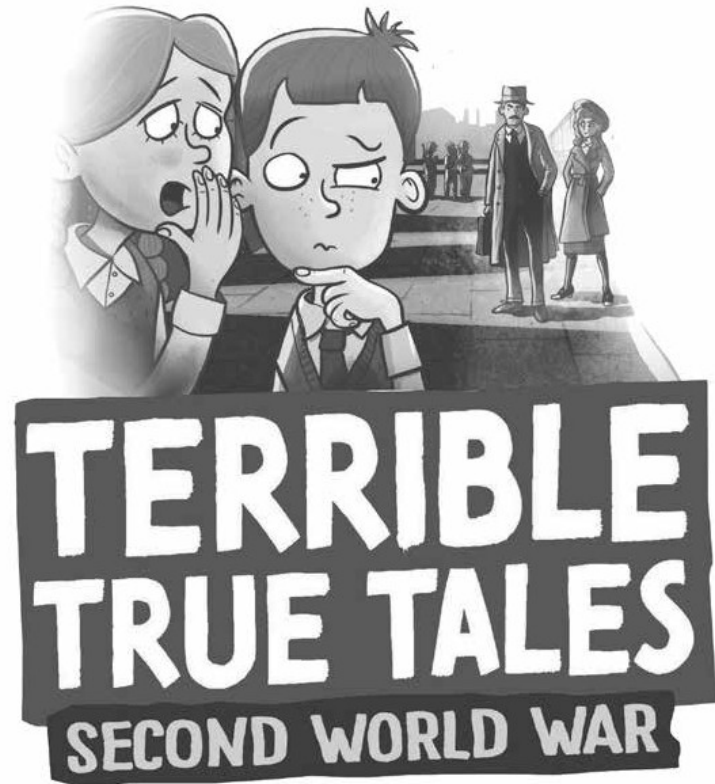


FROM THE BESTSELLING  
AUTHOR OF HORRIBLE HISTORIES  
**TERRY DEARY**



Inside illustrations by James de la Rue

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# CONTENTS

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The Bike Escape.....	5
The Apple Spy .....	67
The Barrel Burglary.....	129
The Phantom Farm .....	191

# **THE BIKE ESCAPE**

## Chapter 1

# Chalk and cheese

October 1939, Highgate, London

It all started when I stole one piece of chalk. Mr Denton, our teacher, wasn't looking and I stole his chalk. Not all of it. Just a new stick of bright white chalk. My friend Myra Dodds kept watch at the door.

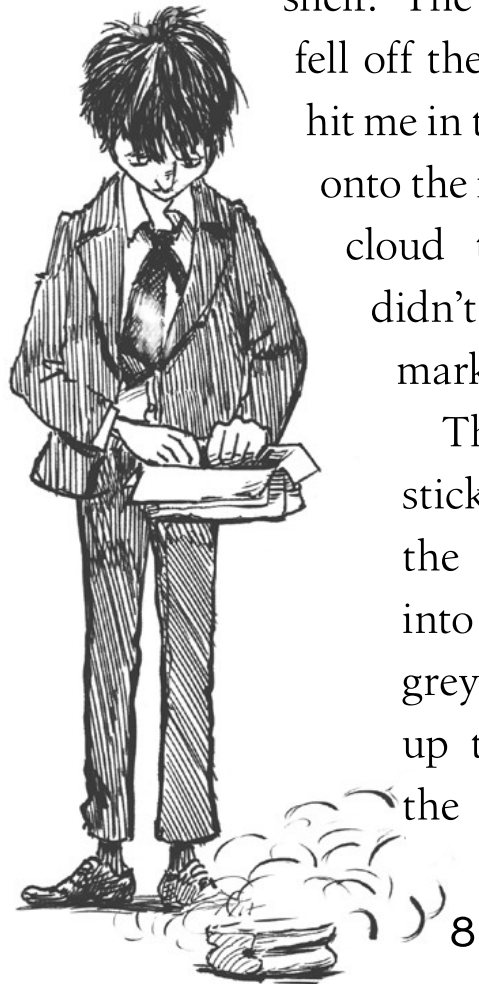
'He's out of sight, Harry!' she said in a whisper loud enough to wake half of Highgate Cemetery. You don't want to wake up the dead in Highgate Cemetery. They say one of Dracula's

victims is buried there. It gives me the creeps.

Anyway, Myra watched Mr Denton go down the corridor and into the staff room. I opened the door to his cupboard, found the box of chalk and pulled it off the

shelf. The blackboard rubber fell off the top of the box and hit me in the chest. It clattered onto the floor and left a white cloud to settle quietly. I didn't notice the white mark on my school tie.

There were three sticks of chalk left in the box. I slipped one into the pocket of my grey jacket. I picked up the rubber and put the box back where



I'd found it. Then I ran out of the classroom to join the lads in a game of football.

There weren't a lot of lads left in the school. As soon as the war started in September that year they shipped half of the kids into the countryside. Evacuees, they called them. Mr Denton, the head teacher, had stood up in assembly with his serious face on. 'When the war starts Mr Hitler will send his bombers to drop bombs on London.' He stopped. He looked around. He waited for us to start shaking with fear and screaming.

I think I just looked bored. 'My mum says he won't waste his bombs on Highgate,' I muttered to Myra.

Mr Denton glared at me. He went on, 'The children of London will be sent to the countryside where they will be safe.



When you go home this afternoon you will have a letter for your parents giving you the details. You will pack a small suitcase, take your gas mask, and bring them to school. Get your mums to make you some cheese

sandwiches too. A bus will take you to your new home somewhere in England or Wales.'

I shook my head. 'My mum says we don't *have* to go if we don't want to. My mum says I'm staying. My mum says it's safe.'

'Your mum says a lot,' Myra said.



'Suppose so,' I agreed. What she said was true.

So most of the boys and girls went off looking more miserable than a wet dog, but I stayed. I could have stayed the whole war if it hadn't been for that bit of chalk.

I just wanted to chalk a goal on the wall of our back alley so we could play football.

I didn't think I'd get caught, did I?

## Chapter 2

# Time and crime

We kicked a shabby tennis ball around the school yard until the whistle went and we had to line up at the school entrance. We walked in silently to queue again outside the classroom door. Mr Denton marched down the corridor. His black teacher's gown swirled and smelled of cigarettes and chalk dust.

We stood at our desks until he told us to sit and then he stared at the floor and the mark left by the blackboard rubber. He turned quietly to his cupboard and took

out the box of chalks. If there had been twenty sticks in the box he wouldn't have missed one. But there were two. There should have been three.

'Stand,' he barked. Chairs clattered as we stood. He walked slowly down the aisle, looking at us with the eyes of a hawk. He stopped when he reached me, glanced at the chalk mark on my tie and thrust a hand into my jacket pocket. He pulled out the chalk and waved it under my nose. 'Mine, I think?'



‘It hasn’t got your name on it, sir,’ I said. His hand was so fast I didn’t see it move but I felt the pain as it smacked my left ear. He breathed through his tobacco-stained teeth. ‘The boy who steals chalk today steals from shops tomorrow. He grows up to steal from houses and then he robs banks. And where does he end up?’

‘Rich?’ I said.

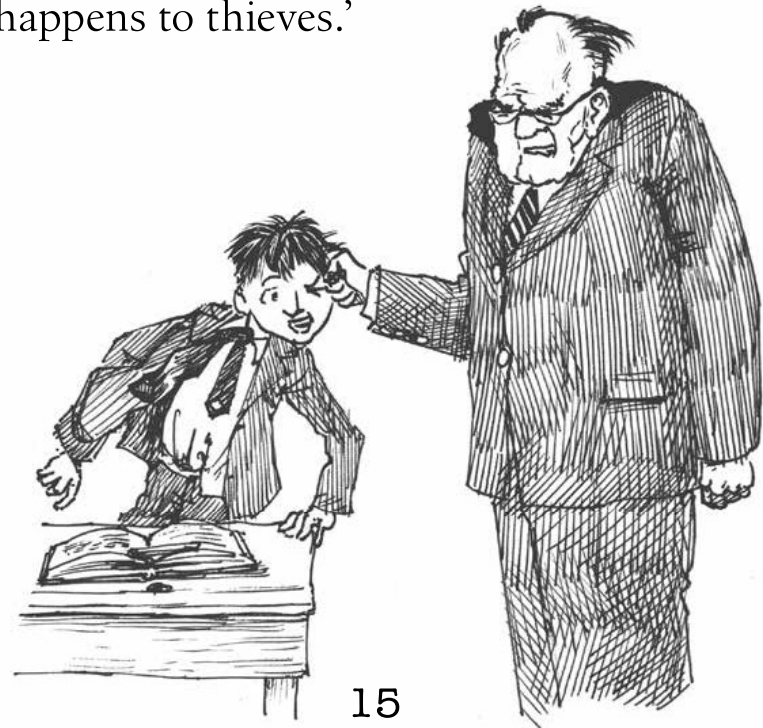
I was ready for the slap on my left ear but this time he caught me out by hitting the other side of my head. I almost fell over. I wondered if they taught teachers the tricks of how to slap heads and cane hands when they went to college.

‘The thief ends up in prison. Just like your father,’ he hissed. ‘And it all starts with stealing chalk from school. So I am going to do you a favour, young Burdess. I am going to teach you a lesson. When you

have learned that it is wrong to steal, you may be saved from a life of crime.’

I thought he was going to cane me. That would be my ‘lesson’. I was wrong. Again.

‘After school I will come to your house with Constable Wright. We will have a word with your poor mother.’ His hand reached up and grabbed the short hair in front of my ear and tugged at it till my eyes watered. ‘Then we’ll see what happens to thieves.’



He strutted to the front of the class with a smirk on his face.

As I walked home that night I tried to act as if I didn't care. 'I won't go to prison. Not for stealing a piece of chalk,' I said to Myra Dodds as we reached the street corner and leaned against the bin they put there to collect pig food.

'They'll just tell you off,' Myra said. 'You won't be sent to prison.'

'Suppose so,' I agreed. I didn't know I was going to be sent somewhere much worse.

## Chapter 3

# Biscuits and bombs

My mum was cross. 'I'll have to tidy the front parlour if we have the copper coming round. What on earth were you thinking of, pinching chalk? Eh?' she said as she rubbed a duster over the table.

'Sorry, Mum.'

'If you're going to start pinching stuff why can't you pinch something useful, like food – a pound of sausages for our tea – or a new dress for me? Your dad would be ashamed of you. Chalk!' she squawked and spat in one of our

best china cups to rub off a mark with her duster.

‘Mr Denton can have that cup,’ I said.

‘The tea leaves are in the pot, pour on the boiling water. I haven’t got any cakes or scones to give them,’ she moaned. ‘I don’t have enough ration coupons. They can have some of those old ginger biscuits I bought before the war.’



‘Mum, they’re coming here to shout at me, not to have a teddy-bear’s picnic.’

‘I’ll not have them saying I have a dirty house,’ she said and spat into another cup. She took off her headscarf and took out her hair rollers – she only did that when she went to visit Dad. I made the tea.

PC Wright was almost too tall and wide to fit in our doorway but he kept his helmet on as he sat at the table. Mr Denton was like a grey eel beside him as he slimed his way into the best room.

Mum poured the tea as the policeman spoke in a deep brown voice, like a judge who was going to send a man to be hanged. Mum pushed the plate of stale biscuits across the table and wrapped her pinafore tight around her. ‘So? Are you sending our Harry to prison or not?’ she asked.



PC Wright looked at the teacher, who gave an oily smile. ‘I was thinking of how we could spare the lad,’ he said.

‘What?’ Mum asked, almost as surprised as I was.

‘Many young evacuees have left the school to go to the country where it is safe from bombs,’ Mr Denton went on.

‘I haven’t seen any bombs,’ Mum argued. ‘We have shelters in the back yards and on the waste ground. We have those sirens

going off at all hours. We have searchlights and barrage balloons. We have everything except bombs.’

‘They will come,’ PC Wright rumbled.

‘The point is,’ Mr Denton said, ‘you have a choice. You can send the boy away as an evacuee, or we can charge him with theft.’ The teacher looked as happy as a dog with a leg of lamb. He wanted rid of me from his school and this was his chance. I was sure Mum would stand up to him and tell him to go to...well.

Mum scowled. ‘You can send Harry off as an evacuee,’ she said sourly.

‘No, Mum!’ I wailed.

‘You can leave tomorrow,’ Mr Denton said.