

Shrapnel

Robert Swindells

Random House Children's Publishers UK

Contents

Cover

About the Book

Title Page

Dedication

Spivs

One: If

Two: Storm Troopers

Three: Six Thousand Million Oranges

Four: DSO

Five: A Shower of Soot

Six: Tom Mix and Hopalong Cassidy

Seven: Dance

Eight: So What's New?

Nine: Eyes Everywhere

Spivs

Ten: Semolina with Prunes

Eleven: Blast

Twelve: Duties to Perform

Thirteen: Spitfire Parked Outside

Fourteen: Sweetheart

Fifteen: Creepy Little Swot

Sixteen: OHMS

Seventeen: A Maid, for Pete's Sake

Eighteen: Relocated

Nineteen: Two Half-Crowns

Twenty: Cabbage Casserole

Twenty-One: All Spuds and No Meat
Twenty-Two: Blithering Nincompoop
Twenty-Three: Tin Lizzie
Twenty-Four: Professional Performance
Twenty-Five: Wibbly Wobbly
Twenty-Six: Better Not To Ask
Twenty-Seven: Bad Manners
Twenty-Eight: A Fish in the Sahara
Twenty-Nine: Sherlock Holmes Himself
Thirty: Bodywork
Thirty-One: Not Expecting Jerry
Thirty-Two: Just Boys
Thirty-Three: Sorry
Thirty-Four: Like a Bird
Thirty-Five: Lucky Girl
Thirty-Six: Knights on a Raft
Spivs
Thirty-Seven: Eggless Cake, Watery Smiles
Thirty-Eight: No Guy Fawkes Night
Thirty-Nine: If Wishes Were Horses
Forty: Two or Sommink
Forty-One: Cars in Heaven
Forty-Two: Sell his Mother
Forty-Three: Job on ITMA
Forty-Four: Wish I Hadn't
Forty-Five: Zombies
Forty-Six: Blue Funk
Forty-Seven: Ruminating

Forty-Eight: Linton Barker's Lungs
Forty-Nine: It Wasn't Exactly a Lie
Fifty: Balls of Fragrant Smoke
Fifty-One: Two Policemen
Fifty-Two: The Dock
Fifty-Three: Not the Gestapo
Fifty-Four: Rhinoceros
Fifty-Five: Kitten
Fifty-Six: Shrapnel
Fifty-Seven: Auld Lang Syne
Fifty-Eight: Heinkel
Fifty-Nine: What Was Left of it
Sixty: Chop Some Bits Off
Sixty-One: A Gong
Sixty-Two: What Happened Afterwards

About the Author

Also by Robert Swindells

Copyright

About the Book

World War Two is raging, bombs rain down on Britain and brave young men fly their fighter planes against enormous odds. Gordon wishes he was one of them - not like his cowardly elder brother Raymond, who has left home and his job to do who knows what.

When Gordon finds a revolver hidden in his parent's house, he decides to track his brother down. But finding Raymond leads to much more than Gordon had bargained for. His brother claims to be a secret governmental agent, and enlists Gordon's help in a mysterious enterprise. Gordon is keen to do his bit for the war effort, but is Raymond luring him into danger . . . ?

A gripping wartime drama from master storyteller and multi award-winner Robert Swindells.

ROBERT SWINDELLS

Shrapnel

RHCP DIGITAL

For Jennifer Alice

Spivs

THE YOUTH IN the natty suit rose, scooping up his companion's empty tankard. 'Same again, is it?' The other boy frowned, shook his head. 'It's my . . . you got that one. I can't let you . . .'

'Relax, chum. I told you, lolly's not a worry. Back in a sec.'

He watched the suit swerve through knots of young men in uniform, heading for the bar. Must be nice, he thought, enough of the readies to stand a total stranger two rounds in a row, and on a Thursday night. His own wage never stretched past Monday.

'There y'are.' The youth banged two fresh pints on the table. 'Get that down the inside of your neck.' He sat down, sketched a toast with his tankard and took a long pull.

His companion sipped, studying his generous acquaintance over the rim of the glass. 'So,' he said, 'what line are you in, if it's not a rude question?' He smiled in case it was. 'It obviously pays well.'

The youth shrugged. 'I manage.' He grinned. 'Better than slaving in some factory at any rate: beats me how you stick it, mate.'

The boy pulled a face. 'It's a reserved occupation for one thing - I won't be called up.' He sighed. 'Tedious though, day in day out since I was fourteen. I've a good mind to enlist, if only for the chance of a bit of excitement.'

The smart youth shook his head. 'No need for that, chum. If it's excitement you're after, you can find it without getting your head blown off, and have cash in your pocket.'

'How?'

'Easy. Join me. Us. We can always use another bright lad who thrives on excitement.' He smiled. *'Have to leave Mummy and Daddy though, or the Army'll get you.'*

The boy smiled. 'That'll be no hardship, I'm cheesed off being treated like a kid. What d'I have to do?'

The youth winked. 'Nothing you'd need a university education for, chum. Drink up.'



ONE

If

'IF WE HAD some bacon,' said Dad, 'we could have bacon and eggs, if we had some eggs.'

Mum smiled at this well-worn wartime joke. 'If we had eggs, Frank, we'd be tucking in to one of those rich cakes I used to bake for Sunday tea before the war, instead of this eggless so-called sponge.'

'If I was eighteen instead of thirteen,' I put in, hoovering up dry crumbs with a fingertip, 'I'd be bringing my Spitfire in to land at this very moment, after bagging two Messerschmitts over Kent.'

'If you'd the sense you were born with, Gordon,' snapped Mum, 'you'd thank your lucky stars you're *not* eighteen. Many a lad will have died today, and more'll die tomorrow. I hope it's all over before you're old enough to go.'

'He won't go anyway, Ethel,' said Dad. 'Minute he turns fourteen, he starts with me at Beresford's.'

Hang Beresford's, I thought but didn't say. Beresford's is where Dad works. It's a light engineering factory. In peacetime they make bicycle parts. Now it's shell cases, same as in the Great War. Dad's worked there since he was a boy. He missed the Great War, because engineering was a reserved occupation. It's a reserved occupation this time as well. My brother went there straight from school, but he packed it in a few weeks ago, when he turned twenty-one. You can do what you like when you're twenty-one. He left home at the same time, but he's been seen about so he's not in the Army. Raymond, his name is. I wish he'd taken me with him.

Well, I get picked on, see?

'What colour's Price's dad?' yells Dicky Deadman, and his three chums shout, 'Yellow.' *Their* dads served in the Great War. *The last lot*, as it's called now. Deadman senior was in the Navy. Charlie Williams and Bobby Shawcross's dads survived the trenches, and Victor Platt's old man drove an ambulance. Victor's got a sister in the WAAF as well.

Fellows in reserved occupations are doing their bit, but chumps like Deadman don't see it. If you're not in uniform you must be a coward, that's what they reckon.

Proves something I'm about to learn - that war brings out the best in some people, and the worst in others.



TWO

Storm Troopers

ANYWAY, THAT WAS Sunday. Eggless sponge and an evening round the wireless, with boards over the windows so enemy planes won't see our lights.

Monday, back to school. On aerodromes up and down the country, chaps were strapping themselves into Spitfires and Hurricanes, the lucky blighters. No double maths for them. As we shuffled into Foundry Street School, they'd ease back their joysticks and lift clear of the dewy grass, heading for the clouds. While old Whitfield called the register and we said, '*Present, sir*', wishing we weren't, they'd spot twenty-plus Heinkels and dive on them, machine guns chattering. And by the time we'd copied twelve dreary sums off the board and done them, they'd have landed and be laughing and joking in the mess, while airframe mechanics patched up the bullet holes in their kites. It'd be five years before

any of us was old enough to join in, and the fun was bound to be over by then.

'You won't find the answers out there, Price,' snapped Whitfield. I'd been miles away, gazing out of the window.

'No, sir,' I mumbled. 'Sorry. I was just . . .'

'Head in the clouds, laddie. Dreaming. What if our brave soldiers spent *their* time dreaming, eh? Our sailors, our airmen? What d'you think would happen *then*, Price?'

'I . . . dunno, sir.'

'*Don't* you indeed?' He was working himself up into one of his paddies. The kids were smirking behind their hands, enjoying it. Famous for his patriotic rants, was old Whitfield. I reckon he had a conscience about not being in the firing line himself. 'Well, *I* do,' he roared. 'Overrun by Nazi hordes, *that's* what we'd be. *What* would we be, Price?'

'Sir, overrun by Nazi hordes.'

'Exactly! And what would *you* do about it, laddie?'

'I don't know, sir.'

'Well, *I* do. You'd sit gazing out of the window while storm troopers rampaged through our school shouting *Sieg Heil*, chucking stuff about, ruining our parquet with their jackboots. *What* would you do, laddie?'

I started giggling. Couldn't help it. Well, think about it: husky storm troopers with blue eyes and short blond hair, parachuting into England just so they could make a mess in Foundry Street School. It was ridiculous. But of course he didn't see it.

'Oh, so you think it's *funny*, do you, Price - enemy troops doing exactly as they please in our school? You've a strange sense of humour, so who knows - perhaps you'll find *this* funny as well.' He scrabbled his cane from behind the cupboard, bounded up the aisle between the desks and laid into me with it. I ducked, clasping my hands round my head as he whacked my shoulders and back. It didn't hurt much, padded as I was with blazer, pullover and vest. In fact, as the stick rose and fell I went on giggling, my nose flattened

on the desktop. I felt like telling the silly old goat to save his thrashing for the storm troopers, but I didn't.

When he'd worked off his paddy, he said, '*There*', like somebody who's knocked the last nail into a really good job, and stalked back to his lectern. I lifted my head. It'd been a hectic minute or so, but it relieved the boredom, and I'd be a sort of hero in the eyes of the class for a while, which would make a nice change.



THREE

Six Thousand Million Oranges

MOST OF THOSE who die in air raids are killed by flying glass. Not a lot of people know that. The bomb blast blows windows out, and bits of broken glass whizz through the air. If a little piece hits you it's like shrapnel - it'll go through clothes and skin and lodge in your flesh. A big one'll take your arm off. Or your head. There was a story in the paper about some poor chap in London. A bomb went off inside the department store he was passing and its windows blew out. A sheet of glass the size of a tea tray hit him, cut him clean in two. That's why there's an air-raid shelter in our school yard, and why we have shelter drill once a week.

It's good, shelter drill. Breaks up the day. We had it that Monday morning, right after playtime. It was science, which I quite like, but I enjoy drill even more. We were halfway through watching Miss Robertson make a battery out of

copper, zinc and an orange – don't ask me where she found an orange – when we heard the rattle. It's a football rattle. The Head, old Hinkley, stands in the main hall and whirls it, and that's the signal for shelter drill.

What you do is, you drop whatever you're doing and get your gas mask. You put it on, line up and follow your teacher out of the building. The teacher brings the register. You cross the yard and file into the shelter. You do all this calmly, without shouting or shoving. The shelter's a long brick building. It wouldn't stand a direct hit, but it has no windows and no part of it will burn. It's dark inside. Around the walls are narrow benches. You sit with your classmates while your teacher calls the register. That's to make sure everybody's there. Meanwhile old Hinkley and the caretaker check that nobody's in the school before joining us in the shelter.

Sometimes the Head will drone on about something while he's got all of us together. One of his favourites is how you're helping Hitler if you waste food. I quite like this one.

Picture the scene. *Der Fuehrer* in his war room. Huge table covered with maps. He frowns as he studies them. Things aren't going too well. Somebody knocks on the door. '*Komm,*' says old Adolf. It's a fat chap in a fancy uniform. '*Splendid news, mein Fuehrer* – the young Englishman Gordon Price has left two and a half Brussels sprouts on the rim of his plate.' Hitler straightens up, smiling. '*Das ist gut!* Launch the invasion barges – England is ours.'

I'd love to hand that in as an essay, just to see what would happen.

Anyway, this time old Hinkley says, 'Four and a half minutes – well done, everybody,' and we file back to Miss Robertson's battery, which generates enough electricity to make a tiny bulb flicker. I don't see the point. I suppose if we could get hold of about six thousand million oranges we could rig up a fruit-powered searchlight but we can't – there's a war on.