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BENEATH SAFER SKIES

A Child Evacuee in Shropshire



Chapter Three

IDYLIC SUMMER TURNS TO WINTER

Summer 1940

The Shropshire valley in which we found ourselves became our new world. Separated from our family in Kent and all we had left behind we learnt to adapt to our new surroundings where, for much of the time, my mother and I were left to our own devices until the normal life of this community, which had found its own patterns of survival over many years, gradually absorbed us.

Here in Mainstone the days passed in relative peace and safety. Our lives settled into some sort of normality. It must have been a worrying and lonely time for my mother, 'a stranger in a strange land'; but we soon fell into a routine, taking an interest in the farm life, exploring the countryside and writing many letters home to my father. My mother's sister with her two children, Robin and Margaret, and Ruth (a friend from the Pembury days) with her twin boys, Peter and Paul,

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were also boarding nearby and we were some company for one another; but mostly we were on our own.

My mother had always enjoyed country life and this helped her to pass the time more happily. Thrown together for company we took an almost equally childlike delight in our daily walks together, watching the changes as summer turned into autumn, and our new home grew familiar and became loved. Sometimes I was joined by other children as I played in the long days of late summer. I had a child's ability to live in the present and leave the dark shadows which hung over us to the nights when, hearing the dread sound of enemy bombers going over us in wave after wave on their mission of destruction to the cities, I cried with homesickness and for my father.

A stream ran through the valley; past the farms where ducks and geese muddied its clear waters; past the school whose playground merged into the fields. On its banks the children played endless games, caught tiddlers in jam jars or tried to dam its fast current with stones, mud and sticks which were quickly washed away.

Below the school the stream flowed under a little bridge. Its railings were just the right height for leaning on, for turning somersaults over, for watching the water flowing so swiftly past us that it made us giddy as we played 'Pooh sticks' with bits of twig torn from the hedges. In places in the valley the stream flowed peacefully through flat water meadows, serene and beautiful, where cattle grazed quietly and swallows darted overhead. It flowed over pebbles, brown and golden. It sparkled and glinted in the sunshine. The water was very cold and very clear although we were told not to drink it.

On its brink were water plants, cuckoo pint and kingcups and reeds which hid the nests of moorhen and coot, and the holes of vole and water rat. In places where the ground

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Playing with Peter and Paul, the Garrett twins, in the stream in the Mainstone valley

was flat the cattle came down to drink and the soft mud was churned into water-filled hoof prints which paled as they baked hard in the sun. On the banks little beaches had formed of round pebbles where we played and paddled and explored the tree roots laid bare by erosion. Willow and elder hung over the stream and in the dark places gnats gathered. Twisted into strange shapes the roots became anything our imagination required, forming those secret dens which are so much a part of a country child's memories.

These were magical places where, with bare toes and dresses tucked into our knickers, we were drawn into a closeness with the natural world of water, plants, air and sunlight that only children know how to enter.

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*The church of
St John the
Baptist at
Mainstone*

On either side of the valley woods rose steeply, shutting us in to this quiet world, enclosing the valley as though shielding it from harm, as indeed they did shield it from the worst of the winds, which swept over the high hills. Through these woods rutted cart tracks led up to the high pastures. Overhung by tall untrimmed hedges, they were shady and cool on warm days. In damp places where trickles of water came out of the rocky banks, ferns grew and moss covered the stones. Along the tops of the banks, bracken and whinberries flourished and blackberries overhung the walls. In the woody areas were the red caps of fly agaric which, seen by me for the first time, looked like fairy villages.

The hedges were tall and wild and full of life. Birds nests were hidden among their branches and butterflies and moths enjoyed the damp grass on their banks. In autumn they glowed with the red berries of rowan, hawthorn and holly. Hazelnuts grew in clusters among their golden leaves and sloes and elderberries waited to be gathered. Above the woods the hills were bare. Open to the winds, their turf nibbled short by the sheep, the trees bent by the wind, they were a place of cloud

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shadows and silence. Right on the border between England and Wales, Offa's Dyke spanned the hills; a shallow ditch where the sheep lay out of the wind and where we played and picnicked on sunny days.

That autumn in 1940, while the war clouds gathered momentum, we watched the harvest being gathered into the old stone barns, helping where we could in the fields. In the little stone church we sang the harvest hymns with gratitude more heartfelt than usual for the bounties of the countryside. The fields were bare now and the short stubble gave us a freedom to walk where we pleased while the rabbits ran before us and the sun cast long shadows and turned everything to gold. Along the lanes the hedgerow fruits were ripening and as we walked, often joined by my cousins and other children, we filled our baskets with anything that pleased us. We gathered blackberries, staining our fingers and scratching our legs on the trailing briars. Hazelnuts were still soft enough to break between our teeth. Trailing vines of bryony, bright as red jewels, wound among the branches, but these we avoided as they were poisonous to humans. We found sweet chestnuts falling from their spiky cases and took them back to be boiled or roasted on the bars of the old black grate of the kitchen range.

A great tree of conkers grew near the school and I collected the shiny brown fruit, especially the ones with flat surfaces, to make into dolls' furniture or to put on a string for a game of conkers. Acorn cups and beech mast cases were made into brooches and button holes. Dried grasses were woven into mats or little round baskets. Collections of leaves were pressed between blotting paper to try to retain their glorious colours or scribbled over to make patterns and silhouettes to be labelled, coloured and admired later by the fire. A few last foxgloves bent over the lanes and we fitted their cool flowers over our