

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Other Times

Leslie Thomas

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About the Book

At the start of the war in 1939 James Bevan is a junior officer approaching middle-age, attached to a small anti-aircraft unit on the south coast.

Abandoned by his wife, the soldiers he command are his family: Bairnsfather, whose sexual encounters with his girl friend Muriel take place in an air-raid shelter; Cartwright, trying to keep two women on his gunner's pay of a shilling a day; Hignet, cosily educating himself in the orderly room. It is a rude awakening when they are called upon for the real war.

Hugely absorbing, rich and rewarding, *Other Times* brims with history and experience, love, sorrow and humour.

About the Author

Born in Newport, Monmouthshire, in 1931, Leslie Thomas is the son of a sailor who was lost at sea in 1943. His boyhood in an orphanage is evoked in *This Time Last Week*, published in 1964. At sixteen, he became a reporter before going on to do his national service. He won worldwide acclaim with his bestselling novel *The Virgin Soldiers*, which has achieved international sales of over four million copies. In 2005, Leslie Thomas was awarded an OBE for Services to Literature.

Also by Leslie Thomas

Fiction

The Virgin Soldiers

Orange Wednesday

The Love Beach

Come to the War

His Lordship

Onward Virgin Soldiers

Arthur McCann and All His Women

The Man with the Power

Tropic of Ruislip

Stand Up Virgin Soldiers

Dangerous Davies: The Last Detective

Bare Nell

Ormerod's Landing

That Old Gang of Mine

The Dearest and the Best

The Adventures of Goodnight and Loving

Dangerous in Love

Orders for New York

The Loves and Journeys of Revolving Jones

Arrivals and Departures

Dangerous by Moonlight

Running Away

The Complete Dangerous Davies

Kensington Heights

Chloe's Song
Dangerous Davies and The Lonely Heart
Other Times
Waiting for the Day
Dover Beach

Non-fiction

This Time Next Week
Some Lovely Islands
The Hidden Places of Britain
My World of Islands
In My Wildest Dreams

LESLIE THOMAS

Other Times



arrow books

Dedicated to Jean Ratcliff and the Lady Taverners
in recognition of the work they do with needy
children

Author's Note

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There are those who will think of this story as a tale from history; to others it will seem that it happened only yesterday.

1

It seemed somehow unfitting that everything should be so docile along that coast; a washed-out autumn sky reflecting in an uncaring sea, birds flying much as usual, offshore a minesweeper rocking as if asleep. Not a foot trod on the shingle. There were small chuffs of wind. It was an empty morning.

At seven o'clock the men stumbled from the two huts. Not for the first time Captain Bevan thought how difficult it was to make a parade from only sixteen soldiers, two excused boots.

They formed up in two blank-faced ranks, not particularly straight, in front of the sandbag rampart around a solitary Bofors gun, its feet spread out on last summer's seaside rose garden, its camouflage netting like an old woman's skirt. Bugles, even if militarily appropriate, were not allowed. Under the Defence Regulations, no one, on pain of arrest, was permitted to sound a siren, hooter, whistle, bell, horn, gong or bugle. The silence irked Sergeant Runciman; an army should be noisy, at least have a certain amount of din. Whoever heard of a hushed army? He had unearthed an old bird-scaring rattle in a barn; it still worked when he privately swung it and he had suggested its use for rousing the men in the morning but a check on regulations by Bombardier Hignet, the sage of the orderly room, revealed that doing so would signify a gas attack. So Runciman had to shout at the door of each of the

huts. Gunfire, as morning tea was traditionally called, was brought in an aluminium bucket by the NCO of the overnight guard. If the hot water had failed in the wash-house, which sometimes happened, the tea was also used for shaving, giving some men brown chins.

Although they were designated a troop of the Royal Artillery it was not easy to think of these men as troops; so few and so disarranged were they. They now paraded in front of the slim-barrelled, lily-snouted gun, on the oblong of asphalt once a playground but with the swings and seesaw banished and only the metal stumps remaining. In wartime children, like everyone else, were expected to make sacrifices.

The men's shadows were longer than the men for it was October and the sun was becoming later and lower. When Runciman, a regular soldier, gave orders his short, sturdy body tensed and then trembled as he shouted, as if it vibrated with the effort even though it was only an everyday drill. Now he ordered the small parade to attention for Bevan's inspection which the officer carried out without fuss. There was little point in making any. Eight men were missing; three on leave, one on compassionate leave because his wife had gone off, and four still in Aldershot Military Hospital following the intense sickness that had decimated the unit and others in the area, two weeks before, when a Maltese civilian cook had reached his limit and dropped senna in the midday stew. It took longer to train a cook than a gunner and army cooks were in short supply. There were insistent queues at the latrines and some who had not eaten the stew pretended to have done so for the sake of going sick. 'Men are crapping everywhere, sir,' reported Runciman soberly.

'It's just as well the Boche didn't attack,' Bevan had said. 'The country would have been left defenceless.'

There seemed not the remotest chance of the Germans attacking, by air or any other means. The war had been on, if not actually being waged, for almost two months. Since the initial official fears had diminished and then disappeared – Southampton, whose six jovial barrage balloons they could see from the gun site, had confidently expected six hundred deaths from bombing in the first twenty-four hours – a deathless quiet, oddly near to a disappointment, had fallen across Britain. Air-raid wardens and fire-fighters had searched empty skies; cardboard coffins had remained unopened. People began to ask what had gone wrong.

Gulls were squawking above the parade and Runciman needed to out-shout them. The men's movements, like their eyes, were dull for there had been a dance in Lyndhurst public hall the night before. They left-turned, right-turned and about-turned, and the sergeant marched them up and down a bit on the asphalt and then silently on the grass, more to get them moving than anything else. Captain Bevan returned Runciman's salute and said: 'Carry on, sergeant' before striding off towards his office. His pace diminished to a walk.

He sat at his adjutant's desk wondering where Eve was, what her baby was like. He expected to get a letter from a divorce solicitor before long. That is what she wanted. They had been oddly grateful to the Prime Minister, Mr Chamberlain, when he announced the Declaration of War on Sunday 3 September, because it meant that they could part more easily, logically and, oddly, with less pain. Eve had been in the rocking chair, her belly swollen, her face washed out. He sat upright, facing her and the situation; they had studied each other with a mix of sorrow and relief. Those vivid moments after 11.15 that morning had meant many things to many people, fear, sadness, deep uncertainty; for them it was a convenient excuse.

Eve had been his second wife; Margaret, his first, had died five years after their marriage. Eve was still at school when he first went to work on her father's estate on the border of Hampshire and Sussex in the late 1920s. Bevan had only been aware of her in the holidays, a tubby tomboy who somehow, almost miraculously, became a slender young woman.

'Everyone still calls me Lumpy,' she laughed to him.

'It doesn't apply any more,' he said.

She had offered him a lift home from the county ball, a night for long-dressed ladies and uniforms. She wore a silver gown. It made her eyes seem grey.

'I know my father got you to join his silly soldiers,' she said as her Ford bumped over the estate roads in the dark. 'Territorials seem a little ridiculous, don't you think?'

'He doesn't think so. He's still keeping a watchful eye on Germany.'

'The uniform suits you though. White tunic and all that.' Her tone softened. 'Uniforms suit tall men. All soldiers should be tall.' He grinned in the dark of the car. 'And your medals. They don't look so cumbersome on you. My father loves his medals.'

'He loves the army.'

'Do you?'

'In peacetime it's interesting.'

'And war?'

'Necessary.'

She pulled up outside the stone cottage where he had lived with Margaret and where he still lived. 'Can I come in and see?' she asked.

'Yes ... yes, of course.'

When they were in the ordered sitting-room she picked up a wedding-day photograph of himself and Margaret.

‘What was she like?’ she asked. ‘I did see her once or twice.’

He was pouring drinks. ‘Quiet,’ he said.

‘Like you.’

‘I suppose so. Some people say quietness is the ultimate intimacy.’

‘She died in an accident, didn’t she.’

‘Yes, one night on the road from the village.’

She took the glass and sat on the arm of the one big chair, her silver dress folding in columns down her legs, her eyes deep and her smile elfish. ‘I’ve been in here before, you know,’ she said. ‘Several times.’

‘You have?’

‘I’ve even spied through the window.’

He sat down opposite her. ‘Why?’

‘My friend Clara and I,’ she said, revolving her drink in the glass. ‘I had a big crush on you. So did she. We used to call you Valentino, handsome but silent.’

Bevan laughed outright. She extended a hand and he touched it with his. ‘My apologies,’ she said.

‘Don’t. I’m very flattered.’

‘We saw you through the window once while you were trying to teach yourself to dance. We heard the gram playing and we thought you had a woman in here. But there you were, book in hand, trying out the steps. It made me feel odd, very sad.’

She dropped her eyes but when she looked up he was smiling at her. ‘I never did learn properly.’

‘You danced very well tonight,’ she said. ‘Even if I had to ask you. Thank God for the Ladies’ Invitation Waltz.’

She handed him her glass and he refilled it. ‘You know I am sailing to America at the end of the week,’ she said. ‘On

the *Aquitania*.'

'Yes, I heard. How long will you be away?'

She shrugged. 'A couple of years, I don't know. It's my father's idea. It's to make me into a well-rounded woman, as he says. As if being known as Lumpy were not enough.'

He handed the drink to her.

'Do you want to hear about my secret visits?' she asked.

'If you want to tell me.'

'I had such a pash on you. Silly, I suppose, but there it is. I was only fourteen. You hardly ever locked your door and when you weren't here I came in and just played at being here with you - you know, making your meals and getting your slippers, games like that.' She hesitated, then finished her drink. 'I must go,' she said as if it were a sudden decision. He took her to the door. 'I even got into your bed once,' she said. She leaned forward and kissed him and he returned the kiss.

'Have a good time in America.'

'I wish I weren't going.' He saw she meant it then. 'When I come back,' she said, 'I expect you to ask me to marry you.'

When she had gone Bevan finished his drink thoughtfully. He took off his white mess jacket and, with a wry smile, jingled the medals. He left them attached to the jacket and put it over the back of a chair.

It was raining on the cottage window now, splattering the small panes. There came a timid knock at the door. She was on the step, her hair and her silvery dress getting wet.

'That silly car ran itself into a hole,' she said, avoiding looking at him. 'And I'm soaked.'

'I can see,' he said. She fell into his arms. He folded them about her. 'It will be ages,' she sniffed. Her face powder had streaked, her rouge was smudged. 'I'll be away

years.' She walked into the room and he closed the door. Without looking at him she began to take her dress off. 'It's sopping,' she said.

In later times whenever he thought about her he always saw again how, pale and young and naked, she had put on his white mess jacket and, with the undistinguished medals bouncing over her breast, had marched laughing up and down the room. Then she sat on the bed, rolled sideways across the cover and said: 'We'd better not do anything while I'm wearing all these bits of tin.'

Later she said: 'I wouldn't dare tell you what I imagined when I crept into this bed that time. Things you would never dream for a fourteen-year-old called Lumpy.'

'You're not Lumpy now,' he said holding her.

She giggled. 'Only where I am supposed to be.' She eased her breasts towards his face. 'Kiss them, please. I always wanted you to give them a kiss.'

They lay together until morning. In the first light they made love again. 'Have you had many girlfriends, James?' she enquired. 'I mean serious girlfriends, you did this sort of thing with.'

He laughed. Soon she would be gone. 'I was married for five years, remember. After that I decided to concentrate on my work here.'

'My father is going to make you his land agent, you know. When Roberts retires.'

He knew. 'That should see me through for life,' he said.

'There is the matter of marrying me,' said Eve. 'You promised.'

'I promised to ask you,' he corrected. 'When you get back. By then you will probably have changed your mind.'

'Oh, I hope not,' she said.

Bevan left the office door open to the October mild air. Bombardier Hignet would soon be released from gun drill, and would make the first cup of coffee. There were some important-looking papers on the desk, none of them important. One concerned a new issue of waste-paper baskets and filing trays marked 'In' and 'Out', and another the looming visit of a military chiropodist. The door faced east and if he stood he could see the Needles, the toothy end of the Isle of Wight. A fresh, sunny wind came in the door ruffling the wall calendar. The *Daily Express* lay folded on Hignet's desk. Bevan walked over and casually opened it. On the front was a propaganda photograph of George Formby, with his lemon grin and ukulele, entertaining troops - amused British and bemused Frenchmen - in France. The RAF had dropped leaflets over Germany advising the enemy to surrender. There was an advertisement for the benefits of Bovril and another for Cherry Blossom boot polish.

Runciman, always the professional, was giving sharp orders to the seven men of the gun crew, so sharp there was scarcely an echo, and Bevan went to stand at the door to witness the soldiers go through the pantomime around the Bofors. The two gun layers, Purcell and Brown, wound the handles for elevation and for line from bucket seats on each side. Bairnsfather, the loader, said they reminded him of his mother and the woman next door both swinging their mangles on opposite sides of the back fence. It was Bairnsfather who loaded the ammunition, clips of four shells, into a hopper and operated the firing pedal. Cartwright and Ugson were the ammunition carriers, Ugson being relieved of his duty of observer once they were in action. Then Sergeant Runciman watched the sky and controlled the gun from his position to the right of it. Hignet's task, to his intense embarrassment, was to sweep up imaginary empty shell cases. They had another similar

gun but it had gone to be mended. The remaining weapon could not be fired even for practice because they were surrounded by a retirement area and residents had complained to the War Office that it shook their beds and bungalows. When they needed to rehearse with loud ammunition, alive or dud, they had to take the weapon to the slopes of Salisbury Plain, several miles to the north. Many people hardly knew there was a war going on.

Now the sergeant was snapping through the action drill. Bevan watched the coned barrel of the forty-millimetre quick-firing weapon elevate and then traverse, it seemed to him, almost eagerly as if the gun itself felt that this might be the real thing. It nosed around the sky apparently sniffing for enemy aircraft. Gunner Ugson, the observer, knew there was sod all up there. It was an excellent gun and had been in use with the British Army only since 1937. They were lucky to have it for Bofors were in short supply. There were less than a hundred in the country and this pair had happened to be unloaded at Southampton at the start of the war. It was a Swedish invention and the Swedes were neutral, had preserved their private peace, while selling the weapon to the Germans, the British, the French and anyone else who would buy. Bevan knew what was coming next in the drill and he half turned away, grateful that no outsider could see. It was so diminishing. He heard Runciman snap through the final sequence of orders and then bawl: 'Fire!'

'Bang!' shouted one soldier. Then because the Bofors was rapid firing - ostensibly capable of one hundred and twenty rounds a minute - three other men each shouted: 'Bang! Bang! Bang!' Even at a distance he could see how embarrassed, how crestfallen the crew were. Not a gull swerved nor squawked. Bevan shook his head and wondered, not for the first time, about the strange state they were in.

* * *

'There's only so many times you can say "bang".' Runciman took his forage cap off and sat deflatedly in the chair Bevan indicated. 'Or ways.' Bombardier Hignet poured him a cup of coffee as though it might be seriously beneficial.

'War?' Runciman said to Bevan. 'Call this war, sir?' He had been a soldier since the early 1930s.

'It's a trifle quiet,' admitted Bevan. 'But I don't know what we can do about it, sergeant.'

'What I say is, if we're going to have a blasted war, let's *have* one. Let's get over there and get at them. Why don't we bomb them? Set the Black Forest on fire, sir. That should burn nicely.' Hignet, as though taking a note of the notion, scribbled on a pad. Runciman went on: 'Christ, there's some bloke in Parliament who says we can't bomb the Krupps Armaments Factory because it's a *private company*. Ever heard anything like it?' He caught sight of the front page of the newspaper and snorted. 'Leaflets! Dropping leaflets.' Even more scornfully he surveyed the photograph. 'And George Formby.'

'He's a secret weapon,' offered Hignet, who had glasses, was overweight and was thought to be intelligent, which was why he was in the orderly hut.

'Fear of retaliation,' suggested Bevan. There was rarely acknowledgement of rank in office conversations, only a casual reference to it as a title, almost a nickname. Captain Bevan was sometimes 'sir', and Sergeant Runciman was occasionally 'sergeant', but Bombardier Hignet was rarely called anything to his face. 'If we do bomb them,' said Bevan, 'Chamberlain's afraid they'll bomb us twice as much.'

'My dad's bigger than your dad,' grumbled Runciman. With a sort of plea he confronted Bevan. 'What am I going

to do with them today, sir? They can't pick up any more litter. They've painted everything in sight, some of it twice, and I can't put them weeding again.' He turned his face to Hignet as if he, as a last resort, might understand: 'These are fighting men.'

'Sandcastles,' suggested Bevan feeling foolish. 'The CO thought the sandcastles we had last week were a good idea. Build up a castle and work out how to attack it.'

'And it's nice on the beach,' put in Hignet peering out through his schoolboy spectacles towards the sea. 'Fresh air, sunshine.'

Runciman scowled towards him. 'We've done the digging holes and filling them up again, we've painted the coal white,' he said returning to Bevan. 'If we build sandcastles will you come over and take a look?'

'Of course. Why don't you build some sort of model of the Maginot Line. A bit of it. There was a diagram in last week's *War Illustrated*.'

'I saw it,' said Runciman. 'I expect the enemy did too.'

'Then we can work out how the Germans can outflank it and get into France.'

'Through Holland and Belgium,' murmured Hignet. He looked down at the newspaper as though washing his hands of the matter, but then added: 'Easy.'

'Easy,' agreed Runciman. 'So easy it don't seem to have occurred to the High Command.'

'Or anybody else,' put in Hignet. He regarded Bevan half seriously. 'You ought to warn them, sir.'

The sergeant, who did not like the bombardier butting in, stood and drained his coffee. There was plenty. Rationing was six months away. 'Right, sir, I'll march them up and down for a while, get them nice and loose, and then I'll set them digging the Maginot Line.'

‘I’m going over to the mess,’ said Bevan. ‘See if I can find the old man.’

‘Golf,’ said Hignet studying the picture of George Formby. ‘Leaflets,’ he sighed. ‘We ought to drop George Formby over Germany.’

‘He’s usually back earlyish,’ said Bevan defensively.

‘Golf, that’s it,’ said Runciman putting on his forage cap, straightening it fiercely and going out. ‘Get the men playing golf.’

When he had gone Hignet sighed: ‘The sergeant wants action,’ as if it were beyond him. ‘They say they’re actually sending some men home, back to their jobs, because they haven’t got anything to do in the army.’

‘You’re not going,’ said Bevan. ‘Hitler may strike at any time.’

It was very strange but James Bevan had known the house since his boyhood. It was called Southerly and faced the English Channel with a blanket of now badly cut lawn going down to the edge of the sand-and-shingle beach. As a thin, tall schoolboy on steamer trips from Southampton, to Bournemouth or Weymouth, he had always looked out for the flag, a blowhard Union Jack, flying from a white pole in the garden as if it were starched, wind-stretched even on the most unflappable summer days. The flagpole was still there, its paint splintering, but without the flag. Authority had taken it down.

Nothing surprised him these days. A deluge of regulations, some of them very curious, had issued from Whitehall as soon as hostilities had begun. They had probably been making them up, collecting and collating them, storing them, for decades. Unauthorised flags were not to be flown or shown. The Government could seize, at no notice whatever, *anything*; anything from a horse to a

house. Officials could demand to be told private information, even private thoughts or desires. A citizen could be thrown into prison for fourteen years for failing in their duty to their country, although many citizens were uncertain as to what this duty might be. The drawing of maps and sketches was forbidden and if a person took a newspaper out of Britain it would be confiscated, although it could be readily purchased again in another country. Britons could still holiday in eternally neutral Switzerland where they could view German troops drilling just across the border and this had proved a popular attraction. Former soldiers came back with opinions that the enemy's goose-stepping not only looked ludicrous, but was also exhausting and could cause injury. At home a farmer could neither kill a pig nor indulge in the unlikely pleasure of smoking a cigar in an open field at night. Woodpigeons were to be exterminated but carrier pigeons became official property. Loitering beneath bridges or alongside railway lines was not allowed, nor was scraping gas-warning yellow paint from pillar-boxes. Staring at police officers or army sentry-boxes was highly suspect.

Even as a boy, James had been attracted to the house, Southerly; its fine windows and white, spread shutters, its outlook to the sweeping Channel, its windy weather-vane on a jaunty turret and its flag. Once, when he was on holiday from school, he had taken the train from Southampton, an unusual solo expedition, and had crawled like a sniper through the hedge and watched people standing on the lawn. There were ladies in extravagant hairstyles and the sweeping skirts of the early century, men formal and upright in the evening, set about in groups, conversing, laughing politely, with drinks in their fingers and servants carrying more glasses on trays. He remembered how enthralled he had been to spy on the genteel scene. He had lain concealed, the bracken

scratching his bare knees, until it started getting dark and the people drifted into the house. One man lingered, a lone shadow, and was joined by a lady wearing a creamy dress who came through the half-light like a moth. The man was apparently waiting for her and, while the boy lay hidden and excited, they kissed with passion. James heard him say: 'It won't be long, darling. Not long now. Soon she will be gone.'

Wide eyed and worried he had travelled home, wondering what precautions he ought to take to save an unknown woman's life. But he told no one and did nothing although he kept an eye out for sudden, suspicious deaths in the *Southampton Echo*. Then there had been the time when he went with a Sunday school to Southerly for a Christmas tea and a magician. The ceilings were painted with idyllic scenes but so lofty that they were scarcely discernible.

On that October morning in 1939, however, it had become an officers' mess. Previously it had been a small and choice hotel, with views of the Isle of Wight and the lofty liners setting out on their luxurious voyages, but it shared the abrupt fate of hundreds of hotels within hours of war being declared.

'Threw the guests out in the street,' said Josef, the sole surviving servant, who now fulfilled multiple functions; porter, doorman, cellarman, waiter and informant. 'Defence Regulations, indeed. Old ladies, eighty and more, old gents. It was like the Nazis, sir, in Czechoslovakia. But this is England, and I don't care who hears me say it.' He glanced around as if he did. 'Some had been here years. It was like their home.'

Josef had more eyebrows than hair. He was short, stout and lined. He operated professionally from a low, almost secret room and at night he had to go outside and climb a fire escape to reach his quarters. He had a wireless set as

big as a cupboard with wavebands for Delhi, Honolulu and Melbourne. 'I've had the police in just to make sure I'm not a spy,' he told Bevan with a certain pride. 'But it's not a transmitter and I'm not doing anything illegal, nothing that's going to endanger the country. I'm a Jew and I don't trust those Narsties.'

He had certificates pinned around his room certifying that he had listened to Stockholm, Helversum, Madrid and other places. 'I've never got a peep out of Honolulu or Delhi or Melbourne,' he admitted touching the face of the set a little sadly like someone who loved a child which had failed to come up to expectations. 'I get Berlin though. Clear.'

'Weren't the police worried about you listening?' said Bevan.

'Berlin? Worried? I'll say. Well, they've got to worry about something and it makes a change from telling people their blackout curtains don't fit. Coppers walking around in their tin helmets. Like I say, there's no law against it. The Jerries play the best Yankee music and I turn a deaf ear to their Nazi rubbish. They're saying that this war was started by Jews. Well, I don't know anybody who started it.'

After the parade had been dismissed and the gun practice was over, the Bofors's barrel shrouded by camouflage netting, Bevan went through a rusting gate in the hedge before the house. There was another entrance, at one side, crudely widened for military vehicles.

Thirty or more officers of several unconnected units dispersed along the neighbouring coast shared the mess; sappers engaged in digging tunnels without end, and ordnance types who had spent weeks taking apart a squadron of clapped-out tanks and trying to put them back together. Everyone was trying to look busy. Josef strolled out of the house and stood surveying the seashore as if he

owned everything as far as his eye could see. He plucked a late daisy from the lawn and examined it. 'Shame we can't show the flag by the beach any longer, Josef,' said Bevan.

'Identification, sir,' sighed Josef. 'If a U-boat came up the Solent and saw the Union Jack he'd know right away it was England, now wouldn't he?' He glanced at Bevan as if he did not expect to be believed. 'Your boss is just back, sir.'

Major Durfield had wedged his backside in a chair, with a pot of coffee in front of him. He called for an extra cup. 'You know what I hate about this war?' he said to Bevan. He was nominally in charge of the artillery troop and another further down the coast which gave him ample excuse to dawdle between the two. He produced a flask and emptied a splash of whisky into his cup, making a token offer to Bevan before quickly slipping the flask away in an inner pocket.

'What's that, sir?'

'Golf,' said Durfield. 'Bloody golf.'

'Is it harder?'

'It's harder because the eighth at New Milton runs parallel to the road, right alongside. If you play early, which I have to, bearing in mind my duties, the damned people going to work, I suppose they're going to work anyway, some of them actually *bawl* at you from the bus. Obscene gestures, waving fists out of the windows. They seem to think I shouldn't be playing. Because it's wartime, for God's sake. They don't realise that when *I'm* locked in combat with the Hun they'll still be in their cosy factories, having their tea breaks, gossiping and going on their communist strikes.' He leaned forward as if ashamed of what he was about to divulge. 'Today, Bevan, I even hid in a bunker so the bastards wouldn't see me. Playing with a Navy chap straight home from convoy duty. He thought I was mad. I

made him hide with me.' He laughed sourly. 'Like being in the damned trenches.'

'Good practice, sir.'

'I wonder if it is,' said the major. He put his cup down and tapped his nose confidently. 'I wouldn't be surprised, Bevan, if this lot wasn't all over by Christmas.'

'Oh, the war. Who's going to win?'

'No winner. A draw, a tie. Hitler will talk to us and we will talk to Hitler and everyone will call it a day. We'll all be reasonable. Not everybody is against Germany, you know, not everybody in Parliament.'

'But it would happen again some time.'

'But not necessarily with the Boche, maybe with the Ruskies. At the moment the Germans are wedged between Russia and us, remember, and we've always feared the Reds. But by then you and I may be too old.' He surveyed Bevan. 'What are you now?'

'Thirty-nine. Old as the century, sir.'

'Right. Well, when it happens again perhaps we can sit back and simply observe. Personally, I had enough of the First War. Did you catch that?'

'Yes, I did.'

'You were young.'

'I'll never learn,' Bevan laughed ruefully.

'You've parted from your wife, haven't you?'

'Yes, sir.'

'I've parted from three of the buggers.'

They finished the coffee and refused Josef's offer to make another pot. 'Let's get out of here before all those oily armourers, or whatever they call themselves, come in, mucking up the cutlery,' said Durfield. 'The rate they're working on those tanks they'll be ready for the next war.'

Why the War Office had to cram half the British Army down here I'll never know.'

Bevan followed him into the shabby lobby. Durfield always stepped out in a commanding way, all that was commanding about him. With every day of military occupation the house was becoming more ill used. There was a pile of bicycles, another of gas-mask containers, and an incident with a fire extinguisher had ruined the fabric covering of one wall; a fallen chandelier stood propped like an open umbrella.

'I've known this place for years,' said Bevan.

'You mentioned it before. Pity it's such a mess. But at least it's being used. Half the hotels they emptied in such a hurry are still empty, those bloody Whitehall numbskulls don't know what to do with them. I'm glad they've somehow left this chap Josef. He's a Jew, isn't he? Jolly useful though.' He stood and straightened his uniform, and for a moment looked almost important. 'I've been meaning to inspect the turret, take a look at it. That knobbly bit on the end of the house. Those air-raid-warden johnnies want to use it unless we need it. We ought to *make sure* we need it. They're civilians. Don't want civvies spying on everything we do.'

Bevan followed behind his expansive backside, then overtook him and opened a scraping door.

'It's up here, sir. I remember going up when I was a kid.'

The tower smelled dank, so enclosed that the emulsion on the walls fragmented on their shoulders. Bevan pushed open the door at the top and they went in. The major, patting the dust from his uniform, resounded in the empty place. His subordinate walked towards the windows, the sun filtered by the grime on the glass. He picked up a yellow page of newspaper. 'Watch it,' said the commanding officer. 'Somebody might have wiped their arse on that.'

Bevan had already checked. It was the sports page of the *Daily Mail*. The headline said: 'Cricket and Football to be Cancelled.' It was dated the previous 31 August. He screwed up the page and wiped one of the windows. A finger of sun drifted in.

'It's not too bad up here,' said Durfield sniffing around. 'Cleaned up it would be a good place for something or other, even if it's only to have a crafty nap. We must make sure that those ARP twerps don't get their hands on it.'

When he had rubbed most of the grime from one pane Bevan worked the newspaper over another so that they each had a peep-hole. 'Our Bofors looks good from this angle,' approved the commanding officer. 'Although how they can say it fires a hundred and odd rounds a minute defeats me. The bloody thing's hand loaded. It can only manage eight. When's the other gun back?'

'Thursday,' said Bevan. 'They promised.'

'Some promise,' sniffed Durfield. 'I doubt if they know how it works.'

Bevan was eyeing the coast laid out before them, the very cloth of England, green and brown, with a faintly glistening sea; Christchurch Bay, grey serrated with silver. The minesweeper was still lolling out there, not doing very much, and a solid merchant ship followed by a smaller one, already trying to keep up, was in the Solent heading for the sea.

'Bugger going to sea,' said Durfield. 'Those U-boats are bastards.'

Bevan said: 'You can see for miles, can't you.' He looked towards the old hump of Hurst Castle, then west to Hengistbury Head where the Saxons landed. Then there were the bungalows of England, squat and untroubled; Milford-on-Sea, Barton-on-Sea, row after white row.

‘What’s going on down there?’ asked Durfield. He pointed to the beach. ‘Are those our bods?’

‘Yes, they are.’

‘What are they up to?’

‘Building sandcastles, sir.’

‘Oh, right. Good, good.’

* * *

Gunner Bairnsfather was one of the few men in the troop who could drive a car, for he had been a baker’s roundsman. The unit had a 1938 Ford, whorled with camouflage. ‘Look at it, sir,’ he said running his thumb around the contours of the green and brown paint. ‘Old Jerry could spot this a mile away.’

Bevan grinned. The gunner was young but almost bald, his fair, wispy hair merging with his pale pate.

‘Everybody in our family’s like this,’ he had boasted in the barrack room, hands fumbling for his spindly strands. ‘Even my mum.’

The strategic lesson with the sandcastles had gone well. The men had sat around contemplating their system of redoubts with a pride recalled from childhood beach days, patting pieces here and there, excavating careful moats, ensuring the sand was sufficiently damp and adhesive. Sergeant Runciman looked for once fulfilled and swung a child’s tin beach bucket he had found, a summer relic. The handle was snapped but the bucket had Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs painted around it and between them they had a competition to see who could recognise and name the dwarfs. There was even some sharp argument. Gunner Brown said: ‘You, Cartwright, you wouldn’t know fucking Bashful if ‘e shouted at you.’

‘You’d know Dopey, Brown.’