

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



The Dangerous Edge Of Things

Candida Lycett Green

About the Book

1949: one year in the childhood of Candida Lycett Green in the remote village of Farnborough in Berkshire. Here she lives with her father John Betjeman and her mother Penelope Chetwode, in one of the bleakest and highest spots on the windswept downland. Candida runs wild with the 'gang' of village children. Stimulated by regular excursions to the cinema in Wantage, Candida and her best friend June became fascinated by the idea of love. Their romantic imagination is fuelled by the beautiful Ruby Mason, who cleans the cottage of a reclusive scientist, Dr Fox, employed at the neighbouring Harwell Atomic Research Centre. They stealthily engineer a romance between the two - until it is revealed that none of the children's special adult friends are what they seem, and the real world shockingly intervenes to overturn their innocence.

Contents

Cover
About the Book
Title Page
Dedication
Map
Acknowledgements
Epigraph
Author note
Prelude

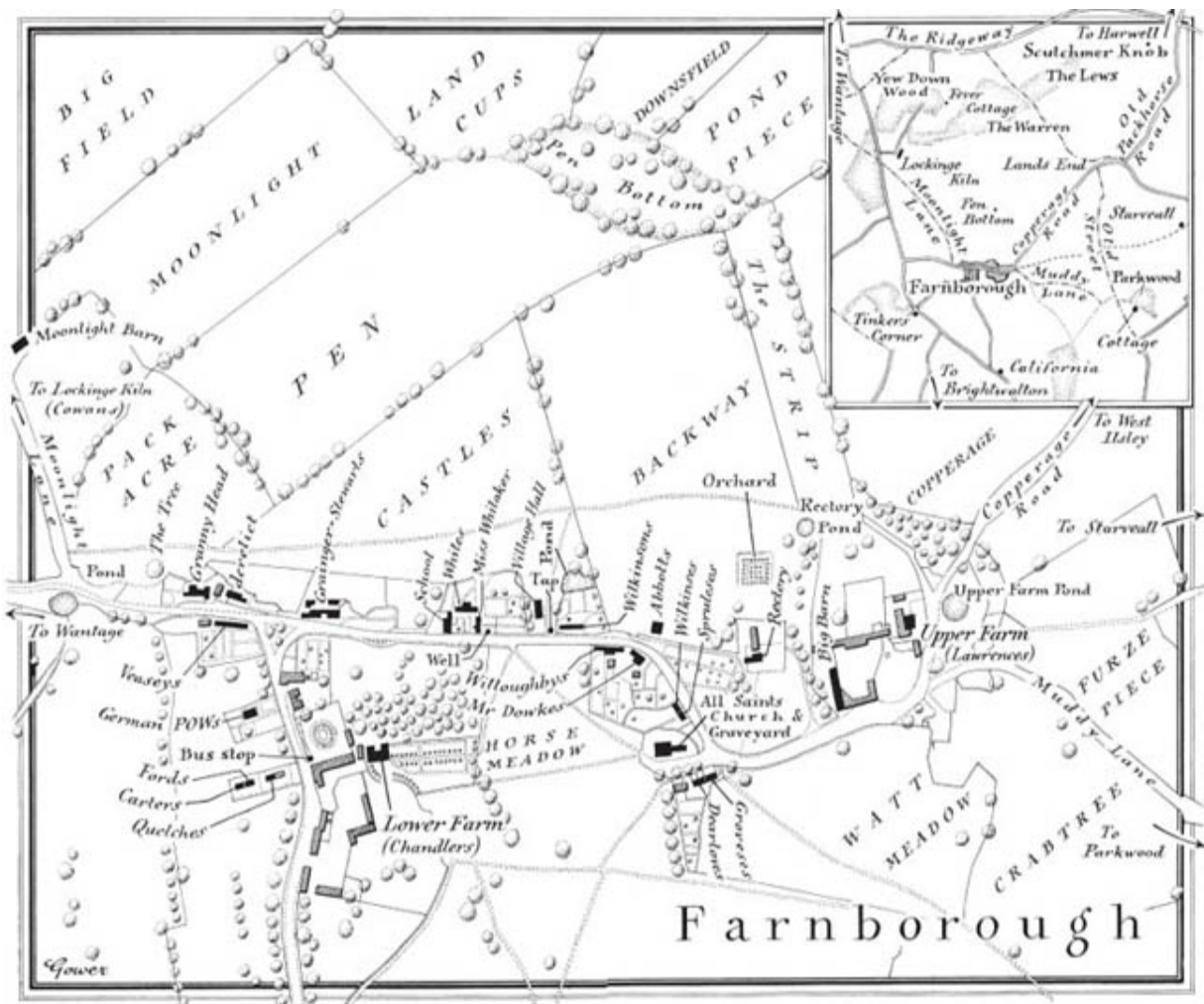
February
March
April
May
June
July
August
September
October
November
December
January
February

Epilogue
About the Author
Also by Candida Lycett Green
Copyright

THE
DANGEROUS
EDGE OF THINGS

CANDIDA LYCETT GREEN

This book is dedicated to the memory of my loved friends
Desmond Elliott and Paul Foot



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the staff of Colindale Library in London as well as the staff at Didcot, Newbury, Oxford, Reading, Swindon and Wantage Public Libraries and Wantage Vale and Downland Museum, and Frank and Joyce Wardingley of the Past and Present Collection in Ardington.

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My thanks also to: Ditta Bywater, the Reverend Antonia Cretney, Carole Davis, Paul Foot, Christopher Gibbs, Sheila Matthews, Daryll Pinkney, Betty Richings, Andrew Schaefer, Caroline Todhunter, Michael Todhunter, the Reverend John Townend, Margaret Townsend and Peter Walwyn for their time; to Nick Hance, Sebastian Pease and Jim Richings for information about Harwell; to Richard Ingrams and Tory Oaksey for their generous friendship, Justin Gowers for his moral support, Deborah Adams and Judy Collins for their matchless editing, Marianne Velmans for her infinite patience, kindness and constructive editorial brilliance, and Rupert, my husband, for everything.

Lastly I would like to thank Richard Bates, Tim Bates, Jeremy Caldicott, Dolly Carter, Terry Carter, Janet Carter, Phil Chandler, Freda Chandler, Bill Cowan, Kathleen Cowan, Richard Cowan, Pam Ford, Christopher Loyd,

Barbara Marshall, Sheila Marshall, Molly Ryan, Florrie Sprules, Topsy White, Cecil Wichell, Christine Wilkinson, Bushel Wilkinson, John Willoughby and my brother, Paul Betjeman, for their recollections, without which this book would not have been possible.

Our interest's on the dangerous edge of things.
The honest thief, the tender murderer,
The superstitious atheist

Robert Browning, 'Bishop Blougram's Apology'

AUTHOR'S NOTE

It was Norman Moss's *Klaus Fuchs: The Man Who Stole the Atom Bomb* that set me off: certain passages in the book took me winging back over the decades to Farnborough. I realized that the paths of the village children, of whom I was one, and those of the brilliant German-born physicist Fuchs may have crossed: that the stretch of downland between the Atomic Energy Research Station at Harwell and our own village was common ground. I was also struck by Fuchs's naivety in believing that, after he had confessed to giving away the secret of the atom bomb to the Russians, he would be able to continue participating in the vital work at Harwell. But it was something he wrote in his confessional statement at the War Office on 27 January 1950 that struck the deepest chord.

... Since coming to Harwell I have met English people of all kinds, and I have come to see in many of them a deep-rooted firmness which enables them to lead a decent way of life. I do not know where this springs from and I don't think they do, but it is there.

I have tried in this book to be true to the memory of the decent, deep-rooted people I grew up amongst. What I have written is based not only on my own memories but on interviews with many of those who were living in Farnborough in the late 1940s. Adding to this collective village memory, as it were, I have used my imagination to elaborate a little on what might have been.



FARNBOROUGH SCHOOL: top left, Miss Whitaker; standing, Una Ryan, Billy Wilkinson, Maureen Carter, John Willoughby, June White; seated, Sheila Marshall, Pamela Marshall, CLG, Moyna Ryan; cross-legged, Janet Carter and Patsy Wilkins.

PRELUDE

ON THE LAST SATURDAY AFTERNOON OF JANUARY 1947, I WENT with some of the Farnborough village children to the pictures in Wantage, escorted by big Mrs Willoughby (20-odd stone), who never took off her pinafore and had arms like skittles. *Courage of Lassie* was showing at the Regent. To catch the old beige Reliance bus, opposite the council houses at the end of the village, and to bump about over the potholes, down the hills and through the fog to the town was the most exciting thing in the world. The big seats at the back of the Regent were where Mrs Willoughby felt most comfortable, but we children all favoured the front row, as close to the screen as we could get. My best friend June White and I, always together, sat next to Christine and Billy Wilkinson, John Willoughby, and then Bushel Wilkinson and Terry Carter further along, out on their own. They liked to be separate because they were older.

When we came out, stars in our eyes and dreaming of Elizabeth Taylor and the Rocky Mountains, there was a blanket of snow all over the Market Place. The statue of King Alfred was draped in a white cloak. The butcher, who was a friend of Mrs Willoughby's and had a shop on the Square, said you could get nothing but a tractor back up to our village, 720 feet up in the downs. (Anyway, where were we going to get a tractor from?)

So Mrs Willoughby decided we'd just have to walk the five miles back home. Past the Iron Foundry we trudged, clutching onto each other for dear life as we climbed Chain Hill beside the railing of the big town cemetery; a hundred graves to haunt us beneath the endless undulations of

snow. We made slow headway because Mrs Willoughby was blowing like a steam engine and we had to keep waiting for her while she got her breath back. When we reached the level open road beyond Chain Hill Farm there was a strange, ethereal light over everything and a deep silence. It was as though we were the only people left on earth. We stayed in a huddle. The only sound in this gigantic emptiness was the squeaky crunching noise of the fresh snow under our shoes as we walked and as long as we kept up a fair pace we forgot about the biting cold. Terry and Bushel, who had recently seen *Scott of the Antarctic*, told us it was important to stick together. By the time we got to Grim's Ditch an east wind had begun whistling across from the woods planted in battle formations on Ardington Down; it whipped and whirled up flurries of snow. Our faces were scorched by it, our nostrils filled with it, our coats all caked down the left side.

It wasn't until we'd slithered up the slow curve of Long Hill that the moaning, icy wind died down in the shelter of the black woods by Lockinge Kiln. Christine had borrowed her sister's shoes, Florrie's best pair, which went all soggy, and her feet got frozen through. She was more worried about what Florrie would say than about getting frostbite and her toes falling off.

'How will we find our way without a moon?' I'd asked back in the Square.

'The snow lights up the night,' Terry had replied.

And so it did. Terry knew things like that. The road had disappeared in the vast, white landscape but we could see where we were by the hedgerows. That was when you could still see the hedgerows. That was only the beginning.

By the first of February the snowdrifts were ten to twelve feet deep and most of the outlying farms were cut off. There was 33 degrees of frost, so they said. In some places on the exposed bits of road, away from the shelter of the

beech coppices, you could stand on top of a frozen drift and touch the telegraph wires, which were sagged down with snow like streamers of white ribbon. The weight of the snow on the roof of Lockinge Kiln Farm had made some of it collapse into the attic and the hole had to be covered up with a tarpaulin. Bill Cowan, the new tenant farmer, had only just moved in and all 774 acres and 2 roods of his new land lay frozen stiff under the whiteness.

At one point during that arctic spell, my mum got stranded in Brightwalton and couldn't get home. The snow had drifted across the lane while she was at the funeral of a local well-respected farmer, and Mrs Carr played 'I Waited for the Lord' by Mendelssohn on the organ. The Reverend Mr Naunton Bates, who had a widow's peak, eyes that sloped down at the sides when he laughed and was never without a pipe in his mouth, harboured my mother, together with several other marooned funeral-goers, in his gloomy red-brick rectory with its twenty-seven rooms and nine tall chimneys. She said it felt much colder inside the rectory than out. For the first time in my life I had to sleep away from home, in the Wilkinsons' long, thin cottage by the village tap, snug in bed alongside Christine and her sister Stella, an earthenware hot-water bottle at our feet. We spent the morning sliding across the pond at the back of their garden, beyond the village hall. It was the best pond in the village by miles.

That snow of 1947 saw my true initiation into the village. It was like a christening. I didn't realize it at the time but that was when Terry Carter first accepted me as being all right. Years later he told me that it was when I walked up the hill from Wantage with them that he had earmarked me as a future gang member.

Terry was the be-all and end-all. He was my brother's best friend, when my brother wasn't away at boarding school, but he was also the leader of a gang of older

children. Everyone did what Terry said, but they only did what he said because he was the best at everything. One evening in the Christmas holidays we had seen him shoot a roosting pheasant out of a tree with his catapult. Although the first shot missed, the second hit it clean on the head and it fell to the ground with a thud. Then, the next morning, June and I tracked him down to the dank pond past the Chandlers' farm. We hid in the hedge above the lane which led out of the village towards Lilley. Terry was carrying a billhook and we watched him looking up at the Scots pines on the far side of the black sludgy water. He then cut off two of the straightest branches and carried them back to a shed behind his house, the last in the row of council houses. Twenty minutes later he emerged with the trimmed branches, two footholds nailed and lashed about two-thirds of the way up. Then, to our astonishment, he proceeded to mount his makeshift stilts from the high bank above the road. He walked off shakily in the direction of the Old Smithy. The thing is, he didn't fall off. June and I couldn't believe our eyes. We went running after him and shouting, 'Terry, Terry, everyone look at Terry!'

His technique improved as he progressed up the village street towards the church. Because he was now taller than the average giant, he could look into everyone's bedroom windows. This obviously upset big Mrs Willoughby: she came bursting out of her front door, scarlet with indignation, and told him off roundly. She was always scolding him, but it only served to add to his stature in my eyes. It was Terry who held the key to my place in village society.

FEBRUARY



The Old Rectory, Farnborough

FEBRUARY 1949 WAS when it all really began; when June White and I started to drift away from the safe shores of home. Until then we were curbed by some invisible boundary within which our whereabouts were generally known, although looking back it's doubtful that our parents thought about us as much as we imagined they did.

My mum assumed that if I wasn't at home I was either in one of June White's chicken houses or at the Wilkinsons'. I had to be in for meals, that was all. But I never wandered far, because my world was the village and its surrounding farmland. I referred to my mother as 'air mum', my brother as 'air Paul' and my father as 'air dad'. This was the norm in the village and I was part of it.

The Wilkinsons were my extended family. Christine Wilkinson had conker-brown hair, dark sparkly eyes and seven brothers and sisters, who all lived in the long white cottage by the village tap, my second home. It had been a double-dweller in its day and had a steep narrow staircase at either end. Christine, Stella, Bushel and Billy shared a room up at one end, with their parents next door, and the three remaining eldest children, Sis, Bob and Florrie, slept in the two bedrooms up at the other. Pearl Wilkinson had recently married her neighbour Tom Groves and lived in a farm cottage half a mile out of the village at Lands End; and Florrie was courting Stan Sprules, who lived in one side of the white cottages next to the church. I saw Florrie and Pearl nearly every day because they helped my mum with the milking, skimming, butter churning, gardening and cleaning. Our house was the biggest in the village, having been built for a gentleman vicar of refined tastes two hundred years before.

I looked forward to the rare occasions when my parents went out because Stella, who was just fifteen, would come over to our house with all her magazines, as well as some packets of crisps, and we would sit in the kitchen with our chairs pulled up near the boiler and our feet on top of the fender. I would stay up late and learn about Hollywood scandals, both of which activities my mother would have disapproved of. Stella brought with her an air of glamorous indulgence. She was the most obviously pretty of the Wilkinson girls, but my mum was always saying that all five of the girls could be film stars if they wanted to be. According to June's mum, Stella had a bit of a 'reputation' and used to spend too much time with the American air-force men from Greenham Common in the King Charles pub in Newbury. My brother, who was thirteen, blushed each time he saw her ever since she had whispered in his ear, 'Roll me over in the clover,' on the way back from a picnic the previous summer.

* * *

June White lived in a small red-brick cottage set back from the village street. It formed the top side of what everyone called the 'Square'. In fact, there were only three real sides to the square – the thatched schoolroom taking up most of one side and the cottage of our schoolmistress, Miss Whitaker, the other. June's dad, Mr White, was jaunty, wiry-looking, brown as a walnut, and worked for Mr Cowan as the cowman at Lockinge Kiln Farm. His smile creased up his face and covered it in tiny lines. He spent most of his spare time with the rabbits, chickens and pigs he bred in the long garden which ran sideways from his cottage towards the village hall. Crammed full, the garden was. Everyone knew he used to bring a bit of feed back from the farm, but Mr Cowan turned a blind eye. On Saturdays Mr White would kill some livestock and, with the eggs, run it

down to the butcher in Wantage, in the sidecar of his combination motorbike. One morning his brother-in-law, another butcher, came over from Hungerford and killed one of the young pigs. You could hear the squeals all over the village. Two days later when June and I found it hanging upside down in a shed with its blood dripping into a basin, we thought for a moment that it was a dead baby and stood there, half thrilled, half terrified. Mrs White made black pudding from the blood.

June's brother Jimmy, named after his father, also worked on Mr Cowan's farm, as a tractor driver, and was looked up to by us children ever since 'the accident'. One afternoon he had decided to try a stunt that involved balancing as many of us as he could muster on his own solo motorbike and driving it down the village street. We had all piled on, sitting on each other's shoulders, hanging off to the side, and in the end there were thirteen of us teetering and wobbling down towards the end of the village street, screaming with fear and excitement. At that very moment Bernard Carter happened to be driving towards us on Mr White's combination, and when he decided to change direction at the last minute he drove straight into us. Arthur Wilkins, from one of the white cottages next to the church, hurt his leg and old Mrs Wilkins brought in the police from Wantage. A lot of the older ones ended up in court, and Jimmy lost his licence.

I didn't see June's big sister Topsy much. She helped with the housework up at Lockinge Kiln Farm and spent most evenings walking out with her boyfriend, who was in the air force and stationed at a small unit at RAF Welford. As Topsy told everyone with great pride, he had flown Dakotas, Horsas and Oxfords for navigation and instrument training.

Mrs White, June's mum, wore a wool headscarf tied up in a knot on the top of her head, kept a cigarette in the corner of her mouth and didn't come out of the cottage

much. She was wider than Mr White (though not as wide as Mrs Willoughby), with a large, low-slung bosom, pale eyelashes to match her pale blond hair, and full, reddish cheeks that made her eyes almost disappear when she was angry. She and Mrs Willoughby were always at loggerheads. They argued over *everything*. I had once heard them down by Mr Chandler's milk churns bickering about when the bus to Wantage was due; gradually their voices rose until they were shouting at each other and Mrs White's whole face went puce. I avoided going into June's house because I didn't think Mrs White liked me much; she'd say things like, 'Not *you* again,' or she'd shout up the dark stairwell, '*Jewn*, it's her.' One day I saw her sitting outside the back door plucking a chicken and stuffing the feathers into an old feed sack while the wireless, turned right up, was playing 'Moonlight Serenade' from the kitchen windowsill. She had no idea that I was standing a few yards away, hidden in the shadow of one of the chicken houses. She went into a kind of trance, with a beatific look on her face and her eyes looking into the middle distance, swaying from side to side on the old wooden chair as she sang along, '... a smile so beguilingly lovely'. In that moment I saw her as a different person altogether and was never scared of her shouting at me after that.

If ever any of the chicken houses, stinking of creosote, fell vacant, June and I would take it over as our own 'play house'. We could squeeze through the opening the chickens used; as long as you could get your head through, then your body would follow. That was before the February of 1949 and the broadening of our horizons.

It was Terry Carter who started it, but then he was the catalyst for most things. June and I hero-worshipped him from afar. We envied Christine and her brothers Bushel and Billy Wilkinson, as well as John Willoughby, for being in Terry's gang. The week before, on the lawn in front of our

house, Terry had thrown a ball up into the air so high that it became a tiny speck, like a lark, and then it disappeared altogether. We all waited, our faces to the sky, but it never came down. My dad was a witness. None of us knew how he did it.

On that Friday afternoon early in February, after June and I had been to a newly organized 'dancing class' in the village hall, Terry Carter and his shadow, Bushel Wilkinson, were waiting outside, beside the village tap. When we came alongside them, giggling about our attempts to learn the four steps back, four steps forward and twirl of the Sir Roger de Coverley, Terry said to us gravely, his eyes to the ground, 'You can join the gang if you want. We decided.'

Terry had a Brummie accent. The 'g's seemed to clang among his sentences more than other letters. I felt the heat rushing into my face. June stood there with her mouth open. This was, without doubt, the greatest moment in our lives so far.

'Come down the Tree in the morning,' he said as he sloped off, Bushel trailing behind him. We watched him disappear across the road, through the kissing gate and into Horse Meadow.

The next morning a fog, as thick as pea soup, was hanging down the village street. At the end of our short drive, always dark under the Scots pine trees, I could hardly see to the Willoughbys' cottage, let alone the Wilkinsons', further down the street. Mrs Willoughby, with a Park Drive stuck to her bottom lip as usual and her gigantic bosom quivering like a blancmange under her pinafore, was filling her bucket with drinking water from the village tap and looked at me suspiciously as I passed. 'I bet you're up to no good,' she said.

I broke into a run. I was out of breath by the time I reached the Whites'. Knowing Mrs White would be at the back, I walked straight in by the front door, which was always unlocked, and climbed the steep stairs ahead of me

to June's bedroom, where she slept with Topsy. The little dormer window looked down the box-edged garden path up which I had just run. There was the same familiar stench of stale pee and old clothes. The high bed with a black iron bedstead, which June and Topsy shared, was jammed against one wall. Topsy was still asleep, a motionless mountain under the bedclothes; the big china chamber-pot under the bed as usual full to the absolute brim. I wondered how anyone got it down the stairs without spilling.

June had on the green wool jumper she wore nearly every day, tight under the armholes and barely reaching down to her waist, a gathered cotton skirt covered in tiny blue flowers, white ankle socks, and a kirby-grip on the floppy side of her straight, light-brown hair. There was never much difference between June's summer and winter clothes except that in winter she wore another jersey on top and sometimes a coat. She had greenish-brown eyes, long, thin legs, and looked much more like her dad than did Topsy (who had inherited her mum's broad beam).

It had been June's grin that had struck me the hardest when we had first met nearly five years before; it was so wide that it almost reached her ears. I was standing on the threshold of the village schoolroom at the beginning of term, a newcomer clutching my brown-sugar sandwiches wrapped up in greaseproof paper and wanting to melt into the floor. June had already been at the school for a couple of terms and, rather than regarding me with haughty disdain as some of the others did, she turned to me and grinned. It was a sudden flash of warmth. She didn't say anything, but it was enough. From that moment we were friends. June was wilful; she broke the rules and usually got away with it. I admired her defiance of authority. An unspoken bond developed between us and eventually we became inseparable.

As I walked behind June down the brick path and out onto the village street she reminded me of a marionette, with her gangly arms hanging down by her sides. She seemed to grow visibly taller every day, so that her clothes, mostly Topsy's pass-me-downs, were always too small for her. We passed the long half-timbered house called the Old Smithy. Beside it the road forked either side of a big grassy triangle shaded by a towering elm. In one direction it curled round to the Chandlers' farm and the council houses and in the other it dipped straight on down out of the western end of the village towards Great Coombe Wood.

We carried on past a long-abandoned cottage, its roof caved in at one end, and next to it the thatched cottage of ancient Granny Head (whose dead husband, we were told, had been a 'jack of all trades' and a 'journeyman', but we didn't know what either meant). Granny Head used to be the local midwife and layer-out of bodies and ever since her husband had died, nine years before, she had worn a long black dress, with a black apron tied over it. Her pure white hair was piled up in circles on top of her head, like a cottage loaf. June had once seen it unravelled and told me that it reached to below her knees. We knew she was eighty-four years old because only the week before, in class, when Miss Whitaker had been telling us about a human skull found in the nearby village of Ardington, on Roundabout Hill, which 'was said to be anything between a hundred and a thousand years old', Pamela Marshall had shot up her hand and waved it desperately at Miss Whitaker. 'Please, miss, my Granny Head is eighty-four.'

At the back of Granny Head's cottage, beyond her overgrown garden, we ventured where we'd never been before, up the bank and into a copse. The carpet of slithery old leaves squelched beneath our feet as we picked our way between fallen branches and tangles of roots, smothered in bright, lime-green moss. Further on, where the ground was

covered in ivy, a drift of snowdrops fell away from the skimpy copse out towards Pack Acre.

The Tree stood out on its own on the very edge of the field. It was a big, sturdy sycamore which had been pollarded a hundred years before, so that the branches splayed out to leave a scooped-out bowl at the top of the trunk, big enough to fit four or five children sitting snugly together. June and I had always known where the Tree was – well, for at least two years – because we'd been warned off ever coming near it by 'the others', the already initiated. My brother Paul was also allowed into the Tree when he was home, but he was away at boarding school more often than not.

We waited at the foot of the Tree for *ages*. Suddenly, Terry and Bushel appeared from nowhere and, with a long stick, hooked down a rope, and heaved themselves up into the bowl. From there Terry leant down, swung the rope to us and pulled us aloft one by one while we clambered up the trunk, finding footholds in the boles as we went. Hoisted to heaven. Terry had fixed a kind of roof overhead with old bits of plank and corrugated iron. The fog was still hanging thick over Pack Acre, the field directly below us, but as we stood for the very first time in this hallowed tree, a shaft of watery white sunlight lit up the small steep-sided combe called Pen Bottom, as though a searchlight were shining on it. June said it was God sending us a sign. We believed wholeheartedly in miracles – the feeding of the five thousand, the raising of Lazarus – and certainly from up here Pen Bottom appeared to have taken on a magic property.

The earthly reality was that we were made to work for our new-found gang membership. We became Terry's minions – in awe of him, we were happy to do anything he commanded. We collected dry kindling so that he could light a fire up in the tree; we filled a chipped enamel saucepan at the village tap so that he could boil the two

eggs he'd taken from his dad's chicken house; we searched for empty tins which he could cut up with his old army penknife and fashion into tips for his hazel arrows; we climbed precipitously up onto the roof of the hideout and tried to shake down the nest that a crow had begun to build at the very top of the Tree. Terry knew more about birds than anyone in the village. He hated crows. 'It can go and find another tree,' he said. We failed in that particular mission and Terry ended up making us all vacate the Tree while he wielded his home-made sling, round and round, until it was making a whistling sound and the stone flew into the upper branches like a comet, scattering the nest.

By mid-morning the fog began to lift like a gauze theatre curtain rising slowly to reveal the stage. The Tree came into its own. In one direction you could see onto the road and watch anyone coming in and out of the bottom end of the village, without them seeing you. In the other, the thistly old pastureland of Pack Acre and Pen spread down and away into Pen Bottom and then up into a broad sweep of chalk upland. Most of the land right up to the far line of the Ridgeway was farmed by Mr Cowan. We knew all the nearer fields like the back of our hands. Christine, Bushel and Billy's father, as well as June's father and John's, all worked for Mr Cowan. Mr Wilkinson was the chief ploughman, Mr White, the cowman, and Mr Willoughby, a general farmhand. We often had to go into the fields to look for them for one reason or another, to give them a message or to take tea out to them in an old lemonade bottle wrapped up in newspaper to keep it hot.

Mr Cowan was well respected, although no one could understand a word he said because he talked with a thick Scottish accent. His name was Bill but people called him Jock. Three years before, he'd sold up the family farm and driven down from Galloway in a Jeep, crammed with all the worldly goods he had left, and with two Border collies for

company. He was twenty-seven years old, sure of himself, a fearless man on a horse and, as Mr White said, straight as a die to deal with. When he walked through the Market Place in Wantage, his finely chiselled features and upright bearing made the butcher's wife's pulse race. So June heard her tell her mum.

Mr Cowan had spotted an advertisement in *Farmers Weekly* for five farms to rent in the middle of the Berkshire downs. When the big local landowner, Mr Loyd, had died, the death duties were so high that his estate had to be broken up; some of its land sold and some tenanted out. By the time Mr Cowan had driven down from Galloway to choose a farm on Christmas Eve 1946, they had all been let except for one. No local would touch Lockinge Kiln Farm, so bleak and remote was it and so poor its soil. Backed by spruce woods, the farmhouse faced out across bumpy, ancient-looking pasture, sprinkled with old hawthorn trees where a hundred years before there had been brick kilns. Beyond, the Warren, a huge wood of coppiced chestnuts, stretched down into a long valley of sheep-cropped turf. Up on the other side were the outer edges of the farm's pastureland - queer-shaped fields called Stimpsons and Allens that bordered the Ridgeway.

To get from Mr Cowan's farmhouse to the village you went down a track we called Moonlight Lane, which led to a shallow hollow where there was always a herd of up to fifty deer grazing. Beyond, the track struck up past a dozen hedgerow oaks, to Moonlight Barn on the crest of the hill. It then dipped steeply away to an old chalk pit and the road into the village. There was a large pond opposite the turning, its water black in the deep shade of a tangle of bramble and elder hanging over it from the high bank on the far side, and an island of sticks in the middle where a moorhen always nested.

We could just see the pond from the Tree and from that first day onwards we climbed up into the enclosing

branches as regular as clockwork, for all sorts of reasons – to escape from being given jobs by our parents, to hide from the younger children who were always wanting to play with us, or to light the fire and cook up different concoctions. We felt safe there: out of earshot of Mrs Willoughby, who never stopped calling for John. ‘You get back here this *minute*.’

Up there we were set apart, lawless. We listened to Terry’s plans – to make a pulley from one beam to another in Moonlight Barn or to requisition the abandoned cottage near the Warren. We told one another interesting information we’d heard at home. We were on the brink of a far bigger world.

Our village was isolated. Since anyone could remember, it had never possessed more than about a hundred inhabitants. Miss Whitaker had told us that, because it was situated at a convergence of ancient tracks, Farnborough had once served as a stopping-off place for travellers, not only from Old Street and the prehistoric Ridgeway running from the Chilterns to Salisbury Plain but also from the old pack-horse route that ran from Hungerford and the Bath road through to Abingdon and Oxford.

Nearly all the men in the village worked on one of the three farms and lived with their families in the tied cottages that went with them. Mr Chandler’s Lower Farm was at the bottom end of the village. (His grandfather had bought it from the Woolley estate fifty years before.) Mr Lawrence of Upper Farm, at the top end, with its fat four-square house looking over the road onto a reed-edged pond, was, like Mr Cowan, a tenant of the Lockinge estate. As well as the dozen or so farm cottages, there was a small shop, a village hall converted from an old Nissen hut, a church, a school, the old blacksmith’s house and two double-dweller council houses. The Reverend Mr Steele,