our new form teacher, Mr. Blanchard, gave us the usual talk about life being more serious this year, and how we really had to knuckle down. Life in Form 2 had been a kindergarten compared with what was to come *etc. etc.* In assembly Old Bertie the headmaster looked stern and said we

had to buck our ideas up. Now there was a war on, it would be letting the side down to muck about, or be any less than perfect in thought, word, deed and smartness of school uniform.

“Pot and kettle!” Roly whispered. Old Bertie’s clothes were always a mess. His tie was askew. It looked as if he’d been sleeping in his shirt all through the summer holidays. His trousers and jacket didn’t match. They never did.

At first the war seemed just another annoying twist to the new school year along with learning Latin, but at home it was making a big difference to Mum. Usually she was the cheerful one at number 43. Dad was much more likely to tell you the world was going to the dogs. Now Mum was snappy with everyone pretty much all the time. She was cross with Pauly if she came home from work five minutes late and she moaned at me if she couldn’t see her face in the shine on my shoes. Dad was keeping out of her way, minding his Ps and Qs. Then he had the accident with the car. Mum went spare. I’d never seen her like that before.

“What were you thinking of, Michael?” she exploded. “They’ll come and arrest you. They’ll put you in prison. And then what will we do?”

The street lights had been turned off at night so the German bombers, if they ever came, couldn’t see where anything was. A man walked straight out of the pitch black in front of Dad’s baby Austin 7 as he was driving home. The car hit him a glancing blow, but it was bad enough for the chap to be carted off to Coventry hospital.

“They will *not* put me in prison, love,” Dad said. “If you ask me, the bloke was drunk. He was cussing and swearing and all sorts. He walked away with a few cuts and bruises, that’s all. He’ll be fine. It’ll teach him to be a bit more careful in future. Me too, I suppose. I haven’t a clue what happened. He came out of nowhere. I just didn’t see him!”

No more was heard of it but Mum wouldn’t be comforted. Day by day through September and October, you could see her becoming more nervy. Her hands shook. She

couldn't sit still for more than five minutes. She shouted at Dad. She thought the Germans were coming for us any minute and we'd all be killed in our beds. When news came through one Thursday that the Germans had dropped a few bombs on Scotland, it was the final straw.

"I can't bear it," she sobbed. "I don't want my family to die."

At the weekend she'd pulled herself together, but there was bad news for me. Worse than bad!

"I'm sorry Adam, but your Dad and I - we've been thinking," she began over Sunday tea, "After half-term we want you to go to Aunt Tilly's and Uncle Ted's in Braunston for a while. You'll be safe from bombs out there in the countryside. I need something to keep me busy, so I'm going to take a job. Accounts. At *Owen Owen's*. Your dad says it'll make me feel better. Give me something else to think about."

Braunston's thirty miles away. It's a village out in the wilds of Northamptonshire, on the Grand Junction Canal. Tilly and Ted live on a narrow boat. I was stunned.

"There aren't bombs," I shouted. "Not yet, anyway. What about the Cathedral? What about school? What about the scholarship I worked so hard to get? You always told me how lucky I was to be at *Henry VIII* and how important it was to make the most of such a wonderful opportunity. What's there to do in Braunston? It's a dump."

Coventry's a city. It's got the Cathedral and big shops like *Owen Owen's*, the new department store. There are three cinemas and wide streets. There are factories and people galore. In Braunston there's a post office, a baker's, a greengrocer's and a pub or two, and that's it!

"There's a village school, I think," Mum replied, doubtfully, "And in the end better stupid than dead. Isn't that right, Dad?"

Dad looked up from his place by the fire. He removed the pipe from between his teeth. He couldn't quite meet my eye.

"Yes, well, on balance, we think it's the right thing to do, Adam. For the time being. Until things settle down. The Cathedral and *Henry VIII* will still be here when you come back."

So come November there I was with a small suitcase and my fiddle, trying to make the best of it on board Tilly and Ted's '*Reluctant Mermaid*' in the middle of the dismal, dank, Northamptonshire countryside.

I missed Thornton Road so much, I wore a constant ache in my heart that I can still remember. I missed my singing. I even missed *Henry VIII*. I'd never liked Tilly and Ted. Mum couldn't understand it.

"Tilly's lovely," she used to say. "She thinks the world of you."

Tilly had a funny way of showing it. On the rare occasions she'd ever dragged herself up to Coventry you'd have thought I was a piece of dirt on her shoe, but Mum was blind to it.

"You let Adam do *that*, do you?" Tilly would say to Mum. Or: "I think kids these days have *far* too much to say for themselves."

Up to the minute I left Thornton Road I tried as hard as I could to argue my way out of being sent away.

"What about the other boys in my class?" I said. "None of them are going to run and hide, are they? They'll have me for a right cissy. It'll be the same as it always is – I'll be the odd one out."

"I don't think it's a matter of 'running and hiding', son. Anyway, there might be no alternative. I'm not sure even the school knows yet, but *Henry VIII's* been designated a 'neutral' area. The government's going to close it down until air-raid shelters are built for all

the teachers and pupils – and that’ll take weeks, even months. At least, that’s what the papers coming across my desk say. You won’t be the only one evacuated. Lots of parents will think the same way.”

“What about my violin lessons?”

I was getting desperate now.

“Tilly’ll enjoy hearing you play,” Mum said.

“Tilly will not!” I thought.

The kids in the Braunston village school were complete duffers. They stared at me as if I were something in a zoo. No one in Braunston particularly liked incomers. And they didn’t reckon much to canal folk either, so I was doubly damned. The lessons were simple and boring: stuff I’d done three or four years ago. I started to think that being dead really was better than being stupid. Then a moment later I’d stop and feel guilty. It seemed such a wicked thing to say, given the terrible things the Nazis were doing to the poor people in Poland. But Dad had been right about *Henry VIII*. No one was learning much there. According to Roly the boys in my class were going in just a couple of times a week for an hour or so. They collected their work, did the best they could at home, and carried it back to be marked, which usually it wasn’t.

The ‘*Reluctant Mermaid*’ was moored on a bank of the canal basin close to the village. Behind it was its ‘butty boat’ – an unpowered tender - which was crammed full of wood, coal and smelly rubbish. Tilly spent most of her time trying to make the rubbish look decent so they could sell it on. She collected anything she could – pots and pans, cutlery, old bicycles, tools. You could see in their eyes that the villagers didn’t really trust Tilly. They mostly wouldn’t let her in if she came to call. She was always asking them, “You won’t be wanting

that will you now?" As soon as she'd heard there was a death in someone's family, she'd be knocking on their door, hoping to find something with a bit of profit in it.

Ted worked as crew on the narrow boats down to London. He was often away three or four nights at a time, and whenever he was home, he was tired and grumpy and wanting to sleep. Narrow boats are well...very narrow...and it was hard not to fall over Ted when he was aboard. His snoring exasperated Tilly but at least it took her mind off bullying me.

"Wipe that daft look off your face," she'd complain at me. "What sort of man are you going to be, fluttering your eyelashes at me like that?"

"Don't leave your books cluttering up the place," she'd moan. "How many times have I told you? I'm not here to tidy up after you."

More than once I tried to tell Mum and Dad how bad things were. They'd drive down to see me every other weekend, bringing bits of homework from *Henry VIII*. It was difficult to talk without Tilly overhearing.

"It's just a bit of homesickness, dear. Only natural," Mum would whisper.

"Stiff upper lip, old chap. We're all having to be a bit brave at the mo'," Dad would chip in.

I stuck it out through a couple of horrible months, damp and cold, but after the Big Freeze things were even worse. The canal was covered in ice so thick you could skate on it. Ted was stuck in London, or said he was. Tilly was beside herself. If Ted couldn't work, he couldn't earn any money, and though she did a few evenings behind the bar in the local pub, they had nothing in the way of savings. No one was buying their bric a brac. Everyone in the village was short of cash, or worried they would be soon.

It was a couple of weeks before Christmas. We hadn't seen Ted for ten whole days. There'd been no news of him at all. Tilly was even more moody and unpleasant than usual.

Then two uniformed policemen stepped aboard the *Reluctant Mermaid* early one starlit evening and banged loudly on the cabin door.

“Are you Mrs Grice?” they asked, shining a torch along the sides of the *Mermaid* and over the butty’s awning.

“Who wants to know?” Tilly replied suspiciously.

“We’ll take that as a yes, shall we?” smiled the weasel faced sergeant. It wasn’t a nice smile. He pushed his way into the cabin. “We’re looking for a Mr. Ted Grice. Have you seen him recently, Madam? Is he here now?”

Tilly sat down on a locker with a bump, shocked.

“What’s happened to him? What’s my Ted done now?”

“Disappearance of some cargo from a warehouse in Acton, madam. We think Mr. Grice may be able to help us with our enquiries.”

They stayed another fifteen minutes, rummaging around, curious, suspicious, checking if Ted was hiding somewhere, I suppose. They raised their eyebrows at the odds and ends in the butty, and looked sceptical when Tilly told them people had given them to her. The sergeant held up a nice set of fire irons and asked,

“Now why would anyone *give* you those? Valuable little item, I’d have thought.”

But then they lost interest and, telling Tilly that if Mr. Grice showed up he should report to Daventry police station if he knew what was good for him, they sloped off into the night.

The rest of that evening, Tilly was dumbstruck, but through the next few days she was in a terrible mood, banging around, moaning and swearing. I couldn’t do a thing right. *‘If only Mum could see you now’*, I thought. I tried to stay out of her way - nearly impossible in the

Mermaid's confined spaces. It was a relief when she went off to pull pints in the pub of an evening leaving me to read. Then on the Friday afternoon she broke my fiddle.

I'd always tried to keep up my practice without annoying her and Ted. In the first few weeks on the *Mermaid*, when the weather hadn't been so bad, I'd gone far out along the canal bank and played the best I could, using clothes pegs to string up my music on bushes in the hedge. But now my fingers wouldn't work in the bitter December cold, so I had to practise inside a few minutes at a time. On this Friday even *five* minutes was too much.

"That wretched noise!" said Tilly, climbing into a temper. "You give me a headache with your blasted scraping. That's enough now."

She reached for the violin to snatch it out of my hand. I clung on, but as she clawed and twisted, the fiddle spun away, landing on the metal floor with a splintering crash. The finger board came away from the body. The strings were a sad mess. It was obvious the instrument had played its last note.

"It's your own silly fault," she shouted, "Winding me up like that. Now do something useful, and go and fetch me some coal."

And that was all she said. There was no apology, no thought of what the violin meant to me. That did it. That night I swore to myself that one way or another I was finished with Braunston. On their last visit Dad had unwittingly given me a new argument. *Henry VIII* was going to open again shortly. The government had changed its mind. Now they said that as long as the school had actually *started* building shelters for everyone, it was OK for classes to return to normal.

Mum and Dad came down to the *Mermaid* that Sunday afternoon, slipping and sliding their way through the icy lanes in the Austin 7. I took them for a walk up the hill to All Saints Church to show them the prettily decorated Christmas tree. Inside it was cold enough to see

your breath. We sat down on the pews and began to talk. Dad's brow furrowed, Mum's hand went to her mouth as I told them about Ted and the police.

"Well I never did," she gasped. "Ted? Stealing? I can't believe it!"

"I want to come home," I said. "I want to go to school properly like everyone else. And if the Germans do bomb number 43 and we're all killed it'd be better than being left alive with Tilly and Ted but without you two and Pauly. There's nothing to do here. I can't sing, it's difficult even to see to read, and now my fiddle's busted. Please, take me back with you. Please!"

"Go and get your bag, Adam" Dad said quietly. "This won't do, Daph, will it? However things stand with Ted..."

I sat on the back seat of the car while they took their leave of Tilly. I don't know what was said but Tilly didn't come out to say goodbye to me. Dad looked like thunder as he crashed the Austin into gear. It's sad, because Tilly's Mum's only sister, and I know they were once very close, but neither she or Ted have been to see us in Coventry since, and they're never talked about. For all I know Ted could still be sewing mailbags in Wormwood Scrubs prison.

My own bed felt unbelievably soft and comfortable. It was so good to be back among the familiar sights and sounds of my room: the picture of a Hawker Hurricane on the bedroom wall, my alarm clock, the checked curtains at the window.

Pauly came into see me before work the next morning.

"I told them in October they shouldn't make you go to Tilly's," she said. "She's always been a mean old cow. If she was ever kind to Mum when she was little it was the last good turn she did anyone. Good riddance, I say!"

I never thought I was the sort to keep a diary. It's Mr. Hill who's got me writing. He used to be a teacher, but he's retired now. He's been giving me extra lessons on a Saturday morning to make up for what I missed before Christmas. Before the war *Henry VIII* boys went to school on Saturdays, but that's been done away with to save on petrol and heating fuel.

"You've got a way with words, Adam," he said one day. "And these are very strange times. You should keep a record of what's happening here in Coventry. I daresay other people are keeping journals too, but perhaps not many your age. Someday people will want to read it ..."

So I took his advice. As you can see!

Wednesday June 5th 1940

My name's Adam Blenkiron – but you know that already. I'm twelve years old and I'm in my second year at the famous *Henry VIII School* in Coventry, although because there's a junior department, my class is called Form 3. I'm supposed to be clever. At my first school they called me 'Brainbox', which I absolutely hated. Two years ago I won a Governors' Scholarship to *Henry VIII*, so my parents don't have to pay a penny, which is a good thing, because otherwise they probably couldn't afford it. We're not poor, but we're not as rich as some. Before I went to *Henry VIII*, in September 1938, Dad sat me down and said,

"Now the thing is Adam, there are a few facts of life you'll have to get used to."

I wondered where this conversation was going. Pauly had already filled me in on *them*.

"We're very proud of you getting that scholarship. But you're going to be mixing with boys whose families are rolling in money. They'll be able to snap their fingers, and their mums and dads will buy them whatever they want. But your mum and I, however much we'd like to

– we can't do that. We have to be careful with our cash, or else we wouldn't be able to live in this nice house. Or run the Austin 7. It's a question of priorities, you see..."

I do see. It doesn't matter. Dad loves the Austin, and so do I. If it's a matter of wearing a school blazer for two years rather than throwing it away after one like some families seem to, what's the problem?

I'm not very tall. I've got really thin arms, which I don't understand because I don't think anyone else in the family has. I can run fast, at least over the first twenty yards, and I'm quite good at football, although I can't shoot for goal as hard as some other boys can. My hair's a sort of sandy colour, and my eyes are blue green. Dad went bald quite early. I wonder if I will?

I like anything to do with English or History, and I'm not bad at Maths and Physics, but I'm not at all keen on Art and for some reason I can't get on with French at all. Music's always been something I could do. I play the violin jolly well, despite what Tilly thought, and I can find my way around a piano enough to play hymns if I'm asked. I love singing, and ever since I was very small I could make up tunes and remember them even when I didn't know how to write them down. Both my parents are in choirs. Dad sings bass and before the war Mum used to be a soprano in the Coventry Orpheus, so I started to follow musical scores when I was very small, sitting at the back of concert platforms where I couldn't be seen with my very own copy of Handel's *'Messiah'* or Mendelssohn's *'Elijah'*.

My dad's first name is Michael. As you know, he works for the Coventry City Council as a planner and architect. Once when some people came round for Sunday tea I heard a friend of his called Barry Sykes teasing him. Dad was saying,

“What we need in this city is a right good clear out. We need to get rid of all the old buildings, and put up some new ones. Or how else are we going to live when everyone has a car? There’ll be no room to move!”

“You’re a boffin, Mike,” Barry Sykes said, shaking his head. “A dreamer, that’s what you are. Just because you can afford a car, it doesn’t mean to say everyone can. What a funny idea – pulling down all those beautiful, ancient buildings – just so that people can waste their money on gadgets and gew-gaws. You *are* joking, aren’t you?”

“Not one bit. It’s the modern world that’s coming, Barry,” replied my dad. “There’s no choice, really. You’ll see.”

My mum Daphne’s very proud to be working in at *Owen Owen’s*, where you can buy all the new ‘gadgets and gew-gaws’. Her nerves are much better now. Of all the kids I know I’m the only one whose mum works for a living. Do I like having a dad who’s a boffin and a mum who works? Well, it seems to keep everyone happy, and at least it means we’re comfortably off. Our house at 43 Thornton Road is detached and has four bedrooms as well as a nice large front room with white painted double doors that open onto the dining room. The garden goes back about sixty yards. When you’ve walked up past the lawn and rose bushes there are apple and pear trees at the end. My sister Pauline, Pauly for short, turns up her nose at living in ‘Snobby Thornton Road’ as she calls it. She wouldn’t mind being rich though: she likes the money she earns from working in the back office at the Daimler factory.

“Why can’t we be the same as everyone else, instead of putting on all these airs and graces?” she moans, when Mum and Dad are out of earshot. “They take the rise out of me every day in the typing pool for being so posh.”

Pauly’s all right. She’s nearly seventeen – so there’s quite a gap between us – but she’s always been there for me, particularly when I was bullied at elementary school.

Sometimes I look at her, and wonder where she came from. With her straight black hair and deep blue eyes, you'd never guess she was my sister. And she's really tall. I'm about a foot shorter than her. She plays Goal Shoot for the Daimler Netball team.

"Oh, don't you worry about that, tich," she says. "You'll put on some height when you're ready. Me, I think *you're* the lucky one. I'd much rather be petite than a galumphing beanpole."

There's nothing galumphing about her. I've seen her play. She's as quick as you like, and you wouldn't want to get in her way. She's got sharp elbows and knees, and even sharper nails.

The Blenkirons have always gone to church at Holy Trinity, morning and evening each Sunday, and they dress up properly to do it. Dad's on the Parochial Church Council, and counts the money in the offertory plate each week. Until the war, Mum was President of the Mothers' Union, but now she doesn't have the time. Whenever she can, which is quite often, Pauly finds an excuse not to go to church. She says she can worship God anywhere, but that doesn't work for me. I find it easier to say my prayers on a kneeler in a great big, solemn building like the Cathedral. I think about all the people back through history who've been there before me, and it makes me shiver. These days Mum and Dad sneak away to hear me sing at the Cathedral services whenever they can.

It was partly my voice that got me the scholarship to *Henry VIII*. The school liked the thought of having one of its boys in the Cathedral choir. Most of the other choirboys come from Bablake, our rival grammar school, our sworn enemies at rugby or cricket or just about anything else. A lot of the best things in my life have been to do with singing – and some of the worst too. When I was about six or seven, I started to look at the books of songs which lay under the seat of the piano stool in our front room. There was one song Mum used to sing

a lot called '*Cherry Ripe*'. When she'd finished tidying up after supper, sometimes she'd sit down at the piano and accompany herself, while we listened. I liked '*Cherry Ripe*'s cheerful little tune. The words reminded me traders selling fruit in the city market. Without thinking about it, I started singing it to myself around the house.

"That sounds very nice, dear," Mum said. "You ought to give old '*Cherry*' a go at the Holy Trinity church concert next month. I could play the piano for you. Wouldn't that be fun?"

As the day of the concert approached, people started saying,

"I hear young Adam's going to be up on stage next Saturday. What a brave boy!"

I hadn't a clue what they were talking about. What was there to be frightened of? It was just singing, wasn't it? What was so scary about that? Anyway, on the night I'd got half way through the piece. Everything was going swimmingly. I was following the music, and then I remembered what Mum had said. I ought to be keeping my head up towards the audience so that my voice would carry to the very back of the room. I started looking round and thinking about who was there and who wasn't. Oh, there was Dad looking proud, and there was the Vicar. Where was Pauly? And all the time I was singing along merrily without a care in the world. Suddenly I came to. I couldn't remember the words of the next line. I glanced down in panic at the music. I didn't know where I was. My voice wavered, and then in total confusion, I made up some nonsense words and music for a few seconds before I finally ground to a halt. Mum looked at me, and I looked at her. She stopped playing. I shook my head and spread my hands in despair. She said quietly, but firmly,

"Start again at the middle bit, Adam. Don't worry. It'll be all right." But by now my face had gone red. My eyes were misting over with tears. She had to get up from the piano and turn back the page of the music for me. We staggered through to the end somehow, but

afterwards I didn't wait for any sympathetic applause. I rushed off stage, and bawled my eyes out in the wings.

Of course later on everyone was very nice.

"You were great," said Pauly. "It didn't matter one bit what happened. Everyone says you've a real future as a singer. I'd love to have your voice rather than the horrible old thing I've got."

"Where *were* you?" I wailed.

"I was there, darling. Didn't you see me? I was sitting with Eileen and Jenny..."

I felt a complete failure. Even now I get hot round the collar if I think about it. These days when I sing, my eyes stay glued to the music score. So there you are. That's the worst thing that's ever happened to me, apart from George Harley. I'll tell you about George in a while.

And the best thing? Well, singing with the choir in the Cathedral. Definitely. It's so amazing to be wrapped up in the massive sound of the organ and all those other singers. There's a feeling when you know you're coming up to one of the best, loudest bits of a piece like Parry's '*I was glad*' (the piece they sang at the King's coronation). It starts in the tummy and spreads out over the whole body like a glow. The music almost lifts you off your feet. In those few seconds I can imagine what heaven might be like. At the end of last summer I sang the solo in a *Magnificat* by Charles Villers Stanford. I'd practised and practised with Mr. Stephenson until I was note perfect, and on that Sunday in July it was as if my voice was taken over by an alien force. Someone else was singing, not me. Every note was in tune and time. It was the most wonderful thing I've ever done. It's why I missed singing so much when I was in Braunston.

Now I've mentioned him, I'd better tell you about George Harley, and then get you up to date with what's been happening since I came back to Thornton Road.

Thursday June 13th 1940

I've known George Harley for about as long as I can remember, and pretty much all that time he's been the bane of my life. The Harleys live in Allen Road, a couple of streets away. My mum and his knew each other from the Mothers' Union and we all used to go down to the swings in Cartwright Park together when we were very little, though I wouldn't go as far as to say my mum ever actually *liked* Mrs. Harley. By the time we were five and walking the half mile or so to the Elementary School in Manners Road, running around together had become *him* chasing *me*, sharing sweets had turned into him *stealing* off me, and I had to put up with George punching and pinching me all day, every day. Apart from things getting more serious not much has changed since. In fact in the last two years at Manners Road, George made my life a complete misery. By then he'd found himself two mates, Brian Hennessy and Roy Simpson. George has always been big and clumsy. Brian finds anyone else's unhappiness a good laugh, and Roy is just plain nasty and warped. He really does get pleasure out of pulling the wings off flies and kicking cats. So what can you do when it's a case of three against one? I tried every dodge in the book. I left going to school until the very last minute and then running all the way there. I volunteered to tidy up the classroom at the end of the afternoon, hoping they'd get bored with lying in wait. But no, they'd still find me! They'd throw my school cap or packed lunch into someone's front garden or up a tree. They'd follow me up the road to our front door calling out names. They'd jostle me, trip me up and push me over on the pavement so that the knees beneath my shorts were always bloodied and scarred.

"They'll soon get bored, and find someone else to annoy," my mum used to say.

“They’re taking a long time about it,” I’d reply.

“Perhaps you should punch one of them on the nose, and see how they like it?” my dad once suggested.

“Michael!” Mum was really shocked. “He can’t go round doing that. Whatever next!”

Things got worse and worse, and when they pinned me down, tore off my shorts, wee’d on them and threw them over the canal bridge, even Mum had to do something. She stormed round to Allen Road with me in her wake holding the stained shorts in her hand, and confronted Mrs. Harley. How embarrassing! George took after his mum. She was a big lady, and noisy with it.

“I’m sure our George would never do such a thing,” she huffed from her top step.

She yelled towards the back of the house, “George. Come out here!”

George slunk down the hallway, and smirked at me from behind his mother’s skirts.

“I don’t know nuffin’ about it.”

“You see!” Mrs Harley was right up on her high horse now. “You want to watch who you’re accusing and look to your own, Mrs Blenkiron. What are things coming to? Making up stories like that! Your son should be ashamed of himself. I’ll complain to the school. That’s what I’ll do!”

So although a bit of me knew she’d never have the brass neck to do it, the only result was that I spent the next few days worried I’d be called up to the front of the class and slippered for making false accusations against George.

His little gang knew I liked singing, and one of things they enjoyed was to follow me down the road doing their own bad impressions of my voice.

“Oh just shut up,” I’d shout over my shoulder. “You’re only jealous.”

“Jealous? Of a weedy, little nancy boy like you? You must be having a laugh!”

And then they'd return to their wordless singing, interspersed with chants of '*Adam is a girlie! Adam is a girlie.*'

And so on and on it went, week by week, term by term. I can't tell you how glad I was to swap Manners Road Elementary for a new life at *Henry VIII*. But still, they'd parade past me as I waited at the bus stop, saying the rudest things they dared in front of the other passengers.

How they knew I'd come back from Braunston I don't know. I went down the local shops to get some things for Mum on a Saturday morning, and there they were, like they'd been hanging around on the off chance every weekend for the last four months. Of course, none of *them* had been evacuated, and now they were going to make the most of it.

"Hey, there's that yellow livered little so-and-so Blenkiron," Brian shouted.

"Scared of his own shadow," George added. "'Spect he pees his pants thinking about Hitler.."

"Mummy's boy," said Roy, aiming a gob of spit onto the pavement in front of me.

"Diddums needed to run away from the nasty bombs?" Brian cackled.

"Just like his dad, from what I've heard!"

They were blocking my way. I stepped into the road to go round them, but George moved his bulk so there was no way through.

"My brother's joined up to fight," said Roy.

"And my dad's in the Territorials," George joined in.

"Old man Blenkiron's got a cushy number in the Council. He ain't goin' nowhere."

"Whole family's a bunch of cowards, I reckon," said Brian. "In the last lot you'd have had a white feather stuck on your jumper, posh boy!"

“My dad can’t talk about what he does,” I retorted. “And my mum’s an ARP warden. You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Dad knows more about the layout of the city than anyone. He works long hours, planning what to do now that the war’s come. There are big changes happening. Everyone knows that all the big factories in Coventry, including Daimler, are doing war work, though people whisper about it behind their hands. As the posters say ‘*Careless talk cost lives*’. There might be Jerry spies listening. But behind the steel doors, where a couple of years ago they were making motorbikes and cars, they’re making tanks and guns now. In the parks and gardens, holes are being dug for public shelters. There’s a huge underground shelter just behind *Henry VIII*. The railings around the flower beds have gone to be melted down for the war effort. The flowers have vanished too. They’ve been replaced by vegetable allotments. All the stained glass has been taken out of the cathedral, piece by piece, replaced by plain glass and wooden shutters and put into storage. Somebody has to organise it all. One of the ‘somebodies’ is my dad. He’s been on a committee with the Cathedral Provost, Canon Howard (the Provost is the Cathedral boss).

Mum’s doing her bit too. I’m proud of her. She spends three nights a week in a basement store room at *Owen Owen’s* which has been turned into the HQ for the Air Raid Precautions people. They’ve been recruiting volunteers to go out and about through the city streets, making sure the black-out’s enforced. And if Hitler’s bombers ever do come, they’ll be the ones making sure everyone’s all right, so you see, even the women are playing their part.

“And what’s so surprising about that?” Pauly demanded in a strop the other day. She poked me in the chest. “You’re like all men. Look it up in your books, and see who was doing all the work by the end of the last war!”

“Stop it, you two,” Mum intervened. “I *do* know you’re *both* going to have to be a bit more responsible at home. I can’t do everything, you know. Otherwise we’ll be pushing our way through cobwebs in the dark.”

Pauly shuddered.

“Exactly,” said Mum. “And you won’t like that, will you!”

The other day I got to thinking about Roy Simpson’s brother. Would I be brave enough to join up and fight Hitler if I were the right age? The more I thought, the more scared I felt. The news recently has all been bad. At the beginning of the month, our boys were brought back off the French beaches just in the nick of time. Otherwise they’d have been butchered by Hitler’s army. There’s only Britain left to stand up to Germany now. It’s just us and those big Nazi bullies, terrifying monster versions of George Harley and his cronies. I caught Mum just before she went off to the ARP for the evening. I was upset.

“I’m scared I’m going to die,” I cried.

“Well, whoever said you were going to? At least not any time soon. Plenty of time to worry about that when you’ve grown up and got kids of your own.”

“But what if the war drags on, and I’m older and I’m not in a reserved occupation and they call me up into the army?”

“The war’s not going to last that long.”

Mum was doing her best to comfort me, but from her glances at her watch, I could see she was worried about being late on duty.

“How can you be sure? It’s been almost a year already.”

“Well, I can’t. Not one hundred per cent. But Mr. Churchill seems to know a thing or two, and he says we’ll have them beaten if we’re all sensible and work hard.”

“And if he’s wrong?”

“Well then, yes, we might all be in the soup. But we’ll still be us Blenkirons, and somehow we’ll pull through, Germans or no Germans. Darling, I’ve got to go...you know I have. There’s some supper on the side for you and Pauly. Your dad’s working late again. He’ll look after himself when he gets in.”

She was pulling on a hat and checking her make-up in the hall mirror. I didn’t feel very comforted, not really. But I knew she was doing her best. What more could she say?

Wednesday June 19th 1940

Last Friday our Anderson Shelter arrived on the back of a lorry. The idea is that every house gets one to keep us safe from any bombs. I answered the door to find a bloke standing there with a chit in one hand and a lump of iron hoisted up on his opposite shoulder.

“Would you by any chance be young Master Blenkiron?” he asked.

I said I was.

“Good,” he replied, “I’ve got a few days’ hard labour for you and your dad sitting on the back of my truck. Where would you like me to put it?”

No one had said anything to me. When I saw how big the load was, I showed him round the side of the house to the paved area by the garden shed.

“Oh, didn’t I mention it?” Dad said when he got in at seven. “Sorry. Slipped my mind. That’s tomorrow afternoon spoken for, then.”

I showed him the impressive pile of metal.

“Hmm,” he said. “And maybe a couple of evenings too.”

It’s true my dad can be forgetful (remember Barry Sykes’ ‘boffin’ comment!) and he’s not big to look at, but compared with mine, his forearms are massive and muscly. I’ve watched him dig in the garden or at our allotment, and always been amazed at his strength and stamina

(and when I was little he'd be using his brain to make up sums and simple algebra for me at the same time!)

"You're going to put it *where*?" Mum complained. "Right in the middle of our lovely lawn?"

"Well, where else do you think? It's got to be close to the house, or you'll be moaning about traipsing up and down to the end of the garden in the middle of the night."

"Even so. We'd only just got it looking nice. All that work getting rid of the ground elder. It's such a shame, Michael!"

"Look, would you rather get killed, or not?" he blustered. "It's a job that's got to be done, so let me do it!"

A compromise was reached. He carefully cut the turfs and put them to one side so that they could partly cover the shelter once it was complete. And then he set to digging - with a little bit of help from me. When he'd finished, there was a small room-sized hole in the middle of the grass about three and a half feet deep, to match the plans that the man from the council had left. Into that went the metal stanchions and cross pieces which would keep the shelter stable. Dad lined the walls with stone that he'd taken from an ornamental wall which had previously stood near the fruit trees. The whole thing was covered with a roof of corrugated iron sheets onto which we piled the earth from the spoil heap and finally, the turf. Now there was a huge mound in the middle of the garden. It looked like pictures you see in history books of the tombs of ancient Britons.

Mum was brought out to admire what we'd done.

"You *have* worked hard," she said. I could tell her how proud she was of Dad.

"If we're still using it next year, we'll plant it out with some flowers around the sides," he said, cleaning his spade.

She stepped through the door of the shelter, just avoiding a bang on the head. "I still don't fancy it much," she said. "Even I have to stoop. How Pauly'll manage, I have no idea."

Dad shrugged.

"That's me done," he said. "Or at least it will be, when I've got some power down there for the lights. Now it's up to you and Pauly to work out how to make it into a bit more than a hole in the ground."

He stopped, and peered at the roof of the shelter. He pulled out a small, corroded bit of metal from between two turfs, wiped off the dirt and threw it in my direction. I caught it.

"There's a present for you, son. Reward for your labour. Clean it up, and see what you've got," he said. "Might be Roman, you never know. I found a couple of other coins like that a few years back. I've still got them in a drawer somewhere. Invaders come and go. It took us Brits four hundred years to see off the Roman army. Let's hope Jerry gets the message a bit quicker, eh?"

Saturday 22nd June 1940

I cleaned up the coins as best I could with Glitto and a stiff brush and showed them to Mr. Hill this morning. One of them was about the size of a sixpence, though it obviously wasn't silver. On it you could quite clearly see someone's head.

"That's very interesting," Mr Hill murmured, squinting at it through the eye-glass he kept in the top pocket of his tweed jacket. "Your dad's right." He looked up and dropped the eye glass back into his palm. "I think all three are Roman asses – pennies, to you and me. But really they shouldn't be in your back garden. Coventry's a medieval city. I suppose some Roman chaps might have been out for a walk one day and the money fell out of their pockets. There aren't the remains of any proper Roman buildings around here, except out at Baginton

– and certainly not under your garden. Maybe the coins were accidentally brought in with soil from somewhere else when your house was built.”

Mr. Hill’s a fascinating man. If you want to know anything about history, he can tell you.

“Do you know who the man on the coin is?” I asked.

“Well, I *think* he’s an Emperor called Carausius. He was knocking about towards the end of the third century AD,” Mr. Hill continued, “Which would be interesting in itself, for two reasons. One is that I seem to remember his coins usually turn up in France, not Britain. And secondly, he was murdered by his treasurer, a man called Allectus, who was English – the only Briton ever to have claimed to be Emperor. Mind you, it wasn’t very long before he got bumped off too.”

“Are they worth a lot?”

“I shouldn’t think so.”

Mr. Hill chuckled.

“Sorry to disappoint you, Adam. You’re not going to get rich from these! But they’re a great find, and a bit of a mystery. Which is always good, isn’t it! Now what about that bit of work you were doing for me about King Charles?”

Another good thing about Mr. Hill is that he’s often quite prepared to let himself be distracted from what we’re supposed to be doing – the best sort of teacher.

Mum’s favourite expression is *‘The devil finds work for idle hands to do’*, and she practises what she preaches. Sometimes you’ll catch my dad reading the paper, or having forty winks on a Sunday afternoon, but Mum never stops. The problem is she thinks the same should apply to me and Pauly.

Because *Henry VIII* was so discombobulated last autumn, this year Old Bertie (his name's really Mr. Burton) decided there'd be no Easter holiday. So we haven't had a school break since Christmas and the term isn't going to end until July 26th! Which would be bad enough, but don't forget my choir practices at the Cathedral. Last year I was going three evenings a week at five o'clock, but since September thank goodness that's been cut to Tuesdays and Thursdays. I have to be there at nine sharp on Sundays too, for a final run through of the day's music. We used to sing Evensong on Saturday and Sunday afternoons. Because of the war these days it's Sundays only but there's still a morning service at 10.30. And if there's ever a special day, like the 'Making of the Mayor' each year, we sing for that as well, which is great, because it means being let off school. You'd think that would all keep me busy enough, but just in case I might be slacking, a couple of months back Mum asked Mr. Hill to come round every Saturday morning to set me extra History and English work. And I haven't told you about Miss Turkey. She does extra French conversation with me at half past six on Wednesdays. Miss Turkey's tall and thin. Her head seems far too small for her long body and when she speaks, her neck wobbles. She's frightfully clever, and very scary. I don't understand half the things she says, and she's always disappointed in me. She sighs and tuts, and says under her breath,

"Eh bien, I'm sure we'll get you there, Adam. Peut-être! S'il plait à Dieu!"

If I ever I complain to Mum that I'm tired out, she trots out another of her favourite sayings: '*No rest for the wicked!*' You can say that again.

Apart from my family, and perhaps even more than Mr. Hill, Mr. Stephenson's my favourite grown up. He directs the music at the Cathedral, and conducts the choir. He never gets cross even when we make mistakes in services, unlike some of the teachers at Henry VIII who throw a wobbler at the slightest thing. Of course, from time to time, things do go wrong,

but if they do he just shakes his head rather sadly. I've even seen him laugh at a horribly wrong note. He makes music fun, and he tells good jokes. Example: "How do you know when it's a singer at the front door? Answer: *He can't find the key and doesn't know when to come in!*" We work hard for him because we know what a brilliant musician he is. I love watching him play the organ. His feet positively dance over the pedal board. How does he do that? I find it difficult enough to make my left and right hands work on their own when I'm playing the piano, let alone having to worry about my feet too. When I have to sing a solo, Mr. Stephenson gives me an individual lesson.

"Smile, young Adam," he'll say. "Let's forget the blackout and light up Coventry with this lovely tune". Or, "You'll make your mum shed a tear with this one..."

Sometimes the war gets me down, but singing always cheers me up.

Thursday June 27th 1940

Excitement. Of the wrong sort. Two nights ago we were woken up by the air-raid siren. It's the first time it's happened for real, though ever since last September there've been tests during the day-time. I was sound asleep, and it took Dad shaking me by the shoulder to really wake me up. He was holding a candle. He looked startled and anxious.

"Dressing gown on now, Adam. And bring a jumper," he said. "Look sharp about it. The German bombers may be here any minute."

I banged my knee as I rummaged in a cupboard for my sweater. My fingers wouldn't work properly as I tried to tie the cord of the dressing gown around my waist. I found some slippers and stumbled downstairs to where Mum and Pauly were waiting, their faces white in the candlelight. For some reason the electric wasn't working. Pauly's teeth were chattering, even though it had been a warm evening. She looked tearful and scared.

“What time is it?” she asked.

“About a quarter to one,” Mum answered. “I’ve put the kettle on. Let’s take a mug of tea down the garden with us.”

“We haven’t got time for that,” Dad growled, opening the back door. An owl hooted somewhere in the distance. The night was very still.

“There’s always time *‘for that’*,” Mum snapped grouchily. “Can *you* hear any planes? No, neither can I. So there’s time to brew a cuppa, isn’t there!”

It was fun down in the shelter – for about the first five minutes. Dad went back and brought some blankets. We wrapped ourselves up, drank our tea and...waited. I must have dozed off, and then woke up as Dad suddenly asked,

“What was that?”

“I didn’t hear anything,” said Pauly.

“Nor me,” added Mum.

“Listen. There it is again!”

I could hear what Dad meant. Somewhere, a long way away, I could catch what sounded like faint rumbles of thunder.

“No storms forecast tonight,” said Dad. He opened the shelter door.

“Be careful, Mike,” said Mum, a bit less gung-ho than she’d been earlier on.

“The sky’s perfectly clear,” said Dad, and then in a tone of wonderment, “Come and have a look at this, Adam.”

I crossed the shelter on my knees and joined him at the door. Giant beams of light criss-crossed in front of us, shifting up and down, changing their angle to cover as much of the sky as they could.

“It’s the searchlights looking for Jerry,” Dad whispered. “But wherever he is, he’s not round here.”

And at that very moment, the single flat tone of the all-clear signal began to wail, so we blearily gathered ourselves up and went back to bed.

“What time is it *now*?” I yawned.

“Four o’clock.” Mum complained. “We’ll none of us be in any fit state for work tomorrow.”

Mr. Hill and Mr. Stephenson have got me thinking in different ways. Mr. Stephenson has a thing about the silences in music.

“They’re every bit as important as the notes. Remember that, boys. And you men at the back there, this applies to you too...take your time. Let the space of the Cathedral speak to you.”

Mr Hill says,

“When you write, what’s left out’s every bit as important as what you include.”

So I’ve been asking myself, *What have I left out of my diary so far?* And then it struck me. I’ve not said anything about ‘friends’. It’s not that I haven’t got any friends. But I think I might have fewer than most people. I’ve told you about Roly Kenyon. He bounced up to me yesterday before school, full of beans as usual.

“Did you hear what happened last night?” Each day Roly catches a bus in from Stretton which is a village out on the Fosse Way. It takes him ages to get to and from school. I’m glad I just have a twenty minute walk.

I was probably a bit grumpy. “I know I spent most of the night under a blanket in our air-raid shelter and all for nothing,” I said.

“Did you hear them then – the bombs?” Roly was still jumping up and down, like it was the best thing that had ever happened.

“We heard some kind of rumbling noises, but I really couldn’t say if they were bombs.”

“They were too! A row of houses in Pailton got hit. And so did the airfield at Ansty.”

Pailton’s not far from where Roly lives, and Ansty’s on his bus route into the city. I had to admit I was quite interested. I just didn’t want Roly to know I was.

“Could you see anything from the bus?” I asked. “I shouldn’t think so.”

“No, not really. One or two of the barrage balloons might have come down.”

Barrage balloons are supposed to protect important places by confusing the German aircraft and maybe even tangling them up in their wires.

“But there were no holes in the ground or anything. I bet it’ll be all over the *Telegraph* tonight.”

The *Evening Telegraph* is Coventry’s daily paper.

“How do you know about Pailton then?”

“Our next door neighbour Mrs. Williams works at the school there. She got a call to say not to bother going in. Apparently the place was completely blown up. And some houses were badly damaged too.”

While Roly was rattling on, the bell had gone, and Larkin, one of the prefects, was bearing down us. He’s OK, not as bad as some, but he has to make it look like he’s keeping us in order. He writes poetry and edits the school magazine. He was quite nice about something I wrote at the end of last year.

“Not half bad, young Blenkiron,” he said at the time. “Rhymes, and almost scans. And it’s better than anything the Upper School can manage. Pathetic lot, they are!”

This morning he was pretending to be stern.

“Save your gossip for later, gentlemen. Don’t you know there’s a war on! Jump to it!”

Saturday July 6th 1940

Things have got serious with George Harley. I hadn’t seen anything of him and his gang for a few weeks, and then suddenly last Monday there they were again, hanging around near the bus station as I walked past. They leered at me, laughed, and whispered conspiratorially. Then they fell into step behind me.

“Nazi! Nazi! Blenky’s a Nazi!”, they chorused. People were turning round to look at them – and me. One lady actually said to them,

“You should be ashamed. Using language like that. It’s not right!”

But it didn’t make any difference. Glancing sideways at my reflection as we passed the windows of a shop, I could see they were making that funny Heil Hitler salute, and marching behind me like German soldiers with their legs stiff and straight. They did that right the way to the end of our street. They obviously thought it was so much fun that they did exactly the same thing on Tuesday afternoon, and Wednesday too. I said nothing to Mum and Dad, but Pauly could see something was up.

“What’s wrong, kid?” she asked.

“Oh, nothing.”

“Pretty big nothing, by the looks of it.”

“George Harley, if you must know.”

I told her what had been going on.

“Unbelievable,” said Pauly. “When will that child grow up? Don’t let him get to you. Do I need to sort him out?”

“No,” I said, “You’ll only make it worse.”

But then, yesterday evening, things got worse by themselves.

Mum came in late from ARP in high dudgeon.

“Someone’s painted a swastika on our front door. In white paint. Of all the bloomin’ nerve!”

That even made my dad jump.

“You what?”

“In white paint. On our front door.”

Dad was out of his chair and running to look. And then suddenly Mum was crying.

“Whatever will people think? What are we going to do, Michael?”

Dad opened the door, gazed in astonishment, and tutted loudly.

“Well, first of all, we’ll have to get rid of it. I’ve still got some of that ‘Midnight Blue’ paint I used in the garage.”

He painted away until the light faded, but for all his neat brushwork, you could still see the outline of the swastika.

“I’ll have to go over the whole thing again tomorrow,” he fumed. “Who on earth would want to do a thing like that?”

I looked at Pauly and Pauly looked at me.

“We think we know,” said Pauly.

Wednesday July 10th 1940

It didn’t end there. On Sunday I was out most of the afternoon singing Evensong at the Cathedral. Mum says she heard a strange noise in the front garden, and went out to see what the matter was. Along the wall by the pavement, below the privet hedge, was a trail of still wet white paint and the words, ‘Nazis live ‘ere!’, accompanied by another swastika. She

looked up the road and saw two boys disappearing round the corner at the end of the road. They were laughing and shouting. One was swinging a can of paint by its handle, and the other Mum recognised clearly as George Harley. From what she told me when I got in at about six, it sounded as if the one with the paint was Brian Hennessy.

“What do we do, Mike?” Mum asked my Dad. “This can’t go on. Those boys are getting out of control. Should we go and see their parents?”

“I think,” said Dad, getting his pipe out, and gouging at its bowl, “It’s gone too far for that. Time for the police to earn their living for a change.”

“Are you sure?” I piped up.

“Have you got a better idea?” said Dad. “Those little idiots have got to be taught a lesson. And I can’t go round and clip their ears for them.”

“I think Adam’s worried they’ll take it out on *him* if you call the rozzers,” said Pauly.

Dad considered for a moment.

“There’s nothing certain in life,” he replied. “Everything’s a matter of probabilities. But it’s more likely they’ll move onto even worse behaviour if we don’t deal with them now. I wouldn’t always have said that. But if this war has taught me anything, it’s that if you don’t nip things in the bud, you store up trouble. As I’m forever saying, perhaps if our government had acted sooner over Hitler, we wouldn’t be in the pickle we’re in now. We were weak, and now we’re paying for it. So, even if there’s a risk, I think we ought to do the right and brave thing and get some help. Don’t you think so, Adam?”

“I suppose so,” I answered reluctantly. I didn’t feel very right and brave.

A policeman called P.C. Weston came round yesterday evening. He looked at the vandalised wall and shook his head. Then he came into our front room, sat down and took out his notebook.

“Would you like a cup of tea?” Mum asked.

“Well since you’re offering, I don’t mind if I do,” said P.C. Weston, pulling up his trousers so they didn’t bag at the knees. “It’s been a long day already and I’m not half-finished yet.”

Mum told him what she’d seen. I said a bit about the problems I’d been having.

“It’s very distressing for you, Mrs. Blenkinsop,” he went on. “And you Adam. I don’t understand what gets into some people’s heads. But this is more than just playground banter. I’ll go round and have a word with this Harley boy.”

I thought to myself I wouldn’t much fancy P.C. Weston ‘having a word’ with me. He was very tall and very solid.

“Adam’s a bit worried about what may happen if you do.”

“I’ll make it clear to the young man that any more of this nonsense and he’ll be seeing the inside of a cell,” P.C. Weston said firmly. “The war’s doing weird things to people. There are some who apparently think it’s a grand opportunity for mischief, because the eyes of the authorities are elsewhere. Well, they’ve got to be shown they’re wrong! Sometimes I think the whole world’s gone barmy. I’ll sort out young Harley and his cronies.”

He stood up and stretched. It seemed as if the top of his head was just about touching the ceiling.

“And I’ll let you know what comes of it.”

He turned to me and winked.

“Keep your pecker up, young Adam. We’ll put a stop to this. Don’t you worry about that!”

Thursday July 11th 1940

I had another morning out of school today, missing double maths and physics which I didn’t mind at all, and for an exciting reason too. A fortnight ago, Mr. Stephenson asked me to stay behind for a few minutes after choir practice. I thought I’d done something wrong.

“I wonder if I could prevail on you to do me a small favour, Adam?” he smiled.

I nodded enthusiastically, relieved I wasn’t for the high jump.

“I’m playing a recital for the BBC on the 11th. Do you think you’d feel able to turn pages for me?”

“Of course I would, sir,” I said. Then it dawned on me exactly what he meant.

“You mean they’re broadcasting it?” I asked.

“Yes! Quite an honour, really. A first time for me, and a first time for the Cathedral organ too!”

“But suppose I make a mistake?” I said. “Or drop the music?”

“It’s more a question of *me* not making a mistake, I should think,” Mr. Stephenson laughed. “You’ll be fine. And if we really make a mess of anything, it’s being recorded, so it doesn’t matter. We can just start again. Isn’t that good! I can let you see the music beforehand, and if you stay after morning service on Sunday, we’ll run through everything I’m going to play. All you have to do is turn the page when I nod, and keep out of my way apart from that. Unless you don’t like the noise I’m making, in which case just feel free to pull out a few more stops here and there.”

My eyes opened a bit wider.

"I'm just joking, Adam. You can leave the clever stuff to me!"

So there I was this morning in the Cathedral. When I arrived at half past ten, the BBC engineers were already there, adjusting the microphones they'd set up high on a wire between the two sides of the chancel. I was certainly nervous, and I expect Mr. Stephenson was too, although he didn't show it.

"Ready when you are, Alan," said Ken the chief engineer. He had a huge handlebar moustache and eyebrows as bushy as his moustache.

"Righty-ho! Here we go, Adam!" Mr. Stephenson whispered.

There was a piece by Bach, the C minor prelude and fugue, which has a melody which somehow manages to be jolly and serious both at the same time, then some strange sounding music by a French composer I'd never heard of – Olivier somebody or another, and some nice trumpety tunes by Purcell and Charpentier to end with. I felt weak at the knees, but I'd managed not to miss a turn or to knock the music off the stand, so at least I'd done my bit.

"What do you think?" Mr. Stephenson asked Ken when we'd finished. "Was that OK?"

"I should say so," he answered. "Super job. You should take it up for a living."

"Oh good," said Mr. Stephenson. He looked genuinely pleased.

"Well done, young man," Ken said to me. "You kept a cool head under fire."

"Oh, young Adam's a star of the future," said Mr. Stephenson, "You should hear him sing. Terrific voice."

"Well, who knows?" Ken said, winking at me. "We may be back. It would be nice to record a Choral Evensong here. It's good to get out into the provinces, particularly just now. Makes everyone feel included. Then perhaps we can give Adam a chance to warm the cockles of the nation's heart."

I don't know what I think about that idea, me singing on radio. Sounds very scary, but when I told Mum what had been said, of course she was practically beside herself.

"Well, wouldn't that be a thing," she exclaimed. "Our boy on the wireless. That'd have people round here sitting up and taking notice. Mrs. Harley could put that in her pipe and smoke it!"

Wednesday July 24th 1940

I saw George Harley again yesterday, but just accidentally: he wasn't lying in wait this time. We passed each other on the street as I walked back from school. He scowled at me, narrowing his eyes to look mean like a baddie in a western film.

"I'll get you," he growled. "Just you wait and see."

I know I should have ignored him.

"Then it'll be so much the worse for you," I answered back.

"You'd have to prove it was me first, Blenkiron. Mummy and Daddy and P.C.Plod can't be around all the time. And the nights are getting darker soon. Watch your back, girlie."

And he slid off up the street. Well, at least I know the visit from P.C. Weston has had an effect. The question is, *what* effect?

Tuesday August 6th 1940

"All we've been told," said Pauly at tea-time, "Is that someone important's coming to the factory on Thursday, and we've to put on our best face."

Very unusually we were all there in the dining room. It was Dad's birthday. In honour of the occasion, there was a small bit of ham each and some salad from the allotment together with cold potatoes, to take our minds off the bread and marge . At least they can't ration what

comes out of the allotment. The Blenkirons are doing what they're told, and digging for victory. Well, Dad is, at least.

"Whoever can it be?" said Mum. "Do you think it's Mr. Churchill? Wouldn't it be wonderful if you got the chance to meet him?"

"Probably some film star," Dad snorted. "Keeping up morale. Wouldn't do much for me, I must say."

"Laurence Olivier would be nice," chortled Pauly, 'Or that James Mason. I think he's a real dish. I'll put on my best frock, in case."

"Now she imagines she'll be spotted in the crowd, and whisked away to Hollywood or wherever."

Dad can sometimes be very sarcastic.

"Never you mind. I'll remember you all when I'm rich and famous. You can come and visit me, and sit by my swimming pool," Pauly replied.

And then there was a bit of a silence, because our life isn't like, is it? In reality it's becoming smaller and more colourless every week. Before the war, I remember we had almost anything we wanted to eat. Now I've forgotten what oranges and bananas taste like. Back then we had meat most days, with a nice big joint of beef on Sundays. Mum used to bake beautiful cakes which won prizes at Holy Trinity's summer fetes. Now she does her best, but she doesn't use butter, and she has to skimp on eggs. We tried to pretend with Dad's birthday cake today, but despite Mum's best efforts it came out of the oven flat and uninteresting.

I was in the kitchen a week or so ago when she was baking some fairy cakes. Dad was mending a shelf. I could see they were getting on each others' nerves.

“This is no good,” Mum exclaimed. She banged down her rolling pin in frustration and added with a sigh, “I know I shouldn’t complain. We’re better off than some. They’re probably half-starving down the wrong end of town.”

“Then again, Daph,” my dad answered. “There are spivs and chancers making so much money out of this war, they don’t know what to do with it. If you’ve got half a skill at working metal in Coventry, you can put in all the hours God sends and charge the bosses what you like. Planning’s a mug’s game. I should be re-training to work at Herbert’s or Daimler.”

He gestured to me with his hammer.

“And you, young Adam, forget all that music and book learning. Get yourself a trade. Then you’ll never be short of a bob or two.”

“Oh stop lecturing everyone, Mike. We need something to cheer us up. Which was why I was making these blessed fancies...”

Dad’s joking, of course, but *not*, if you see what I mean. Me, I don’t *fancy* working in a factory one little bit. Far too boring!

Friday August 9th 1940

Well, it turned out not to be Mr. Churchill, or Laurence Olivier or James Mason. It was even better. It was King George and Queen Elizabeth! Pauly even got to say hello to them. And she remembered to curtsy.

“What did they ask you? Come on Pauly, spill the beans!” Mum was beside herself with excitement. You could see she was really envious.

“Well, the King didn’t say anything at all that I heard,” Pauly answered. “Though I think he talked a lot to the men down on the shop floor, and was apparently terribly interested in

what they were doing. But the Queen (Pauly put on a posh voice) came up to me and said, *'How do you do?'*

"Whatever did you say?"

"I said there was a lot of hayfever about, and I'd got it really bad."

"Oh Pauly, you never did!"

"And then the Queen said, *'Goodness gracious, the nearest hay field must be miles away.'*"

"That's all she knows," Dad chipped in. "No more than two miles, I should think."

"What was she wearing?"

"Blue. A lovely blue dress with a hat to match. Lots of feathers."

"Just right for going round a factory."

"Oh, shush Michael. They have to keep up appearances. That's what being royalty's all about."

Mum's a great enthusiast for anything to do with the royal family. Dad's not so keen. I remember him being very cross when the previous King, Edward VIII gave up the throne because he wanted to marry Mrs. Simpson.

"I don't know why we need 'em," Dad grumbled. "We could get on perfectly well without."

"Aren't they part of what we're fighting for - what makes Britain special and different?"

"If - when - this war is over, we'll have to see. Maybe Britain should be a republic."

"That's a terrible idea, Michael. Who'd want that?"

"You think I'm the only one?"

"Well, I hope so!"

Wednesday 14th August 1940

Mum and Dad and me are having a week's holiday this week with Dad's sister, my Auntie Phyll, who lives somewhere called Amersham in Buckinghamshire. It took us four hours to drive there last Saturday, going the 'pretty route', as Dad calls it, and having a picnic in a field on the way, trying to ignore the cows who were also having their lunch there. The Austin 7 can't do much more than thirty miles an hour and it was probably a good thing Pauly has to work this week. There's only just room for three people and a suitcase inside. There's a telephone at Auntie Phyll's and Pauly's been left with strict instructions to call us from home or work if there's the slightest problem at home. Before we left, Mum said anxiously,

"Are you sure you'll be all right, love? Don't forget to eat. And lock up securely every night."

"Stop worrying, Mum. I'll be right as rain," she replied carelessly, as if being in the house overnight by herself were something she did all the time. "I'm a big girl now, you know."

"I *do* know. But you'll always be my baby, Pauly, and that's the truth. Don't be going and having any wild parties while we're away!"

"It'll be good for her," said Dad sternly as we drove out of Coventry. "She's got to learn to look after herself some time. And God help him, I suppose she might have to look after a husband eventually. If she ever gets round to marrying."

But that didn't stop Mum phoning Pauly when we got to Amersham and again on Sunday afternoon.

Yesterday we went out for a walk in the Chiltern Hills. The corn had just been cut, and the fields were stubbly and yellow white. It was Dad who saw the planes first, high in the sky, dodging between the fluffy clouds, making their way from west to east.

“Germans,” he said.

“Should we be worried?” Mum asked.

“About them? No. They’re after an airfield somewhere. Or just looking for a scrap with our boys.”

Well, if Dad was right, they certainly got one. Even while we watched we saw another group of planes coming towards them from the east.

“Hurricanes,” I said authoritatively.

The planes began to chase each other, zooming around all over the sky, and then from one of them appeared a trail of black smoke. As it began to dive, it started to topple over on itself before falling uncontrollably towards the ground, out of our sight beyond the hills.

“That’s awful” said Mum.

“I hope it’s one of theirs, not ours,” Dad added

“If it is, then good riddance,” I said. “Roly says the only good Jerry is a dead one.”

“I don’t think either of you should say things like that?” Mum said quietly. “That’s some mother’s son you’re talking about, and she may never see her boy ever again. Nor even have a body to bury.”

I felt suddenly ashamed. “I’m sorry,” I said. “I wasn’t thinking.”

That night I tried to think about sheep or French grammar before I fell asleep, but a scene from an imaginary movie kept playing in my head. A young man in a burning plane, struggling to free himself so that he could parachute safely to the ground. Struggling – and not succeeding. What if the young man was me? One day it might be.

Monday August 19th 1940

I didn't want to come home from Amersham. Apart from what happened during and after that walk, it was mostly a peaceful, relaxing time, not having to think about the war or school or the Cathedral or Coventry. I spent a lot of it reading the books from Auntie Phyll's shelves. I'd never tried any Charles Dickens before, and really liked being far away in the world of a hundred years ago with Pip or Oliver Twist. They had their problems too, but none of them were to do with bombs or invasions, and mostly things came right in the end. Back home last night, we didn't get much shut-eye because the sirens went off just before eleven o'clock. This time we hadn't quite made it into the Anderson when we heard explosions out towards Canley. That's not so very far away. The series of loud, dull ke-rumps did strange things to our ears.

"Goodness, that's weird," said Dad. "Did you feel the air compressing with the blast waves? I wouldn't like to be any closer!"

Later, as we sat inside the shelter getting cold and bored, I started to worry. It wasn't so much the bombs as the thought of the Germans arriving and taking over Coventry. In my head I could hear the boots clattering over the cobbles, and see the red and black flags hanging from the City Hall.

"It won't come to that," Dad said. "You remember what Mr. Churchill said. If they try, we'll fight them every inch of the way."

"But what if in the end we can't stop them?"

Mum spoke up, her voice high and shaky in the way it always is when she's stressed out.

“I don’t know, Adam. I really don’t know. We have to pray, and do our best. There’s nothing more we *can* do. After that, it’s a matter of faith. God will look after us.”

Will he?

Wednesday August 21st 1940

Last night was by far the worst it’s been so far, and today I’ve found it hard to keep my eyes open. We really didn’t get much sleep at all and it’s left us all feeling on edge. Mum was very snappy at breakfast.

“No excuses, Adam,” she barked at me. “It’s a matter of keeping up standards.”

And that was just because I had my elbows on the table, and was still wearing my pyjamas at half past seven.

It was all very noisy long before we heard the sirens. They didn’t go off until the small hours, but there were aircraft buzzing and droning around as soon as it got dark. Whoever they belonged to (and we guessed some of them must be German) it seemed as if they were circling the city. It made me think of a cat playing with a mouse. I kept wondering when one would suddenly zoom in and pounce, blowing us all to smithereens. The searchlights were criss-crossing the sky as usual. They seem to do a great job of lighting up the clouds but I’ve never seen them find a plane caught in them. What was new this time was the constant rat-a-tat-tat from our anti-aircraft batteries.

“Well, they’re dug in all around the city.” Dad was trying to be reassuring. “You don’t necessarily see them, but I suppose that’s the point of camouflage! The Germans probably have cameras in their planes trying to spot where they are. They’ll soon have more pictures of Coventry than the library does.”

“I’ve seen the guns in the park by *Henry VIII*,” I said.

“I think those are duds!” Dad laughed, grimly. “Call it ‘public relations’ or ‘propaganda’ if you like, but the government needs to convince us they’re looking after us. If you ask me, it’s a bit late trying to shoot down the bombers once they’re sitting over Coventry. It’d be better to nab them as soon as they cross the water.”

In between trying to doze under our blankets (which are scratchy and uncomfortable) , we play cards by the dim light of the naked electric bulbs dad’s rigged up along one side of the shelter. I look at comics, and even do bits of reading homework, anything really to take my mind off what’s really going on. What I feel in my stomach is a worse version of the ‘butterflies’ I get before singing a solo. At its worst it’s like wanting to go to the toilet all the time, except I wouldn’t want to risk going into the house to use the lav.

About three in the morning it went quiet, and then maybe at about four the all-clear sirens woke us up again, so at least we had two or three hours in our own proper beds.

Friday August 23rd 1940

Mum said very firmly she wasn’t taking any chances with her family’s lives, and she moved us into the garden long before midnight. While we were away last week she’d bought some sleeping bags and camp beds. Yesterday she wedged them into the Anderson.

“This is no good, Daph,” Dad complained. “I can’t sit up straight. I’ve got a crick in m’neck, and Pauly’s legs keep poking me in the gut. Did you grow an extra few inches this week, girl?”

“Ooh, you are a moaning Minnie,” Mum replied. “You’ll be thankful for these as the weather gets colder. But I must admit, it’s a bit cosy.”

When the first screamer bombs fell, they caught us off guard. Their terrifying high-to-low wails made us think they’d finish right on top of us. The double blast was deafening.

Mum gasped. Pauly screamed. We threw our faces towards the ground and clutched at our ears with our hands. Had we been hit? We'd been trying to get some kip, so the lights were off. Dad turned them back on, and since the electrics were still working, we guessed number 43 was still in one piece. For the next five minutes or so there was a chaos of noise from around the city. More anti-aircraft gunfire, apparently closer than the other night. Then a series of four explosions as more bombs fell, each one very slightly fainter than the previous one, and each preceded by a whine as it arrowed down towards the ground. There was a strange sudden clatter of falling masonry somewhere nearby, and a sound like metal rain hitting roofs and road.

"Shrapnel. Stay put everyone!" Dad commanded. It was an absolutely unnecessary instruction. No one was going anywhere.

"Whatever were those noises?" Mum was shouting. We'd all gone temporarily deaf.

"Terror bombs, Daph." Dad yelled back. "Meant to scare us all witless as well as blow us up."

"It's certainly working."

"Everyone OK?" Dad asked.

"Hold my hand, Mike," pleaded Mum.

We all clasped hands and hugged each other, waiting to see what would happen next. But nothing did. The night went quiet again, and eventually the all-clear sounded at about five.

When we dragged ourselves out of the shelter, it was a fine cloudless morning, and the silhouette of the house was a clear unbroken shape against the electric blue sky. No damage, but quite a bit of mess in the street. A few random bits of metal and brick were

strewn around. Further down towards the main road some of the terraced houses had lost all the glass from their windows. A man was standing looking up at his first floor, shaking his head. But as far as we could see everything was still standing: no one would be homeless as a result of the raid.

“Perhaps they were after the Standard factory?” Dad wondered.

“I can’t take many more nights like that one,” Mum said. “Goodness, I feel dreadful. Look, I can’t keep my hands still. And I must look worse.”

“We might have to get used to it, Daph. Shall I put the tea on?”

“Do I have to go in to work?” Pauly yawned.

“Yes, you do, young lady,” Mum said, pulling herself together. “We’re all going in to work, except Adam, who’s staying here to learn some physics before the new school term and do some violin practice. We can’t let that nasty little Hitler man beat us, bombs or no bombs.”

Monday 26th August 1940

“I’ve been asked out to the flicks on Sunday evening,” Pauly said at breakfast on Friday.

“Is that OK?”

“Oh, have you indeed,” answered Mum. “And who’s the lucky young man?”

“Maurice Perkins.”

“Oh, I know him. His parents go to Holy Trinity. Don’t see young Maurice there much.”

“He’s quite nice, though. Smart.”

“Smart pants, or smart in the head?”

“Smart in the head, obviously,” Dad chipped in. “Or he wouldn’t have asked our Pauly out.”

“So what’s on at the *Rex*, then? Not that ‘*Gone With The Wind*’ film I hope. I don’t think that’d be very suitable. Especially not on a Sunday.”

Pauly pulled a face.

“Oh, Mum. You’re so old-fashioned. From what I’ve heard, I don’t see what’s so naughty about it, but since you ask, it’s the ‘*Thirty Nine Steps*’. Is that moral enough for you?”

“Mind your manners, my girl, or you won’t go at all.”

Pauly made pretty please, and was given permission to go to the cinema with Maurice under strict instructions that he was to walk her home by 10.30 at the very latest, if she thought she might ever like a second date with him.

It was a quarter to ten when the sirens went. I was just going to bed. I get to stay up late on Sundays in the holidays, and anyway, because of all the disturbed nights this week, I’d been asleep on the sofa most of the afternoon.

“Oh, not again,” Mum said. “I’ve had enough of this to last me a lifetime. What about Pauly, Mike. What’ll she do?”

“She’s a sensible girl, and presumably this Maurice isn’t an idiot. Try not to worry, Daph. They’ll find their way home, or if it comes to it, there’s a public shelter near the *Rex*.”

We retreated to the Anderson. Mum was fidgety. Dad too. Half past ten passed. No bombs...but no Pauly either. Then came the first of the blasts, loud and apparently close by.

“Where is that wretched girl?” Mum complained. “I’ll give her a piece of my mind when she gets in. Do you think you should go to look for her, Michael?”

“No, I shouldn’t. As well you know, seeing as how you work with the ARP. Anyway, I’m not likely to find her, am I? She could be anywhere.”

We waited and waited. The all-clear sounded, and we went back inside the house. Still no Pauly. By half past one in the morning, Mum was almost hysterical.

“Our Pauly’s dead, I know she is,” she sobbed. “We should never have let her go. You should have put your foot down, Mike.”

Dad’s foot was making its own comment, tapping out the beat to a tune only he could hear on a table leg.

Finally, just after two, a key turned in the front door. A battered looking Pauly more or less fell into the hallway. Behind her stood a pale, sheepish young man in a suit that was damp and stained.

“I’m OK, Mum,” she said. And then she fainted.

They hadn’t been in the *Rex* when it had been hit, but it was a close thing. They were a couple of hundred yards up the road, dithering about whether to make a run for Thornton Road, or whether to pile into a public shelter they’d not been into before. It wasn’t an easy decision to make. They had no idea how much of the night they might have to spend there. Eventually, amid a chaos of police, ARP and fire engines, they’d stumbled off up the road in the pitch black, and from out of nowhere a piece of hot metal had fallen from the sky, according to a policeman, perhaps shrapnel from a round fired by an anti-aircraft gun. It struck Pauly a glancing blow on the side of her head. It certainly burned her, and grazed the skin enough to draw some blood, but if it had hit her an inch or so to the right, it might have killed her. Maurice turned out to be a bit of a hero. He’d hauled Pauly to a first aid post, where they patched her up. The nurses kept them there until they were sure Pauly wasn’t concussed.

After a few minutes lie-down and a cup of hot sweet tea, Pauly revived, and was as talkative as ever, although not everything she said made sense. Maurice was warmly thanked

and sent packing, and we got to bed sometime around four o'clock again. I didn't make it to the Cathedral for the morning service. I wonder how many other people in the choir did?

Monday 2nd September 1940

It was back to school this morning – the summer's over. We dragged ourselves through the school gates, struggling to keep awake. There's not been an uninterrupted night this week, and Sunday night was no different. Old Bertie, who was dressed as he always is in a shabby old tweed suit, more like a farmer than a headmaster, gave us a good talking to in assembly. Along the line I could see boys rubbing their eyes and yawning.

"We hear a lot about 'doing our bit'", he rumbled from the lectern. "But what does that mean for you boys? Some very sad letters come across my desk. But those letters are tinged with glory. I have to tell you there are Old Coventrians who've already given their lives for King and Country. You owe it to them to do your best each and every day. To whom much has been given, from whom much will be asked. I couldn't do better than remind you of some of the words of our School Song:

'On field and in room, wherever we may be

Though the task be drear and grim

Though pressed to the full and the way be hard

May our courage never dim.'

Don't you think that's terrible poetry? Mr. Metcalf began to play the wheezy organ and we started on the first verse: *'We are the school on top of the hill that Henry the King did will...'* but the sound of the singing was weak and unenthusiastic. Old Bertie, red-faced

and angry, rapped on the side of the lectern with his stick. Mr. Metcalf broke off his playing in the middle of a line.

“That’s just not good enough, boys,” Old Bertie intoned, “If our troops were to show as little effort as you put into your feeble vocal performance, we might as well just give Hitler the keys to the Houses of Parliament and let him get on with it. You, Larkin, yes you, boy...”

He pointed at the sixth former, whose ears were turning pink under his shaggy bowl of hair.

“I didn’t see your mouth moving at all. Set the younger boys an example for God’s sake. And after assembly go and get your hair cut. You will not come into my school ever again, looking like that.”

“Bit rough on poor old Larkin,” Roly Kenyon puffed, as we made our way to our new classroom after assembly, “Bertie’s such a hypocrite. I don’t think he’s got a clue how to knot a tie...”

“So here we go for the fourth form,” I said. “Greek as well as Latin. Physics *and* Chemistry.”

“I wonder how long the school will be able to keep things going,” said Roly. “I can’t see Evans anywhere. Or Kempster. I heard he’d been sent off to Wales by his parents. And won’t at least some of the teachers get called up into the army?”

I hadn’t thought about that.

“I shouldn’t think anyone would give Mr. Besant a rifle!”

Our new form teacher was ancient and as bald as a coot. He stuttered and walked with a pronounced limp.

“He must be about a hundred and three!”

Evans and Kempster weren't the only ones missing. Compared with the end of the summer term, our class seems to be at about three-quarters strength.

All in all, it was a funny beginning to the new school year.

Wednesday 18th September 1940

I'd always wondered and now I know. If a bomb falls in your garden when you're sitting in your Anderson shelter, you've got no chance. There's a boy in our class called Harrison Arthurs. I don't know him very well, and he keeps himself to himself. His dad's the minister of a small free church out in Radford. He didn't come in to school today or yesterday, so our class is down to nineteen out of an original twenty eight now. Roly, who knows all the gossip (I don't know where he gets it from!) told me at break why Harrison was missing.

"Direct hit on their shelter," he said. "Mum, Dad, two younger sisters all killed. Wallace Rd. out in Radford."

Radford's a mile or so north west of the city centre.

"But Harry's OK?"

"Apparently. My source tells me he insisted on going inside the house to use the toilet, and while he was there, boom, the bomb came in. The house was pretty much destroyed, but they found Harry alive in the middle of it all, still sitting on the lav, white as a sheet. All the rest of the family were gonners. I don't think there was anything left to be found of *them*."

You'll remember Roly wants to be a journalist when he leaves school. Sometimes he seems very heartless. He won't spare even the goriest of details.

Perhaps he gets rid of his fears by talking them out. Me, I just turn these nightmares over and over in my mind. They stop me sleeping even when I know I should be grabbing all the shuteye I can.

We're slowly learning about the different ways in which buildings and people can be destroyed. There are incendiary bombs which because of the oil or chemicals in them are designed to set fires, so they might not kill you straightaway unless one lands precisely on your head. There are parachute bombs which float down gently. They might still explode when they reach the ground, but on the other hand they might have delayed action fuses in them, so sometimes people are caught unawares when by the explosion, perhaps when they're busy pulling victims out of the rubble. Really, what Jerry's trying to do is kill all the doctors and nurses. I thought that was against the law. A boy lost his life the other day when he picked up something he thought was a cigarette tin painted bright yellow. It was just lying among some rubble. In fact it was a small bomb and it blew up in his face. According to Roly there wasn't much left of him either. And the terrible thing is, if we aren't already, we'll soon be doing the same thing to ordinary German people in Cologne or Berlin or Munich. Shouldn't wars be settled by armies, and not by killing innocent people like me, Pauly and Mum and Dad? Dad says they'll never break the British fighting spirit, but it's wearing me down, I can tell you.

Friday September 20th 1940

I feel like I'm wandering around in a daze. I go from place to place, to school, to the Cathedral and do the things I'm supposed to do, but my head's not really there, and my heart's not in it. We practised for Sunday evensong today, singing an anthem I used to really enjoy by Samuel Wesley. The words say: *'Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on thee'*, but I haven't got any peace. I try to say my prayers, but I don't understand why God's allowed this war to happen, and anyway I can't concentrate, because all I can think

about is poor Harry's family. When the Blenkins are crowded in together under the back lawn, it's all too easy to imagine that any minute our shelter will turn into our tomb.

What's it like to die? Will there be any time to think about what's happening? Will it hurt? And assuming I'm going there, and not to the other place, what's heaven like? Is there anything after death at all? There's no one I can talk to about any of this stuff. Pauly just gets on with life: she lives in the moment for Maurice, who's now very much a thing, and for shopping, and who's doing what at Daimler's. Dad's so practical that his brain just doesn't appear to work in the way mine does. I think Mum's more like me, but she's too busy. She hasn't time to talk. After choir practice Mr. Stephenson said to me,

"You look a bit down in the dumps, Adam. What's the matter?"

I burst into tears. I didn't mean to, but I did. I think it was just because he was being kind. He took the handkerchief from his top pocket and gave it to me. I looked at him doubtfully.

"Go on! Blow your nose on it, if you want to! It's all right."

"I don't know what the matter is," I blubbed. "It's just everything falling to pieces, I suppose."

"It *is* all very disconcerting," he admitted. "Even for someone as old as me who can remember the First War. This one seems very different. Much closer to all of us, whether we're in the army or not. And you're a sensitive chap, Adam, and all the better for that. We need deep thinkers. Perhaps if we'd had a few more deep thinkers we wouldn't have got into this mess in the first place."

"What do I do?"

"Well, I'm always here, if you want a chat. Being a choirmaster shouldn't just be about teaching people the difference between their A flats and their oboes. Just a thought...you're

pretty much the age when you'll be wanting to think about confirmation anyway. Canon Howard's a good listener. He's sorted me out a few times. Perhaps you should have a talk with him?"

I don't know about that.

Wednesday 2nd October 1940

I'm propped up in bed, trying to write this, but it's difficult because of the bruising. Mum's got me on aspirin, but everything's still achingly painful.

The *Evening Telegraph* is always full of reasons to be careful about the black out. People walk into lamp posts, or fall off kerbstones. Or they get hit by cars which they can't see and whose drivers can't see them – like the accident Dad had last year. At least things like that are mostly their own silly fault. I didn't see who it was who attacked me on the way back from choir practice yesterday evening, but it doesn't take too many guesses, though as George Harley said a couple of months ago, I'll have to prove it, and I can't see how I'll ever do that.

The stupidest thing is, though the nights are drawing in now it wasn't really completely dark down the short cut through the alleyway at the back of the Cathedral. Not many people go that way. Assuming it was George Harley and not some random thug, he and his cronies must have been keeping tabs on me to know it was my regular route home after choir. Whoever they were, they worked as a team, because it took one to grab me from behind and pull a woollen hood over my eyes, while at least one, possibly two, others punched me and threw me to the ground. Then they put the boot in, kicking me in the stomach and back. They were smart enough to avoid my head. They didn't say anything at any point, but I can't forget the disgusting smell of onions on the breath of the person holding me. When they'd used me

as a punchbag and a football, all I could hear was the echoing sound of footsteps running away across the cobbles. By the time I'd staggered to my feet and pulled off the hood, the alleyway was empty. My stomach ached, and I had a dead left leg. I honestly didn't think I'd be able to walk all the way home, so I pulled myself along the Cathedral wall and limped towards its side door. I almost literally bumped into Canon Howard.

"Goodness gracious me," he said. "It's young Blenkiron, isn't it? Whatever happened to you?"

He took me inside, sat me down in a vestry, and did the best he could to tidy me up from the first aid box he produced from a cupboard.

"Correct me if I'm wrong, Adam," he murmured, "But you didn't get this from just falling over, did you?"

I shook my head.

"Do you know who was responsible?"

I said nothing. He thought for a moment.

Not one of the other choirboys, surely?"

I shook my head again.

"And certainly not one of the men? Well then, that's quite enough questions. They can wait. I think we need to get you home. My car's outside. Now where do you live? Thornton Road, isn't it?"

I was surprised he knew.

"Oh, you'd be surprised what I know!" He tapped his nose and smiled.

So I arrived at number 43 in style sitting in the front seat of Canon Howard's smart Rover 12. You can imagine the fuss that followed.

Thursday 3rd October 1940

I didn't go to school today. As well as everything else, I'm sporting a black eye – a real shiner – and my left ear's painful and red.

"You can't go to *Henry VIII* looking like that," my mum said. "Whatever will people think?"

"Might be the making of him. They'll draft him straight into the school boxing team..."

Of course, Dad was joking, but Mum didn't see the funny side.

"They will not, Michael. Over my dead body!"

The bruising has come out properly now. Right across my back there's a series of blue and black weals. I had to take my shirt off to show Police Constable Weston when he came round after lunch. Mum and Dad both took an hour off work so that they could be there. P.C. Weston tutted.

"I don't know what to say, Adam," he said. "Really I don't. It's appalling. And I feel I've let you down. I swear I'll swing for those little blighters, so I will. You say you didn't get a look at any of them, but Harley definitely threatened you a few weeks ago?"

I said he had.

"What can be done about it?" Mum asked anxiously. "This can't go on."

P.C. Weston looked grim.

"It certainly can't. But I still think you need to leave it with me, Mrs Blenkiron. I'll have to talk to my sergeant. But I promise you one thing, and this time I mean it. Adam won't have any more trouble from that quarter again. Trust me."

Pauly snorted when Mum told her at tea-time what P.C. Weston had said.

"Fine words butter no parsnips. They'll do nothing. You'll see. The police are being run ragged. There's a nice lady at work, Mrs. Freeman. Her Bert's away on a Royal Navy ship, she

hasn't a clue where. Well, a bomb blew her windows in over Radford way, so she fixed them up the best she could. But then when she came in after work the other week she found some tealeaf had broken in and stolen her savings *and* a watch Bert had given her when he was called up. So what have the police done? Nothing! Absolutely nothing! It's a disgrace. All they could say was, what did she expect, leaving her valuables lying around."

"Well, make us feel better, Pauly, why don't you?" Mum snapped. "I know the world's falling apart, but we can't just give up."

Wednesday 9th October 1940

I've been back at school since Monday, telling people I walked into a door in the dark. I shouldn't think for a moment they believed me. Super-sleuth Roly obviously smelt a rat.

"Go on Adam," he whispered, "You can tell *me* what really happened. I won't say anything to anyone..."

Actually, I was glad to be up and doing things again. Being an invalid was becoming boring, and nothing actually hurts too much now.

Then, at tea time yesterday, we got a shock. There was a knock at the door. Mum answered it to find George Harley standing there looking as if he'd been dragged through a hedge backwards.

Mum came back into the dining room and said in a small, surprised voice,

"It's George, Adam. He says he wants to speak to you..."

I must have looked anxious, because she continued,

"I think it's all right. He doesn't look in a fit state. Go on. I'll be right behind you."

Mum was right. George wasn't going to do harm to anyone. He was slightly stooped, holding his arms across his chest. He seemed to be having difficulty breathing. One eye was

closing up, and there was a swelling on the right side of his lower lip. His voice was hoarse and his head hung down, so he couldn't look me in the eye, even if he'd wanted to.

"I'm very sorry," he croaked. "About what happened. It won't...it won't happen again."

It took me a few seconds to take in the situation. Eventually I replied weakly from the top step,

"Well, thank you. That's all right!"

It wasn't really. I was still thinking how much I hated his guts, and how much I'd like to do to him what he'd done to me.

"I've brought something for you," he spluttered, and pushed into my hands a brand new balsa wood kit of a model Spitfire fighter still in its box. Then he offered his now empty hand for me to shake. It was damp and flabby.

"Well I never!" said Mum afterwards. "Whatever got into *him*?"

Overnight she had time to think.

"It's not right," she said at breakfast this morning. "Do you think P.C. Weston...? I mean, the state that boy was in!"

Dad put down his paper.

"Some people are never happy, are they?" he said. "What does it matter? By the sound of things, the boy's been set on the right track, and we should all have a quieter life as a result. Particularly Adam..."

"Two wrongs don't make a right!"

"They don't, but what are you going to do? You don't know Weston had anything to do with it. And even if he did beat up the Harley boy, are you going to complain to his sergeant? Who was probably the one who told Weston what to do in the first place! Life's just too short, Daph. There's a war on. Honestly!"

Sunday 13th October 1940

We've been doing 'figures of speech' in English at school, and one of them is 'irony', which is where you say something by saying the opposite thing, if you get me. I might be wrong but I think there was a good example yesterday. All Saturday Dad was involved in an exhibition of Town Planning at St. Mary's Hall showing what Coventry might be like in the future. Dad was very proud, because he'd worked on making some of the fantastic cardboard and wood models that were on display. They show a wonderful new Civic Centre together with a theatre and a concert hall, and the Cathedral surrounded by green space and trees. There aren't many roads, but there are lots of places people can walk without being bothered by buses and cars. 'Pedestrian precincts', they call them. It all looks very futuristic and exciting. Back in the spring they put on the exhibition for a whole week, but because of all the bomb damage, they were asked to repeat it this weekend to cheer people up. Like Dad's friend Barry Sykes, Mum really doesn't get it.

"I *like* the old buildings," she says. "And I don't mind the cobbles. It's our history, isn't it? I enjoy thinking about the people who lived here hundreds of years ago."

"What? Lady Godiva and all that? It's all myths and legend. None of it really happened! It's only the future that matters now. Can't you see that?"

Dad can sound like he's sneering when he gets on his hobby horse. Mum gives as good as she gets.

"If you don't know where you came from, you don't know who you are! Maybe Lady Godiva *is* just a story, but the ancient buildings are beautiful. You wouldn't pull down the Cathedral, would you, and put up a concrete box?"

"Maybe more people would come to the services, if we did!"

Mum and Dad have this argument every few months. I can more or less speak their lines for them. Anyway, the irony is that Saturday night's bombing was the heaviest yet, and if it goes on like this, there won't be any choice. The city will have to be rebuilt because there won't be anything left of the old one. The skating rink went up in flames last night, and the Rex cinema took another hit. The railway yards are a complete mess, and most of the city's buses were set alight. The Daimler factory copped it badly too – good thing Pauly wasn't working a late weekend shift.

Wednesday October 16th 1940

Mum had a double shock yesterday. She was tearful all evening, after she got in. Firstly there was another heavy raid on Monday night. We sat there listening to the fireworks for what seemed like hours. It's the same every night now. We have our routine. We play snakes and ladders or rummy, or try to read, or amuse ourselves by 'packing a suitcase' for Hitler or Churchill or the King – you know – 'a' is for an 'army', 'b' for 'bombs' 'c' is for 'camouflage' *etc. etc.* In short, anything to take our minds of the fact we could be blown to pieces any time soon. Am I less scared than when this all started? I told you about my 'butterflies'. Well, I suppose I get that less these days. But I notice that when the bombs are very loud and close by, I start shivering and shaking, no matter how snug and cosy I am inside my sleeping bag. And sometimes my hands are still shaking the next morning. I asked Mum about it.

"I'm doing it again too," she said. "Like last year, but all the time now. I've heard it's what happened to soldiers in the First War, when they were under bombardment for long periods of time. I don't know what we can do about it. I worry about you being here, Adam. Are you sure we shouldn't get you away – obviously not to Tilly's – but somewhere else?"

“No,” I answered. It probably came out sounding rude. “No way. I meant it when I said I’d rather we all died together. Why won’t you believe me?”

“It’s not only *your* feelings that matter,” my dad replied sternly. “Think about what your mother and I might feel, if you stayed, and were the *only* one killed.”

I didn’t have an answer for that.

Anyway, it was obvious that the raid on Monday was at least as intense as the one two days before. Our guns kept firing and firing, so you began to wonder if they’d soon run out of ammo. When Mum went into *Owen Owen’s* yesterday morning, she found her office had simply gone, along with half the department store. They looked up at the gaping holes in the building, and cleaned up the dust the best they could. Then they rigged up ‘*still open for business*’ signs outside, but the gentleman’s clothing and household goods areas had to be boarded off and closed until further notice.

“They say they’ll make us a new office out the back, but for the life of me I can’t see where,” Mum sighed. “I was working with the books on my knees all afternoon. I shouldn’t think they’ll be able to read anything I’ve written. Let’s hope I got all the noughts in their right places. If it goes on like this there won’t *be* an *Owen Owen’s*.”

But the thing that really shocked her was when she went into the ARP station at six, to be told that her friends Mr. Henson and Mr. Appleby had been killed during Monday night’s raid. Mum’s job is to look after the telephones, but the actual wardens go out around the streets, telling people to turn off their lights, or alerting the fire services when incendiary bombs have set things alight. She liked David Henson and Martyn Appleby a lot.

“They were such nice men,” she cried. “And so kind.”

I offered her my hanky. She looked at it, and then decided against using it.

“Thank you dear,” she said, “But I’m all right. Really I am. I always felt safe with those two when we were working together. Why did it have to be them? There are others I could do without. Why is it always the good ones?”

Apparently, a time bomb had exploded when they were investigating a fire at a small factory up on Coundon Road.

The Cathedral was hit too, and when we went in to practise this evening, you could still smell the smoke. They’ve had to cover a bit of the roof with tarpaulins, but they put the fire out quickly, so no major damage there.

Friday October 18th 1940

I’m lucky to still be here. And poor Roly’s in hospital. This is how it happened. We’ve only been doing half days at school, because everyone’s half asleep when they *are* there, so they’ve been sending us home in the afternoons to try and get some kip before the evening raids. There aren’t many buses still running, but there’s always one going out to Ansty from the bus station at about half past one. I was walking with him over the railway bridge. Smoke from a locomotive underneath us was billowing up in our faces when suddenly we heard a desperate shout, ‘Take cover. It’s flippin’ Jerry!’ Then we heard the sound of a plane coming in furiously fast and low from the north of the city. The only problem was, there *wasn’t* anywhere to take cover.

“Down on the ground!” I yelled at Roly. “Get flat.”

I was already lying on the pavement, putting my hands up over my head.

Roly’s never the quickest. He’s always last to be picked for football. He just isn’t built to react fast. The aircraft’s cannon opened up with a double rat-a-tat-tat as it skimmed the straight path of the road and I remember thinking, ‘Well, that’s it then!’ I don’t recall if the

actual bullets made a sound, but I do have a clear picture of Roly being knocked off his feet, and tumbling over onto one side. He gave an awful scream as he fell.

“Roly,” I shouted, “Roly! Are you all right?” but he wasn’t moving.

In an instant the plane had gone. What was astonishing was how just seconds later we were surrounded by people. Someone was asking me if I was OK, which apart from a grazed knee I was, and they were covering Roly with a blanket and resting his head on a coat.

“Is he all right?” I asked a man who was leaning over me, anxiously inspecting me for damage. I was almost glad to hear Roly crying and groaning, but I couldn’t see him through the bystanders.

“Taken one in the leg, I think. Could have been much worse,” the man replied. And then an ambulance arrived, madly ringing its bell, and Roly was rushed away to the hospital. The crowd melted away and I was surprised to find myself more or less alone. I shrugged off a couple of bystanders, who were hovering around helplessly. I was absolutely dazed but I went and found Mum in what remained of *Owen Owen’s*. When she’d got over the shock, we staggered together up to the hospital and asked about Roly. They wouldn’t let us see him, but apparently they’d operated on his leg as soon as he’d been brought in. He’ll live, but when I asked if Roly would ever be able to walk again properly, the doctors wouldn’t say.

Saturday October 26th 1940

Bad news. Dad’s sold the Austin 7. Good news. He’s bought an Austin 14. There’s more room, particularly on the back seats. You could squeeze three people on those at a pinch. And there are arm-rests that fold up and down. Now that’s posh!

“However will we afford it, Mike?” Mum asked.

Dad cleared his throat. "You've got to know the right people," he said. "Don't worry your head about that. Anyway, I've had enough of sitting in that wretched shelter night after night, waiting for Jerry to land one on us. We need a break, at least for a few nights."

So last evening, instead of staying in Thornton Road, the four of us drove out towards Leamington at about ten o'clock, and parked up in the entrance to a field. It wasn't exactly the chilliest night for October, although the stars were very bright, but it was bitterly cold in the car even with our sleeping bags and blankets. However, for the first time in a fortnight, our night wasn't disturbed by things that go bump in the night.

We drove back into Coventry at six this morning.

"Did you get any sleep, love?" Dad asked my mum.

She yawned.

"Not a lot," she said.

"Me neither. Let's give it another go tonight."

So that's what we're going to do.

Sunday October 27th 1940

The same as last night, but even colder - but still quiet, so we did get some zzz. There was a frost on the ground when we woke up. And there was a farmer with a tractor wanting us to move so that he could get into his field. I thought he might be cross, but he and Dad got into friendly conversation, and we ended up having breakfast with him and his wife in front of their fire.

Their family name is Strauss. He's Bill and she's Annie

"If you don't mind all four sharing, we've got a spare room you could use," he said.

"Far better than being scrunched up in that car. You'll catch your death."

Mum was looking doubtful.

"We don't want paying," Bill said hastily. "It's only right that those who can should do their bit for others."

"Well, thank you very much," said Dad. "That's very kind of you."

As we drove in towards the city, a bit late now, because I had to be washed, changed and in the Cathedral for ten o'clock, Mum said, meaning the farmer and his wife,

"Do you think they're all right?"

"Why wouldn't they be?" said Dad, puzzled. "Seemed very nice to me."

"Funny name, don't you think, 'Strauss'?"

"Oh, I see. You mean, it sounds a bit German. Well, they speak like they've lived in the Midlands all their lives..."

"German spies would, wouldn't they?"

"In which case, don't you think they'd call themselves 'Smith' or 'Cholmondeley', rather than something that made us think they could be German?"

Mum didn't have an answer for that.

Pauly was talking to Mrs. Beardsmore next door this afternoon, and saying how quiet it had been out in the country.

"Oh, that's very nice," said Mrs B. "It was as peaceful as could be here too. They do say Jerry's been bothering Birmingham the last two nights. Seems like it's one place or the other."

So we could have stayed in Thornton Road after all, and got some proper sleep for once.

Wednesday October 30th 1940

A diary's got to be truthful, hasn't it, otherwise what's the point? I wasn't quite telling the *whole* truth about the day Rory got shot up. I feel very bad about it, and I don't know what to do. I don't suppose anyone will ever read this, but I'm going to tell you, my imaginary reader, and maybe that way I won't feel so guilty. My dad once said,

"Look under any stone, and you'll find something nasty waiting to creep out."

I'm not the nice person people sometimes think I am.

In fact we finished school at noon that day a fortnight ago, and actually Roly could have caught a bus at *twelve* thirty from the bus station. It was me who persuaded him we could do a bit of trainspotting from the bridge for an hour. I told him if anyone asked he could always say he'd missed the earlier bus. I could say I wanted to keep him company while we revised French irregular verbs together. So the awful fact is, if he'd caught the earlier bus, he'd never have been hurt. What happened is my fault, and I'm in a stew about it. I can't tell Mum or Dad because I can't bear it when they're angry, and they'd have every right to be. So would Roly. I wrote to him to say sorry. He sent a note back sounding very cheerful, and saying not to give it a second thought. Everyone was making a huge fuss of him, and his leg was getting better quicker than the doctors had said it might. He'll see me back at *Henry VIII* sometime in November. He also said worse things happened at sea, and had I heard about the Hurricane that had crashed? His other friend Gareth had been to the site and picked up some bullets and a piece of what he thought was the parachute harness. Roly said he thought he might start his own collection of war souvenirs. The letter ended like this:

'...There was a huge explosion up on Whitley Common a fortnight ago. Apparently it was a delayed action bomb. Some soldiers drove it out of the city on the back of a lorry but it blew up before they could deal with it. There were bits of people and clothing all over the trees.

Gareth said he traded some bullets for an army cap. Isn't that a thing? If you find anything of interest, let me know. We can always swap.'

I don't really understand Roly. How can he have been nearly killed, and yet be so fascinated by all this horrible detail? It turns my stomach.

Thursday 7th November 1940

We got burgled a couple of nights ago. It used to be that no one locked their doors round here, and though it makes the house cold during the day, we've been leaving the windows open when we're in the shelter or out at Leamington. That way, if a bomb drops close by, the glass is less likely to break. But when we came into the house at breakfast, it was obvious something was wrong. For a start there was the strongest smell of cigarette smoke, and though Pauly likes the occasional fag, she'd never dream of lighting up in the house. Mum and Dad would go bonkers, because they both hate smoking. I think Pauly keeps her habit a secret.

"Someone's been in here," Mum said, and at once she was running up the stairs.

"Oh, Michael," I heard her cry.

We followed her, and from the door of their bedroom, I could see that all of Mum and Dad's drawers had been turned inside out. There was clothing scattered everywhere.

"Nana's rings and necklace have gone," she said. "And Lord knows what else..."

In fact not much else had been taken, except a five pound note that Dad had left in a jacket pocket, but everyone's been very gloomy since.

"You can't trust anyone these days," Mum moaned. "This war isn't bringing people together, it's making them meaner and nastier."

“Maybe they’re desperate. What would *you* do if you’d lost everything you had?”

Pauly chimed in.

Dad told her off.

“Well I wouldn’t embark on a life of crime, for one thing. It’s about showing a bit of moral backbone, and keeping your dignity and self-respect.”

I’m still feeling guilty about Roly. Whoever robbed our house is a bad person, but so am I.

Sunday November 10th 1940

Every year there’s a Remembrance Day service in the Cathedral. It’s a very big ‘do’, so of course the choir’s always on duty. This year there was a long parade with as many different groups of the Armed Forces as could be spared plus the Local Defence Volunteers (the Home Guard), the Fire Service and the Police. Even Mum got to be there as one of the ARP’s representatives. The Cathedral was full, and in the front of the congregation we could see the mayor and the corporation with their gold chains of office hanging round their necks. We sang the forty-sixth psalm *‘God is our hope and strength’*. I wondered vaguely whether God was doing much for me. Everyone hollered out the hymn *‘Fight the good fight’* and in the last verse, instead of the choir singing a descant, an army trumpeter played a solo over the organ which was very stirring. Canon Howard read a prayer from the printed service sheet. It made me want to cry. He said:

‘O Father of all mankind, we pray Thee for the City of Coventry in which Thou has set us to live and work and called us to defend. Shine into the hearts of the many thousand citizens who dwell therein that each one may feel thy presence encompassing them around. Comfort the homeless and bereaved with the knowledge of thy care for their souls and inspire us to

share the burden of their bodily needs. Banish from our midst all injustice, poverty, squalor, ugliness and vice and help us to build a city worthy to be called the City of our God.'

At lunch Dad said,

"I hope the little toe-rags who broke in to our house were listening. I think we've done more than enough for the 'burden of their bodily needs'. But I'm all for banishing squalor and vice."

Monday November 11th 1940

We got lucky last night.

"The weather forecast says it's going to rain and rain. Jolly good," Dad smiled.

"Jerry won't fancy visiting if there's heavy cloud cover and it's blowing a gale. Let's risk it and stay at Thornton Road."

"World's turned upside down," Mum said from the washing up bowl. "I remember the days I was fed up if the weather was going to be bad. Now the wetter it is, the better I like it."

Sometimes the sirens go, and we hare off into the Anderson, and then nothing happens and you wonder why. This time the night was completely quiet, apart from the wind howling outside and banging at the windows. For once I got eight straight hours sleep.

Dad went into work at seven, and I picked up *The Times* which dropped onto our doormat shortly afterwards. I thought to myself how amazing it was that even in the war, the newspaper had found its way from London on a train to Mr. McKinlay's shop and that a paper boy had been up early enough to put it through our door.

The front page story was all about the RAF bombing Munich on Saturday. It had been the anniversary of the founding of the Nazi party, and Hitler and his gang had all been there having a booze-up to celebrate. Our boys certainly spoiled their fun, because they had to

cancel their nice little party. I know I shouldn't say this, but I hope they were as scared as we are, and I just wish our biggest bomb had fallen on the place they were staying and blown every one of them to smithereens. Maybe if one of his own people was brave enough to bump off Hitler we and the Germans could go back to living peacefully together. Is that too much to ask?

Wednesday November 13th 1940

Mum met a Duchess today to add to the Blenkirons' collection of Royals. There's an old lady called Mrs. Allison Mum sometimes visits off Wallace Road. Her house is the only one left standing in a long row. All the others have been demolished by the bombs or had to be pulled down because they're no longer safe. Probably Mrs. Allison's should be too, but she refuses to move because, as she says, "That would be letting that 'orrible little man win, wouldn't it?" – meaning Hitler. Anyway, a man from the council told Mrs. Allison that the Duchess of Gloucester was making a visit to the town, and said would she mind if the Duchess dropped in, and some photographs were taken for the newspaper. Mrs Allison said that was fine but could she please have a friend with her. So Mum's boss at *Owen Owen's* gave her the morning off. She put on her best dress in case any photographs got taken of her.

"I wouldn't have minded, but there wasn't a camera in sight. And I laddered a pair of stockings climbing over the masonry to Liza Allison's front door."

"How was the Duchess?" I asked.

"Very nice. Very posh. But it was good of her to come. She said she'd just been to see some houses where a dozen people had been killed, seven of them from one family. I think she was really shocked. Well you would be, wouldn't you? What do you say to people like that when you're a duchess and you live in a castle?"

“Weather forecast’s too good for tomorrow. And we’re coming up to a full moon,” Dad said grimly, ignoring Mum’s question. “It’s perfect weather for Jerry.”

“Should I go to choir tomorrow night?” I asked.

“You should be OK. Jerry doesn’t usually like to get started too early. Just don’t shilly shally around afterwards. Come *straight* home, won’t you?”

He looked me straight in the eye as he spoke. Does he know something about me and Roly that day on the railway bridge?

Sunday November 17th 1940

I don’t believe in God any more. How can I, after what’s happened these last few days? I’m growing up. I can see my body changing, like the book Mum left in the desk drawer for me to ‘find’ says it will. Apart from getting hair and all that, the book also says that when you’re thirteen or so you start to think differently about the world, and that *‘your feelings about fairness and injustice may become more powerful and angry’*. So I think maybe just as when you’re six years old you stop believing in Father Christmas, so perhaps at twelve or thirteen you should stop pretending there’s someone up in heaven who cares about you and ‘counts the number of hairs on your head’. What I can’t work out is why all the so-called grown ups still say they believe in Him. They can’t all be stupid. Not Mum, Dad, kind Canon Howard or nice Mr. Stephenson! On the other hand, I’m pretty sure Mr. Hill doesn’t believe. He certainly doesn’t go to church, and I’ve noticed he always hums and hahs when the subject of having Faith comes up. I’ve definitely heard him say people in the past have done bad things in the name of religion. They killed each other in their thousands during the English Civil War. Maybe it’s simply too hard for most people to accept that life’s pointless, and that in the end

we're just here for a few years before we die into nothingness. Certainly just now I feel as if I'm deep in a black, black hole, and I don't know how to climb out of it. I know the only thing I must do is to tell you what's happened, and hope I feel better for doing it.

From the beginning of November Mr. Stephenson reduced the number of weekday choir practices to one – on a Thursday evening. There are only a dozen of us boys now. We have to rehearse at six o'clock because the men don't get out of work until then. Usually all we've been doing is to practise the music for the next Sunday morning. Because of the black out, they've rigged up standard lamps under huge shades which give just enough light to read the music by.

"Let's cheer them up with *Stanford in G* next Sunday," Mr Stephenson said. "Mr. Balfour, will you take the solo in the *Nunc Dimittis*, and Adam, perhaps you could reprise your sterling performance of a year ago in the *Magnificat*?"

We sang through the pieces and to be honest, I was finding it hard to concentrate. My voice was cracked and wobbly. Mr Stephenson frowned.

"I'm sure it'll be all right on the night, Adam" he said, "But maybe you can give me ten minutes when the others have gone just to make sure everything's tickety-boo."

I looked at my watch, and reckoned I'd still be home by eight, so I nodded.

As I started to sing through my solo part with Mr. Stephenson up in the organ loft, I saw Provost Howard come in to the nave with a couple of young blokes and sit down to listen for a few moments. The Provost's in the Cathedral on fire-watching duty most nights. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Mr. Forbes join them. He's an old gentleman who's been around since the year dot. I think he was a stone mason once, but now he acts as a caretaker. He knows every inch of the building and he loves the place. Once he starts talking about this

statue or that font, it's hard to shut him up. Suddenly the air raid sirens went off and everyone jumped – there must be one just outside the Cathedral because the sound was very loud. Then immediately through the clear glass of the new Cathedral windows the sky began to light up with a series of explosions. At first they seemed far away but within a minute or so there was a deafening series of bangs right above us. Mr Stephenson looked alarmed.

“Oh what?” he exclaimed peevishly, “That’s a bit jolly early for Jerry. I think we’d better get you out of here, young Adam.”

He banged in the stops, and switched the organ off, just as a thunderous report right above our heads made the timbers of the organ loft shake. Bits of plaster fell on our hair and shoulders. Our ears were ringing.

“You chaps all right?” Provost Howard shouted.

“Just coming down,” Mr Stephenson yelled back.

Even by the time we’d run down the flight of stairs behind the pulpit, we could see smoke billowing from the roof above the organ pipes. There were two more ground-shaking bangs, followed by a crash of plaster and timbers. Up near the altar, a thick curtain of smoke began to fall from a hole in the ceiling, while by the reading lectern and the chancel steps a flaming canister had shot right through the double skin of the Cathedral roof and was threatening to set the front pews alight from its halo of white flame. It was like an enormous, sinister firework – in reality, a large incendiary bomb.

“Bill,” Provost Howard shouted to one of the two young men, “I reckon there’s a fire bomb stuck up there.”

He pointed to the smoke over the altar.

“See if you and Sam can manhandle it over the battlements. Push it onto the ground where it can’t do any harm. The rest of us’ll try to deal with this one.”

We scooted over to the fire buckets which were stored by the south door and lugged them up the aisle. The Provost and Jock Forbes threw the sand they contained over the incendiary by the lectern. When it had stopped spitting sparks and flame, they kicked the canister into a large metal decorators' tray Jock had dragged from the cupboards in a side-chapel.

Through the curtain of smoke above the organ there was now an ominous glow of incandescent red.

"Alan, run round to the police station, and tell them we need the fire brigade asap. We can't deal with all of this on our own. Adam, make yourself useful. In the Smith's Chapel over there you'll find more buckets. Start filling them with water from the tap on that wall. We'll have to try to put out the fire over the organ ourselves if we can."

If he'd been a soldier, the Provost would have made a good commanding officer.

By this time Bill and Sam had returned from the battlements.

"We got that so-and-so over the side," Sam said. "No problem. What next?"

"Go back up and look at what's going on up there," the Provost puffed, pointing at the organ.

"Use the stairs to the organ loft. Then go through the door on your left. It'll carry you straight up to the roof," Jock said.

In a couple of minutes they reported back.

"We've copped one straight through the lead onto the oak timbers," Bill shouted. "We can't reach it. It's burning through the wood."

"There's a pickaxe in the vestry," Jock replied. "See if you can use it to pull the lead back. If the lead's got warm, it shouldn't be too difficult to do. We'll relay water up the stairs."

Which is what we did. I ferried buckets of water to the foot of the steps, and the others ran up and down three flights with sand and water till eventually the fire was out. We took a momentary breather. For the first time Provost Howard really noticed I was there.

“Goodness Adam,” he said, “Whatever would your parents say? You deserve a medal for all this, but really I think you should take cover down in the Crypt shelter.”

Under the Cathedral there’s a place called the Crypt where small services are sometimes held. The word ‘Crypt’ means something that’s hidden. It makes a perfect shelter because the stones around it are so heavy that no bomb would ever penetrate, or so you’d think – much safer than an Anderson.

But before the Provost could make me go, another stick of incendiaries burst along the roofs of the chapels along the south side of the Cathedral, including the Children’s Chapel and the Smith’s Chapel – where the only tap was.

“Where’s the bloomin’ fire brigade?” Jock moaned. “What do we pay them for? They’re probably sitting on their backsides having a brew.”

“They’ll be rushed off their feet,” said Sam. “There’s never been a night like this. Jerry’s not let up for one second.”

Bill ran into the Smith’s Chapel with some buckets, but the smoke was too much for him. He retreated, holding his sides, coughing and spluttering.

“If that stuff gets into our lungs, we’re done for,” muttered Jock.

“It’s no good, Bill,” said the Provost. Even in the middle of all the chaos, he seemed relatively calm. Inside I should think he was desperate to see the place he loved so much being broken apart.

“I think the only thing for it is to save what we can and leave the rest to God. It’s only stone and wood. It’s not worth losing anyone for.”

We took the cross from the main altar, the candlesticks and the silverware. The Provost removed some of the most beautiful vestments from their cupboards, and tenderly laid them just inside the Cathedral door. Then Mr. Stephenson, Sam and Bill carried them and other Cathedral treasures across to the police station for safekeeping. I stopped for a moment and looked into the Children's Chapel. Through the smoke I could just make out the beautiful carving of a child kneeling in front of the cross. As I gazed, I felt an arm on my shoulder. It was Jock Forbes. There were tears in his eyes.

"I remember that being made," he said. "It's such a lovely bit of work."

Even as we watched it disappeared into the grimy, smoky flames.

Jock lifted his hands in a gesture of despair.

"That's my whole life gone up in smoke," he wept.

A minute or so later the Solihull Fire Brigade arrived with their uniforms and hoses.

Jock recovered himself.

"At last," he harrumphed. "The cavalry!"

And with that I was banished to the Crypt with the others who'd taken shelter there.

"Adam," called the Provost over his shoulder as I went, "If you can do it safely, meet me tomorrow morning. Outside the south door, seven sharp. I'll owe your parents an explanation."

Underground, the sound of the carnage taking place outside was muffled, but still frighteningly audible. If anything the explosions seemed weightier with every passing minute. Even where we were the air seemed to compress and suck itself in.

"Now Jerry's lit up the city, damn him, he's coming in with the real high explosives," said a little man who was still wearing his mackintosh and bowler hat, although it was distinctly hot inside the shelter because of the number of people in the confined space.

“There’ll be nothing left of Coventry at this rate.”

I started to think about Mum, Dad and Pauly. They’d be worried sick because I hadn’t come home, but there was nothing I could do. There were two ARP wardens on the door, and it would be more than their jobs’ worth to let me go anywhere alone, even if I wanted to. Of course I started to worry about what was happening in Thornton Road. Maybe our house had gone the same way as the Cathedral. At about midnight the hubbub of conversation in the Crypt began to die away into whispers. Despite the continual noise people were trying to snatch some sleep, not knowing how long they’d be there. Then above our heads we began to hear a new, slow, rumbling, roaring crescendo, as if an aeroplane was trying to land in the Cathedral. People woke. Some of the women screamed. As the noise reached its crashing, thumping climax, the room seemed to jump up and down. We were all terrified.

“We need to get out,” the man with the mackintosh cried. “Or we’ll all be buried alive. That’s the roof of the Cathedral coming down!”

A few seconds later there was a repeat performance. The ground seemed to shudder under another thunderous train wreck of a sound.

The wardens looked at one another, unsure what to do.

“Don’t just sit there like blinking idiots,” Mackintosh Man went on. “Let us out.”

“Where are you going to go?” asked the older of the wardens.

“I don’t know.” The little man was beside himself. “Anywhere would be better than here. The shelter in Broadgate? Or I’ll just make a run for home. I don’t care. I just know I don’t want to die here.”

“You can take your chances if you like,” the warden replied. “I’m not sure I would. But yes, I suppose the Broadgate shelter’s probably do-able. If you’ve got to go, for heaven sake’s

use your common sense, and don't run. There's all kinds of debris lying around. Nobody'll have time to mend your broken legs and ankles."

Eventually everyone agreed that Mackintosh Man had a point. We filed out of the Crypt door and up the stairs. As we left the Cathedral through a haze of acrid smoke, I looked behind me and saw the remains of the organ which George Frederick Handel had once played. It was in pieces. The wood was charred and burned. The metal pipes had collapsed and lay this way and that in a crazy mess. There were holes in the roof above it, and beyond, the sky was an astonishing vivid, angry red.

"It's done for, isn't it?" said a woman seeing me gazing around at the ruins. "What a shame. D'you know, I'd never been in the Cathedral until today, and that's God's truth. Must have been lovely though."

The shelter in Broadgate stank to high heaven. I badly needed a pee, and went behind a curtain to go in a bucket that was already full to the brim. When I came out, I must have looked lost. An elderly, grey-haired warden asked kindly,

"Who are you with, son?"

I told him I was on my own. He tutted and asked who I was.

"Oh, you'd be Mrs. Blenkiron's boy then. I know her, all right. Nice lady. Can't be too many families with that name in Coventry."

I asked if there was a telephone that could be used to get a message to my mum and dad. He shook his head.

"All the wires are down, son. There's no communications, no water, no electricity, no nothing. We'll all just have to sit tight until morning. It'll give your parents a dreadful fright, I know it will. But there's nothing can be done."

So I did as I was told and sat tight. It was six thirty when the all clear sounded. Just before seven I emerged into the half-light of a weird, fiery, foggy dawn. The smell of the smoke was unbelievable, bitter and dense. I walked round in a sleepy daze to the Cathedral's south door. The tower and spire were still standing, but apart from that, the ancient church was open to the sky. Its walls had partly fallen away. Everywhere around the city centre there was complete devastation. Every second building was an empty blackened shell. People stood singly or in clumps like ghosts, looking around them, shaking their heads, stunned and lost. How many had lost their lives in the city last night? Fires burned here and there among the stone and brick. Bright, angry flames still leapt towards the murk of the invisible sky. It was a chilly day, but the air was filled with hot sparks and burnt scraps of paper and wood. Then astonishingly, just as they might on an ordinary day, the bells of the Cathedral rang the hour. The Provost, hands deep in the pockets of his cassock, shoulders hunched, appeared from the swirling smoke.

"We seem to be making a habit of this," he joked, but his lips were thin. There was no smile in his voice. I felt sorry for him. The Cathedral was his best friend and he'd just watched it die. There was nothing to say as he began to drive me to Thornton Road.

A journey that should have taken ten minutes took us more than half an hour. We came to junctions where policemen held up their hands and waved us off on a different route. We steered round huge potholes in the roads. On a main road we saw a bus lying at a drunken angle, half sunken into a chasm that had opened up. In one place a fountain of water cascaded across the road from a burst main. In another an eerie green arc of electricity flickered between fallen wires. Everywhere there were piles of rubble and sagging walls. The glass-less windows of houses stared blindly at the twilight morning. The roofs of some were missing too, the timbers exposed where the slates had fallen away. Finally we arrived at Thornton

Road. The corner shop was still there, but there was damage to the house next to it. I held my breath, but my heart leapt with joy and relief. Number 43 was apparently in one piece.

“Well thank God for that at least,” muttered the Provost, reading my thoughts.

Mum’s face when she answered the front door was drawn and white. For a moment she looked shocked and disbelieving to see us standing there. Then she fell on me and hugged me to her tightly, covering my head with kisses. Dad and Pauly embraced me in their turn. Pauly was in floods of wordless tears.

“I thought it was the police,” Mum said to the Provost. “I thought they’d come to tell us Adam had been killed. Oh, my goodness!”

She sank on to a chair, head between knees, breathing deeply in and out, trying not to lose consciousness. When she recovered, we told our stories of the previous night. At half past eight, it had become obvious Mum could do nothing more at the wardens’ office. The telephone lines were down. They’d sent her away with her hard hat to run home through the nightmare of the bombardment. This morning she’d already heard that what was left of *Owen Owen’s* had been finally obliterated. There was no point in going in to work now. Dad and Pauly had made it home last night and eaten some supper. They were already camped out in the Anderson when Mum arrived home, and all through the night they’d veered between reassuring each other I was safe somewhere, and fearing the worst as the bombing became heavier. The longer the night had gone, the more terrified they’d become. The Provost listened to our stories for a while, and held Mum’s hand. Then he made his excuses and left.

“I have no idea what, but there’ll be things to do at the Cathedral. And other people who’ll need looking after. God bless you all!”

“I don’t know how we’ll ever thank you enough,” said Dad.

“It’s me that should be thanking you,” the Provost replied. “Adam’s a very fine and brave young man. And he wouldn’t be those things without the three of you.”

“What a wonderful bloke,” said Pauly when he’d left.

There’s no higher praise. I’ve never heard her say such a thing before - about anyone!

During Friday we slept when we could, except for Dad, who walked into work to see what help the Planning Department could be among the mess and confusion. When we got up later in the afternoon, I was still amazed to see that despite all that had happened in the city the post had still arrived. I saw Mum sweep up two envelopes from the mat. She frowned at one of them, obviously not recognising the handwriting. She opened it, read the letter inside carefully, and then slowly folded it up again, looking anxious and serious. I thought no more about it. Most of what comes in the post doesn’t concern me.

We wondered what the next night and the weekend would bring, but the Luftwaffe had done its worst. What’s the point of wasting good bombs on a city that’s already on its knees! There was nothing more Hitler and Goering could do to us, so no doubt their aircraft had been sent off to other towns or cities to dish out the kind of punishment Coventry had taken.

This morning – it’s still only Sunday - was spent organizing food, doing washing, and being as normal as we could. In my case I tried to catch up with school work by reading some of the text books I had in my bag. But I was tired: my head didn’t seem to belong to my body. It was impossible to concentrate. In the afternoon Mum stopped running clothes through the mangle and came into the front room where I was falling asleep over Thomas Hardy’s *The Trumpet Major*.

“Can I talk to you for a moment, Adam,” she asked. Her face was serious. “It’s about Roly.”

I hadn't heard from him in a while, but then again, it had been hard to keep in touch, him being out in the country with his feet up. I should have written to him more than I had.

"I'm afraid there's some bad news," Mum said, "Roly's mum has written to us. Ten days ago the wound on Roly's leg became infected. It happens sometimes. The doctors did all they could, but his blood went bad. I'm sorry to say Roly passed away on Tuesday. He wasn't in any pain, and he died peacefully in his sleep, in his own bed, with all his family around him. His mum wrote because she thought you needed to know as soon as possible. She didn't want you to hear it second hand."

My head emptied. I felt numb. I couldn't think what to say. The room and my mum became for a few moments far away, above me, below me...I don't know. I was floating in a bubble of nothingness. Then slowly my body and the space in which it sat joined themselves together again. I started to cry. I leant in towards my mum's chest and she held me, stroking my back. And I told her what had really happened that day on the bridge, and how terrible I felt about it.

She didn't reply immediately. I could feel her heart beating fast. Then she said in a low, soothing voice,

"It was the German pilot's machine gun which killed Roly. That, and bad luck. You're not to blame, Adam. You shouldn't have dallied around the way you did, but who hasn't done that sort of thing? I know I have. It's nothing."

"I didn't mean to..." I sobbed.

"I know," she said softly. "I know."

So there it is. I think it's stupid to believe in a God that allows people to be so wicked they'll kill innocent civilians who've never hurt a fly. Or a God who makes a world in which

someone like Roly can suddenly die for no reason. Maybe Roly's death was just the last straw which broke this camel's back. Maybe I'd have ended up thinking this way sooner or later, but I do and that's an end of it. Despite what Mum says I don't know how I'll ever stop feeling guilty. I'll just have to go on living with the awful truth of what I did to Roly, and hope to avoid ever doing something as bad again.

I don't know whether they'll ever rebuild the Cathedral. If they do, it'll be years in the future, probably when the war's over. But even if there was a new organ and new choir stalls tomorrow, I couldn't be a chorister any more. How could I stand up and sing about how wonderful God is in front of all those people, when I don't believe a word of it?

POSTSCRIPT

Wednesday January 1st 1941

I haven't been able to write this diary for weeks, but it's a New Year. Like you're supposed to, I've made some New Year's Resolutions and maybe 1941 *will* be better than 1940. I can't leave the story stuck in the horrors of last November. It wouldn't be right. I know it's only six weeks since then, but I'm not thinking the same way, even now. I'm not going to pretend everything's hunky dory, or that I've got all the answers, but some things have happened to make me slightly change my mind.

The week after the big raid everyone was very sad. They held mass funerals for the people who'd died. Mum and Dad kept me away from them, but I don't think I'll ever forget seeing people in the streets, holding onto each other, stumbling along, unable to see for their tears. It went on for days.

When the time came for Roly's funeral it wasn't too bad, considering.

“You don’t have to go, if you don’t want to,” Mum suggested gently.

“I need to be there,” I argued, passionately. “I’d be letting Roly down if I stayed away. I owe him that at least.”

But the nearer it got to the day, the more churned up I became. I’ve sung at Memorial Services before, like the one for Colonel Wyley at the Cathedral way back in the spring, but I’ve never seen a real funeral with a coffin and undertakers. The Memorial Services are quite fun in a weird kind of way, because you hear about the interesting life of the person who’s died. Usually they don’t have a ‘do’ like that unless he or she’s done something really remarkable.

Dad took a few hours off. He drove me and Mum to the little village church in Ansty. Roly’s dad works as a fitter at the RAF aerodrome nearby, and there were lots of his colleagues there in their smart dress uniforms as well as Roly’s family and people from his village. Old Bertie, the *Henry VIII* headmaster was there too, and he seemed to have brought along Larkin, the sixth-former I’ve mentioned before, although at first I couldn’t understand why. The vicar said a lot of nice things about Roly, and told some funny and kindly-meant stories to show what a nice person he’d been. Once, when he was little, Roly had got locked in the bathroom. The vicar said how brave he’d been while a neighbour rescued him by breaking down the door with an axe. He mentioned how keen Roly was on collecting, and how pleased he’d been to get his place at *Henry VIII*. I saw Old Bertie puff out his chest and nod vigorously in agreement at this. No one sang the hymns, either because they didn’t know them, or they were too choked up or because the organist wasn’t very good – which was true. He played everything very slowly with lots of wrong notes.

I thought I’d blub my guts out, but when it came to it, I didn’t cry at all – I was too confused. But as I sat there, a stream of terrible thoughts and bad words flooded into my

head, words I don't use at all in real life. I was shocked. I thought for a moment that I'd been taken over by an evil spirit, and then thought that if I didn't believe in God any more, I couldn't believe in evil spirits either. In which case where did the bad words come from?

"Are you OK?" Mum whispered.

I shook my head. She took my hand and squeezed it, but after a few minutes I didn't know if I was holding her hand, or she was holding mine. She was the one who was crying.

Later there was a tea in the village hall, and Roly's mum came over to say hello. Considering everything, she was putting on a very brave face.

"Thank you for coming, Adam," she smiled. "And you too, Mr. and Mrs. Blenkiron. You've been such a stout friend to Roly over the last few years, Adam. He found *Henry VIII* very difficult once he got his place there, you know. More than once he said you were what kept him going every morning. He was scared stiff of some of the teachers."

She leaned in towards us confidentially. She whispered under her breath,

"Particularly Mr. Burton. I think he's a very strange man. Now would *you* come to a funeral dressed like that?"

We tried not to be too obvious as we turned round to look. It was true. Everyone else was dressed very soberly. Old Bertie was sporting the same farmer's jacket he always wore with a pair of snazzily checked plus-fours. His trilby hat was held under one elbow. He was balancing a cup of tea in the other hand as he chatted to the vicar.

We giggled.

"Don't be a stranger, Adam," Mrs Kenyon said. "You can come and visit any time you want. Perhaps there's something of Roly's you'd like as a keepsake?"

I didn't know what to say. Mum helped me out.

"You'll have a think about that, won't you Adam?"

I nodded and said thank you, but all that came to mind was Roly's treasure trove of war souvenirs, and really, I didn't want any of them.

Maybe Old Bertie didn't recognise us. At any rate he didn't come over to say hello. Larkin did though. He looked glum.

"Hello young Blenkiron," he muttered. "Bad show, eh? Poor Kenyon. I gather you had a narrow escape too."

I agreed I had, and looked at the floor.

"Bertie's dragged me along, because he's got some idea I'm going to write a poem for the school mag as a tribute to the poor chap. Can't think what to write though. Got any ideas?"

I can't remember whether it was the day before or the day after Roly's funeral, we were sitting round the radio listening to the BBC evening news. There was a piece about Coventry and how things were getting back to normal. Dad banged his fist on the table and shouted at the wireless.

"*Normal?* They should try living here for a few days to see how normal it is!"

"Shush, Michael!" Mum was trying to calm him down as usual. "It doesn't help. No one can hear you except us."

Dad carried on regardless.

"Here we are having to carry water from the end of the street because there's no supply, and with the power going on and off. Half the houses aren't standing, and half the population's literally starving. Nobody's doing anything about it, because presumably, they think everything's *normal*! I sometimes think the idiots in London have forgotten all about us."

"I expect they've got their troubles too."

"We were singled out. The Germans have got a new word for it, did you know that? They're threatening to 'Coventrate' other towns and cities."

"Where did you hear that?" Mum asked.

"That poisonous little traitor Joyce was on the radio at work the other day. According to him we were bombed specifically because of the RAF raid on Munich."

"Billy Joyce?" Mum laughed contemptuously. "I met him once a long time ago. He seemed a nasty piece of work to me even then. We should just ignore him. People shouldn't listen to his nonsense. It ought to be against the law."

I've heard all about William Joyce. Lots of people tune in to his '*Germany Calling*' broadcasts. Night by night his thin, cocky, sly voice tries to tell us we're going to lose the war. But how had Mum met him?

"Your grandpa mixed with the wrong people when I was a young girl. He read the *Daily Mail* every day. They were rather keen on the Fascists back then. Joyce came to speak at a rally in Coventry and stayed overnight in our house. Grandpa saw through them eventually – when the Blackshirts began to make trouble on the streets in the East End of London - and by the time he died, he was ashamed he'd ever had anything to do with Mosley, Joyce and their sort."

Grandpa had died when I was seven. He'd always seemed a lovely, huggable great big bear of a man. I couldn't really believe he could ever have thought the Nazis were a good thing, and I said so.

"He wasn't the only one, Adam. There were lots of people who thought the way he did. Some people even say the previous King – George's brother, Edward VIII - was one of them. They believed our government was too weak, and that the wrong people had control

of the country's money. It's easier now in some ways. We can see what their ideas have led to. You don't have to be an Einstein to know the difference between good and evil."

"Makes you think though," mused Dad. "Why Coventry? Did the high-ups sacrifice us for the sake of preserving London?"

Mum shot him a horrified look.

"They wouldn't have done that, would they, Mike?"

"Wouldn't they? I wouldn't put it past them."

After the big raid, there was a period of quiet. The sirens still sounded often enough, and usually at the wrong time, just when dinner was on the table, or you were in the lav, but few bombs fell. After what they'd done on November 14th, you couldn't believe the Germans had taken pity on us, but maybe they thought there was too little left of Coventry to bother about. People were dazed and confused. There was so much to do. No one really knew where to start. Anyway what was the point? If Coventry was magically rebuilt tomorrow, wouldn't Jerry come back the very next night and blast it all to the ground again? Whether it was me trying to get schoolwork done, or Mum pottering about between the ruins of *Owen Owen's* and the new ARP centre, or Pauly hanging around Daimler while they tried to fix the machinery, none of us knew what we were doing. Dad put in long hours at the office, making lists, arguing about which building or road should be repaired first, and then, if the telephones were working, trying to get hold of people who could approve the work and someone who could actually do it.

Mr. Hill still kept coming round on Saturday mornings to give me extra tuition. He'd been bombed out of his house and was living in one room at his sister's. He wore the same

clothes each time he visited us. He looked suddenly much older, grey and tired. If I'm honest he was starting to smell a bit.

"Have you read any Siegfried Sassoon?" he asked. I said I hadn't.

"I'll bring you some. He's very good about the First War. He doesn't rub it in too much, but what he says about shell shock is interesting. It's what we're all suffering from, I think, though we don't know it."

"What can we do?" I asked.

He laughed.

"I'm not really very sure. It's all very well to treat one person if they've been blown up and gone a bit mad, but if everyone's in the same boat..."

He thought for a moment more and then added,

"Talk about it, I suppose. And then talk about it some more. And not stop talking about it just because we think it's boring. That way, we might get some of the poison out of our systems."

I've read '*Memoirs of a Fox-hunting Man*', and enjoyed it, but the books that follow it are just too sad and difficult. I need things to cheer me up.

During the dark days of November and December the walk into *Henry VIII* each day was a depressing one. At the school end, Thornton Road was permanently blocked for weeks by a crater that stretched from the garden wall on one side right over to the opposite fence. I couldn't get through without muddying my shoes and trousers so I had to go the long way round to reach the centre of town. The easiest way was via Allen Road where George Harley lived. Allen Road was a mess. In two or three places the houses had been blown away completely. Some of the others were still standing only because the side walls had been

shored up by timbers, exposing ugly expanses of red brick. The windows were roughly boarded up where the glass had gone. George's house had never been the tidiest, but compared with those on either side, it seemed to have survived more or less unscathed. By some fluke the windows in their front room were still intact. I hadn't seen George since the big raid – in fact, since his grovelling apology at our front door – but I could never help looking at their house as I trudged by.

On a Tuesday during mid-December – I think it was the seventeenth – I was coming back from school at lunchtime. My bag was arm-wrenchingly heavy. It was fit to burst with homework for the afternoon and evening. Here and there people were doing their best to put up Christmas decorations, but there were none in the Harleys' house. George was standing motionless in the green and beige of their front room, staring out at the street. He saw me too. For a second our eyes met, but his gaze was vacant. There didn't seem to be a scrap of emotion or recognition in his face. I quickened my step and looked back down at the path – you have to watch your every step these days. I remember thinking there was a slight smell of gas hanging in the air. By now I was maybe a hundred yards up the road. I was thinking how strange it had been to see George looking like a prisoner in his own house. Suddenly, there was a fierce whooshing bang behind me. A blast of wind and dust flung me forward. I staggered and almost fell. The air in my ears compressed, and in the seconds that followed I heard the collapse of stonework more as a whine than a rumble or crash, because my ears weren't working properly.

I turned and saw a cloud of dust billowing from the spot where the Harleys' house had been. Yet I'd heard no aircraft overhead, nor the sinister whistle of any incoming bombs. As it had been that awful day on the railway bridge, I was amazed how quickly people appeared

on the scene, most of them in uniform – police, firemen, ARP wardens, even two soldiers. The problem was that no one was hurrying to do very much. They were all standing around, looking at this new and interesting pile of debris. It didn't seem to have occurred to them that there might be anyone under it.

I threw down my schoolbag and sprinted back. A policeman held out his arm to stop me.

"It's not safe, young man. Stay clear. The last thing we need is rubberneckers. Run along home like a good lad."

"But my friend's in that house," I shouted, forgetting for a moment that George was anything but a friend. "His name's George. George Harley."

The policeman's attitude changed.

"Are you sure?" he asked. "How do you know? You weren't in there with him?"

"No. I saw him at the window of the house. And I remember a smell of gas."

An ARP warden ran towards us.

"It's the gas main, all right. We need to evacuate the area."

The warden pointed at one of the soldiers.

"And you mate, for crying out loud, put that fag out, or we'll all be blown to kingdom come."

As he shouted his instructions, there was a high-pitched yelp of pain and a groan from somewhere under the masonry in front of us. It was loud enough that I could hear it quite clearly, even though I was still half deaf.

"That's him," I shouted, "That's George!" and I ran past the policeman's outstretched arm to towards the sound.

I knelt down, and pulled away a few bricks. Under the angle of some fallen timber, I could just make out a face. It was cut, bloodied, bruised and barely conscious. It was George all right. And he was alive! I could hear a chorus of shouts behind me.

“Get that kid out of there!”

“I’ve found him,” I shouted. “Over here!”

To George I said, as calmly as I could,

“They’ll have you out of there in just a moment, you’ll see. Keep still. Don’t struggle.”

George probably wasn’t in any position to struggle. I was worried there’d be another fall of rubble from above him and that he’d suffocate in the small artificial cave which was keeping him alive.

The policeman was at my elbow now. He spoke gently.

“All right son,” he said. “You’ve done a great job. But it’s time for the professionals to do their bit. Let’s get *you* safe, for starters.”

Three things happened the next day. The first was that I found myself back in the hospital, in the same ward Roly had been in, but this time visiting George. He was in a pretty bad way, like a character from *The Beano*. His head was bandaged, and there were cuts and grazes all over what could be seen of his face. One arm was in a sling, and one leg was suspended in the air. He could scarcely speak.

“Thank you,” he whispered. “You saved my life.”

“I don’t think I did,” I said modestly. “They’d have found you anyway. I was just the first one there.”

He grimaced and levered his one remaining good hand towards me. I shook it gently. It was limp and clammy, the way I remembered it from that time at the front door.

Mrs Harley was waiting in the corridor with my mum.

"I don't know what to say, I'm sure."

She crumpled and began to cry. My mum put an arm round her.

"Times like this," she said, "We all have to stick together, don't we? I'm sure George would have done the same for Adam."

And she winked at me.

The second thing was that P.C. Weston came knocking.

"You're as daft as a brush," he said. "That gas main could have gone up again and taken you with it. On the other hand, I don't know if there's a medal for someone your age, but if there is, you deserve it. What with one thing and another, I reckon you've had a better war than many serving at the front."

As he was speaking, the strangest thing happened. It was as if someone had opened a window and let the fresh air in. Suddenly I was thinking about George *and* Roly. In fact a picture of a smiling, happy, bouncing Roly came very clearly into my mind, as they say '*large as life and twice as natural*'. I could see him, notebook in hand, wanting to hear about my rescue of George in microscopic detail.

"I bet there wasn't half a lot of blood," I heard him say.

"Was there?" I answered. "I really didn't notice..."

"I wish I'd been there. Go on, tell me some more. Were there any bones actually sticking out of George's leg?"

I started to laugh, and the fog that had been in my head all through the recent weeks began to lift.

In the evening, there was another rat-a-tat-tat on the front door. Dad opened it to find Provost Howard standing in the rain.

“Could I possibly have a word with young Adam, do you think?” I heard the Provost say. Dad brought him through to the kitchen, and made him a cup of tea.

“Adam, I know things have been difficult, to say the least. I’m here to ask for your help.”

I think I must have looked cautious. I was feeling better about myself, but not necessarily about God.

“The BBC...the country...is doing us a great honour. I’m sure you know that it’s becoming a tradition for there to be a special broadcast in the hour leading up to the King’s speech to the nation. The one that happens at three o’clock on Christmas Day afternoon. Well, they’ve asked if we would begin the programme with a five minute...erm...I think they call it a ‘slot’ ...from the Cathedral.”

“From down in the Crypt, you mean...” Dad interrupted.

“No actually, from the open air, between the old Cathedral walls.”

“Well let’s hope it doesn’t come on with a blizzard then,” Dad laughed.

“Quite so, Mr Blenkiron, quite so. But the thing is, Adam, would you come and sing with us? We’re rather short-handed, what with the festive season and the bombing and so on. We’ll be a small and select group.”

I’d promised myself I was finished with singing in churches, but it was hard to say no to the Provost. There was a steely glint in his eye. I took a deep breath, gulped and answered that I’d be glad to help.

“Oh good!” The Provost beamed. “Mr. Stephenson *will* be pleased. He told me he was quite worried the trebles wouldn’t be up to snuff without you.”

We Blenkirons had our Christmas lunch earlier than usual – on the dot of twelve – and then all four of us walked rather solemnly across to the Cathedral - even Pauly. It was a bitterly cold day and we were well wrapped-up in coats, scarves and gloves. The fire had destroyed all the choristers' cassocks and surplices, and anyway the service was going to be on radio so I'd been told to wear my school uniform for a 'semblance of smartness'.

"Good thing it's not on that new-fangled television," Dad said. "For several reasons. Firstly your face might crack the screen. And secondly, maybe it's best Hitler doesn't get to see what he's done to our city."

There were eight of us boy choristers. I nodded at John Rathbone, one of the Bablake lads who I liked. He nodded back. His dad was one of the five or six choir men who'd turned out for the occasion. At about ten to two, the Provost clapped his hands and cleared his throat.

"What a moment!" he exclaimed. "In just a few minutes our voices will ring out to every corner of the world. Just think about that. There'll be men on sheep stations in the Australian outback, women cooking a Christmas meal in the heart of the African continent, children in remote Canadian villages. They're all hear the message of hope we're going to bring them. So smile as you sing, chaps. Let's try hard to believe that an end will eventually come to the troubles we currently face, and that God is with us."

All that's left of the Cathedral is the great tower and spire. We stood in its shadow out of the biting wind, as the BBC producer waited until the bells rang two. Then he counted down one...two...three...on his fingers, and the Provost began to speak slowly and beautifully into the microphone in front of him.

"Six weeks ago the enemy came and hurled down fire and destruction upon our city from the sky through the long night. So many lives were lost, so many homes destroyed and

our Cathedral nave and chancel utterly burnt and brought to the ground. It was ruthless. It was wicked. I am looking now at the heaped-up ruins and the long line of the outer walls, scarred and windowless. Yet even now the ruined Cathedral keeps much of its former majesty and beauty, unconquered by destruction. So is the spirit of Christ unconquerable. What we want to tell you is this: that with Christ born again in our hearts today we are trying, hard as it may be, to banish all thoughts of revenge, and we are going to make a kinder, simpler, a more Christ-child sort of world in the days beyond the strife."

He turned towards us, and together we sang the haunting, ancient tune of the 'Coventry Carol'. It had been sung in the city's streets for five hundred years. As we finished the last verse the sun came out from behind the clouds and shot a beam of light diagonally across the stones in front of us, catching the specks of dust that swirled around in the air. The BBC man gave us the thumbs up.

"Thank you to one and all," he exclaimed. "What a moving start to today's programme. Pity about what's going to come next."

Mum looked shocked. The producer caught her eye.

"I don't mean His Majesty's contribution, madam. That's still fifty minutes away. The nation's going to have to listen to a fair old bit of nonsense before that, I'm afraid. *Actors* and all sorts, I daresay."

Jock Forbes arrived at my side.

"Come and look at something with me, young Adam," he said. He led me a few yards away. Together we climbed up onto some fallen stones.

"I only noticed it this morning. See those pieces of fallen timber. See the shape they've made."

I followed his pointing finger. Back in November two long planks had dropped from the roof of the Cathedral. They now clearly made the charred right angles of a cross, lying across the steps which once separated the nave from the chancel. As we gazed down on them, we suddenly heard the sound of a single-engined aircraft coming in fast from the west. Instinctively everyone flinched and ducked. There was no time to take cover but thank goodness it wasn't Jerry.

"It's one of ours," the Provost shouted. "Let's give him three cheers!"

As the Spitfire crossed above the Cathedral it waggled its wings in salute. In return we gave three cheers for the RAF at the top of our voices. And at that moment, something changed. As we hugged and wished each other a happy Christmas, I began to think everything might not be completely hopeless. It seemed possible to believe that after all, there could be a God who loves us, in spite of the terrible things that we humans do.

The past can't be undone. What matters is the future. There are lots of things I haven't a clue about, but I do know that I want to help build a new and better world. Someone will have to!

THE END

Historical Note: The true story of Coventry in 1940

Do you get on with everyone in your class? Or even with everyone in your family? Most of us find there's *someone* we struggle to like. Most of us feel badly hurt by someone's words or actions at some point in our lives. If you study history you'll find it's exactly the same with different countries, or even between different groups in the same country. Read the

papers or follow a news website, and you'll see how it's still true today. People fall out with each other, and sometimes they fall out so badly that they fight.

The story of how Britain came to be at war with Germany in 1939 is long and complicated. Some historians will tell you that the causes go back at least to the early years of the twentieth century. Could it have been avoided? The answer is, yes, perhaps, but only if things had been done differently in the years immediately after the Great War (1914-1918). By the early nineteen thirties, war was probably inevitable, sooner or later.

Some bombs had fallen on London in the First War, and a few people had been killed, but it was obvious to everyone that another world war would involve intensive bombing on a previously unimaginable scale. Civilian populations were going to be a major target in a way they'd never been before. The Second World War only finally came to an end when the Americans dropped atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945, killing tens of thousands of innocent people at a stroke. Before then, like many other places, London had endured the Blitz, beginning in 1940, and the British had in their turn reduced some German cities to ashes. For example Dresden was completely destroyed by Allied bombers in February 1945.

On November 14th 1940, Coventry was attacked in a similar way, and Adam's dad was right in saying the Germans invented the word '*Coventrated*' to describe what they did to that city and what they might do to others. Between five and six hundred people were killed that night alone, but technology was developing fast. By the time the Germans were using rockets in 1945, one V2 killed as many people in a single strike on South London. But who's counting? Each death causes untold grief and suffering.

I've invented Adam and the rest of the Blenkiron family, Roly and George, but *Henry VIII* school is real enough. It's still an important part of Coventry life today along with its great

and equally ancient rival school, Bablake. Mr. Burton ('Old Bertie') really was the headmaster at the time, and was known to be a bit of an eccentric. However it was because of his energy and 'can-do' attitude that the school somehow kept going through the war. Larkin the sixth-former was a real person too. He was Philip Larkin, who later became one of Britain's most famous modern poets.

Life was very difficult for ordinary people living in Coventry through 1940 and 1941. A greater proportion of the population died there as a result of the war than was the case in London. The large number of civilian casualties was because the many factories in the city were built unusually close to the houses. Before the war these factories made cars and motorcycles. When war was declared, Britain was desperately short of tanks, guns and ammunition. Secretly the Coventry factories turned their hand to the war effort. For that reason workers in Coventry earned more than average for Britain at the time: it was hard to get enough skilled people to do the work that Britain needed to make armaments. In the rest of England there was jealousy that men in Coventry earned so much.

It seems true that the city was bombed in revenge for the British attack on Munich. Over the years there've been 'conspiracy theories' suggesting Mr Churchill and the British government knew in advance Coventry would be attacked in this way, and did nothing to stop it. The truth probably is that although the government knew there was going to be an attack *somewhere*, they didn't know exactly which towns or cities would be hit. It could as well have been Birmingham or Southampton. At that time the British armed forces didn't have the aircraft or guns to stop the German bombers, and the boffins were still trying to understand the electronic systems the Germans had developed to pinpoint their targets.

It's a strange thing that by their bombing the Germans achieved what some people like Adam's dad wanted – the constructing of a new city from concrete fit for the traffic and shopping of the second half of the twentieth century.

Canon R.T. Howard, the Cathedral Provost, Mr. Stephenson, the organist and Jock Forbes were all real people too. Provost Howard and Jock Forbes showed great bravery on the night of November 14th. The sermon the Provost actually gave at the beginning of the historic 1940 Christmas broadcast is a longer version of the words you've just read. If you go to Coventry today, you can see the wonderful new Cathedral, finally finished in 1959, which replaced the one destroyed on November 14th 1940. The Provost saw the project to its conclusion before he retired and wrote a book about everything that happened. After the old Cathedral was destroyed Mr. Stephenson the choirmaster had to go to Lancaster to earn a living, but out of loyalty he always kept the title of Organist and Choirmaster at Coventry Cathedral. Sadly he died before the new building was finished, or who knows, he might have come back to pick up his old job where he left off in 1940.

Is it possible to stop wars from happening? It's a very good subject to debate with your friends or classmates. Sharing the earth's resources more fairly might be something to think about, but it isn't obviously the reason why the Second World War began. For those of us living in Britain, the rethinking of our relationships with neighbouring countries is a big issue at the moment. Perhaps the experience of World War Two has some lessons to teach us...but different people will see this in many different ways. What do the grown ups you know think about that?

Christians have an idea that inside all of us there's a tendency to do bad things, and that this needs dealing with by putting right our relationship with God. How might this influence the way we think about war and fighting?

I wonder what you'll think of Adam? Whether you're a boy or a girl (girls sing in a lot of Cathedral choirs too these days, though they didn't in 1940!) I hope you'll feel he's a bit like you in some ways. He does some good things, and some bad things. He's growing up, he's in the middle of what most of us would consider an awful situation, and he's confused, because the questions he's asking are hard to answer. Is life hopeless, or is there a God who cares for us?

The picture of the fallen timbers in the shape of a cross, first spotted by Jock Forbes, became famous. Why do you think it caught people's imagination in the way it did?

