Lovereading4kids.co.uk

Opening extract from

A Little Love Song

Written by

Michelle Magorian

Published by

Egmont

All text is copyright of the author and illustrator

Please print off and read at your leisure.

ONE

Rose gripped the handlebars and pressed hard against the pedals. Bumping and juddering along the uneven country road her black braids slapped her back. Above her, the sun appeared intermittently between leaden clouds. Once she reached the top of the hill she stood still, gasping for breath, her legs shaking uncontrollably. Below her, an expanse of pale green sea brushed against a tiny village and the surrounding coves and cliffs.

Two tiny lanes broke off from the main street of the village and led down to a jetty. The coastline to the left of it curved into a small V-shaped bay where a handful of boats were moored, except for one with a red sail which swayed and leaned through the water. On a narrow peninsula stood a manor house.

Three whole months here, she thought, three blissful months of no school. Three months when she could write for as long as she wanted. She just hoped she could finish one really decent story, one that she didn't have to keep writing in fits and starts and shelving for months at a time. She felt so hemmed in, by her age, by her school, by her family. The war had been going on for nearly four years and what had she done? Nothing, aside from collecting bits of salvage, and helping raise miserly amounts of money. If she didn't have to go back to her wretched school she could have registered for call-up in five months on her eighteenth birthday.

She glanced back over her shoulder. There was no sign of her sister. She pushed off again. She knew she was being mean but she had so little opportunity to be by herself that she wanted to make the most of it.

Careering down to the village she took in the cluster

of whitewashed cottages with their grey tiled roofs. There was a strong whiff of fish. She stopped at the foot of the hill, left her bicycle by the wall of the end cottage nearest the beach and swung open the gate. A short plump woman in her fifties answered the door. She was holding a long empty pea-pod.

'Excuse me, is this Salmouth?' asked Rose. 'I'm not a foreign spy,' she added, pulling out a crumpled identity card from her pocket.

'That's right, dear.'

'I'm supposed to be meeting someone at the church. Can you tell me where it is?'

' 'Tis jest up and round a bit.' She waved the pod in the direction of the street. 'You jest carry on up this here road, past the two lanes and the corner pub, then takes the first turning on yer right. You can't miss it.'

A strange scuffling noise from the floor caused Rose to glance down. An ancient dog had flopped into a wrinkled heap at the woman's feet.

'This is Rumple,' announced the woman, and she gazed fondly at him.

Rose squatted down and ruffled his fur.

'On holiday, are you?' the woman asked.

'Sort of.'

'That's nice. We don't see many people down here now, what with most of the beaches havin' barbed wire round 'em and petrol being rationed. It's bicycle or shanks's pony if you want to get around here.' She paused. 'And Harold's carthorse. But he looks as old as Rumple.'

Rose grinned. 'Who? The horse or Harold?'

The woman laughed. 'Why both!' she said.

Rose stroked the dog's chest. 'I think Rumple is very nice.'

'Oh, everyone's fond of him. He misses the boys

though, don't you, old thing?'

Rose was about to ask but stopped herself.

'That's my four,' explained the woman. 'All in the forces. John's in the navy. He's in India. Robert's in the R.A.F. He's stationed in Norfolk, and my other two are in the army. Keith's in the Far East and the youngest, Barry, is in a P.O.W. camp in Germany.'

Rose stood up. 'Oh, I am sorry,' she said quietly.

'At least I know he won't be doing any fightin' for a while. And I can send Red Cross parcels to him. Will you be stayin' long?'

'Three months,' answered Rose guiltily. 'My mother's an actress. She's going abroad with E.N.S.A. They take shows out to the troops. She's sort of evacuated me and my sister out here till she comes back. There's a woman who'll be looking after us. It's all arranged.'

'Oh well, I expect I'll be seeing a lot of you then.'

Suddenly Rose found herself holding out her hand. The woman looked surprised for a moment and then gave it a vigorous shake. Her palm felt warm and firm, Rose noted.

'My name's Mrs Clarence.'

Rose smiled. 'I'm Rose, but most people call me Roe.'

'Where are you stayin'?'

'Lapwing Cottage.'

The woman frowned. 'Sure it's *Lapwing*?'

'Yes. Why?'

Mrs Clarence stared at her for a moment.

'I didn't think the major would be rentin' it out again. Still, no harm, eh?'

There was an awkward silence.

'Must dash,' said Rose and she backed down the garden path to retrieve her bicycle.

She cycled up the main street past two lanes and a pub on the corner and turned into a lane on her right. A hundred metres up a slope stood a small grey-stoned church with a bell tower. She hopped off the bike and leaned it against a tree just inside the church gate. As there was still no sign of her sister, she decided to run down to the harbour and take a quick look.

She headed towards an empty fishmonger's shop at the corner and peered in. Two inert crabs decorated the window shelf. They peered back at her. She was about to walk past the bookshop next door when she caught sight of her reflection in the dusty glass and scowled. Why did she have to be the awful-looking one in the family? Trust her to be the thin ugly one with a Cinderella for a sister. The ugly duckling who would never, never turn into a swan.

She thought of Diana, green-eyed, tall and built like a perfectly proportioned Greek statue. Rose's eyes were dishwater-grey and she had such small breasts she was sure no one would notice if she wore a brassiere or not.

A small bell jangled as she pushed the door of the bookshop open. Hundreds of second-hand books were scattered in neglected piles across the floor. She stepped gingerly over them and tried to manoeuvre her way round the central bookcase. In front of a book-lined alcove stood a cluttered table and chair. Beside it, wide wooden stairs sloped up to the next floor.

'Hello,' said a voice from above. 'Can I help you?'

Rose jumped.

A faded pair of baggy corduroy trousers was making its way down the stairs. The owner of the trousers was the scruffiest-looking man Rose had ever seen. His brown hair stuck out wildly and continued round his

chin and mouth into a shaggy ginger-streaked beard. His skin was so pale that his large brown eyes appeared almost black. She guessed he must be in his late twenties or early thirties, but it was difficult to tell.

'No, thank you,' she replied politely. 'I was just looking.'

'Holidaying, are you?'

'Sort of. We're here for three months.'

'Three months!'

'Yes. We're staying at Lapwing Cottage. Do you know it?'

He flinched. 'Yes,' he said quietly. 'I know it.'

Suddenly she was conscious of how out of place she must look in her navy gymslip and school blouse and she reddened. She pulled her watch hastily from her pocket and moved towards the door.

'Must dash. Er... what times are you open?'

'Nine till six. And watch out for that pile of books. You're about to go flying.'

She left the door banging behind her. As she tore up the lane she muttered angrily to herself. Why on earth had she blushed like that? But she knew. It was the man's eyes. They had met hers with such frankness and amusement that it alarmed her. It was almost as if he already knew her.

She skidded round the corner and sprinted in the direction of the church.

Diana was leaning wearily against the church wall, her bicycle propped up against her, her cardigan knotted round her waist. She looked worried. As soon as she spotted Rose, she threw back her thick chestnut plaits and straightened up.

Really, their mother was ridiculous making them braid their hair, thought Rose. Diana was almost

twenty-one! Rose would gladly have had hers cut if she hadn't been afraid of looking like a boy.

'Have you been waiting long?' asked Rose.

'No,' said Diana, 'but that's not the point. You shouldn't have gone on ahead. You could have got lost. Then what would I have done? I don't even know if this is Salmouth. The signposts have been taken down.'

'Oh, but it is. I've asked.'

'Country people often give strangers the wrong directions in case they're the enemy.'

'We hardly look like German parachutists,' said Rose, and she started to giggle. 'Has Mr Thingummy come yet?'

'No. It's a good job he hasn't,' said Diana. 'It'd have been embarrassing if I'd had to tell him I'd lost you. And his name is Mr Partridge.'

'Oh yes. So it is.' She stuck out her stomach. 'Afternoon,' she drawled. 'I'm Mr Pa-a-artridge.'

'Please,' begged Diana in a whisper. 'Here he comes.'

A tall stocky man with a red face and a large belly was walking in their direction. A battered cap which appeared to have shrunk was perched precariously on his balding head.

'Afternoon,' he said leaning back. 'I'm Mr Pa-a-artridge.'

Diana avoided looking at Rose.

'You're the Miss Highly-Robinsons, I take it?'

'Yes. How do you do?' said Diana politely.

'So, you're havin' a go at Lapwing Cottage?' he said, ignoring her outstretched hand.

'Yes. We've been looking forward to our stay there,' said Diana, smiling and glancing up the lane. 'Which one of these cottages is it?'

'Oh, it ent in the centre of Salmouth. It's along they cliffs.' And he waved his hand towards the sea.

'But I was told it was in Salmouth,' she said.

'It's that all right, but Salmouth stretches outward quite a bit.'

'I see. Is it far?'

' 'Bout a mile or two.'

'Oh,' said Diana, disappointed.

The man smirked, turned on his heel and headed for the main street.

It took all their strength to push their heavily loaded bicycles up the slope from the beach to the coastal path above the cliffs.

'He could at least offer to help,' panted Diana.

But Mr Partridge strode on ahead, pausing only now and then to make sure he was being followed. Rose hauled her bicycle over a small rock, and wheeled it past Diana. She was determined to keep up with Mr Partridge. She was beginning to feel tired but she was blowed if she was going to show it.

Mr Partridge was now well ahead. Rose gave her bicycle a determined push. Once she had caught up with him, she kept up a steady pace alongside.

Gazing out at the sea she felt a flutter of excitement. 'Yes,' she said firmly. 'I'll learn to swim this summer.'

'You won't do no swimming round here,' said Mr Partridge. 'That little beach in town's the only one for miles that ent got barbed wire round it. It's a funny old beach too. Dangerous. The sea's up to yer knees one minute and over yer head the next. No. You won't get no chance to swim round here. Not unless you go to one of the coves, and then you can only get to those by boat. And no one'd let you borrow one. No. Ent no hope of you swimmin' round here.'

Oh yes there is, Mr Doom and Gloom Pa-a-artridge, thought Rose.

After what seemed like five days, Rose spotted a small white unkempt cottage, with weeds and brambles growing wild round it.

Mr Partridge stopped. 'There she be,' he said.

Rose gaped at it. 'Rightyho,' she said, matter of factly. She stared at all the unploughed wilderness. It puzzled her to see so much land being wasted. In London, people were even growing carrots in window boxes. 'I'll wait for my sister, Mr Partridge, if you'd like to go on.'

He nodded and carried on walking.

'On no!' cried Diana, when she saw the cottage. 'That's not *it*, is it?'

'I'm afraid so,' said Rose.

'We can't possibly stay here.'

'It's not so bad,' said Rose.

'Oh well, as long as I can have a hot bath,' Diana began weakly, but she was too tired to finish her sentence.

'Here goes then,' Rose whispered.

They pushed their bicycles forward and headed for their holiday home.

Mr Partridge was waiting for them by a small wooden gate. The paint had been stripped off by wind and salt spray. He pushed it open, and they struggled up the overgrown pathway, towards a door. It was unlocked.

Mr Partridge lowered his head and entered the kitchen. At the end of one of the whitewashed walls stood a black range. In the centre of the room was a scrubbed wooden table and three chairs.

Rose noticed a large oil lamp on the table. No electricity, she thought, or gas. She opened the window over the sink and stuck her head out. Standing

in the middle of wild flowers, unpicked vegetables, high grass and apple trees was a solid black object.

'A pump!' she yelled. 'We've our own pump!'

'Mr Partridge,' began Diana, eyeing the sink, 'where are the taps?'

'Taps? There ent no taps here, ma'am. That's what the pump's for.'

Inside a cupboard to the left of the sink were three cups, three plates, three sets of cutlery, one saucepan, two glasses, some jam jars, a wooden tub, a broom, a bucket, a mop and various cleaning materials. On one of the shelves were a jug of milk, a bowl of eggs, bread, and a pat of butter, a teapot and enough tea to make a few pots.

'Mrs Partridge has laid the range for you.'

He pointed to where piles of wood were stacked neatly in order of size beside it. 'The major likes to give you a head start, see.'

Diana clasped her hands anxiously. She stared at Mr Partridge and opened her mouth but no sound came out.

'I'll show you where the latrine is,' he said.

Rose and Diana followed him out of the kitchen into a narrow corridor. As he opened the door into the garden, Rose spotted a zinc tub hanging on a hook behind it. 'That's the bath, I suppose.'

He nodded.

In the garden stood what appeared to be a miniature shed. Mr Partridge had no sooner lifted the latch when one of the hinges broke and the door crashed into an awkward diagonal. They peered in. A square wooden seat with a hole in it stood over a deep trench.

'What happens when it gets full?' asked Rose, mesmerised by the depth of the pit.

'You won't stick it long enough to find out. You're

our third lot to stay. The others didn't last a week. Too scared.'

'Why? Is it haunted?'

'Roe, don't ask such silly questions!' exclaimed Diana.

'So they say. Miss Hilda, that's the lady who used to live here, were a bit mad, see.'

'Really! What, screaming mad?'

'Roe!'

'Oh no, she weren't dangerous, like. Well, not that I know of.' He lowered his voice. 'She was just a bit *queer*, you know. See that door in the corridor, that's where her things are. They're all locked up. Been in there since last autumn when she died.' He straightened up. 'Since her death I've been collecting the rent for her brother Major Withers, which,' he emphasised again, 'ent never been for long. Still, you're all paid up till the end of September so that's one job I won't have to do, isn't it?' And he gave a smug smile.

'No,' murmured Diana.

'You won't need me to show you the bedrooms. My wife left clean sheets and pillow cases up there for you. If you need to use a telephone,' he added significantly, 'the nearest one is at the farm over the hill. That's the Acres' place. 'Course I wouldn't stay if I was you. If you got ill or died of fright it'd be months before your bodies were found.'

They stood by the steps and watched him leave.

'Thank goodness he's gone,' said Rose. She gazed back at the garden. 'Don't you love it?'

Diana looked doubtful.

'Take no notice of him. He's just trying to scare us off. Let's start unpacking, before Miss Hutchinson arrives.'

Diana paled. 'Oh no. I knew there was something I had to ask! I don't know what time she's supposed to be arriving.'

'Oh, come on!' said Rose. 'Let's get started.'

She dragged her two pairs of bicycle bags up the stairs, her sister trailing on behind.

They found themselves standing in a sparsely furnished bedroom, facing the main garden. A pile of freshly laundered sheets was stacked on a single bed.

'This is Miss Hutchinson's room, I suppose,' said Diana.

Rose slipped quickly out of the room and opened the next door off the landing. It was a tiny hallway room. She guessed it must have once been part of the landing. In front of the garden window was a table and chair. The table would be ideal for her writing. Let's hope Miss Hutchinson doesn't bag that, she thought.

She carried her bicycle bags into the bedroom but when she saw the view from the far window she dropped them and ran towards it. Flinging it open she leaned towards the sea. Clusters of lilac-pink flowers grew out of the wall and shook as a salt breeze wafted in. Rose breathed in deeply.

It was certainly a strange cottage. The main garden was at the side and the front door faced the lane. To her it seemed lopsided. She felt that the front of the cottage ought to face the sea.

She drew herself back into the room. Two mahogany beds stood on either side of the garden window. She grabbed the end of one and pulled it on its castors towards the coastal window.

She hung her gymslip and dress in the wardrobe and dumped the rest of her clothing in the chest of drawers.

She had just changed into a pair of shorts when she

heard shouting coming from downstairs. She ran out of the room.

Diana was in the kitchen holding a letter.

'It was on the table,' she said. 'It's from Miss Hutchinson. She's been called up!'

TWO

'He knew all the time,' muttered Rose. 'He must have hung around until we'd gone upstairs and then sneaked in with the letter.'

Diana sank into one of the chairs. 'I'd better ring Mother up and tell her we're coming home,' she said.

'We can't do that,' said Rose. 'She'd drop out of the E.N.S.A. revue.'

'That's hardly our fault, is it? Miss Hutchinson should have let her know sooner.'

'But she didn't,' said Rose slowly, 'and Mother doesn't even know now.'

'She'll be awfully shocked when she does,' said Diana, 'especially when she knows we'll have to spend the night alone.'

'Not if she doesn't.'

'What do you mean?'

'We don't have to tell her.'

'Let her think Miss Hutchinson is with us tonight?' said Diana. 'And then break the news tomorrow so she won't worry?'

'No.' Rose paused. 'I mean, not tell her at all.'

'I don't understand,' said Diana.

Rose dragged a chair out and sat down. 'The rent's

all paid up. Why not just stay anyway? Let Mother think Miss Hutchinson's here and that everything is fine.'

'*Lie* to her?' said Diana, aghast.

'It's only half a lie. After all, everything *is* fine, isn't it?'

'It certainly isn't.'

'Diana, you can't tell her. She'll back out of doing this show and let someone else take her part. You know she will.'

'We could wait until she's gone and stay with Aunt Em.'

'She starts rehearsals at Birmingham Rep. next week,' Rose reminded her.

'We can't stay here on our own.'

'Why not?'

'Who's going to cook our meals and wash our clothes?'

'We don't have to have meals. We can eat sandwiches and dip our clothes in a bucket of water every now and then.'

'And who's going to chaperone us?' asked Diana.

'We can chaperone each other.'

'But what would people think? Two girls on their own?'

'We're not girls.'

'You are.'

'But you're not. A lot of people are married by your age.'

'Look at you,' said Diana, waving her finger at Rose's shorts. 'As soon as you're out of Mother's sight, you go and put those things on. I bet she doesn't even know you've packed them.'

'Aunt Em thinks they're all right.'

'That's because she made them.'

'Diana, this is Salmouth, not London. They're far more respectable than skirts. At least the wind can't blow them up and show your knickers.'

'Please,' said Diana, shocked. 'Don't use that word.'

There was a moment's silence.

'Well,' said Rose. 'What do you think?'

Diana shook her head.

'We can't,' she said. 'We don't even know how to cook an egg let alone get a range going. And what about ironing and shopping? We wouldn't know where to start. It's no good, Roe, we'll have to go home.' She gave a dismal sigh. 'At least Timothy will be pleased.'

Rose took a deep breath. She was sick of the sound of that boy's name. A besotted lapdog, he was forever turning up on the doorstep with envelopes containing the drippiest poems imaginable. Diana couldn't cope with it but she was too kind-hearted to send him packing.

'I think you're being mean. Mother's heartbroken since Father's death. This is the first time in ages that she's started to look happy again. You know how long it took for Aunt Em to persuade her to go to an audition. And now that she's got the job and has gone to all the trouble of evacuating us out here, so that we'll be nice and safe, while she risks her life and goes off to the Far East, you want to stop the whole thing because you're too selfish and too scared to spend three months looking after yourself.'

'Just look at us,' said Diana. 'We've only been here an hour and we're quarrelling. And that's what we'd be doing all the time. You know we would.'

'Mother's good on stage,' said Rose ignoring her. 'You know she is. She'll boost the troops' morale and...'

She stopped. She could see it was useless.

'I suppose I'd better go up to that farm and telephone,' said Diana at last. She looked hesitantly at her. 'Would you like to come with me?'

'No, I wouldn't,' yelled Rose, making for the door.

'Where are you going?'

'For a *long* walk. After all, I might as well make the most of my short stay here.'

'Roe,' began Diana. 'Please...'

Rose slammed the door. As she tore down the path, a long sucker caught her blouse and scratched her arm. She pulled it off angrily and flung back the gate.

She sat on a grassy tussock near the coastal path seething, her knuckles pressed hard into her forehead. 'I'll refuse to eat a thing,' she muttered. That'd get her, she thought; that'd make her feel guilty. If there was one weapon she could hold over people it was her ability to go without food for days. That's what she did at school if her pocket money was stopped as a punishment for losing her temper. By the third day of starving herself the teachers' manner towards her changed dramatically.

'Now come on, Rose,' they'd plead. 'You must eat.'

'I'm sorry,' she'd reply, 'but I just don't feel hungry.'

Sometimes it was true. She didn't feel hungry.

She raised her head and stared out at the sea. If she was honest, she was being just as selfish as Diana. She had longed for this holiday. It was the one thing which had kept her sane throughout the summer term. Now they would have to return to London and her mother would be hovering over them all the time. If Rose so much as sat anywhere for a think or a scribble, she would be either made to *do* something, or her mother would want to read what she had written. Rose couldn't bear to show her writing to anyone. Not that

she ever did. Except Aunt Em, sometimes. She wondered what Timothy would say if he knew that her sister showed her his poems.

'Oh, Diana!' she said crossly. With her looks she had nothing to worry about, yet she worried about everything and that included drippy Timmy's feelings. 'But what if...?' she began, mimicking her sister's favourite expression. How anyone so striking could lack so much confidence beat Rose. Diana had always had it easy, she thought bitterly. She had never been expected to pass exams by her father. She was just loved for herself, whereas Rose was constantly having to win his praise. Now, because she was too frightened to stay, they would have to go home and put up with Timothy. For a moment she felt a flicker of sympathy for her sister. Timothy was the only male in her life who had the courage to come near her. Diana was so beautiful she scared all the others away.

And then she had an awful thought. Suppose Diana was right about him. Suppose Timothy wasn't ghastly and that it was being in love which caused him to behave the way he did.

'If that's what love does to you, I'd rather not have anyone fall in love with me,' she muttered.

She tugged at a large clump of grass and tore it out of the earth.

Not that anyone would. She looked too much like a boy.

'Oh hell!' she yelled, and she hurled the grass into the air.

A gust of wind caught some of the blades and carried them to a ledge. Rose lay on her stomach and looked down. Below her was a cove. It was obviously one of the coves Mr Pa-a-artridge had gone on about; the ones you could only reach by boat.

'Really?' she said to herself. 'We'll see about that, Mr Pa-a-artridge.'

She gripped the rocks and placed her feet carefully on a jutting edge. Peering down she realised that if she swayed from side to side, and stretched her legs out far enough, there was actually what appeared to be a set of uneven steps. She lowered herself down to the next ridge. Halfway down she stumbled and slid down some loose stones, grazing her knee against a piece of rock. She stood still for a moment to catch her breath.

She bent her knees, grabbed a thick branch near her waist and lowered herself carefully on to the next ledge. Now what, she thought. She looked in vain for something else to grip. There was another piece of rock at the end of the ledge. She slid herself along towards it and tested it out to make sure it wouldn't crumble under her weight. It was solid and there was a larger rock underneath. She just needed to lower herself a little bit further and she would virtually be able to jump.

She made it to the large rock and stretched a leg to a ledge which stood diagonally above another one. Don't rush, she told herself. Once she reached the next ledge other ones were easier to find. She leapt on to the ground, threw off her sandals and ran across the beach. The water swirled in from the sea, throwing itself flatly across the sand and up into a fine spray on the rocks.

Rose sank down and pushed her toes into the sand. She felt so private and safe. Surrounded by a semicircle of pink and grey cliffs, her only companions were the seagulls perched high on the ledges above her.

Her anger had somehow left her. Instead, she felt sad.

A gull flew from one of the rocks. She watched it soar and glide and settle on another one.

I ought to go back, she thought dismally. She picked up her sandals, dragged her feet towards the cliff and took a last look at the cove, trying not to cry.

Approaching the cottage she noticed that Miss Hilda's locked room had blackout curtains across the window. They stood out starkly, a dark square patch in the centre of the peeling white walls. Now she'd never have a chance of seeing what was behind them.

Diana was waiting for her at the gate. 'Worried as usual,' muttered Rose.

'What did Mother say then?' she snapped. 'When do we have to go back?'

'I haven't phoned yet. I've decided to stay.'

'Oh,' cried Rose astonished. 'You *are* a brick!'

Diana gave a shy laugh.

'Not really. If I'm home for my twenty-first, Mother will organise a big formal do and invite every relative still living. I'd hate it.' She paused. 'Will you come with me then? I'm not very good at lying.'

'Oh, I feel as if I can breathe again,' said Rose. 'Yes, of course I'll come!'

'Roe,' said Diana quietly.

'Yes.'

'I'm terrified.'

'What of?'

'Of failing at everything. I'm so stupid.'

'I'm the one who fails, remember? You're the one who passed all their exams.'

'That was a fluke,' said Diana. 'And anyway they were secretarial exams. They're hardly as important as...' She stopped.

'As what?'

'Oh, nothing.'

'If it helps,' said Rose, 'I'm a bit scared too.'

'Oh dear.'

'But not that scared. Come on,' she said, linking arms with her sister. 'Let's get it over with.'

The next morning, after failing to get into the locked room, Rose examined the garden. Flowers and leaves of varying sizes had long since grown over the borders which surrounded the tiny lawn of waist-high grass. There was a strong whiff of honeysuckle. Rose stood back and stared up at the wall. Pale pink and yellow flowers trailed and sprawled up to Diana's bedroom window.

Wild flowers had invaded the foot of the garden, their yellow, blue, pink and lilac heads bobbing among untended vegetable patches. Rose pushed her way through a clump of green leaves so tall they almost obliterated the rough stone wall which was strangled in undergrowth. 'Rhubarb,' she whispered.

The stalks were green but for a pink glow at the roots. She released them and moved with difficulty through to the wall. Clumps of blackberry bushes appeared to be keeping company with some pale pink fruit. At first she thought they were raspberries, but they were longer in shape.

She turned and gazed at the apple trees by the latrine, under her window, and the two at the end of the garden. Unripe green apples hung from their branches. Thanks to Miss Hilda, they'd be all right for fruit.

She squatted down, disappearing into a miniature jungle. 'What I need to find out is what a weed looks like. It would be awful if I killed a prize marrow by mistake.'

She rose from her hiding place and headed for the

kitchen. Diana was sitting at the table, staring with fixed concentration at a shopping list. She looked desperate.

'Don't worry,' said Rose. 'We'll be all right. I've discovered rhubarb, blackberries and something pink in the garden.'

She caught sight of some numbers scrawled down on the paper. 'What on earth are you *doing*?'

Diana looked anxious. 'I'm trying to calculate how many points I've used up. Roe, I don't even know which shops we ought to register at. Miss Hutchinson was going to do all that. Do you seriously think we can do it?'

'Of course we can.' She sat down beside her sister. 'If we can last until next week, we'll be fine. We've enough money for this weekend...'

'But Mother's arranged for Miss Hutchinson to collect the money every week from the local post office. I don't think they'd allow *me* to draw the money out instead.'

'I've been thinking about that.' She touched Diana gently on the arm. 'Do you think you can tell another tiny lie? Remember Mother won't be able to see you blushing.'

Diana sighed. 'Go on.'

'Explain that the post office is two miles away, that it doesn't seem fair that it should always be Miss Hutchinson who has to go to collect the weekly money, so could she authorise it to be collected by you *or* Miss Hutchinson? After all, if Miss H. was here and she came down with bubonic plague, we'd be stumped, wouldn't we?'

'What if Miss Hutchinson tells her she's been called up? Mother'll never be able to trust me again.'

'But Miss H. left the letter to be delivered by hand. If

you're worried, you could always write to her, thanking her for the letter, and tell her that you've let Mother know.'

'It's awfully risky.'

'You're not backing out, are you? Look, Mother'll be leaving next week. If we can just keep our heads till then, we'll be sailing!'

Diana picked up the list and stared at it.

'I'm sure Mrs Clarence will help us with the shopping,' said Rose. 'She's the woman who directed me to the church. The one I told you had an old dog. The one who didn't think I was a German parachutist.'

Diana smiled.

Rose stood on the tip of the slope. Below her lay the beach. She waited for Diana to catch her up before descending into the village. 'Not long now,' she said reassuringly.

Diana responded with a nod. Speaking was too much effort. She trailed after her. The pinkish dust from the pathway flew up soiling her white shoes.

Rose waited for her again at the foot of the cliffs before heading across the beach. She swung open the gate to Mrs Clarence's cottage.

'Are you sure we should?' asked Diana.

But before Rose had knocked on the door Mrs Clarence opened it, a tea towel in her hands. She beamed. 'Come in,' she said. 'You must be the sister.'

'Are we disturbing you?' said Diana.

'Not at all. I was just drying up the lunch things. You look worn out. I'll make you some tea.'

'Oh, but...' started Diana.

'Go on with you. Sit down!'

Diana sank gratefully into a chair.

Rumple, who was slumped by the unlit hearth, raised his head for a brief moment, gave a sniff and let his chin flop back to its original place.

A clock ticked loudly on the mantelpiece. Two photographs of young men in uniform stood on either side of it, a third on the wireless which stood on a table and a fourth on top of a small china cabinet.

'Her sons,' explained Rose.

Mrs Clarence came out of the kitchen carrying two bowls of vegetable soup and several slices of buttered home-made bread.

'We don't want to deprive you of your butter ration,' said Diana.

'There's plenty more where that comes from. We're not so fussy on points here. I've a friend who's got cows. She gives me butter in exchange for a few veggies and a bit of knittin'. Now,' she said firmly, 'you eat that up. I don't expect you got over hearing Miss Hutchinson's been called up yet.'

They stared at her, astonished.

'You'll get used to it. People knowing what's goin' on. I know old Harold, see. He works up at the Partridges' and at my friend's farm doin' odd jobs. So what are you going to do then? Go back home?'

'No,' said Rose. 'We've decided to stay. Without Miss Hutchinson.'

'That's nice. There's someone else who can look after you then?'

'I'm going to look after us,' said Diana suddenly.

Mrs Clarence looked shocked. 'You can't stay up there on your own. Who's going to cook and wash for you?'

'Us,' said Rose.

'I'm nearly twenty-one,' said Diana. 'It's about time I learnt.'

'But you're not brought up to it,' protested Mrs Clarence. 'Would you like me to ask around and see if I can get you a maid?'

'That's very kind of you, Mrs Clarence, but no thank you. Anyway, I don't think you'd find one. Most of them have been called up.'

At this Diana blushed violently.

Rose knew the reason for her sister's embarrassment. It was because Diana still wasn't in uniform. Thanks to their mother's persuasive tactics and much string-pulling, she had managed to keep Diana at home.

'What does your mother say about you bein' on your own?'

Diana opened her mouth and reddened again.

'She trusts us,' said Rose, rescuing her. 'Doesn't she, Diana?'

Diana nodded.

'"There are not many mothers who trust their daughters in your situation," ' Rose blundered on. '"But I trust you." That's what she said.'

Mrs Clarence gave a sigh.

'Oh well, I s'pose it's all right then. You both seem so young though. Still, you all got to grow up quicker now,' and she gazed at them sadly for a moment.

'We were going to ask you about the shops here,' said Rose quickly.

'I'll take you round.'

'Oh, would you?' blurted out Diana.

Mrs Clarence laughed. 'Of course.'

'You don't need me to come, do you?' asked Rose.

Diana looked anxious. 'Why? Where are you going?'

'Only to a bookshop. I can post your letter to Timothy for you on the way.'

'No thank you.'

'Yes. I suppose you'd better do it. I might *accidentally* lose it.'

Mrs Clarence gave a sudden cry.

'You haven't planned to do anythin' this evening, have you?' she asked. 'Only the Women's Institute are havin' a special Kitchen Front talk tonight. It's all about what you can make with yer rations. Would you be interested in comin' with me? You might find it useful.'

'Yes, please,' answered Diana.

Rose stared horrified at them. She couldn't imagine anything more boring. To her relief she realised that she hadn't been included in the invitation.

'And when we come back from the shops,' continued Mrs Clarence, 'I can show you both how to cook a few simple dishes.'

'Oh, Mrs Clarence, that is kind of you,' said Diana.

'I'll be off then,' said Rose abruptly. 'Thanks for the soup, Mrs Clarence,' and she hurriedly made for the door.

Rose had just reached the bookshop when a tall spectacled youth in shorts and sandals came flying out of the doorway. She stepped back quickly. Within seconds he had disappeared round the corner towards the beach.

'Excuse me!' she said loudly after him.

The shop was empty; the door still open. She slipped in carefully. She didn't want the little bell to ring and bring the man down.

Moving swiftly round the shelves she looked for something on human biology. She knew the basics from girls in her dormitory, but their stories contradicted one another and they left too many questions unanswered. She had scanned the biology

books at school for any information about how babies came about, but the nearest she got to it was a chapter on the reproductive life of the stickleback.

'Can I help?'

Rose jumped. The book-man was standing on the stairway.

'What?' she said, feeling herself blush.

'Are you looking for anything in particular?'

'No. I was just browsing.'

He slid his hands into his pockets and gazed down at her, making Rose uncomfortable. She was usually the one who played observer. She glanced at his shorts and plimsolls.

'Yes. Derry tells me off for wearing them too.'

'Derry?'

'My young cousin. He's staying here. You must have caught sight of him leaving.'

'I did. He bumped right into me.'

'Ah.' He paused. 'And how are you finding Lapwing Cottage?'

'I love it.'

He smiled, his eyes distant. And then he moved briskly down the rest of the steps.

'You're my first customer of the day. Do you want to be left alone to browse or would you like me to recommend something? You don't have to buy. You can borrow if you like, seeing as you're here for so long.'

She suddenly noticed that her hands were covered in dust. She brushed them against her shorts.

'Am I really your first customer?'

'Yes. They don't go in for reading much here in the summer. Only when it's raining. I keep a mixture of light and heavy for them down here.'

'Light and heavy?'

'Romances, thrillers, the odd Dickens and a few art books.'

'What happens in the winter?'

'Much busier. At Christmas it's packed.'

Rose noticed that the edges of the man's eyes were pink and that the shadows underneath them had grown darker. She let her hands drift across a set of Agatha Christies.

'How old are you?' he asked suddenly.

'Seventeen and three quarters.'

'Read any D. H. Lawrence?'

'He's banned, isn't he?'

'Some of his books are.'

He walked up the stairs.

'Come on up. I'll find some of his poems for you.'

Rose followed him, groaning inwardly. Memories of standing up in turn at school reciting endless verses of 'How they brought the Good news from Ghent to Aix' for the weekly literature mark came flooding back. She was about to tell him not to bother, but as soon as she stepped off the tiny landing into the next room, she changed her mind.

She had never seen such a bookish living room. Bookcases and shelves stretched upwards to the ceiling and unplaced volumes lay scattered about the floor. Only one wall remained empty. Leaning up against it were paintings and prints. The window above them looked out on to the bay.

In the centre of the room were two large armchairs and a low table. There were books on the mantelpiece, by the grate, and on a stool by one of the armchairs.

'May I open the window?' she said.

He picked up his pipe from the mantelpiece and stuffed it with tobacco. 'Go ahead.'

She flung it open and leaned out. The thunder of distant guns jerked her back inside.

'There's an army camp about fifteen miles inland,' he explained. 'It's probably one of their practices.'

'Oh,' she said and she leaned back out again.

'Now, young lady, let's choose some books for you.'

Oh Lord, he was going to get her some of those awful poems. She followed him into the adjoining room. It was a kitchen that he seemed to be using as a study. In between the range, the sink and the larder were piles of paper. Like the living room it, too, was overflowing with books. A table was pushed up by a window overlooking the sea. It looked like a general dumping ground. He brushed papers and envelopes aside revealing a heavy black typewriter underneath.

'Now where is that damned book?' He pushed his hand through his hair and gave a grunt.

'Actually, poetry isn't one of my favourite subjects.'

'Ah, but this is different,' he said squatting down on the floor. 'Ah ha. 'Ere she be,' he cried, breaking into the local dialect.

He thrust it into her hands. 'I'd be interested to hear what you make of them,' he said over his shoulder.

Rose followed him down to the shop feeling both annoyed at being saddled with a book not of her choice, and flattered that he had lent it to her.

'Thank you, Mr...'

'Trelawn,' he said. 'But call me Alec. Everyone round here does.'

Embarrassed, Rose walked hurriedly out of the bookshop. She could never ever imagine calling someone of his age by their Christian name.

THREE

The next morning Rose woke early. She pulled on her black swimsuit, threw her notebook, a towel and shorts into a bicycle bag and crept quickly down the stairs. Out in the garden, she cupped her hands under the pump and gulped down some water. She left a note for Diana explaining she would be back in a couple of hours, and set off.

Once she had reached the grassy tussock above the cove she lowered herself over the edge placing her feet carefully on the ragged set of uneven steps the elements had beaten into the cliff. The bag which was strapped to her wrist swayed awkwardly across her chest. She slid down some loose stones, paused for a moment and then stretched out her leg towards a more solid ledge. By the time she had landed at the bottom, she vowed she would buy a satchel or knapsack.

She threw off her sandals and sat cross-legged on the beach, emptying the contents of her bag and spreading them out around her. Then, taking a good hard look at the sea, she stood up and stepped out boldly. At the water's edge an icy wave swirled round her ankles. She leapt backwards. Step by step she forced herself forward, until the sea was at hip level.

'Ready, steady, go!' she yelled, and she bent her knees quickly.

The water rushed up to her neck. She gasped at its coldness and flung her arms about, walking in Groucho Marx style through the water. She held her chin up stiffly, watching the incoming waves out of the corner of her eye and leaping into the air as soon as they swept near.