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Opening extract from

The Deeping Secrets

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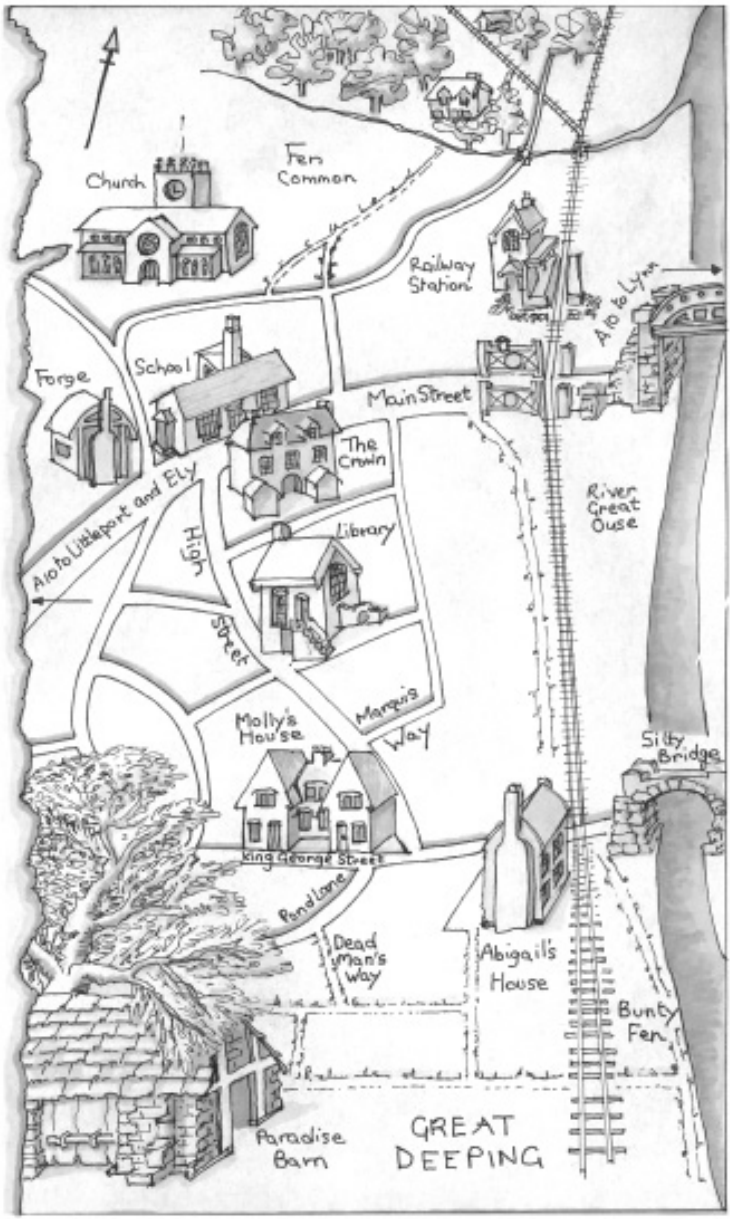
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THE DEEPING SECRETS

VICTOR WATSON


Church
Fen Common
Railway Station
A10 to Lynn
Forge
School
Main Street
The Crown
River Great Ouse
A10 to Littleport and Ely
High Street
Library
Marquis Way
Molly's House
Silty Bridge
King George Street
Pond Lane
Dead Man's Way
Abigail's House
Bunty Fen
Paradise Barn
GREAT DEEPING

Wednesday 2nd April ~ evening

It came like something thrown by the gods, hurtling down the sky directly towards him.

Joe Temper was walking along Green Lane, beside the railway. He wasn't hurrying, and neither was the goods train that was labouring slowly on the down-line, catching him up from behind.

A girl was walking towards him – Molly Barnes, daydreaming as usual, taking a different way to her friend's house by the level crossing. Molly took no notice of the approaching train, and she seemed unaware of the aircraft diving down towards it.

The locomotive had overtaken Joe, chugging comfortably along the track beside him, when he saw the first bombs drop from the screaming plane.

At the roadside there was an abandoned flatbed farm wagon. Its tyres were soft, buried in undergrowth. It had been sleeping there for years.

Molly's friend Abigail, standing a quarter of a mile away, had been watching for her. She too saw the first bombs fall. To her, it seemed as if Joe took flight across the lane towards Molly, felled her gently, and ushered her to safety under the floor of the wagon.

To Molly, the action was physical, with bones, bruises and bewilderment. But the effect was the same, and with extraordinary speed. She was under the wagon, and Joe had rolled in beside her and pushed her head down. She twisted her face sideways, spitting out mud and grass.

'Keep your head down!' He pressed a hard arm across her shoulders.

There was a series of overwhelming explosions, sullen volcanic roars, then a clattering and thumping of débris as lumps of mud and scraps of wood fell heavily onto the truck-bed above their heads. A metal wheel from one of the freight wagons thudded down and buried itself in the grass close by, half a hundredweight of instant death.

They crawled out into the still evening air. There was silence everywhere, stunned, deafened. There was a rich smell of fresh new grass crushed, then the smell of smoke and burning.

'Crikey!' Joe said.

Molly stared at the scene. Most of the bombs had missed the train, falling in the wet meadow on the other side of the tracks. But some had scored a direct hit on three or four wagons just behind the engine. There was a long uneven crater, and piles of scattered wreckage. A single stretch of rail – with bits of sleeper still attached – stood vertically upright. Then it collapsed slowly, caught on some telegraph wires, and brought them down too.

Further down the track, the stoker had climbed onto the top of the tender. He stood there staring, legs apart, hands on hips. The engine driver was climbing slowly down from his cab.

The bomber had gained altitude and was already out of sight.

Abigail was racing along Green Lane towards them. Her mother, who worked the crossing gates, had already rushed indoors to phone the signalman. All trains had to be stopped.

'Thanks,' Molly said. She felt breathless. 'It's a good job you were here.' She knew who Joe Temper was, but she didn't think she had ever spoken to him. He was older than she was, and in the senior class at school. She knew he lived out in Camel Fen.

'It's OK,' Joe said.



About a quarter of a mile down the line, Great Deeping station was empty. There were no passengers and no railway staff.

The porter who should have been on duty had absented himself and was standing over a mile away, by a wood at the edge of the town. Mr Creake had waited impatiently, trying to control his excitement. When he first heard the sound of the solitary Stuka bomber approaching, he started to shake, clenching his fists in his pockets and aware of his racing heartbeat.

A small voice inside him protested. *What have you*

done? What have you done? But he silenced it, as he always did. It was the voice of weakness.

He heard the distant hoot of the locomotive as it approached the level crossing. The sound came faintly across the quiet evening rooftops of the town. Everything was happening with perfect timing.

Mr Creake saw only the first of the bombs as they fell because the Stuka was flying low and the trees of the wood obscured his view. But everything was going well and he braced himself for what he knew must happen next. His excitement was so intense that he couldn't breathe properly.

For a fraction of a heartbeat, he thought it had started. But hope died at once. The explosions he heard were only the sounds of the bombs, little more than distant muffled thuds, feeble and insufficient. Rooks nesting in the tops of the trees cawed noisily as they flapped away in indignation.

The big overwhelming blast he had been anticipating did not happen. Something had gone wrong.

An object fell at his feet – a rook's egg. It exploded and splattered over his shoe, a mess of green and brown-blotched shell fragments, some pale fluid, and a small graceless creature, unhatched and featherless.

Mr Creake crushed it savagely with his foot. Then he fell to his knees, clasping his head. After a few moments, he rose and ran into the trees, stumbling with shame and failure. They would be angry with him, full of furious contempt.

Thursday 3rd April

Next day, people came to view the damage, walking the length of Green Lane, stopping to stare, to talk, to express their dismay.

Green Lane was a grassy track that started in the road by the level crossing. It was about half a mile long. At the other end, it went past the gasworks, through the goods yard, and out onto the road by the railway station. It was used by dog walkers and people taking a shortcut to the allotments close to the station.

Almost everyone in Great Deeping visited Green Lane that day. They saw the wrecked trucks, and the holes in the meadow where the bombs had failed to hit the train. The remaining wagons – more than thirty of them – had been towed away. Some Royal Engineers had been brought in, and they had already started work to repair the track-bed.

It was Wartime; things had to be dealt with quickly.

At first, the story the people told themselves was a bright one, full of amusement. What fools the Germans must be to send a solitary bomber on a special mission to destroy an empty freight train! Completely empty! People were cheered to know that the enemy could

make such a mistake. Later, the story darkened. It became known that the empty goods train was there because of a last-minute change of plan. A trainload of high explosives had been scheduled, but there'd been a problem with the brakes. So the empty train had been sent on early, to use the time slot in the schedule. If a single truckload of explosives had been hit, it would have blown up the whole train. And that would have set off the gasworks too. Great Deeping – and everyone who lived there – would have been wiped off the earth.

One of the onlookers was Edward Barrett. He was not with the other children. He stood alone, casting a solemn eye over the wreckage. As he gazed intently at the engine where it stood with one undamaged truck still attached, he stretched his upper lip over his lower lip, awkwardly, impossibly, so far down that almost his whole chin was covered by it.

He was always doing that – and the skin under his mouth was red and sore.

By the end of the day, the people's story was even darker – and had turned into a question. How, they asked themselves, did the Germans *know* that a trainload of ammunition was supposed to pass through Great Deeping at that precise moment?

There could only be one answer: there was a spy somewhere. An outsider must have come among them and passed the information to the enemy.

But who? And how?

What in our *little town,* they thought. *Never! Nothing like that ever happens here.*

Young Edward Barrett felt his wet chin with nervous fingertips.



Letter to Hitler – no. 17

Dear Herr Hitler,

Writing letters which I can't send might seem mad, but I have my reasons. These letters are my tribute to a great man. I belong at your feet, I am a German in my heart. I do not belong to this contemptible country. I am not alone. There are certainly others.

The day will come when I will be able to send these letters to you. For when you and your great armies ride in triumph into London, there will be nothing to prevent me from putting them into the post openly addressed to you at Westminster.

The first steps have been taken.

Yours in admiration,
The Voice of Nazi Britain

Friday 4th April ~ last day of term

There was a new poster pinned up in the classroom. *Walls Have Ears* it said at the top. It showed two old ladies, bent over their walking sticks and huddled close together as they talked. Behind them was a wall, with a doorway, and peering round was a man with enormous ears, listening. On his arm he wore a band, with a swastika.

Until yesterday, there had been a cheerful spring poster, with tadpoles in a pond, and hazel catkins.

At three o' clock, the whole school assembled in the hall, little ones sitting cross-legged on the floor at the front, middle-sized ones sitting on benches, Molly and Abigail at the back, standing with the big ones. There were more of them this year because of the evacuees.

'God ought to have given infants square bottoms,' Abigail had whispered to Molly as they filed in.

The headmistress, Miss Redway, said she hoped they would all have a good Easter. Then they said a prayer and sang *There Is a Green Hill* with Miss Lee at the piano. That was how it should be and Molly approved. It had always been like that. Then Miss Redway spoiled it.

'Hands up,' she said, 'all those people whose fathers

are away in the War.'

Hands went up all over the hall, some hesitant and uncertain, some quivering with importance. One of the younger teachers put up her hand too.

'And now those of you whose father is an air-raid warden or a Special Constable.'

Five more hands.

'Now,' she said, 'who can tell us what we mean when we talk about the *front line*?'

Dennis Martin in the top year explained that it was where the fighting was, where our soldiers met the enemy and fought them.

'Good,' said the headmistress. 'Quite right, Dennis. And where *is* the front line?'

Germany was one suggestion. Italy, France, Normandy, North Africa. Texas was suggested once, and Mexico. The smallest girl in the school, in an excited whisper, suggested fairyland.

'But there is one place you have all left out.'

Everyone stared, faces were screwed up to show how hard they were concentrating.

'Great Deeping!' Miss Redway said. 'Since Wednesday, when they tried to blow up an ammunition train, the front line is *right here, in our town*.'

She paused to let this sink in. 'The enemy are among us, spying, eavesdropping, pretending all the time that they are one of us. But they are not! They are fifth columnists, agents, spies, evil wicked people from afar trying to destroy us.'

The whole school was silent now. The other teachers looked grim.

Molly scowled. She hated this. She always looked forward to end-of-term assemblies, especially this one. Easter was her favourite time of year and she wanted to enjoy it as she did every year, untroubled by fear.

'We are all fighting at the front line now,' Miss Redway said. 'I would like you to put up your hands if you are willing to be brave little soldiers.'

Many of the younger children looked uncertain, as if they thought they might be marched off to battle at once. Most of the older children did put their hands up – but not all. Someone whispered loudly, 'She's batty!'

'I don't want to be a brave little soldier,' Molly grumbled quietly, and kept her hands resolutely by her side. Abigail did the same, but with less conviction. Everyone was expected to be brave these days.

Three children from Class Five did a short play – two of them came in telling each other about a new British fighter plane; the third had a Hitler moustache and a notebook. He scribbled down what he had heard the other two say, and hurried off with a hugely triumphant look on his face.

Molly daydreamed. In the corner of the hall stood a table with a spring display – bright green moss, primroses, cowslips, some violets, and a papier-mâché bird's nest with six small clay eggs coloured blue. The window pole leaned in the corner. The dusty blackboard seemed to be asleep. And the afternoon sunshine let

itself in through the high narrow windows and illuminated two hundred heads. It had shone like that every Easter during the First World War, and the war before that, Molly supposed. All the way back to 1868, which was the date carved over the main entrance.

I won't let them scare me! Molly thought. At that moment she hated Miss Redway. She felt as if the headmistress had stolen something belonging to her.

She wished Adam had been there. Adam Swales was an evacuee from London. He lived with Molly and her mum but he had gone to spend some time in Wales with relatives. He'd been allowed to miss the last week of term. Most people didn't care if their evacuees went away for a while. Some people would be pleased if they went away for good. But Adam was different. Even Molly's mum hadn't wanted him to go.

'Are you a Nazi spy?' she said to Abigail afterwards.

Abigail nodded. 'Didn't you know?'

'All right, then,' Molly said. 'I'll be one too.'

It was wicked to say that kind of thing. But Molly *felt* wicked. They were cheating her of her Easter holiday. It should be a time of pussy willows and celandines and sticky buds, with bright chilly skies and lovely lengthening evenings. But it was being turned into something different, full of fear.

Inwardly, Molly dug her heels in. She would *not* be scared by this nonsense!

Imagine a small town high in the mountains of North Wales. A town built entirely of grey slate.

And imagine Adam Swales walking unhurriedly into the top of the town and stopping to look along the main street.

His favourite place in the whole world.

Adam had been coming to stay at his uncle's farm every year since he was three years old. The farm was two miles away, up in the hills towards Snowdon. But it was the town, not the farm, which had first made Adam want to draw pictures. He had found some paper and a pencil and knelt hunched at his aunt's kitchen table, trying – even as a small toddler – to find the best way of holding a pencil and forcing onto the paper some black-and-white sense of that extraordinary place.

There was no forcing now. Adam sat on a step at the top of the street, opened his sketchbook on the small wooden board he carried with him, and took a couple of pencils from inside his sock.

He was motionless, studying the blacks and greys of the town, slate black and slate grey. The roofs were tiled with slate; the walls were built of blocks of slate; the doorsteps and window sills were great slate slabs; the door frames and window frames were upright slate columns; the pavements at the side of the road were made of slate. The war memorial put up in 1919 was carved from slate. And he knew that, inside, most of the houses had slate floors, slate hearthstones and slate draining boards in their kitchens.

Often drab and colourless, this place was. The wettest place in Great Britain, some people said. Endless clouds streamed in from the west, rose into the mountains and poured onto the town a relentless and drenching wetness that was too concentrated to be called just *rain*.

But Adam knew that, if a sudden gleam of cloud-filtered sunlight illuminated the wetness, this mountain town would be changed into a fairy dream of impossibles. You could *not* have brilliant greys and bright blacks. But, in this town, you did.

He knew that many great artists drew self portraits every few years throughout their lives. They did it as a measure of their work, a test of time and skill. For him, this town was his self portrait.

Two girls – about his age – came up the street, talking to each other in Welsh. When they reached Adam, they stopped and watched for a moment. Adam smiled briefly at them. He was used to this.

One of them said in English, 'You an artist, then?'

Adam nodded.

The other girl said, 'You're Bronwen Jones's cousin, aren't you? Up at the Farm?'

The girls watched him in silence for a moment or two. Then the first one said, 'You can draw us if you like.' They linked arms and giggled.

Adam looked up from his work. Under their headscarves they had bright pretty faces, with soft brown hair and dark blue eyes. But he didn't want to draw them.

He smiled and shook his head, and the two girls went off, laughing and talking rapidly to each other in Welsh.

A woman came out of a butcher's shop, got into an Austin Seven, and drove out of town. As the sound of the car died away, the London Adam became aware that the silence of the mountains was full of the bleating of a thousand sheep. But the Welsh Adam had hardly noticed it – because it was there all the time, this sound, casting a nursery-rhyme spell on the mountains and valleys.



Outside school, a fight was developing.

Abigail and Molly had never spoken to Edward Barrett. He was four classes lower than theirs. The boy was being herded and shoved against a wall in the street outside the school. There was some jeering and a good deal of laughter. He was small, surrounded by bigger children. It had happened before.

Joe Temper walked up to the two girls.

'Wotcher, Molly. You all right?'

Molly's face darkened, Abigail's brightened. Just because he saved my life doesn't mean I have to be his *friend*, Molly thought crossly. Abigail, she knew, was a more generous person, more open.

'What are they doing to that little boy?' Abigail demanded.

'That's Edward Barrett,' Joe said.

'We know that,' Abigail said. 'Why are they always on at him?'

Joe looked thoughtfully at the crowd of children. So far there was no violence, only jeering. 'He's a poor scrap of a thing,' he said.

'Is it true that his dad is dead?' Abigail asked.

Joe nodded.

'Killed in the War?' Abigail's own father was missing, feared dead. Molly was immediately on her guard, watchful and anxious for her friend as she always was when the subject of dead fathers arose.

'Not in this one,' Joe said. 'Before this War started. There was one in Spain.'

Neither Molly nor Abigail had heard about the war in Spain.

'And his father's two brothers have both been killed in this one.'

The two girls took this in, slowly. Molly spoke first. 'It's not *fair*,' she said passionately.

Joe studied her for a moment, thoughtfully. 'And his grandad, *he* got killed in the First War,' he added. Then he turned on his heels and walked over to the group of noisy kids.

Abigail and Molly watched. The crowd grew silent as Joe joined them and a way was made open for him. They couldn't hear whether he said anything or not – he certainly used no force. His presence was enough, and the viciousness turned to humour, even to friendliness. Joe had been totally fearless. There had

been a growing storm and he had stilled it, but it was impossible to say how. He was no bigger than the biggest of them. But they gave way to him, gladly, wanting to please.

'How did he do that?' Abigail said quietly.

Molly sniffed and looked haughty.

'*And* he saved your life,' Abigail said.

'I know!' Molly said. 'I wish he hadn't!'

'*Molly!*'

'I didn't mean *that*. I meant I wish I'd saved my *own* life!'

Joe came out from the crowd with Edward in tow, wrapping his upper lip over his lower, looking confused.

What a specimen! Abigail thought. It was an expression her mum used a lot.

Joe asked Edward what he was going to do tomorrow, the first day of the holidays.

The first day of the holidays! They were words that gave Molly and Abigail a thrill of pleasure and promise. But Edward looked as if the first day of the holidays meant nothing. Was he completely joyless?

'You can come and see my racing pigeons if you want,' Joe said.

The boy nodded. His lower lip and most of his chin were red and raw and painful.

Does he ever speak? Molly wondered.

'Can we come too?' Abigail asked.

Abigail! Molly shouted inwardly. *I'm not interested in pigeons!*

'You *will* be interested,' Abigail said to her.

And I don't particularly want to spend my precious holiday time with a boy with a squelchy chin!

Abigail, apparently, was not troubled by Edward's squelchiness and Joe didn't seem to mind who came to see his pigeons. 'OK,' he said. 'You're welcome. But not till after ten – I like a lie-in in on Saturdays. Then I got my farm jobs to do.'

'Come on,' he said to Edward. Then he turned back to the girls. 'You don't want to worry about all them spies she was on about,' he said. 'There een't any.'

Molly was startled. She hadn't said a word about spies.

'But someone told the Germans about that ammunition train,' Abigail said.

'Yes,' Joe said slowly. 'Some madman, I s'pose. Someone who thinks Hitler is bloomin' marvellous.'

'That's bad enough!' Abigail retorted.

Not as bad as a whole army of spies skulking everywhere in the town, Molly thought. An enemy on the other side of the English Channel was bad enough. And when the enemy flew its planes so low over your rooftop that you could see the pilots' faces, that was terrifying. But when the enemy might be your next-door neighbour, or the postman who delivered letters to your house every day, how were you supposed to cope with that?

Nevertheless, Joe Temper had cheered her a little. Quite a lot, she later admitted to herself.