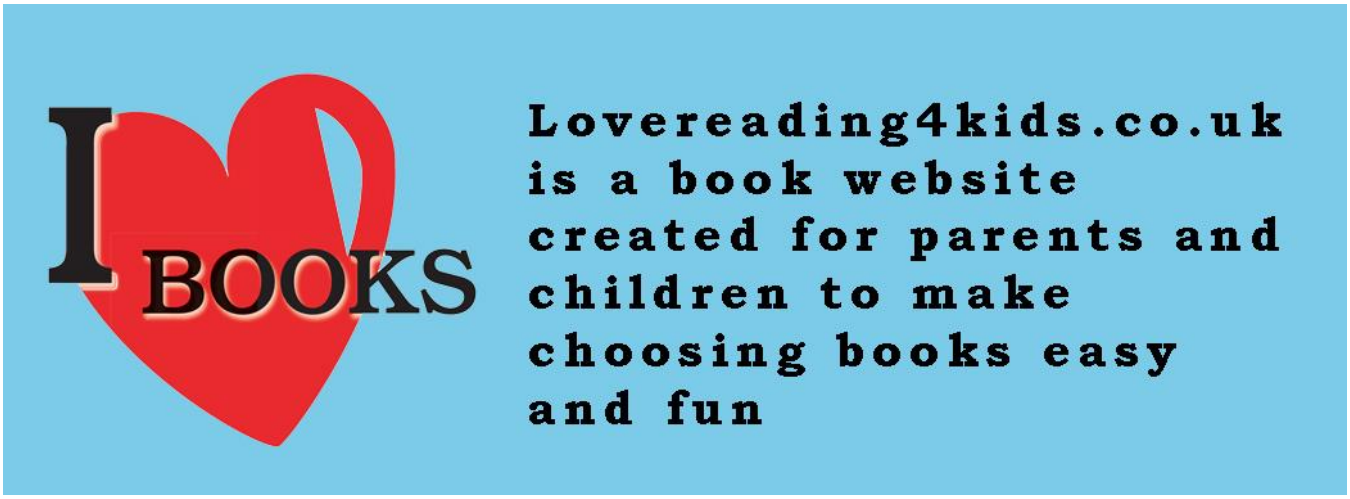


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School for Skylarks

Written by

Sam Angus

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Soldier Dog

A Horse Called Hero

Captain

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SCHOOL FOR SKYLARKS

SAM ANGUS

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1

OFF THE EDGE OF THE MAP

Lyla wasn't at all certain that such a house as Furlongs could exist, until she actually had to go there.

'I am NOT staying with Great Aunt Ada.' She spat out the name with precision. 'I'll run away and you won't be able to stop me.'

Father searched Lyla's face as if about to say one particular thing, then thought better of it and said another thing entirely, enunciating with heavy patience.

'London. Will. Be. Bombed. Children. Are. Being. Evacuated.'

'*Some* children are being evacuated, but this one has actually been STOLEN from her bed,' said Lyla through her teeth, tears rising behind her eyes.

Father waited a while, then, with an attempt at levity, said, 'Anyway, you'll enjoy Aunt Ada – she's a little unusual. Do be kind to her.'

'You weren't kind to *Mop*,' snapped Lyla. 'She says you'd've *killed* her with your coldness . . .'

Lyla trailed off – her words, being borrowed from her mother, felt false in her own mouth. Besides, Father being in uniform and about to fight a war made her uneasy and put her somehow in the wrong. She gathered her anger, stoking it so it wouldn't run out of steam. You had to do that because Father's patience was a river that ran on and on, and gave you nothing to push against.

'I've not changed, Lyla. I am the same man I was the day she married me. I loved Mop then, and I still love her now.'

'You left her,' Lyla retorted. 'That's what the papers said. And everyone knows what you did. *Everyone*.' Lyla put on a clipped, tight sort of BBC voice: *'High-ranking civil servant Lovell Spence cited for infidelity.'*

Father gave a brief, taut laugh. He pushed his foot against the accelerator and the motor swung widely round a tight corner.

'The minute she sees I'm gone, she'll come and fetch me and if she doesn't I'll escape,' said Lyla.

'Lyla . . .'

He'd been about to say something and then stopped, and Lyla was disappointed because that meant it might, for once, have actually been interesting.

After a while, Father slowed the Austen, sighed, and said with forced joviality, 'I should look around if I were you. You'll need to know where you are to plan your escape.'

Lyla harrumphed and folded her arms tightly in a look-at-me-I'm-upset-and-unfairly-treated sort of way. A solitary ewe grazed along a railway track, and in the distance was what might be a station – a clock, a small pavilion, and a sign turned around to confuse the enemy. Lyla scowled. 'It's not as if the Germans would even BOTHER to come to such a faraway place.'

Father inhaled wearily then glanced at his watch. He'd have to drive all the way back to the kind of government meeting that Mop said was always just caution and compromise.The Austen rattled over a cattle grid, then turned between noble gateposts on to an unmade drive. Father slowed the motor, unwound the window, and breathed deeply to savour the air.

Just then, the house appeared.

Lyla caught her breath. She saw its crenellations and chimneys, its turrets and swaggering towers. It was baffling, haphazard and rambling, as if all the bits of it had just risen up whenever and wherever they'd wanted, so you couldn't tell for certain where it began and where it ended. Sheep grazed right up to its walls and ferns sprouted from its stones like the plumes of a cavalier's hat. Poetry and romance hung about the turrets and towers, a yearning for the dashing and the untamed that beckoned to something in Lyla's spirit and reminded her of the heroines in the stories she'd read. Nevertheless, she carefully formed an expression of disgust.

'It looks draughty and cold.'

Father chuckled. 'Well, yes – as a matter of fact, it is. When the wind blows, the carpets lift off the floors and dance, the water freezes in the pipes, and the cream freezes inside the cows and turns to ice cream.'

'Does it really?' asked Lyla, delighted till she remembered about being cross.

Father pulled up on the circular gravel forecourt beside a door that stood at the foot of a tall octagonal tower. Above its Gothic arch a stone galleon perched everlastingly on the crest of a wave.

'I'm not getting out.'

Father shrugged as if to shake off both the journey and the company of his daughter. He knocked at the door, and immediately it opened and someone appeared – perhaps a butler, for he wore a splendid and ancient livery. He was tall and bore himself with formality and decorum.

'Solomon,' said Father warmly, taking his hands.

'Captain.'

'How are you? How is she, Solomon?'

'Her ladyship is preparing for war, sir.'

Solomon had the tact and restraint of a butler, but Lyla saw that his eyes twinkled with the faintest hint of amusement.

'Specifically,' he continued, 'she is working on some pyrotechnic illuminations known to herself as Dandelions. They are to confuse the German ships when they steam up the Bristol Channel.'

The twinkle faded from Solomon's eyes, and his face once again assumed the deadpan inscrutability of the butler one might expect to find in such a house as Furlongs. Dipping his head, he withdrew, then walked with a stiff, awkward sort of gait to the luggage on the back of the Austen.

2

CHOP-CHOP – SHOW 'EM OUT

'Aunt Ada!' called Father.

Father stood in a shaft of dust-speckled light cast from a mullioned window. All of a sudden, Lyla saw him for the first time as a person distinct from herself and from Mop. She saw a faraway smile soften and light his face, melting its drawn severity, and she realised she'd never given any thought to Father's happiness or unhappiness before.

She tightened her arms about herself. Mother's unhappiness took up most of the space in Lyla's head, and she had to watch it warily, for it might suddenly spill and cast its tarry darkness over the day or the week.

Lyla looked about the dim room. Tusks, antlers and medieval weapons hung on either side of the immense stone fireplace. Shields painted in heraldic purples, blues and reds ran around the walls. As Lyla's eyes adjusted, she saw the strangest of things crowded willy-nilly on the hall table: a barometer, the tusks of

a walrus, and an unnervingly alive-looking armadillo that stood tiptoe on quaint little feet between a tray labelled 'Mail In' and another labelled 'Mail Out'.

'It's just the same, Lyla,' Father murmured. 'Nothing changes here.'

Lyla rolled her eyes. Where was the fun in things staying the same?

Just then, from a low stone arch that led to a low stone passage, a brisk, bright voice called, 'Solomon! Solomon! Where are you, Solomon? There's someone in the place.'

The owner of the voice appeared, wearing an all-in-one sort of outfit – the kind that a fighter pilot might wear, with chest pockets, hip pockets and shin pockets, all of them crammed with pieces of wire and batteries and ticking things. Her eyes were bright and reckless, her skin smooth and clear, but her hair was a startling polar white and roughly sheared as if she'd commandeered a passing groundsman on his way to deal with the brambles. She was quite old, yet she held herself very upright, and there was a vigour to her, the fierce energy of a high-voltage current. On her head perched a pair of goggles and – Lyla took a step closer to make quite sure of this – on her shoulder sat a canary.

She made a shooing motion as if Father were a clutch of hens.

'Show 'em out, Solomon. Chop-chop – show 'em

out.'

'Ada, it's me, Lovell.'

Father's voice was warm, amused by Great Aunt Ada's curious brand of hospitality.

'Lovell . . . Oh, good.' She paused for a moment. Then, distracted by the bottle in her hand, she waved it about and said, 'Now, look here, Lovell. Well, d'you see, my Pink Dandelions, they're twenty-four inches diameter – that's a hundred feet wide when they burst, d'you see? They'll do the trick. No, no, I will not fail nor falter in my duty. Invasion will be a matter of life or death for us all.'

Ada had laughing eyes, flecked with gold.

Lyla stepped a little closer to see if the canary on her Great Aunt's goggles was real or not but then seeing that the bottle that her Great Aunt was brandishing about was labelled 'BLASTING POWDER', she retreated a step or two. Father, however, was smiling.

'Dear Ada, you haven't changed at all. You'll blow the place up one day, you know.'

Ada's attention appeared to have been distracted once again, for now she was unearthing a paper from a pocket and flapping it at Father.

'And this! Number of rooms? Number of acres? Dammit. They won't have it, I tell you. They'll sack the place. Solomon! Solomon! Let no one in! Man the doors!' she said with furious indignation, still oblivious to the fact that her butler was not to hand.

Lyla, tired of being ignored, rolled her eyes. 'Actually, I'm sure Hitler will choose a more comfortable house in a more convenient location.'

'Who's that?' barked Ada peering in Lyla's general direction, then shaking her head vigorously. 'Oh no, Hitler will never get his hands on the place – the Dandelions – the fireworks – will see to that. No, no, no. He'll be baffled – quite baffled – by my Pink Dandelions when they burst over the Bristol Channel. His instruments of navigation will be befuddled by them, don't you see? Hitler won't know where he is at all and will turn tail, don't you worry. No, no, it's the Ministry of Works – they're the problem – got to keep 'em out, d'you see? They'll turn it into a barracks; fill the place with soldiery and so on, just like the last war.'

Soldiers? Aha! Lyla smiled quietly to herself. If Furlongs was to be filled with soldiers, then she wouldn't have to stay here. Option One: run away. Option Two: request that the Ministry of Works fill Furlongs with soldiers and send her home.

'This is Lyla,' Father announced, attempting to put an arm around his daughter's shoulder.

Great Aunt Ada squinted briefly at Lyla.

'WHO IS SHE?' she roared.

'Did you not get my letter?'

'Plenty of letters, but Solomon knows I don't hold with 'em.'

'Ah, well you must find the letter and read it – that's important, Ada . . . Lyla's come to stay.'

'I've no intention of staying.' snapped Lyla.

'Lyla,' said Father, 'London will be *bombed*.'

Ada hesitated, then harrumphed.

'Well, I dare say we shan't notice each other much, she and I.'

'You won't notice me at all. Mother needs me, so I'll be returning to London.'

'*Needs* you, you say?' Ada asked with quiet ferocity. '*Needs* you?'

'Yes. In any case, I don't want to be here. You see I was kidnapped—'

'Two different things entirely,' Ada interjected. 'She needing you and you not wanting to be here. Don't confuse them.' 'I'm not confused at all,' said Lyla promptly. 'Number one – I don't want to be here and have no intention of staying. And number two – Mop will be anxious.'

Great Aunt Ada glanced quickly at Father. Father held her gaze, and gave a brief dip of his head. Ada, noting this, paused and then waggled her fingers in a gesture that could be intended to indicate either understanding, dismissal or goodbye – or perhaps all three. Together with her wires and batteries and gelignite she wandered off absent-mindedly towards the corridor but Lyla because she did very much want to know, called out after her,

'Is that actually a real canary on your – ?' Lyla tapped the top of her head to indicate the goggles that her Great Aunt wore.'Ah yes, dear. This is Little Gibson.' answered Great Aunt Ada before continuing off down the corridor on some peculiar business of her own.

'Oh good, Solomon's ready with the motor,' said Father, looking at his watch.

Lyla abruptly forgetting the matter of the canary being real or not whirled around in horror. She said nothing but inwardly as she watched him she was begging, *Don't leave me here! Please, don't just walk away from me*.

'Come, Lyla.' Father went to her and bent to hug her.

Lyla shied away from him but he took both her hands in his. 'Dear Lyla, you've been so very brave.'

She shook her hands free. The blood rose to her cheeks, her fingers clenched, and she burned with hurt and rage. *Please don't leave me here. Don't leave me again.*

Father's face creased with pain. 'You are so very loved. You are everything to me.'

Lyla clenched her fists and bowed her head. *He left me once and now he's leaving me a second time.*

'One day perhaps you'll see that I am not so bad a man as you think me now.' With a sigh, Father rose and slowly, head bowed, went out to the motor.

Alone in the hall, Lyla gazed out through the open door and saw him, his hand on the ignition, looking back at Furlongs with a long sad smile. She heard the engine start and then the scrunch of gravel and she trembled with disbelief and anger. She ran out and stood alone on the gravel and yelled over the splutter of the engine.

'I'll escape, and you won't be able to stop me.'

3

OLD ALFRED

Mop was right. Father was cold; all head and no heart.

Lyla scowled at the weapons and painted shields but saw nothing she could throw or break. Everything was so immense, so ancient and indifferent to her that she felt small and powerless.

She stayed there, alone in the centre of the vast hall, raging and hot and turning about in a welter of rage and indecision. Should she escape now? Right away?

While thinking about her escakpe, she grew conscious that something or *someone* was watching her.

She looked about.

No one.

She looked about again.

Still no one.

Yet she *was* being watched. She looked about once more and thought it was perhaps the watchful little armadillo on the table. She didn't care what a stuffed