

21 December 1940

INVASION MAY BE BY AIR

Despite three months of Nazi bombings, it seems many people in Britain have become lulled into a false sense of Christmas security.

The forces of the Third Reich are still only separated from us by twenty-two miles of water. There is growing evidence to support the belief that Hitler may be planning a new attack over the Christmas period. The threat of invasion is still very real.



TONIGHT IS THE DARKEST NIGHT OF THE year.

It is so dark, you can barely make out the stone cottage sitting in front of you. It is the only building in the valley. A path runs right from the fields to a red front door, framed by the remains of a rose bush. In summer, when the days are long and warm, the roses flourish. But there are no roses now. It is the dead of winter and the dead of night. The door is surrounded by thorns.

The cottage is dark inside, even darker than outside. The windows are hung with heavy curtains, so that no light can escape and none can get in. There is a fireplace in the corner, but it has been a long time since anyone has lit it. The cottage is bone-cold, frozen from the inside out: even the floor stones are coated with frost. It is silent, and it is dark, and it is dead.

But not completely.

From somewhere in the attic, a light is glowing.

It comes from a single candle that rests in the centre of the floor. The light gleams off the rubbish packed high to the rafters: broken boxes, old rugs, furniture, all of it left and forgotten. The glow is small but strong – it feels like it could light the whole house, if it tried.

Three figures sit around it. They have been waiting for some time.

“This is stupid,” says the first.

It’s a knight in shining armour. He is much smaller than you’d expect – no bigger than a child. The candle-light shimmers off his breastplate and catches on the edge of his lance. A moustache pokes from his visor and dances when he talks.

“He’s not coming! We’re going to get in *heaps* of trouble and it’ll all be for...”

“Quiet, Rogue.”

The knight turns to the figure beside him – a badger. But this is no ordinary badger. He’s smoking a pipe. He carries a club and wears a tweed waistcoat. Also, he can talk.

“I *told* you not to call me that,” says the knight.

The badger bristles. “Oh! Your name! I can’t call you your *name* now?”

“It’s not *Rogue*,” says the knight. “It’s *the King of Rogues*. I’ve told you a thousand times! I don’t call you

Noakes, do I? I call you ‘Mr Noakes’, because that’s what *he* named you so...”

“Quiet, both of you.”

The knight and the badger turn to the third figure – a Bengal tiger, towering over the room around them. Her head is lost to the gloom of the ceiling; her whiskers catch the cobwebs in the eaves.

“Col will come,” she says. “Maybe not tonight, maybe not tomorrow, but he *will* come. We just have to keep calling him, that’s all.” She shuffles. “Now if you don’t mind, I’d rather not do it listening to you two squabble like a pair of old ladies.”

The badger grumbles and puts his club down. The knight sighs.

“Oh, Pendlebury ... how can you be so *sure* that Col’s coming?”

The tiger gives him a look that seems, at first, like anger. But it’s not anger: it’s fear. She is very, very scared.

“Because,” she says, “he’s the only hope we have.”

22 December 1940

LONDON CROWDS BACK FOR CHRISTMAS

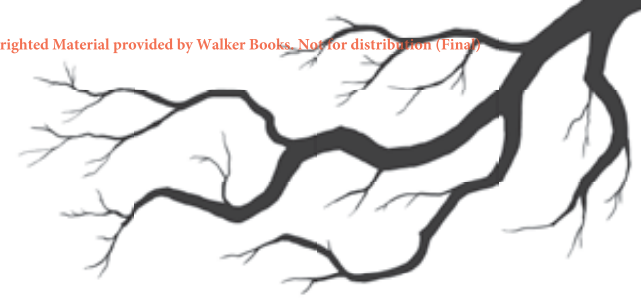
Thousands of evacuees arrived back in London this weekend for the Christmas holidays – despite the Ministry of Transport’s “stay-put” appeal.

Trains arriving and leaving the big London terminals yesterday were packed, and the platforms at Euston Station were crowded with travellers.

Child evacuees who cannot return home for Christmas will have parties just the same.

In Bedford, there will be a free pantomime. Soldiers in Devizes will give an entertainment, and Macclesfield has promised “a really good party” for everyone evacuated there.

Since the war began, 2,100 children have been left orphaned and homeless.



The Evacuee

COL WAS IMAGINING THINGS AGAIN.
Are you there, Col?

Can you hear us, Master Col?

You must come back to the cottage, Col!

Col sighed. He’d been hearing the voices for days now, every time his thoughts drifted. It was strange: he hadn’t thought about the Guardians in months, and now he couldn’t seem to keep them out of his head.

But he didn’t have time for imaginary friends – not now.

Not when Rose was waiting for him.

He raced down the empty streets, leaping over sandbags and skidding round corners. Blackout was about to start, and Buxton was deserted. The last of the Christmas shoppers had gone home, and the only people outside now were air raid wardens, wrapped up in scarves and camped out shivering in deckchairs.

The shop windows were all dark behind the strips of brown paper glued up to protect them from bomb blasts.

Not that any bombs would fall *here* – Buxton was a country town tucked in the valleys of the Peak District. It was the safest place in Britain, or so everyone kept saying. The only enemy planes you saw out here were the ones heading to bomb cities like Liverpool and Manchester. That was why Col had been sent up here in the first place. Buxton was safe. Safer than London, at least.

Col glowered. He was safe, all right: safe and miserable. He'd hated every minute of the six months he had spent here, over a hundred and fifty miles away from his home and everything he had ever known. Living with his Aunt Claire had been the darkest, loneliest and saddest time of his entire life.

But finally, all that was going to change. His sister was here: she had finally come. When he got back to Aunt Claire's, Rose would already be waiting for him. Col turned the final corner and saw the tiny crack of light beneath Aunt Claire's front door, where the blackout curtains didn't quite reach. His heart leaped. After months of being separated, he was finally back with his family – his true family. He threw open the gate...

And stopped. There was something waiting for him in the darkness of the garden. A crouched figure, its breath seething in silent clouds...

Col shook his head. He was just scaring himself, as usual.

"Mrs Evans?"

"Yes, dear?"

"What are you doing in the flowers?"

Mrs Evans glared at him from beneath her helmet. "Never you mind what I'm doing! It's a free country. Hitler's not here *yet*, you know."

No one in Buxton understood how Mrs Evans had been made an air raid warden. She was "an eccentric", "a real character", or "a raving lunatic", depending on who you asked. She was old – no one knew exactly how old – but she had the energy of a much younger lunatic, so no one ever made fun of her in case she hit them with her walking stick. She could usually be found putting neckties around the trees in the town square, having arguments with the garden moles at four in the morning, or – like now – crouching in Aunt Claire's geraniums in the middle of blackout.

"Who am I poking?" she said, giving him a jab with her stick. "Speak up, young man!"

"It's Col, Mrs Evans. From next door."

She nodded. "Ah, yes! The orphan boy."

Col's blood chilled. No one had ever used that word to describe him before – but it was true, wasn't it?

"I didn't recognize you, dressed like – *that*," said Mrs

Evans. “You look like a performing monkey at a funeral.”

Col blushed. He was wearing a pair of black shorts, a black jacket, a bright white sash, and a pillbox hat with a little chinstrap.

“It’s my uniform,” he muttered. “I’m in the Boys’ Brigade.”

“Boys’ Brigade?”

“It’s like the scouts. Camping, making fires, that sort of thing. Aunt Claire thought it would help me make friends.”

“Did it?”

“No.”

Col had spent most of the last six months hiding in his bedroom. He’d always been a loner – and he didn’t see the point in doing anything else, when blackout started so early and ended so late. Col had never known so much darkness.

He glanced at the crack of light under the door. He didn’t have time for this – Rose was waiting for him.

“Can I help with anything, Mrs Evans? I still don’t really understand why you’re in our flowers.”

Mrs Evans tutted. “If you must know, Col, I’m putting out salt for the little folk.”

Col frowned. “Little folk?”

“Fairies! Pixies. Troopers. They’re all over the countryside at the moment. The Midwinter King is in

dominion, you see, and he’s sent the fairies from the Spirit World to search for the Green Man. Good thing I had so much salt lying around!”

“Oh. Do they like salt?”

“No! Can’t stand the stuff. Have to stop and count every grain, you see. That should keep the little runts out of my butter.” She shivered. “Surely you’ve noticed the change in the weather, boy? That’s *his* doing. He grows stronger every day.”

Col had no idea what Mrs Evans was talking about – but she was right about the weather. Buxton was cold – iron cold, constant and brutal, coming up through the ground and clawing your ankles. No one had ever known a winter like it, and it was happening all over the country. By day, Britain was hammered by rain and blanketed in thick fog, stopping trains and stranding travellers. At night, the temperature plummeted: it cracked toilet bowls, froze sheep in their stalls, and cut off hundreds of houses with snowdrifts. The emergency services – already stretched to breaking point with the nightly raids – were forced to abandon the cities and cut paths through the snow to help cut-off villages.

That was the worst part of all. Despite the weather, the raids were still continuing. People were trying to stay cheerful and keep their spirits up, but things were becoming desperate. Rationing was getting worse, food

supplies were running low, and the enemy was right on their doorstep. People said that they might stand a chance if America decided to join the war – but with each passing day, that seemed less and less likely. The end had never seemed so close before.

Col gazed at the sky. It looked like tonight was going to be worse than ever. The wind was beginning to pick up, and the sky was bare and black as sheet-ice, the moon a razor-sharp crescent that was almost too bright to look at. Raids were always bad on bright, cloudless nights like this, when enemy planes could make out the ground beneath them. People had started calling it Bomber's Moon...

Col snapped to attention. Mrs Evans was poking him with her stick again.

“Good grief! Are you deaf as well as stupid? I *said*, any plans for Christmas?”

Col's heart lifted at once. He'd been so distracted, he'd forgotten all about the plan.

“Yes!” he said. “My sister Rose is coming. She stayed behind in London to volunteer with the emergency services. It'll be the first time we've seen each other in six months!” Col glowed with pride. “She's a despatch rider – she bikes around during the raids, passing on messages for the fire service. Rose has always been brave like that.”

Just for a moment, the cold and the dark disappeared – that always happened when he thought about Rose. Mrs Evans frowned.

“Really? And your aunt's OK with that, is she?”

Col grimaced. “She, er ... doesn't know we're doing it.”

Col and Rose had been forced to keep their plan a secret for months – and with good reason. Rose and Aunt Claire did *not* get on, and everyone in Buxton knew it. His aunt badmouthed his sister every chance she got: *seventeen years old, and thinks she knows everything!* It was why Rose hadn't once been to visit – that, and the fact that trains were reserved for soldiers and war supplies, and tickets were so expensive, and then the terrible weather...

But tonight – finally – it had all come together. Rose was here, and there was nothing Aunt Claire could do about it. They were going to have the perfect Christmas together, just the way they'd always done it. The decorations, the presents, the food ... the cottage.

“We're staying in Darkwell End,” said Col, his eyes shining. “It's where my dad grew up. It's the most magical place in the world! It's only half an hour away from here by train, but it's right in the countryside, with forests and fields and streams. We used to spend every Christmas there, before...”

Col stopped. He still didn't know how to finish that

sentence. The last of his words were left hanging in the air between them, like smoke from a snuffed candle.

“I should go,” he muttered. “Rose will be waiting for me – her train got in an hour ago. Merry Christmas, Mrs Evans.”

Mrs Evans nodded. “Merry Christmas, Col! Make sure the King’s spies don’t see you.”

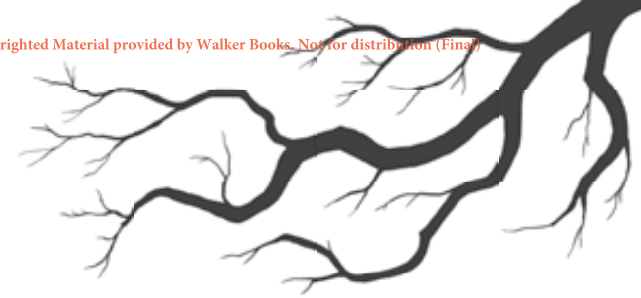
Col frowned. “What king?”

But Mrs Evans didn’t answer – she just stayed where she was, fiddling with her salt and humming carols under her breath. Col considered getting her a blanket, then decided against it. He was late enough as it was. Rose would be explaining everything to Aunt Claire by now – she’d need his help.

He turned to the house, heart glowing. It was hard to imagine, after such a terrible year, that anything could ever be good again. The war had made everything so dismal. He and Rose had lost so, so much. But now, their struggles were all behind them. Just for a short while, the world didn’t matter any more.

It was Christmas ... and his family had come back to him.

He opened the door, and stepped into the light.



The Letter

THE LIGHT IN THE HALLWAY STUNG HIS EYES LIKE seawater. The darkness disappeared – the wind died. After being outside, the warmth of the house almost burned him. It felt like stepping from one world into another.

“Col! How many times? Close the door properly when you come in!”

He blinked. Aunt Claire was standing in the hallway, her arms folded. She looked tired and irritable, but then she always did. Col glanced around. There was no sign of Rose – she must be in the other room. He closed the door.

“Sorry I’m late,” he said. “The Brigade meeting overran and—”

“That wind!” said Aunt Claire, cutting him off. “And you wearing shorts! Aren’t you cold?”

“Yes,” Col admitted.