

‘Save the Books!’ by Esther Kerr

The sun rose slowly, spreading rays of crimson light over the tall brick house, and illuminating the brass plaque on the door: Cole & Son, Bookbinders. Pigeons hopped in the street outside, as I stretched in my bed, snuggling under the covers.

‘Aggie?’ It was Mum calling from downstairs. ‘Up, please!’

I put my pillow over my head.

‘Agnes!’

Sighing, I got up. I knew that voice. Swinging out of bed, I pulled my slippers on, and shuffled down the stairs.

The wireless was on, full blast, in the kitchen, but Mum turned it off as I walked in. I’d caught the word ‘Hitler’ though, and the guilt on her face told me everything I needed to know. Resigned, I snatched a few mouthfuls of porridge and ran upstairs to be in the place I loved most - Dad’s workshop.

Dad was a bookbinder; a word doctor, I had called him when I was little. There was a sign on his workshop door, with a Shakespeare quote on it: ‘To unchartered lands; to undreamed shores’. It was true. When I settled with one of the books in there, it seemed that the cluttered little room just melted away - no, I was spirited off to fog-wreathed moors, or faraway cities, underground caves, or the Swiss Alps.

I pushed the door open, and stepped inside, trying to forget what I had heard on the wireless. Forget the war, forget Hitler, and breathe in the smell: a mixture of snuff, glue, leather, fresh paper and sawdust. I ran my fingers along the spines, and eventually pulled out ‘The Sword in the Stone’ by T.H White. I was soon mesmerized, Wart’s adventures completely riveting me. I wondered where Dad was. I loved our conversations about books; he read to me aloud, and we debated and discussed... Tucking the book under my arm, I ran down the narrow passage that connected the house and the shop.

Dad was in his office, reading a newspaper. He looked up with a frown, saw who it was, and smiled - a little too quickly, I thought. He shoved the paper into the drawer, before I could see it. I sighed. Hitler again.

Dad opened his arms. ‘Ah, my charming daughter! Have you been reading the adventures of White and Kay again? Good!’ He got up from his chair. ‘I’ve got something to show you.’

He picked up a book from his desk, and I fell on it, with a cry of delight. It was a copy of the Canterbury Tales, with leather covers, marbled flyleaves and beautiful ink illustrations.

It was as I was gazing at the picture of the Sword in the Stone, that we noticed a faint thrumming, coming from outside. A long dark shaped blotted out the sun, chugging ponderously towards the shop. I dropped the book. The ink in Dad’s inkwell juddered.

Something that looked like a long black sausage was floating over the rooftops. But I knew better. I had seen it in the papers, I had heard about it in the playground. This was how Josie John’s house got destroyed and how Billy Hamilton’s dad lost a leg. This was a Bomber.

‘Save the books!’ I shouted, scooping up the Canterbury Tales, and running back into the workshop. ‘Save the books!’ I hitched up my pinafore skirt, to make a sort of bowl and began pulling books into it, running for the cellar.

Mum looked up, startled, as I ran through the kitchen, towards the cellar. Stacking the books among the bottles of Dad’s wine. I ran back upstairs, into the shop - just as the first bomb dropped.

There was a whine as it cut through the air; and a moment where time seemed to stop, as it hovered in the sky. Then it all speeded up again, splintering, leaving a boom as the rafter buckled and collapsed. Tiles littered the floor.

I tried to scream, but smoke was coiling through the office, like a giant serpent. Downstairs, I heard machines, printing presses, smash. I could imagine the scattered cogs, and the ink pooling across the floor like dark blood. Dad was crouched under his desk.

The Bomber crawled through the clouds, like a huge black caterpillar, trailing fumes. It looked almost comic, yet it had just destroyed so much of what I loved. Dad rose, dazed, from under the table. Out of the window, I could see neighbours, seem still in their night clothes, gathered around our shop. Some shook their fists at the aircraft as it bumbled away, some called up to us.

‘Alright, Horace?’

‘You hurt?’

‘You can always come kip with us, if it’s too bad’

Their voices were so full of concern and sympathy, that I felt tears spring to my eyes. Together, Dad and I walked slowly, gingerly, back through the rubble. His life’s work, I thought, his entire life’s work, was wrecked.

And yet I wondered... We British had dropped bombs on Germany. Did they hate us too? Were they scared every time they saw a plane as well?

From the street, I could hear a voice calling. It was Mrs Morgan, from number 3.

‘Alright up there? All alright? It’s going to be fine sweethearts. Don’t worry. It’s going to be fine.’

And despite all that had happened, I believed her. The books in the cellar were intact. Most of the books were fine. It was the machines, the printing presses. They were razed.

‘Are we poor now, Dad?’ I asked.

He spun round, shocked.

‘I don’t know, Aggie. Maybe we are. But we’ll do something. We’ll do something.’

Later, I sat on the garden wall, thinking about what had happened. ‘Maybe we are’, Dad had said. But even if we were, we were still alive, and together.

Which was what really mattered.