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Opening extract from

Friend or Foe

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CHAPTER 1

HIS MOTHER WOKE HIM AS USUAL THAT morning, shaking his shoulder and then kissing him gently as he rolled over. It was pitch black around him, but then he was used to that by now. For months they had slept down in the cellar on the bunks his father had made the last time he was home on leave.

'Here's your apple, dear,' his mother said. 'Sit up and have your apple now.' And she patted the pillow behind him as he pushed himself up on to his elbows. He felt the saucer come into his hand. His early morning apple was the only thing that had not changed since the war started. Every morning as far back as he could remember his mother has woken

him this way – with an apple peeled, cored and quartered lying opened up on a white saucer.

He felt his mother shifting off the bed and watched for the flare of yellow light as she struck the match for the oil lamp. The cellar walls flickered and then settled in the new light, and the boy saw his mother was dressed to go out. She had her coat on and her hat with the brown feather at the back. It was only then that he remembered. His stomach turned over inside him and tears choked at his throat. The morning he had thought would never come, had come. Every night since he'd first heard about it, he prayed it might not happen to him; and the night before, he had prayed he would die in his sleep rather than wake up and have to go.

'You were restless again last night, dear. Did you sleep?' He nodded, not trusting himself to speak. 'Come on now. Eat your apple and get dressed. Quick as you can, dear. It's six o'clock by the station, they said. It's a quarter-to now. I left you as long as I could.'

Fifteen minutes left. Fifteen minutes and he'd be gone. Thirty minutes and she would be back in this house without him. She was bending over him, shaking his shoulder. 'Please, dear. We must hurry.

Eat it down, quickly now. Miss Roberts said you'd be having a roll and jam on the train, but you must have something before you go.'

'Don't want it, Mum.' He handed the saucer back to her. Only moments before he had been savouring that first bite of his apple. They were always crisp, always juicy, like nothing else. But now he felt sick at the sight of it.

'You must, David. You always have your apple. You know you do.'

He had upset her and ate it to make her happy, swallowing it like medicine, trying not to taste it. Each bite reminded him that this was the last apple.

Once out of bed he dressed to keep the cold out. His mother was packing his suitcase and he watched everything going in and wondered where he'd be when he took it all out again.

'They said only one case, so there's only room for one change of clothes. All the things you wanted, they're at the bottom. I'll send on the rest as soon as I know where you'll be.' She smoothed down his coat collar and brushed through his hair with her fingers. 'You'll do,' she said, smiling softly.

'Do I have to, Mum? Do I have to go?' Even as he asked he knew it was useless. Everyone was going

from school – no one was staying behind. He was ashamed of himself now. He'd promised himself he'd be brave when he said goodbye. He clung to his mother, pressing his face into her coat, fighting his tears.

She crouched down in front of him, holding him by the the shoulders. 'You remember what I said, David, when I told you your father had been killed? Do you?' David nodded. 'I said you'd have to be the man in the house, remember?' He took the handkerchief she was offering. 'You never saw your father crying, did you?'

'No, Mum.'

'Men don't cry, see? Try to be a man, David, like your father was, eh?' She chucked him under the chin, and straightened the cap on to the front of his head. 'Come on now. We'll be late.'

It was still dark up in the street, and a fine drizzle sprayed their faces as they walked away from the house. David looked back over his shoulder as they came to the postbox at the corner and caught a last glimpse of the front steps. He felt his mother's hand on his elbow, and then they were round the corner.

Ahead of them there was a glow of fire in the sky. 'South of the river,' his mother said. 'Battersea, I



should say. Poor devils. At least you'll be away from all that, David, away from the bombs, away from the war. At least they won't get you as well.' He was surprised by the grim tone in her voice.

'Where will you go, Mum?'

'Wherever they send me. Probably to the coast – Kent or somewhere like that. Somewhere where there's anti-aircraft guns, that's all I know. Don't worry, I'll write.'

Their footsteps sounded hollow in the empty street. They had to step off the pavement to pick their way round the edge of a pile of rubble that was still scattered halfway across the street. That was where the Perkins family had lived. They had been bombed out only a week before; they were all killed. Special prayers were said at school assembly for Brian and Garry Perkins, but no one ever mentioned them after that. They were dead, after all.

In the gloom outside Highbury and Islington Underground Station there was already a crowd of people. Miss Evers' voice rang out above the hubbub and the crying. She was calling out names. His mother pulled at his hand and they ran the last few yards.

'Tony Tucker. Tony Tucker.' Miss Evers' voice rose

to a shriek. 'Where's Tucky. Has anyone seen Tucky?'

'He's coming, miss. I saw him.'

'And what about David Carey? Is he here yet?'

'Yes, miss. I'm here, miss.' David spoke out, pleased at the strength in his voice.

'Here's Tucky, miss. He's just coming.'

'Right then.' Miss Evers folded her piece of paper. 'We're all here, and it's time to go. Say goodbye as quick as ever you can. The train leaves Paddington at half past eight, and we have to be there at least an hour before. So hurry it up now – and don't forget your gas masks.'

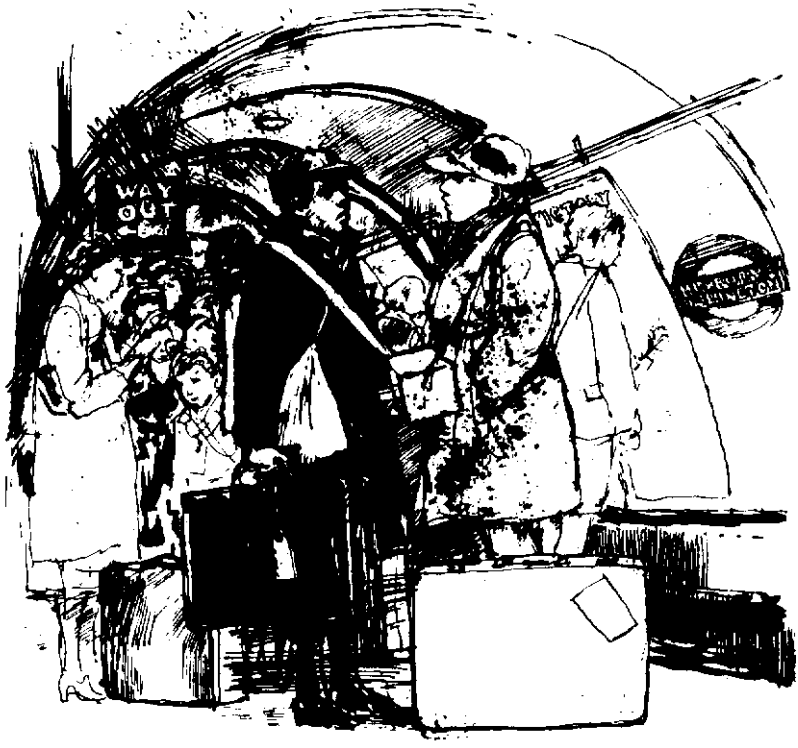
David felt the case being handed to him. 'Goodbye, David. And don't worry. It'll be all right. I'll send a letter as soon as I can. God bless.' She kissed him quickly on the cheek and turned away. He watched her until she disappeared at the end of the street. All around him there was crying: boys he'd never dreamt could cry, weeping openly, and mothers holding on to each other as they walked away. He was glad his mother hadn't cried, and it helped him to see so many of his friends as miserable as he felt himself. He blinked back the tears that had gathered in his eyes and wiped his face before turning towards the station.

The warmth of the Underground came up to meet

them as the school trooped down the silent, unmoving escalator. They followed Miss Evers along the tunnels, down the stairways and out on to the platform. Tucky came up alongside David and dropped his suitcase.

'H'lo, Davey.'

'H'lo, Tucky.' They were old friends and there was nothing more to be said.



They did not have long to wait. There was a distant rumble and then a rush of warm, oily wind that blew their eyes closed as it rushed into the platform. Miss Evers counted them as they pushed and jostled into the carriage, herding them in like sheep, so that every corner of the carriage was filled. The doors clicked and hissed shut, and the train jerked forward, throwing everyone against each other.

David watched the last Highbury and Islington sign as long as he could, craning his neck until the carriage plunged into the darkness of the tunnel and it was gone.

'That's that, then,' said Tucky next to him. David nodded and looked up at the parallel rows of handles that swung from the roof of the carriage, always out of reach. And he remembered his father lifting him up high above everyone, and how he'd hung on to the strap next to his father's looking down on a sea of upturned faces.

Miss Evers was shouting at them again. 'Boys, boys. Can you all hear me, boys? Sam, you're not listening. I can see you're not listening. You can't listen and talk at the same time – it's not possible. Now, we've been through all this many times before,

but I'll do it just once more to make sure. We're going to . . . where are we going, Tucky?'

'Devon, miss.'

'What station do we have to go to, to get to Devon, Tucky?'

'Don't know, miss.'

'Paddington, Tucky. We're going to Paddington Station.' Whenever Miss Evers wanted to tell them all something, she always asked Tucky first; and when Tucky didn't know, and he never did know, that was her excuse to tell them herself. She picked on Tucky mercilessly, and David hated her for it.

'And what am I going to give you at Paddington Station, Tucky? Can you remember that, Tucky?'

'No, miss.'

'Your placards, Tucky. With your name and address on. Remember? In case you get lost.'

'And the string, miss,' someone else said. Tucky was already sniffing, his hands screwed into his eyes. Another question from Miss Evers and he would dissolve into floods of tears.

'Well, I'm glad someone was paying attention. Placards and string. You'll be wearing the placards round your neck. Remember now, Tucky?' Tucky nodded into his raincoat sleeve, and Miss Evers left

him alone after that.

They had to change trains once and Sam left his case behind on the train. Miss Evers screamed at the guard and the doors hissed open again and she went back in for it. When she came out she screamed at Sam, but Sam braved it out and then grinned sheepishly as soon as her back was turned.

Placards strung round their necks, and two by two, the boys climbed the long stairs up into Paddington Station. David and Tucky were almost last in the crocodile and as far away from Miss Evers as possible.

Up to that moment it had been just his school that was being evacuated, but now David discovered that every other child in London seemed to be at the station. Miss Ever shouted back at them to hold onto the belt of the boy in front and they wound their way like a long snake through the crowds of milling children and screaming teachers, who paused only to blow their whistles. And above it all came the thunder and rhythmic pounding of steam engines, and the rich, exciting smell of the smoke.

David had been on a train once before. Just before the war started he'd been on a school journey to Birchington, but then his mother and father had been

on the platform waving him off. He felt the belt in his hand jerk and the crocodile stuttered forward again towards the platform.

Miss Roberts, the headmistress, was waiting for them by the ticket barrier; and so was Miss Hardy. Miss Roberts was in her usual bird's nest hat, and Miss Hardy, as usual, was clucking around her like a worried hen. Miss Evers seemed relieved to see them, and smiled for the first time that morning. Miss Roberts took charge and beckoned everyone closer.

'The train's at least two hours late, boys, so we'll have to wait. Put your cases down and sit on them.' It was good to have Miss Roberts there in her hat and bright clothes. There wasn't a boy in the school who didn't like her, and now her smiles and laughter were familiar and comforting in the strangeness and noise of the station.

David spent the two hours chatting to Tucky and looking at everyone else – that was all there was to do. The marches blared out of the loudspeakers, but they were so loud he could hardly make out the tune – and when there was a tune he recognised, a great explosion of steam would ruin it for him. Miss Hardy gave everyone a roll and jam with a mug of warm milk, and Miss Roberts sat heavily on her suitcase and

smoked her way through a packet of cigarettes.

It seemed as if the train would never leave, but it did – three hours late. The boys piled into the train, fourteen to a carriage, and the train stood there, hissing gently.

David and Tucky found themselves sitting in Miss Roberts' carriage. They knew it would mean cigarette smoke all the way to Devon, but that was better than Miss Hardy's fussing, and a lot better than Miss Evers' waspish tongue. Miss Roberts collected all their placards and put them in the luggage rack above their heads.

'You won't need those for a bit. I think I know who you all are.' Miss Roberts sat down next to Tucky, and the seat sank. 'You'll need them again when we get to Devon – if we ever do.' She took off her bird's nest hat with a flourish and shook out her red hair, and then settled down to a packet of Senior Service cigarettes and a pile of orange paperbacks.

She was a huge lady, and Tucky wondered if he would ever be able to stop himself from sliding down towards her into the crater she had made in the cushioned seat.

Doors were banging all the way down the train and a group of sailors ran past waving and shouting.

More banging, the shrill whistle, the pressure building up in short blasts of steam; and then the train heaved forward, the engine settling into a slow pulling rhythm as they watched the platform slip away.

'We're off,' said Tucky.

'On our way, boys,' said Miss Roberts. 'Say goodbye to London, and good luck. Not for ever, you know. We'll be back.'

David stared out of the window and wondered what his mother was doing at that moment and how long it would be before he'd see her again.