

*St Martin's*

Sophie ate her breakfast, scrambled powdered eggs – ugh! – and a mugful of steaming tea that had been stewing in a big urn since early morning.

The centre was crowded. She and Hugh had spent the night in the shelter again, and she was bleary-eyed from the lack of solid sleep. Hugh was still out for the count on the camp bed.

About twenty children from the district were about to be evacuated to the country, far away from the dangers of London, and they were hopping around the place with excitement. Mrs Stokes, she knew, was hoping to get herself and Hugh evacuated too, but Sophie decided to avoid discussing it with her until her mother's condition improved. She was staying put in London.

'I'm off to the hospital,' Sophie mouthed to Reverend Fry later that morning. He was reading Bible stories to some of the younger kids. Hugh was engrossed in the story of Noah's Ark, and luckily didn't whine to come with her.

The weather was crisp and cool outside. She would walk today and save money. There was a queue outside Baxters, the high-street grocers. The women were standing patiently

with their shopping bags, gossiping. Sugar and some bacon and maybe cheese, that's what they were hoping would be on offer today. That's what the rumours had said anyway. Normally Sophie would have joined the line, but now she didn't need to. She was forced to slow down as part of the street had given way to a curious pattern of holes and cracks. The path would occasionally give a strange wobble under the weight of her feet, threatening to send her sprawling in the dust.

Work crews were busy trying to salvage gas pipes which lay twisted and torn amid the concrete. The railings all along Windsor Terrace were gone, obviously off to a munitions factory to be melted down. Things were getting worse all over Europe, with sea battles, air battles, land battles. What would they do if the Germans invaded Britain? wondered Sophie.

The doctor and matron were busy in her mother's ward. Sophie would have to wait, and she decided to pop down to see Mrs Abercorn. This ward was much bigger than her mother's, with about sixteen old ladies arranged around the room in beds, and a few sitting in wheelchairs.

Mrs Abercorn hugged her tight.

'Oh Sophie, pet! I'm ever so pleased to see you. How is your poor mother?'

'She's a little better. She opened her eyes last time. I think she knew me because she said my name,' Sophie confided.

'Oh, thank God!' the old lady smiled.

Sophie suddenly realised that Mrs Abercorn was indeed a very old lady. She seemed to have shrunk, and her hands and arms and neck were far bonier than Sophie remembered.

‘I’ll be getting my marching orders in a few days,’ Mrs Abercorn announced.

‘Are you going home?’ Sophie asked.

‘No, no, pet! The old place is all bombed out, just like yours – unsafe, they tell me. No, I’m going to Eastbourne, to a convalescent home for old folks like myself. My sister Millie and her husband Ron live about twenty miles from there.’

‘Oh!’ said Sophie.

‘We all have to do our bit, part of the war effort. Have to put up with things. You know something, love, I haven’t stayed a night out of London since I was sixteen. Young Joe was always trying to coax me to come over to Canada, said he wanted to show off his old Mum, but I couldn’t do it, just couldn’t leave London. I reckon old Adolf has changed my mind for me. Still, there’s life in the old bird yet. They haven’t finished me off yet!’

Sophie grinned to herself, Mrs Abercorn was a tough old girl, and she would miss her terribly.

‘Aunt Jessie!’ Sophie couldn’t believe it. Jessie, her mother’s younger sister, was sitting in the chair beside Mum’s bed. She almost squashed the breath out of Sophie with a tight squeezing hug. ‘I’m so glad to see you, Sophie!’

Mum was half-sitting up, propped up with pillows against

the bed-rest. She opened her eyes drowsily and tried to smile.

‘Oh Libby! You smiled at me!’ Aunt Jessie murmured proudly.

Sophie was so relieved to see her aunt. It didn’t matter that she was a scatterbrain and not to be relied on. She was an adult member of the family, and she had turned up.

They sat by her mother’s bed for over an hour. Aunt Jessie kept telling stories of when they were children, and the trouble they used to get into, and talked about how beautiful Mum was on her wedding day. Sophie gave her a kick when she mentioned the house. Sometimes Mum would nod, and her sister would squeeze her fingers and pat her arm.

Mum was tired and eventually the blue eyes closed heavily and her breathing became deeper and she slept.

‘Let’s go get a cup of tea!’ mouthed her aunt.

They walked silently from the hospital, and found a small tea shop round the corner. After a few minutes, the waitress, in her black uniform and starched white apron, got them a seat near the window. Aunt Jessie almost flung herself on it and immediately reached into her handbag, got out a packet of cigarettes and lit up, puffing the smoke into the air.

‘Ah! That’s better!’ she joked, running her free hand through her shoulder-length bob of curling brown hair. ‘Sophie! Tell me how you’ve been, and my little man, Hugh? I got such a scare when I heard what happened!’

‘We’re staying at the centre on Bury Road. The old church hall.’

‘I know,’ said Aunt Jessie. ‘I spoke to a Mrs Stokes on the

phone. Listen, Sophie, something has got to be sorted out for you and Hugh. They want to evacuate you to somewhere safe, and I can't say I blame them. I haven't seen London since I came to stay with you last Christmas. The whole place is in bits, falling apart – shops, buildings, offices, homes, just gone – honestly, I could have cried when I got off the train today. Anyway, it's no place for a pair of kids, whatever about those that have to stay and work in the city.'

'I won't leave Mum!' shouted Sophie, making the two old ladies beside them turn and stare. 'I'm not leaving Mum!' she muttered obstinately.

Her aunt puffed long and slow on the cigarette.

'You saw your Mum today, Sophie! It's doctors and nurses she needs most at the moment, they're the ones who'll get her better. Soon she'll start to worry about the two of you. Libby is a worrier, you know that, and she'll worry and make herself even more ill. She called Hugh's name twice in her sleep. You know what she's like, Sophie!'

Sophie nodded. Her aunt was right. 'Couldn't we go and live with you, please?' she pleaded.

'You know, darling, that I'd love to have you, but I have no house or place of my own. I gave up the flat I shared with Helen and Rose when my office transferred out of the city. I just couldn't afford to keep on paying the rent for Museum Square. You won't believe it, but at the moment we've been released from desk duties and are all working as "landgirls".'

Sophie laughed. Anyone more unlike a 'landgirl' was hard to imagine.

‘I know!’ her aunt blushed and sipped her tea. ‘You should see me in my overalls and wellies, up to my knees in mud and heaven knows what else!’

‘We were evacuated before, you know, with Mum,’ Sophie reminded her. ‘Remember, we went to stay with that ghastly Mrs Monks outside Oxford. She starved us almost and wouldn’t let Mum have any hot water to wash in. Even the walls of the bedroom were damp. It was disgusting, and when Dad saw it he took us back home immediately.’

‘That was different, Soph! Things had got quiet then and Neil thought it was safe for you again in London. But now things are a whole lot worse. Libby should have sent you away earlier. I don’t know what she was thinking of!’

‘I don’t want to be evacuated! I don’t want to leave London!’ As soon as she said it, an image of old Mrs Abercorn flashed across Sophie’s mind.

‘The Luftwaffe are stepping things up, Sophie. Hitler is pushing as hard as he can and the whole of Europe, as we know it, is falling into his hands. He intends to destroy London, and every man, woman or child that stands in his way. That’s what everyone says. Please, Sophie, we’ve all got to think about what’s best.’

Sophie knew in her heart of hearts that her aunt was right. Aunt Jessie was never serious, but now Sophie realised that there was no budging her. Thousands of children were being evacuated – why should they be any different?

‘I’ve written to Neil, and I wrote to your grandfather, and also telephoned him.’

*'Grandfather?'* Sophie almost choked on her tea.

'Yes, your grandfather in Ireland. I told him about Libby's condition and he has agreed to take yourself and Hugh.'

Grandfather, how are you! To Sophie all he was was someone who sent a Christmas card with a pound note in it every year. His letters were few and far between. Her father refused to look at them, and her mother would sit brooding and hunched, reading them, and afterwards lock them away in the mahogany bureau. The night after a letter came there was always a row between her parents, and Sophie had come to dread their arrival with the tell-tale Irish stamp and postmark.

'But we've never even seen him! He doesn't know us or care about us! Why should we have to go to bloody Ireland?'

'Sophie! He is your grandfather, after all, your flesh and blood. Libby did keep in touch with him, you know. She told me she wrote to him sometimes,' her aunt said earnestly. 'You could go off and be evacuated to God knows where and to anybody, like you were in Oxford, or you have a chance to go to Ireland to someone who's related to you. It's where your father was reared, and besides, Ireland is a safe place. The prime minister, Mr De Valera, has declared its neutrality.'

Sophie sat, silent.

'Kids!' muttered Aunt Jessie, pouring herself another cup of tea.

'I'll think about it!' Sophie said grudgingly.