

Goodnight Mister Tom, Chapter 17: Rescue

The small alcove stank of stale urine and vomit. A thin emaciated boy with matted hair and skin like parchment was tied to a length of copper piping. He held a small bundle in his arms. His scrawny limbs were covered with sores and bruises and he sat in his own excrement. He shrank at the light from the torch and made husky gagging noises. The warden reached out and touched him and he let out a frightened whimper. An empty baby's bottle stood by his legs.

"You give me that baby, son," said the warden, but the boy tightened himself up, his eyes wide with fear. Sammy slipped in between the warden's legs and sat patiently waiting for his master's command. Tom turned to the policeman.

"I'd like to talk to the boy. 'E knows me, like."

The policeman nodded and left to call an ambulance and to disperse the crowd of neighbours who were now massed outside the front door.

Tom squatted down.

"It's Mister Tom," he said gently. "I was worried about you, so me and Sammy cum lookin' for you."

Will looked in his direction.

"He'll have to go to the hospital," said the warden.

Will let out a cry.

"Don't worry, boy," said Tom reassuringly. "We'll stay with you. Now you jes' hang tight to that ole bundle and I'll untie you. This man's yer old school caretaker. He didn't know you was here and now he's goin' to help you git out. The light's on so's we can see the ropes more clear, like."

Very gently and laboriously he untied him. The warden, realizing that the boy looked calmer when the old man was by him, left him to it and watched.

Tom told him exactly what he was going to do. He knew that Will's limbs would be stiff and that they would be agony to move. He took hold of him firmly and manoeuvred him gently towards him. It was difficult because Will clung so tightly to the bundle.

After Tom had managed to ease him out, he heard an ambulance drawing up outside and the sound of doors opening and slamming. The policeman crouched down beside him and handed him a blanket. Tom wrapped it round Will and the bundle and carried him to the ambulance.

"The dog's mine," he said firmly to one of the ambulance men who was about to push Sammy out. "And I'm traveling with the boy."

The warden climbed in after him and sat on the free stretcher bed in the back. The doors were shut behind them and the ambulance ground slowly forward.

"I'd like to git me hands on that woman," the warden growled furiously. "All pride and angel pie on the outside, and inside this," and he pointed to Will, who was now lying on a stretcher in the warmth of Tom's overcoat.

"She must be orf 'er nut!"

Tom glanced at him. "I 'spose you'll be lookin' for her," he commented.

"Try and stop me!" The warden's pride had been shaken badly. It was embarrassing to have that policeman think he didn't know his job.

"Thank you," said Tom quietly.

"What for, guv?"

"For listenin' and breakin' in."

"Any time."

He gazed down at Will's face. A tiny speck of colour appeared in his jaundiced cheeks and he began to move his fingers. The warden looked intently at the bundle and then at Tom. Tom gave him a nod.

"Reckon we could find a blanket for the little un, like?" he asked.

The warden caught on immediately.

"I'm sure we could, Mr. Oakley," and he unfolded one of the blankets.

"William," whispered Tom. "Will." He opened his eyes and looked up at him.

"Yes," he whispered.

"Can I has a look at the little un?"

Will nodded and relaxed his fingers a fraction. Tom drew the folds of the cold bundle to one side. The baby had been dead for some time. It was thin and tinged with a greyish hue. He glanced at the warden. They didn't need to say anything. The look told all.

"I've just warmed this blanket up for the little chap," said the warden.

"It's a her," Will croaked.

"Oh, girl, is it? Wot's her name, then?"

"I calls her Trudy."

"Trudy. That's nice," and he leaned towards him. "You feel this nice soft blanket, Willie."

"I ent." He faltered. "I ent . . ."

"You ain't what?" he asked.

"I ent Willie."

The warden looked concerned.

"Shock," he whispered. "Must have gawn orf his chump."

"No," explained Tom. "We never called him Willie."

"Oh," said the warden, still not quite understanding.

"Will," whispered Tom. "Yeh."

"Well . . . Will," began the warden again. "How's abaht givin' ahr little Miss Trudy a blanket of her own, like yours."

Will nodded and relaxed his grip. "Hurts," he gasped as he attempted to move his arms.

"Takes yer own time," urged Tom. Will smiled as he recognized the familiar saying. "And keep breathin'. Sammy'll warm them arms, won't you, boy?"

Sammy was curled up by Will's legs. He stood alertly to his feet. Slowly Tom pried open Will's stiff arms, and with the help of the warden they took the baby and wrapped it carefully in the blanket.

Sammy was placed on Will's lap. Will jerked involuntarily. He was very sore. All he wore were the undershirt and pants that Miss Thorne's sister, May, had given him for his birthday. They were now a filthy grey and yellow. His bare feet were mauve with the cold and his filthy clawlike toenails curled inwards. Tom squeezed the feet with his hands to try and work some warmth into them. Will's stiff arms were now enfolding Sammy. Suddenly holding a warm body instead of the cold one he had just handed over made him aware that something was wrong with the baby. He glanced urgently across at the warden, who was holding her.

"It's all right, son," he said. "I got her."

"Hurts," he whispered. "My arms. They hurt."

"They will do for a bit," said Tom. "You been holdin' 'em in the same position for a long time. They ent used to movin' yet." The ambulance jerked to a halt and the doors were flung open. Tom carried Will out, followed by Sammy and the warden. They pushed their way through two heavy doors, into a lobby. A woman with glasses sat behind a small glass window. She looked up at them briefly as they sat down on some chairs.

"I'm sorry," she said. "No dogs allowed in here."

"Ent there somewhere I can leave him?" inquired Tom.

"I'm afraid not. He'll have to go."

The warden stood up and exchanged a few words with her.

"I see," she said, looking at Tom and Will. "There are some railings at the side of the hospital. You could tie him to one of those. I'm sure no one would disturb him."

"Tie 'im!" exclaimed Tom.

"Afraid that's the best they can do, Mr. Oakley," said the warden.

A cleaner bustled past them. She stopped.

"Cheer up, luvs," she said with a jolly smile. "It ain't the end of the world. You'll be all right here. They looks after you real proper."

Will and Tom stared blankly at her as she disappeared jovially down the corridor, singing "Wish Me Luck as You Wave Me Good-Bye."

A young man in a white coat came flying out of one of the doors in the corridor, followed rapidly by a nurse, and walked towards the warden and Tom. The young man glanced at the bundle.

"Dead," he said abruptly.

"Dead," whimpered Will.

"Dead cold he means, don't you, sir," said the warden, winking urgently at the doctor and indicating the boy.

"Oh, yes," said the young man. He was exhausted and hadn't realized that the boy and the baby were together. He knelt down by Will and drew aside the coat and blankets. The nurse, a dark-haired fresh-faced woman who didn't look more than nineteen, knelt down beside him. The doctor mumbled something about lacerations and delousing. He looked up at Tom. "You a relative?" Tom shook his head.

The warden spoke up for him. He knew how strict regulations were about not allowing visitors who weren't relatives.

"The boy stayed wiv him for six months in the country. He went back home to his mother, who said she was ill. He ain't got no dad, you see, and this gentleman heard no word so he comes miles to find him. Mother's left the boy."

"Looks like he found you in the nick of time," said the nurse, and she gave Will a warm smile. The doctor stood up.

"Best take him to the children's ward and clean him up. Bit late for stitches. He'd better have a tetanus jab."

"That an injection?" asked Tom anxiously.

"Yes. Nothing to worry about. It's in case of infection."

"Good clean air'll cure that," said Tom.

"Nurse," said the doctor, ignoring him, "take him to children's."

Tom stood up with Will still in his arms.

"Dogs aren't allowed," said the nurse, glancing down at Sammy, who still stood alertly by Tom's side.

"It's all right," piped up the warden. "I'll look after him."

"I'll come with you," said Tom to the nurse.

"I'm afraid that's not allowed," she said. "I ent leavin' the boy with a load of strangers."

She gave a sigh.

"You can come as far as the ward but no farther. You'll have me for the high jump, you will."

Tom observed her briefly. Here was this well-spoken skimp of a girl telling him what to do.

Will looked terrified when he handed him over to her.

"I'll take care of him," she said gently. "I'll ask if you can see him in the morning."

"I'm stayin' 'ere, Will," he said. "I'll be in that big hallway where we was sittin' jes' now. I won't be far away, boy."

He watched her walk away with Will in her arms and then headed back towards the lobby.

"I gave the receptionist the details," said the warden. "I have to make a police report nah."

"Where's the baby?" asked Tom.

"One of the nurses took her orf to the morgue."

He glanced at Tom, who stood looking very stunned.

"Wot you need is a nice strong cuppa tea. A mate o' mine's got a post just rahnd the corner from 'ere. Comin'?"

Tom shook his head.

"I promised the boy I'd stay here."

"'Ere, luv," the warden yelled at the bespectacled receptionist. She blinked in amazement at his familiarity. "We're just going round to Alf's. If there's any changes wiv the boy, let them know where Mr. Oakley is." He smiled at Tom. "Come on," he said. "It'll be all right. You only need stay for a few minutes."

They crossed the hospital courtyard and out through the large gateway. Just outside the railings on the corner was a small hut with walls made of sandbags and a corrugated tin roof. A sign with WARDEN'S POST written on it hung above it. Inside sat a balding middle-aged man with a thick black greying moustache.

"'Allo, Sid!" he exclaimed when he saw the Deptford warden. "Wot brings you 'ere? Not a bomb casualty, that's for certain," and they chuckled. "'Itler keeps threatenin' to devastate us, don't he, Sid," he continued. "But he can't git near us. Not wiv ahr boys up there to protect us," he said, waving a patriotic finger up at the roof of the tiny hut.

Tom remembered David Hartridge. Was it only yesterday that the telegram had arrived? It seemed like a month had passed since then. He had been reported missing, believed dead. Poor Annie.

"Come in and warm yerselves," said Alf. "I'll restew me brew."

Inside the hut was a makeshift brazier made out of a bucket with holes in it. The bucket had some kind of coke burning in it. It was stifling hot inside the hut. Tom squatted down on a tin drurti while Sammy squeezed in between his legs.

"You ain't from rahnd 'ere," commented Alf.

"No," said Tom. "No, I ent." And so the story of Will's discovery was told yet again.

"Wot you goin' to do nah?" asked Sid.

"Take him back," remarked Tom. "To Little Weirwold."

"Don't think you can do that. I think they'll have to find 'is muvver first. Probably prison for her."

"And Will?" asked Tom.

"'Ome. Children's 'ome, I s'pose."

"I'm takin' him back," said Tom firmly.

The warden glanced at Alf. They knew better. Tom drank his tea and returned to the hospital. He tied Sammy to a railing at the side, opposite some tiny stone steps.

"I'll come and visit you soon, boy," he reassured him soothingly. "It's only temporary, like."

It was dawn by the time he had sat down in the lobby. Three ambulances had driven up with casualties and he had given the ambulance men and nurses a hand. A communal shelter had collapsed on fifty men, women and children. Tom helped load and unload the stretchers.

By the afternoon there was still no word of Will and no answer to Tom's repeated questioning. He continued to sit patiently in the lobby, alternately dozing and going out to see Sammy.

At last a fair-haired nurse came up to him.

"Are you Mr. Tom?" she asked.

"Yes," he said, standing abruptly. "How is he? Can I see him?"

"You're not a relative, are you?"

"No, but I'm pretty near—the boy lived with me, like. He ent got no father and his mother's deserted him."

"A psychiatrist has been to see him, Mr. Tom. He's from a special children's home and he's agreed that it's all right for you to see him."

"Sichitrus? 'Ow d'you mean?"

"A man who cares for sick minds."

"Oh yes. I read about them somewhere," and he grunted. "Nothin' sick about his mind, though."

"He's under deep psychological shock," said the nurse. "He keeps suddenly screaming out for no apparent reason. We've had to keep sedating him."

"Sedatin' him?"

"Putting him to sleep."

"Why?"

"To stop him from screaming."

"Mebbe he needs to."

"That's as may be, Mr. Tom, but we have to consider the other children in the ward."

Tom nodded. The sooner Will could get out into some wide-open fields, the better.

"When can I see him?"

"Now. Follow me."

They passed through the maze of corridors. Since Tom had helped with the emergency, he had begun to learn his way around. Two nurses nodded and smiled at him. They thought he was a volunteer helper.

The fair-haired nurse pushed aside the swing doors into the children's ward. Tom strode in and looked around. She pointed to a bed on his left. The first one by the door. Accessible. Easy to get to in an emergency— although why he felt that was important he had no idea.

Will was propped up by pillows. His hair had been shorn off completely, revealing an array of multicoloured cuts and bruises around his bald skull. He was well scrubbed and smelled strongly of disinfectant. Sitting in a voluminous white hospital nightshirt, he appeared quite shrunken.

"Didn't recognize you with yer army cut," said Tom.

Will smiled weakly. His teeth were still the same yellowy-brown color.

"How you feelin'?"

"Stiff."

His lips were pale and cracked and it was obviously an effort to speak.

"I gits nightmares," he whispered. "And when I wakes up they stick a needle in me and then I can't move or speak." He fell back exhausted onto the pillows. "How long does I have to stay here?" he croaked.

"Not long, I shouldn't think. You look well patched up." He felt Will's thin fingers. They were cold. He gave them a blow and rubbed them between his hands. Picking up his haversack from the floor, he slung it onto the bed. "Got a new pair of gloves fer them hands," he said. "Had a feelin' you might be needin' them. You'll has to put on a bit more flesh though, else they'll slide off."

"Where's Sammy?"

"Outside. Regulations. Not allowed in. Case he brings in germs, I s'pose." He glanced around the ward. "Though I reckon there's more germs in this here hospital than most places." He gave a gruff laugh.

Will leaned awkwardly on one elbow.

"This bloke came to see me."

"Oh yes. Doctor, was 'e?"

"I dunno. He said he was from a home and that I'd be goin' there and I'd get better there." He clutched at Tom's arm. "Can't I come back with you?"

"Course you can. Don't know the law side, mind, but we'll git round it somehow."

"Mr. Tom," interrupted the fair-haired nurse from behind him. "I'm afraid you'll have to leave now."

Will hung tightly to Tom's sleeve. "Don't go yet!" he urged.

"Stay a bit more."

Tom sat closer to him on the bed.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Tom," said the nurse nervously. "But you must go now."

"The boy would like me to stay for a bit," he replied calmly.

"I'm sorry, it's against regulations."

"Whose regulations?" Tom said, turning to face her.

"Now come on, Mr. Tom, let's not have any trouble."

"What's going on, nurse?" boomed a loud noise at the end of the ward.

"Nothing, sister," said the nurse shakily.

The sister, a middle-aged woman with a loud step, walked firmly down the ward towards them.

"Time to go!" she said in a no-nonsense manner.

Tom stood up and leaned over Will's bed.

"Afraid I'll has to go, but I'll be in the hallway and I'll see you tomorrow."

Will clung to his arm with both hands now. He could barely sound the words. "Don't go," he pleaded. "Don't go!"

"Please leave, sir," said the sister sharply. "You're only upsetting the boy."

"I think it's your regulations what's upsettin' him, ma'am." He turned to Will.

"Tomorrow'll come awful quick," he added comfortingly.

The sister stepped forward and firmly wrenched away Will's hands from Tom's arm.

"Now go, sir! Immediately!"

Tom reluctantly began to depart. Will pushed himself up and tried to get out of bed.

"Stay where you are. There's a good boy," singsonged the fair-haired nurse.

Will began to whimper and make grunting noises.

"Go!" shouted the sister. "Nurse! Sedation!"

Tom walked dejectedly through the swing doors and listened helplessly to Will's cries.

He stood for a moment and then turned to look in through the window. The two nurses were holding Will facedown. Another nurse joined them and gave him an injection in his bottom. A few seconds later Will sank helplessly into the bed and the nurses let go of him.

"Mr. Tom, is it?" said a quiet-spoken voice behind him. Tom jumped and turned sharply. A man in his thirties wearing a gray suit had been standing behind him. He must have a soft step, thought Tom, who had heard no movement. The man was going bald and the hair that remained was of a thin texture. His skin was as white and shiny as that of a cloistered nun. He gave Tom a bland smile and held out his hand.

"I'm Mr. Stelton," he half whispered. "I expect William has told you about me."

Tom nodded.

The man observed Tom in a seemingly detached manner and then looked quickly away to gaze at a wall in the corridor. Neither of them spoke, and Tom had a feeling that the man had no intention of breaking the silence. He was leaving that to Tom. Tom was irritated by this, but he wanted to find out about Will.

"Yes," he said. "He told me you want to put him in a home."

"Ah," said Mr. Stelton quietly. "Did he?" and he gave another bland smile and gazed back at much the same place.

"Wall interestin', is it?" inquired Tom.

"You see yourself as a wall, do you?" the man commented, still staring at it.

"Stop shilly-shallying and tell me about the boy."

Mr. Stelton turned and faced Tom briefly.

"Of course," he said.

They found a few chairs in a corner and sat down. Tom couldn't help observing the quiet manner in which Mr. Stelton walked. It was a slow lope and his toes pointed slightly inwards. He sat next to Tom with his knees together and rubbed the tops of his thighs gently up and down as he spoke.

"I believe in a more modern approach, Mr. Tom," he said. "I don't use drugs."

"Oakley," corrected Tom. "Mister Tom's the boy's name for me."

"Ah," he said and gave a significant nod. "You don't wish me to call you by the boy's own name."

"About those drugs," interrupted Tom, before Mr. Stelton could gaze into space again. "I don't use them either."

"Of course not," and he gave another bland smile.

Tom wondered why Mr. Stelton spoke in such a subdued tone. Was he afraid of disturbing someone?

"I deal with disturbed children," he went on quietly. "And I work in conjunction with a home. There, children are well cared for and are given lots of attention. We feel . . ."

"We?" inquired Tom.

"Myself and the head of the school."

"Thought you said it were a home."

"It's also a school. We feel," he continued, "that he would benefit from treatment there."

"What sort of treatment?"

"Psychiatric treatment. Analysis. We want to encourage him to talk about his background and find out why he is the way he is."

"Thought that's pretty obvious," said Tom. "The boy ent had a lot of lovin'!"

"Ah," said Mr. Stelton quietly.

Not another silence, thought Tom. The idea of Will spending time talking to a man who semispoke, semi-walked and gazed in the distance whenever one made eye-to-eye contact did not appeal to Tom. As far as he was concerned, it would be enough to drive the sanest person mad.

"I'd like him back with me," said Tom firmly.

"Ah," sighed Mr. Stelton, taking several mental notes.

"And you can ah till the cows come home. That's what I want and that's what the boy wants." This was followed by another silence while Mr. Stelton rubbed his thighs gently up and down.

"You're not a relative," he softly intoned.

"No," answered Tom. "But . . ." He stopped.

"Yes?" said Mr. Stelton looking vaguely interested for the first time.

"I'm fond of the boy."

"You're fond of the boy," and he gave a nod and turned to gaze away from Tom's penetrating green eyes. "You could visit me," he suggested, back to staring at the wall. "And William, while he's at the home. I'm sure if you are . . ." He paused, "If you mean what you say, you'll want the best for him. The staff at the home are younger than you and well trained." He stood up. "We're picking him up the day after tomorrow. Monday. If you would like to come with us you are welcome. We're not like a hospital. We encourage visitors. So long as they don't disturb the children," he added.

He gave Tom another neutral smile, shook hands and padded quietly away down the corridor.

Tom began to walk dejectedly towards the lobby.

"Give us a hand, will you?" asked one of the nurses as he passed her.

A large elderly man with a misshapen leg needed to be lifted onto a stretcher fixed to a trolley. Tom helped lift him.

"You Red Cross people are marvellous!" the nurse said, having recognized him as a helper from the shelter casualty emergency. "Are you here tonight as well?"

Tom nodded. Why not? he thought. It would stop him from thinking about Will. He ran down the corridor to give a hand with some newly arrived casualties, and when at last the lobby was reasonably quiet, he stepped outside for some fresh air and paid a short visit to the railing, where Sammy was attached. He untied him and they sat on the stone steps.

"What we goin' to do, boy?" he murmured as he ruffled Sammy's chest. "We ent got much time." He stared out at the street beyond the railings. It was already beginning to get dark again. He rubbed his chin. Gray stubble had started to sprout where he hadn't shaved.

"Oh, Rachel," he said half aloud to the sky. "What would you do?" and he saw her, in his mind, swing round in her long dress and flash her dark eyes at him.

"Kidnap him," she said laughingly.

Tom gave a start. Rachel wouldn't have said that. On second thoughts, Rachel would. He rose slowly. "I'll jes' play it be ear," he muttered. "Mebbe if. . ."

His thoughts were interrupted by the sounds of several ambulances arriving. He tied Sammy back to the railings, ran briskly along the side of the building and round the corner to where the entrance doors swung and immediately began carrying people into the hospital.

Three hours later he was walking back down one of the stairways, carrying a blanket, when he realized that he was standing outside the children's ward. He peered quickly through the small window. The fair-haired nurse was still on duty. She was slumped asleep across a table with a small night light beside her.

Tom looked quickly around the corridor. There was no one in sight. Before he allowed himself time to think, he crept into the ward and gently eased the swing doors to a close. Will was fast asleep, well knocked out by the drugs.

As Tom drew the sheets aside, one of the smaller children on the other side of the ward woke up and started coughing. The nurse opened her eyes and lifted her head. Tom hastily pulled the sheets back into place and crouched down on the floor. The nurse spoke to the child soothingly, gave her some medicine and tucked her in. She then returned to the table. She was trying to study for an exam on anatomy, but soon her eyelids grew heavy again and within minutes she had fallen asleep.

Tom whipped back the sheets, lifted Will out and wrapped the blanket he was carrying around him. He stuck one of the pillows down the bed and tucked the sheets round it. Not very convincing, but it was all he had time for. Holding Will firmly in his arms he stood up. If the nurse woke up now, he thought, he'd be in for it. One of the children turned over in his sleep and gave a little moan but the nurse went on sleeping, quite undisturbed. He glanced out the window. Very quickly, he swung the door open and walked firmly out and down the corridor. He knew that if he looked furtive he would give the game away. He met the nurse who had chatted to him over the elderly man. She smiled at him.

"It's all go, isn't it?" she said.

Tom nodded and headed for the lobby, where he had left his haversack. Two ambulances drew in, and in the general confusion that followed he picked up the haversack and strode towards the swing doors. He glanced quickly at the receptionist. To his relief, it was a different woman on duty. As soon as he was outside, and the drivers had turned their backs, he ran into the dark unlit courtyard, round the corner and down to where he had left Sammy.

Sammy leaped up excitedly and began to bark. "No!" whispered Tom urgently, placing a firm finger on his nose. "Down, boy. Quiet!"

He laid Will on the bottom step and feverishly undid the haversack. Quickly he put some warm underwear and socks on him.

"You keep guard, Sammy," he whispered, and he untied him and put the leash into his pocket. The next garments to go on Will were a brown patched pair of corduroy shorts, a grey flannel shirt, a navy roll-neck jersey and a green balaclava. The balaclava at least hid his bald head. Unfortunately he had no boots or overcoat for him. He hid the blanket in a dark corner and wrapped his own overcoat round Will. Slinging the haversack onto his back, he walked towards the open courtyard with Will in his arms, Sammy following. A firm step, he thought to himself as he strode across it. At any moment they might discover Will's absence. He continued out through the gates and down the street. Suddenly a voice called out sharply to him.

"Oy. Mister!"

He turned. It was Alf. He had forgotten about the Warden's Post. Drat it.

"You got the boy then?"

He nodded.

"Good on you. Takin' him back to the country?"

Tom nodded again, waved good-bye and strode firmly down the street, wanting desperately to run or look behind and not daring to do either.

After much climbing on and off buses the three of them arrived at the large station. They spent the remainder of the night in a shelter nearby. There were no trains going to Weirwold the following morning, but there was one going two thirds of the way, to a village called Skyron. Tom hurriedly bought tickets, tied the leash round Sammy's neck and headed for the platform. His tickets were clipped by the same ticket man.

"Got yer grandson there?" he remarked cheekily. "Deep sleeper, ain't he? You'll spoil him carryin' him like that. I'd wake him up and make him walk, lazy tyke."

"He's ill," said Tom.

"Oh," said the ticket man, startled. "Not contagious, I hope."

"No."

The man handed the tickets back and Tom and Sammy ran along the platform. The train was due to leave within minutes.

"That dog should have a muzzle," yelled the ticket man after them.

They climbed into the train and sat by a window in an empty carriage. Not long now, thought Tom, and they would be out of London. A tapping on the window interrupted his thoughts.

He looked up to find a policeman looking down at him through the glass. He pointed to Will. Tom quickly covered his stockinged feet with his coat.

"Air raid keep him up, eh?"

Tom nodded.

"Have a safe journey."

"Thank you."

At last the train drew out of the station. They were joined by an elderly woman who sat crocheting for most of the journey and who chatted about the weather and rationing and how she missed butter. She left them halfway to Skyron. For the rest of the journey, they had the carriage to themselves.

Skyron was a large village not much bigger than Weirwold. Tom walked through it and headed for the open road, where he began to hitch for a lift. They had three lifts—one in an army truck, one in a vet's broken-down old Morris, and one in a trailer. Tom walked the final five miles to Weirwold. It was a cool crisp day but the sky was clear and sunny. As soon as he saw the river, he felt overwhelmingly happy. How untouched and different it was from London. The water sparkled beneath the sun's keen gaze. He stood on the top of a hill and drank in all the fields that lay below. He now understood Will's bewilderment at suddenly confronting so much open space after his background in Deptford. He glanced down at Sammy, who had begun to limp slightly. His small tongue was hanging out of his mouth like a piece of old leather.

"Not long now, Sammy," he said encouragingly.

By the time they reached Weirwold he was carrying both Will and Sammy in his arms. He tramped over the old cobbled streets as twilight fell, on through the square, past the closed shops and towards the blacksmith's.

He knocked firmly at his door. A window opened from above.

"Mr. Oakley!" cried the brawny, dark-haired man. "You's back from London."

Mrs. Stoker, the blacksmith's wife, appeared at his side.

"Has you really been to London?" she asked in awe.

He nodded.

"You look fair done fer," and she disappeared and reappeared at the front door.

"You must be starvin'," she said. "I'll make you a meal."

"That's very kind, Mrs. Stoker, but I want to start out for Little Weirwold soon," he replied.

"Put the boy by the fire," she said.

Tom placed him in an armchair by the hearth. Mr. Stoker eased the armchair nearer and pushed back the overcoat to allow the warmth of the flames to reach his limbs. As he did so he let out a gasp. Mrs. Stoker turned to look at him.

"Oh, my luv," she said. "He's in a bad way. Good job you went for him, Mr. Oakley."

By now the news had spread fast about his journey to London.

"Well, you keep that to yerself, mind," said Tom.

The Stokers decided not to ask any more questions. What you don't know you can't tell on, and that was that.

After a rest and some tea, Mrs. Stoker lent him some blankets for Will and gave him a bag filled with sandwiches.

It was dark by the time Dobbs was harnessed for the journey. Tom tucked Will up with Sammy in the cart and clambered up to his seat to take hold of the reins.

"Come on, me ole gal," he yelled in delight as Dobbs jogged forward. "Take us home."

Will awoke to the sound of Tom singing. He opened his eyes to discover a starry sky above him. Sammy was slumped in an exhausted stupor by his feet. Will pushed aside a few of the blankets and looked up to where Tom was sitting. He struggled to his knees, but his legs were too wobbly and he sank back into the pile of blankets.

"Mister Tom," he croaked. "Mister Tom."

Tom stopped the cart and turned round.

"Woken up, eh?"

Will blinked his eyes until Tom came clearly into focus.

"You ent dreamin'. Lie back boy. We ent long from home." He tucked the blankets round him again.

"But," stammered Will, "how did I git here?"

Tom shook the reins and Dobbs moved forward.

"I kidnapped you," he said over his shoulder, and then he suddenly realized the enormity of what he had done and he burst into laughter. "Yes, that's what I done, boy. I kidnapped you!"

Will lay back and fell asleep. He next woke to find himself being carried through the Littles' front door and into their sitting room with its large array of books and cozy armchairs. Tom put him down on the sofa by the fire and Mrs. Little called her husband. Dr. Little leaned over Will and with the gentlest of hands pushed his balaclava back and examined him.

"You seem pretty well patched up, Will."

Mrs. Little gave him some hot milk and toast, but he fell into another deep sleep before he had even attempted to touch it.

The Littles listened to Tom's story.

"I know I done wrong," said Tom. "But I couldn't let him be taken to a home."

"Country air," put in Mrs. Little. "Familiar surroundings. People who love him. Best thing for him."

Her husband looked at her over his ever-sliding spectacles.

"They're bound to track him down sooner or later."

"Nonsense," expostulated Mrs. Little huskily. "They're too busy to go chasing evacuees. They didn't even know he'd returned to London."

Dr. Little turned to face Tom.

"The sores will heal. They healed before. It's the wounds inside that will take the longest to heal."

"I know that," said Tom. "I'll give him me support when he needs."

"Me too!" cried a voice behind him.

They turned to find Zach standing at the doorway in his pyjamas. He ran across to the sofa and looked down at Will's inert body.

"I knew you'd bring him back," he said fiercely, tears in his eyes.

"You look tired, Tom," said Mrs. Little. "Sit down." Tom thanked her and sank gratefully into an armchair.

Zach continued to gaze silently at Will.

"Mister Tom," said Zach earnestly, "if you need any help . . ." but it was useless continuing.

Tom was asleep.