

THE SIREN

The sound came from somewhere near the river. It started as a low growl and rose to a long, mournful wail.

Grace Williams looked up from her homework. She had lived in London all her life and was used to fire sirens. After a quick glance out of the window to see if the smoke was visible from the fifth-floor flat, she pushed back a lock of curly brown hair from her forehead and went back to her geography notes.

But something was wrong.

After holding its high note for a few seconds, the siren had fallen back to a growl. Then it rose again to a scream. On and on the noise went, rising and falling like the howl of a wolf.

Grace felt a shiver run through her body.

She put down her pen. What on earth ...? Surely it couldn't be an air-raid warning already. The war had only started yesterday. She got up and stood by the window. As she gazed over the roofs of Battersea glowing in the warm light of a September evening, she became aware of another sound.

'Grace! *Grace!*' The call was even more urgent than the wail of the siren.

Grace heard footsteps hurrying down the passage from the kitchen. The door flew open and her mother

burst into the room. Her face was as white as the flour clinging to the front of her apron.

‘Grace!’ she cried. ‘Can’t you hear it?’

Grace stood open-mouthed. She had not seen her mother look this worried since her father had gone away to join the army.

‘It’s only a practice, isn’t it?’ she mumbled.

‘*Practice!* Good God, Grace, have you forgotten we’re at war? Now put on your gas mask and get down to the cellar before we’re blown to smithereens!’

It was the first time Grace had heard her mother swear. Shocked, she pulled her gas mask out from under her bed, tugged it on over her glasses and, without another word, followed her mother down to the cellar.

Grace’s family rented a four-room flat at the top of Albion Villas, a large Victorian building at the corner of Hanover Street and Victoria Terrace. It was taller than the houses around it, and from her window Grace could see the billowing chimneys of Battersea Power Station and the brown waters of the Thames beyond.

The power station worried Grace’s mother. ‘It’s bound to be a target for the bombers’, she told Grace on the evening that Mr Jeffreys, the local air-raid warden, checked their gas masks. ‘Even if we don’t get gassed, we’ll be blown up by bombs meant for the power station.’

The remark had started an argument. Grace’s mother wanted her to join the thousands of other children who would be evacuated from London if a war started.

‘You’d be so much safer in the countryside, my love’,

she pleaded.

Grace refused. She wasn't a clingy child. It was just that, now her father was away, she didn't want to leave her mother on her own. Although Grace was only twelve, she felt strangely protective towards her mum. Not that Mrs Williams needed looking after. She was twenty-nine years old and had recently started as a full-time supervisor at Walkers Knitwear of Fulham, which now made parachutes for the RAF.

Even so, Grace wouldn't change her mind. She was not going to leave London and live in some draughty farmhouse miles from anywhere with people she didn't even know.

Sitting beside Grace in the cellar of Albion Villas, her mother tried again. It had been an hour since the siren had gone off. As no bombs had fallen, they realised it had been a false alarm and had removed their gas masks.

'Just because we weren't bombed this time, darling, it doesn't mean it won't happen', she began.

'I know', said Grace absent-mindedly. She was wondering how she was going to manage to finish her homework on time.

'So what about going somewhere safe, just for a little while –'

'*Mum!*' interrupted Grace. 'I've already said I'm not leaving! Why are you so keen to get rid of me?'

'Oh, don't be silly, Grace! I just want to send you away from the bombing, that's all.' She tried a new approach. 'You could stay with Aunt Emily ...'

‘Not on your life!’ Grace replied crossly.

Grace had never met Aunt Emily, her father’s unmarried eldest sister. Aunt Emily lived alone in Honiton, Devon, and never wrote, not even at Christmas. Grace had once asked her dad what she was like.

‘Oh, Emily’s nice enough’, he had replied.

‘Just a bit stuck in the past, that’s all.’

The last thing that Grace wanted was to go and live with some old-fashioned fogey in the middle of nowhere. No, she thought, I’m not going to Aunt Emily’s. Not even if the whole of London is bombed as flat as a pancake.

MISSING, PRESUMED DEAD

That autumn, Grace found herself living in an unreal world. Where was the war everyone had said would be so terrible? It seemed to be happening only in the newspapers or on the radio, not in the skies above London or even in the fields of France.

Like everyone else, Grace's family still blacked out their windows at night so that enemy bombers couldn't see their lights. The air-raid sirens went off from time to time, too. But just as on that first warm evening in September, no planes came.

Grace didn't always take her heavy gas mask to school. Sometimes, when teachers checked, she was sent home to collect it. Walking back past the empty air-raid shelters and government posters, she imaged she was on a film set. Everything looked like a city in wartime, but there was no actual danger.

Not then, anyway.

At the beginning of the autumn term, Grace's school was half empty because so many pupils had been evacuated. The staff was more relaxed and Grace's teacher, Mrs Filton, treated her almost like a friend. Mrs Filton's son, Philip, was an engineer on *HMS Zulu*. Mrs Filton called him 'our secret war hero' and pinned up his picture next to the blackboard.

By December, there had still been no serious air raids. Most of the evacuees gradually returned home. The school was soon back to its usual, bustling self. Mrs Filton became more strict and even took down the picture of her son. It wasn't appropriate any more, she said.

The return of the evacuees had its good side, though. Grace's mother didn't mention Aunt Emily anymore, and Grace enjoyed seeing her old friends again, especially Mary Timpson. Mary had been sent to a farm in Warwickshire. The farmer had let her milk the cows and even ride Plodder, his old Shire horse. Secretly, Grace was a bit envious.

At Christmas, Grace's dad came home on leave. Dressed in his smart new uniform, he looked taller and stronger than Grace remembered. He moved differently, too. Instead of shuffling along, as he did when he worked in the bank, he now walked briskly with his back as straight as a broom handle.

'Proper sergeant major, aren't you, Frank!' said Grace's mother proudly, watching her husband carry his bulky kitbag into the flat as if it were no heavier than a handbag.

'Bit fitter than I was, Barbara!' he replied, throwing his kitbag on to the sofa. 'Not a sergeant yet, though. But getting there.' He pointed to the white stripe sewn on to his sleeve. 'Not bad, eh? Lance corporal after less than a year.'

'You got promoted? You never told me.'

Grace's mother tried to look cross.

‘Only happened last week, Barbara. Thought I’d keep it a surprise.’

‘It is a surprise’, she smiled, putting her arms round his neck and kissing him. ‘A fantastic one! Well done, Frank – and welcome home!’

The Williams family had a wonderful Christmas. The time Grace enjoyed most was going to the cinema with her dad, just the two of them. On the way home, he told Grace funny stories about army life, talking to her as if she was another adult and using words she didn’t really understand. She felt so proud of him, so grown up, so happy.

Looking back, Grace thought of the day her father returned to his regiment as the day that her war really started.

In February he wrote to say he was being sent to France. After reading the letter, Grace’s mother turned pale and burst into tears.

Grace was upset and confused. ‘But there isn’t a war in France’, she said, trying hard not to cry herself.

Her mother dabbed at her eyes with a handkerchief. ‘Sorry, Grace. It’s silly of me. I know there isn’t any fighting in France. But I’m frightened that there will be. And when it comes, your dad will be in the thick of it.’

She covered her face with her hands and started crying again. ‘I hate this war!’ she sobbed. ‘Oh, Grace! I hate it so much!’

Grace’s father wrote home regularly. Grace read his long, chatty letters over and over again until she knew

them all by heart.

But suddenly, in May, the letters stopped.

The Germans had launched an attack into France, driving back the British and French armies. The British, suffering heavy casualties, retreated to the French port of Dunkirk. The government called on all seagoing ships to rescue them, and somehow the remainder of the army was brought home.

Every day Grace and her mother anxiously scoured the lists printed in the newspapers, naming men who had been killed, wounded or captured. Lance Corporal Frank Williams was never mentioned. But no letters came, either.

Then, one Saturday afternoon in the middle of June, a telegram was delivered by a man in uniform.

‘It is with great regret’, Mrs Williams read in a quiet, trembling voice, ‘That His Majesty’s Government begs to inform you that Lance Corporal Frank Williams has been reported missing, presumed dead’.