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Opening extract from

Just Henry

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1. Unwelcome news

'WILL YOU PLEASE BE QUIET!'

But the pleas from the usherette were having little affect on the handful of small children who were straddling the backs of the cinema seats and riding them as though they were horses.

Behind them, Henry swayed from left to right in an attempt to see the screen. Above his head, a lone collie was leaping through the flames of a burning orphanage in search of a missing boy who was in bed in the attic. The film music rose to a crescendo, as did the volume of noise from the auditorium. Finally, the wonder dog managed the impossible and the little boy was saved. This was greeted with a roar of approval from a thousand voices in the upper circle and stalls.

As soon as the credits began to roll there was the crashing of upturned seats followed by a stampede up the aisles.

The introductory drum roll of *God Save the King* stopped the ones who hadn't made it through the exit doors and they froze to attention like everyone else. As Henry stood, towering above the noisy group in front of him, he thought yet again that he really was too old for the Saturday morning Pictures. He had had no intention of going that morning but when the official looking envelope addressed to his stepfather had plopped through the door he couldn't bear to stay in the house any longer. His mother had looked as if she was about to faint when she spotted it on the mat. He had been tempted to tear it open so that she could find out how stuck-up and stupid his stepfather was there and then, but had stormed out the house instead.

Once the National Anthem was over he sat down again and gazed up at the screen tabs. Whenever the lights hit the auditorium after the Saturday morning show he was always surprised by the shabbiness of the curtains. In the dark, when red, green and blue

lights whirled in circles on them, their age disappeared and it was like being in Hollywood.

Suddenly he was aware of an usherette, peering down at him from the aisle, in her smart brown and gold uniform.

'Hoping to lie low till the main programme?' she enquired. 'Come on ducks.'

He moved his bare feet along the red carpet and recovered his damp plimsolls with his toes. It was so hot in the cinema that once the lights had dimmed he had kicked them off, as did nearly everyone else he judged, as the smell of hundreds of unwashed feet and hot sweaty rubber had hit the darkened auditorium. He slipped them on and loped towards the exit doors narrowly missing being sprayed with disinfectant by one of the cleaners. As he stepped into the palatial foyer, hordes of children were still running down the wide carpeted stairway and joining the flood of children pushing their way from the stalls. He stepped to one side and knelt down to tie his laces, sweating profusely, his shirt and baggy shorts clinging to him. It was as stifling in the expansive entrance as it had been

in the auditorium. A few yards away, by the Cinema Club table, he observed a smartly dressed man taking down notices advertising the benefits of belonging to the club; cycling groups and handicraft lessons. He was the choirmaster. A girl with long black plaits was hovering beside him.

'And then there's the Carol Competition in December,' the man was saying over his shoulder.

'And I can belong to the choir?' she asked eagerly.

'As long as you're not tone deaf,' and he gave a laugh.

She was very well spoken, thought Henry. He had never heard anyone at Saturday Morning Pictures sounding so lah di dah. He observed the way she stood bolt upright in her blouse and skirt as though her body had never known what the word slouch meant.

'You enjoy singing then?' asked the man.

'I *love* singing.'

Henry turned quickly before he was spotted and wandered over to the 'Coming Attractions'.

* * *

HE'S A FAMILY MAN! he read.
He poisons Uncle Henry . . . drowns Cousin Ascoyne
blows up Uncle Rufus . . . pierces Aunt Agatha
shoots Uncle Ethelred . . . explodes Cousin Henry
Ealing Studios present
DENIS PRICE . VALERIE HOBSON
JOAN GREENWOOD . ALEC GUINNESS in
A hilarious study in the gentle art of murder
KIND HEARTS and CORONETS
A BRITISH PICTURE

'Blast!' he muttered. It was an A film. That meant he would have to find an adult in the queue willing to take him in.

When he turned, the girl had disappeared. The choirmaster who was clearing the table caught his eye.

'I didn't notice your name among those auditioning for the choir,' he commented. 'You must be about thirteen now?'

'Fourteen, sir. It's my voice, see. It goes a bit up and down now.'

'Ah. Well why not come along to the auditions and

we'll see how you do. I'm sure we can squeeze you in again if you're up to the mark.'

Henry hesitated. He hated performing in public but Gran had told him what a wonderful singer his father had been and it made her feel good knowing he was carrying on the family tradition. Henry had let her think there wasn't a choir any more but she was bound to find out about the competition.

'I'll think about it, sir.'

'Good lad.'

He was about to leave when he spotted the girl again. It was difficult not to. She was the only still figure in the centre of the foyer. Oblivious to the children jostling around her, she stood with her head thrown back. Someone else was also observing her from the foot of the stairway. It was Pip, the smallest boy in his form, almost the smallest in the school. People said he ought to be a jockey and had nicknamed him Pipsqueak. Then it was shortened to Pip and it stuck.

A small, tired looking woman wearing a faded floral wrap-around overall was dragging an industrial

vacuum cleaner towards him, Pip smiled at her. Henry guessed she must be his mother. He looked away out of habit. Pip was nice enough but as everyone knew, you ignored people like Pip.

The foyer was almost empty now. He glanced back to where he had seen the girl but she had gone. He strolled over to where she had stood and looked up. Heavy dark beams criss-crossed the colossal arched ceilings like something out of a film about the Tudors. It was strange that in all the years he had been coming to the Plaza he had never looked upwards.

'Come on sonny.'

The commissionaire, a tall imposing man, was waiting patiently for Henry to leave. He was pulling on a large black coat with gold braid and buttons and his smart cap. Henry dawdled past the two box office windows and the chocolate girl. She had just finished wrapping a white overall around her waist and was hanging a tray of chocolates round her neck. Glancing at her he tried to think of yet another excuse to stay so that he could avoid going home but one look at the Commissionaire's raised eyebrows and he quickly

pushed open the nearest foyer door. Out on the stone steps, the August heat nearly knocked him sideways. Two queues for the matinee had already formed on the pavement and were beginning to trail down Victoria Road. It often struck Henry as strange how two roads, which joined each other could be so different. Victoria Road had been untouched by the bombing but all that remained in Henry's street were nine small houses clustered in front of a bombsite. A fence had been put up in front of it after the war to prevent children playing in the rubble but it had been broken for years and everyone used it as a short cut to Hatton Road and the railway station.

He was hopping down the steps when he spotted a familiar figure in khaki having a smoke.

'Charlie!' he yelled.

The nineteen-year-old turned and gave him a wave. Henry gaped at him in astonishment for Charlie's luxuriant mop of ginger curls had been shorn off. All that remained was a carrot coloured blur on his scalp. Charlie sprang to his feet, put on his black beret and slowly turned round in his Army uniform as if in a

fashion parade. Henry took in the huge polished black boots, gaiters and white blanco'd belt.

'Smart, eh?'

'Yeah. They didn't leave much hair on your head did they? What's it like?'

'It'll get better now I've finished Basic Training.'

'That bad eh?'

'I survived.' He shook his head and gave a short laugh. 'I dunno. One minute Dad says doing National Service will make a man out of me. The next minute he says don't volunteer for anything.' He took out a packet of woodbines from his pocket. 'I expect you'll get on better than me when it's your turn, your Dad being a hero and all that.'

'That was nine years ago.'

'Makes no difference. He sacrificed his life for another man.'

He pushed the packet of cigarettes in Henry's direction. Henry shook his head.

'Still think it's like burning money?'

'Burning cinema tickets,' said Henry.

'So what was it like?' asked Charlie indicating the

cinema. 'They still have the sing song with the Wurlitzer organ?'

'Yeah *and* the short films *and* the news *and* the cartoons *and* the serial *and* a bell ringing concert on stage. I had five Hopalong Cassidy's in front of me as well.'

'Why d'you still go?'

'It's cheap and sometimes they have a good film.'

'Roy Rogers?'

They grinned at one another. Henry couldn't stand Roy Rogers, a young singing cowboy who was always immaculately dressed even at the end of a gun battle.

'That too. But last week they had a film with Errol Flynn in it, *Sea Hawk*. It was good.'

'I dunno how you can stand the racket.'

'I can't,' said Henry, smiling.

'So, have you found someone else in the street to take you into the A films?'

He shook his head. He had missed Charlie's company in the queues. Charlie didn't mind him talking about the films. But he wasn't going to tell him that. He'd sound soft.

'When d' you get back?'

'Late last night. I got a seventy two.'

'What's that?'

'Seventy-two hours leave. So far, most of it's been used up, gettin' 'ere. So,' he added dragging on his cigarette, 'Where you off to?'

'Home' said Henry quietly.

'You don't sound too cheerful about it.'

They stared across the bombed landscape towards Hatton Railway Station, where his stepfather worked. A ring of smoke rose above Charlie's head.

'When do you have to go back?' Henry asked, changing the subject. He didn't let anyone know about the rows at home, not even Charlie.

'Tomorrow. I'll either get the coach from London just after midnight or get the one-thirty milk train.'

'Not long then?'

'Nah. Got to make the most of what I got left.'

'Yeah,' agreed Henry quietly.

'Good to see you, mate.'.

Henry took that as his cue to go. He gave a casual nod, turned the corner into his street past number 2

and headed for the broken fence. For a while he burrowed around in the long stretch of rubble for broken floorboards or scraps of material his mother could wash and use for making swathes of patchwork material, but his heart wasn't in it. He knew he was just filling in time to avoid walking into Number 6.

He crossed back over the road past half a dozen girls playing hopscotch and glanced through the front window. His Gran was sitting, flopped back in her armchair fanning herself with a magazine. As he opened the front door a screeching sound erupted from the kitchen followed by high-pitched laughter. He pressed his hands to his ears. How his mother could put up with it for a day let alone weeks mystified him. The kitchen door had been flung open and he caught sight of his half-sister running in circles at top speed round the kitchen table, shrieking her head off, her blonde curls bobbing up and down. He wondered how so much sound could emerge from someone so small.

His mother was closing the range door. She looked over her shoulder, her face flushed with the heat.

'She just needs to get out,' she said, smiling.

'I didn't say anything,' he protested.

'You didn't have to,' she said, 'your face! You look like you've walked into a horror film.'

He wanted to talk to her about going to see *Kind Hearts and Coronets* but it was impossible to think straight with Molly making such a racket. He wished he could be alone with his Mum, like they used to be before Molly was born. He glanced up at the shelves on the wall opposite the range, crammed with books. Sticking out between a Latin primer and a Geometry textbook on the top shelf was the unopened envelope. His mother turned hurriedly away.

'Auntie cross!' yelled Molly from her highchair and she pointed her spoon at Henry's Gran and banged it on the tray.

'She needs a good slap, that girl,' snapped Gran who sat slumped opposite her, scowling.

'It's just high spirits!' said Henry's mother nervously. 'You keep forgetting. She's only two.'

'Too noisy. Too messy. Too spoilt for her own good.'

Henry's mother gave a laugh.

'Now, Mrs Dodge, you don't mean that do you?'

'Don't I just?' she muttered.

'Now, let's enjoy the meal, shall we?' said his mother brightly. The atmosphere in the room was so tense that Henry thought his backbone would snap. Only Molly seemed not to notice the tension in the room As soon as his mother had begun stacking the dirty dishes and had placed a pan of potatoes on the range ready for when his stepfather returned home from the morning shift, his grandmother shuffled back to the front room

It was at about half past two when the door in the yard opened and Henry spotted a tall gangly figure in blue overalls and black cap through the back window. His mother visibly jumped. Molly froze for an instant and then started jumping up and down shouting, 'Daddy! Daddy!'

No sooner had he opened the scullery door into the kitchen than she flung herself at him. Within seconds she was in his arms. Struggling, he managed to put his tea can on the table.

'Hello love,' he said turning to Henry's mother and kissing her on the cheek.

This display of affection still embarrassed Henry even though his mother and Uncle Bill had been married for three years.

'Had a good day?' she asked automatically.

'Yes. I was on a steam engine. They needed extra trains for the holidaymakers so they had to use them as well as the electric ones.' He stopped and stared at her. 'It's come hasn't it?'

She nodded.

Now he'll get his come-uppance, Henry thought.

'And you haven't opened it?' he asked, struggling with Molly who was bouncing energetically in his arms.

'No.'

'Shall I take Molly into the yard?' Henry heard himself say.

'Molly not go!' she screamed, 'Molly STAY!'

His mother glanced at the wall, which divided his Gran's room from the kitchen.

'Molly, you don't want Auntie coming in here and telling you off again, do you?'

'And watching Uncle Bill open the envelope,' murmured Henry, under his breath.

His mother shot him a pleading look as if to say, '*don't you start too.*' She scooped Molly from her father's arms and handed her a wooden spoon. 'Come and do some stirring for me, Molly.'

By now Henry was fighting down the urge to smile. He knew that the letter would upset his mother but it was worth it to see his stepfather put in his place.

Uncle Bill took the envelope down and stared at it as though it was an unexploded bomb.

'Do you want me to . . .?' began his mother.

He shook his head and tore it open. He unfolded the letter and sat down slowly.

'*Trounced*,' thought Henry.

'I don't understand,' Uncle Bill murmured shakily.

'*But I do, Mister High and Mighty*,' thought Henry. '*Now Mum will see you for what you really are.*'

'Bill?'

'I've done it. I've got the Higher School Certificate. Advanced French. Advanced History. Advanced English.'

'Oh, Bill!' she cried and she stepped over Molly and flung her arms round him, her eyes filling.

Henry froze. *It must be a mistake. His stepfather was*

stupid. He couldn't have passed the examinations. He was all talk. Had ideas above his station. That's what Gran said.

There was a loud hammering at the front door.

'I'll get it,' said Henry needing to escape, and he stumbled into the hall.

Through the long windows at the top of the door he saw a bald head bobbing up and down. He had hardly opened it when a short portly man in a threadbare tweed suit and bowtie rocketed past him and flew into the kitchen.

'Mr Cuthbertson!' his mother exclaimed.'

Uncle Bill stood up.

'Don't keep me in suspense, man,' he said.

Speechless, Uncle Bill handed him the letter.

'By heaven, you've done it!' he exclaimed. 'I knew you would. Doors will be opened to you now.'

Uncle Bill gave a weary smile.

'Don't mention university again,' he began.

'No, no, no! Not university old chap. I'm talking about teaching. Because of the shortage of teachers there's an Emergency Training Scheme. It only takes a

year to train and you are more than qualified.'

'I'm a railwayman,' protested Uncle Bill.

'Smoke! Smoke!' yelled Molly, pointing to the potatoes which had begun to make a crackling sound.

'Oh no!' gasped his mother. As she grabbed the saucepan handle, Mr Cuthbertson suddenly dashed out of the kitchen crying, 'Stay there!' over his shoulder.

Minutes later he re-appeared, flanked by two pasty looking men. A cigarette was dangling from the mouth of one man and his companion was carrying a camera.

'*Sternsea Evening News*,' the photographer announced.

'Is that the letter?' asked the one with the cigarette, glancing at it on the table.

'The very one,' said Mr Cuthbertson and he handed it to him. 'He's been to classes with me, studied between shifts.'

'You're right, Mr Cuthbertson. It is a scoop. Working class man up there with the grammar school lot.'

'I'll take a shot of him outside the front door with the family,' commented the photographer.

'But I'm still in my overalls,' protested Bill.

'That's good. Now let's get outside into the light. And put your cap back on.'

As they walked through the hall to the front door, Henry tried to linger behind.

'What's going on?' said Gran opening her bedroom door. 'Oh hello, Mr Cuthbertson. Come to commiserate have you, dear?'

'Not to commiserate,' said Mr Cuthbertson wiping his glistening head with a handkerchief. 'To celebrate, Mrs Dodge. To celebrate,' and he dashed out the doorway.

Her face fell.

'He's got it,' said Henry numbly.

'What! He never has?' she whispered.

Henry nodded.

At that moment Henry's mother appeared carrying Molly. 'Henry?' and then she spotted Gran.

'I'm not coming out without Gran,' said Henry firmly.

'I thought you were having a nap, Mrs Dodge. I didn't want to disturb you,' and she reddened. 'I expect Henry's told you the news.' And she darted outside.

Gran took his arm.

'Come on,' she said. 'We Dodges will show 'em eh?'

Henry smiled. His Gran always made him feel better.

They found his mother and Uncle Bill huddled by the front door holding Molly's hands between them like gingerbread men.

'If you'd just close the door,' said the photographer cheerily.

By now the next-door neighbours had appeared and Henry was so embarrassed he wanted to disappear.

'Hold the little girl in your arms,' said the photographer to Henry's mother and he placed Gran next to her.

'And if you could just stand next to your dad,' he said waving at Henry.

'He's not my dad!' Henry said fiercely.

'*His* dad's a hero,' said Gran. 'Gave up his life to save another man's life. Pushed him aside during a bombing raid and took the blast. He should have been decorated.'

'Henry is my stepson,' Uncle Bill explained.

'Righti-ho,' said the photographer, 'so, if you could stand next to your *stepfather*.'

A short dumpy woman, who lived next door at number 8, suddenly appeared with a collection of clothes pegs wedged in her mouth, a bundle of nappies in her arms.

'What's goin' on, Maureen?' she asked, through the pegs.

'Bill's passed some examinations, Mrs Henson.'

'All eyes on me and cheese!' interrupted the photographer, 'and move a bit closer.'

They shuffled awkwardly towards one another.

'Cheer up, Mrs Carpenter,' he added winking at Henry's gran.

'I am not Mr Carpenter's or Mrs Carpenter's mother,' she snapped.

'Mrs Dodge is my previous husband's mother,' explained Henry's mum hurriedly. 'She moved in with us when she was bombed out.'

'And then *he* moved in with his grand ideas,' Gran said.

'Give me strength!' Henry heard the reporter murmur.

'Cheese again!' sang out the photographer at which point Molly suddenly stretched an arm upwards and laughed. 'That's my girl!'

Afterwards his grandmother escaped into her room.

'He'll make our lives even more of a misery now,' she complained.

Uncle Bill strode back in smiling. Henry wanted to hit him.

'I see there's a Dick Barton film on at the Gaiety,' he said jovially.

'I know,' murmured Henry, looking away.

Henry was annoyed to see his mother placing three tiny glasses filled with sherry on the table. His mother only brought out the sherry at Christmas. She handed one to Uncle Bill.

'Congratulations, love.'

'I couldn't have done it without you,' he said beaming.

Henry clenched his fists, remembering how he and his mother had to keep Molly away from him so that he could study upstairs in peace. Suddenly the door swung open and his Gran stood there, her face rigid.

Henry picked up the third sherry glass and handed it to her.

'And about time,' she said, her lips pursed. 'I wondered if you'd remember, Maureen.'

'Of course I remembered you. That's why I poured you a glass.'

'I'm not talking about me. You do know what day it is today, don't you?'

There was an uncomfortable silence.

She had forgotten, thought Henry bitterly. But he wasn't surprised. All she ever thought about now was his sissie stepfather.

'Seems not,' said his Gran. She flung her head back dramatically. 'Had he lived, it would be the birthday of Henry's father.' She raised her glass, 'To my beloved Alfred. Lest we forget,' she added pointedly.

2. Escape

'AT LEAST I TALK ABOUT HIS FATHER. YOU HAVEN'T FOR YEARS.'

'I leave that to you, Mother.'

'I've had to put up with a strange man moving into the house . . .'

'A strange man! How can you talk about Bill like that? If it hadn't been for him . . .'

Henry was sawing wood in the old air raid shelter the following afternoon when he overheard his mother and Gran in the kitchen.

'Well, what man spends all his time with books? Not like Henry. He's always doing odd jobs, deliveries, sawin' up wood, scavenging. Out in all weathers.'

'As is Bill at work,' added his mother, 'and he pays the rent and puts food on the table.'

'P'raps you don't talk about Henry's dad because you feel guilty. You married pretty quickly after his death.'

'I was a widow for five years!'

'Five years is nothing.'

Henry didn't like being around when they argued. He slipped out of the shelter, bolted through the door at the back of the yard and along the alley behind the houses, climbed over the pile of bricks next to Number 18 and headed for the bombsite opposite. Aside from a motorbike with its sidecar outside Number 14 and a few kids sitting on their front steps in their Sunday best, the road was deserted. He made his way to the Plaza to see *Kind Hearts and Coronets*.

Hovering at the foot of the cinema steps he watched the queues grow. He hated having to ask an adult to take him in to see an A film. Asking favours from anyone was embarrassing and he was shy of strangers. His attention was suddenly caught by a thin woman in her thirties who was waiting with a boy in his form called Jeffries, a boy whose company he had done his best to avoid for years. He recognised her instantly. She was his mother. Why couldn't they leave

Sternsea? No one wanted to know them so why did they stay? Why didn't they get the message? Gran said she thought Mrs Jeffries had sent her son to Henry's school out of spite and it did seem that way. He moved further away from them and spotted a short middle-aged woman wearing glasses, her hair pinned back into a dishevelled bun under a wide brimmed hat. She was absorbed in an orange paperback. He watched her absently scooping strands of hair behind her ears so that they trailed along her shoulders. He hesitated for a moment and then slowly drew nearer. He was about to speak when she turned a page with such speed that he changed his mind. It was obvious she had got to the exciting bit and wouldn't want to be interrupted. It was then that he noticed Charlie heading towards the back of the stalls' queue. He waved frantically.

'Will you take me in?' he called out.

'Yeah, 'course.'

Henry sauntered towards him, relieved.

'So, spill the beans,' said Charlie when he had reached him.

'About what?' asked Henry puzzled.

'Come on, mystery boy, everyone's talkin' about it. *The Sternsea Evening News*?' And he pulled out a half smoked cigarette out of his pack of woodbines.

'Oh that.'

'Yeah, that,' he said lighting the stub.

'It's my stepfather,' said Henry wearily. 'He's been learning from these books and going to classes between shifts.'

'And?' said Charlie taking a drag from the stub.

'He's just passed some exams.'

'What sort of exams?'

Henry sighed.

'Higher School Certificate,' he said putting on a snooty accent.

Charlie gave a long, low whistle.

'He must be really brainy!' he said. 'Like you.'

'I am not,' Henry protested. 'I'm nothing like him. I'm like my Dad.'

'You should have gone to the grammar school.'

'I'm happy where I am.'

What Charlie didn't know was that when Henry had

taken the eleven plus examination for the grammar school, he had written his name, put down his pen and folded his arms. He was determined to show whose footsteps he was going to follow. His mother had been upset but his Gran had understood.

'Henry's going to grow up to be a proper man who goes out and does things,' she had said. 'Not someone who reads about it in some book. He's his father's son,' she had added proudly.

'Is he goin' to leave the railways then?' asked Charlie.

Henry shook his head.

'So why did he take the examinations?'

'Because he's stupid,' Henry muttered.

As they reached the bottom step, Charlie asked suddenly. 'Do you mind if we sit apart?

'No, course not,' said Henry, minding a lot. He liked being with Charlie, in spite of his awkward questions. 'Is it because of my stepfather getting this certificate?'

'Nah,' laughed Charlie. 'It's . . .' He hesitated. 'It's a girl, see. One of the usherettes.'

'Do I know her?'

'Yeah. She lives in our street. Lily Bridges.'