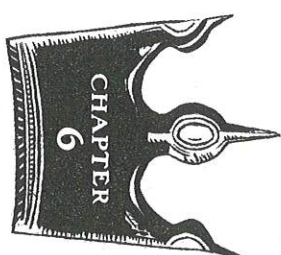


with both hands and pulled on it, but try as he might, he



Scroggins and his gang were standing in a semi-circle at the foot of the Shire Hall steps around the figure of a pale-faced girl with bobbed brown hair and a blue and white checked dress. From the look of her, George guessed she was probably about his age. As he approached, the boys moved in closer and the girl backed up on to the first step, drawing the small wicker basket she was carrying to her chest.

Raymond Scroggins took another step forwards and jabbed a finger at her. 'Go back home and tell Mister Hitler we're going to give him what for, Nazi-girl!'

'I am not a Nazi. Please!' She stumbled up the remaining steps, her brown eyes wide with fear.

'Yes you are. Same as that dirt-grubbing granddad of

yours. Come on. Give us a Heil Hitler.' Scroggins flipped his hand into a mock Nazi salute. His friends copied him.

'Hey! What if she's smuggling a secret message in her basket?' A scrawny, carrot-haired boy leapt up the steps after her. As he made a grab for the basket, the girl cried out and swung it away from him. A bunch of eggs flew out, smashing against the pavement in small yellow explosions.

Scroggins and the others burst into gales of raucous laughter.

George balled his fingers into fists. He'd seen enough. 'Oi! Leave her alone!' He flew at the boys, knocking them aside like skittles, then dashed up the steps and wheeled round in front of the girl, knuckles raised.

'If it isn't old Georgie-Porgie,' Raymond Scroggins's eyes shrank to two pale green slits. 'Think you're some kind of a hero, do you? Well, we know different, don't we, lads? How does that rhyme go?' He scratched his head and gave a mock frown, then opened his thin-lipped mouth and half sang, half yelled:

'Georgie-Porgie pudden n' pie...' He raised up his arms and glanced around him.

The other boys smirked at George, then joined in at the top of their voices.

'Kissed the girls and made 'em cry!'

Raymond Scroggins paused. He shot the girl a sly look and signalled to the others to start up again.

'When the boys came out to play,

Georgie-Porgie ran away.'

He bared a set of raty yellow teeth and took a step up.

'Go on then, Georgie. Give her a kiss!'

George's cheeks flushed. Heart thumping, he jerked his fists higher. 'Get back or... or I'll—'

'You'll what? Get that big brother of yours to try and dive-bomb me?' Scroggins stuck out his arms and mimed being a pilot spinning out of control. The other boys exploded into more fits of laughter.

A ball of hot fury ripped through George's chest. 'Don't you talk about Charlie like that!'

Scroggins gave a loud snort. 'Oh dear, Georgie-Porgie. Can't you take a joke?' He took another step up.

CRUNCH! George's right fist made contact with his nose.

'Arrghh!' Scroggins's hands flew up to his face. He lurched backwards down the steps and toppled to the ground.

The rest of the boys drew back, exchanging fearful looks. One by one, they melted away until only Scroggins was left, cowering among the mess of broken egg yolks and shells.

George glared at him. If he thought he was done with him, he had another think coming. He jumped down the steps, drew back his fist and took aim again.

'No! Don't! Cool fingers clutched his arm and forced it down to his side.

He spun round.

The girl shook her head and fixed him with a wide-eyed look. 'If you do, you will be as bad as them.' She spoke with an accent: not country like the people round there; not London either.

He frowned. 'But they were going to hurt you.'

'It does not matter. Look. A policeman. We had better go before he sees us.' She pointed to a figure in a dark blue uniform and helmet, cycling up the hill towards them.

George snatched one last look at the hunched, shivering figure of Scroggins, then hurried after her.

'This way.' She darted across the road to a large red-brick house. Running up the steps, she pushed open the door and slid inside.

George faltered. He looked over his shoulder. The copper was getting closer. Any minute now Scroggins would be up on his feet, pointing the finger. But if Jarvis came out of the pub and found him missing, he'd have his guts for garters. He ought to go back...

'Come on!' The girl had reappeared at the door. She motioned for him to follow. Reluctantly he climbed up the steps and crossed the threshold into the shadowy space beyond.

A long hallway stretched ahead of him, with doors leading off on both sides and a staircase at the far end. George wrinkled his nose. The air smelt of dust and mothballs. It reminded him of the old wardrobe in Mum and Dad's bedroom back at home. The one he used to hole up in when him and Charlie played hide 'n' seek. He pinched his nostrils to stop from sneezing.

The girl's breath came in short sharp pants behind him. 'That was close.'

He turned. She stood in the shadows, with her back against the door, chest heaving, a hand raised to her throat.

He scowled. 'Bully boys. They didn't hurt you, did they?'

The girl's eyelids flickered. She gave a small shudder and shook her head. 'Thank you for helping me.' She slid her hand down and held it out to him, doing her best to keep it from shaking. 'I am Katharina. Katharina Regenbogen. But you can call me Kitty, if you like.'

George struck out his own hand, then snatched it back, frowning. '*Raygonbogen*? What kind of a name is that?'

The girl flushed. She drew her hand quickly up to her cheek and hooked a bit of hair over her right ear instead. 'It means rainbow in my language.'

His frown deepened. 'Your language? What's that then?'

The girl hesitated then pulled back her shoulders and looked him full in the face. 'German.'

George's eyes widened. So Scroggins was right. She *was* one of them! He shot her a bitter look and made to push past her.

But the girl blocked his way. 'You cannot go out there yet. If that... that boy has told the policeman what you did and he catches you, you will get into trouble. His father is a policeman too.'

George's jaw tightened. She was right. He took a step back and looked her up and down. 'What are you then? Some kind of girl spy?'

She made a sharp clicking noise with her tongue. 'I thought you were different from those other boys.'

George felt a hot rush of shame. 'I'm sorry. I—'

She shook her head and sighed. 'It does not matter.' She reached for the door handle and pulled the door open. A waft of hot, syrupy air slid inside. 'Perhaps it is better if you go after all.'

'No, really?' He pushed the door shut again. 'I shouldn't have said it. It's just . . . well, the Germans, they're our enemies, ain't they?'

She gazed down at the red floor tiles and gave a juddering sigh then looked up again, eyes glistening. 'I am German, but I am Jewish too. Which means Hitler is my enemy also. Do you understand?'

George blinked. 'I . . . I think so, yes. There was a Jewish boy in my class back at home. His name was Daniel Goldberg. He was born here, but his uncle and aunt lived in Germany. He told me once about how hard things got for them and all the other Jews after Hitler took control.'

Kitty heaved another sigh. 'It is more than that.'

'What d'you mean?'

'Hitler hates us. He wants to . . . to kill us.'

George's frown deepened. 'Kill you? Why?'

She bit her lip and glanced down at the floor again. 'He blames the Jews for the state Germany was in before the start of the war. He accuses us of being traitors. Of stealing and cheating and telling lies. But all the things he says about us' – she shot her head up again, eyes gleaming – 'they are not true. *He* is the one who is evil. Him and his . . . his Nazis.' She wiped her mouth with the back of her hand.

'So . . . so what are you doing here?'

Kitty paused then took a deep breath. 'I was lucky. *Opa* – my grandfather – he lives here. He came for his work years ago and stayed. My parents . . .' Her fingers fluttered to a thin gold chain round her neck and tugged on a small six-pointed star that hung from it. She pressed her lips together, swallowed and went on. 'They managed to get me on one of the special transports that came to England before the war began.'

'Didn't they come too?'

'No. The transports were only for children.' Her voice trailed away. She clutched at the star pendant again.

'What happened to them?'

'They . . . they are still there.' She kept her head down, her voice no more than a whisper now. 'In Germany.'

George's chest cramped. He knew what it was like, being separated from the people you loved. Not knowing about them. Wondering when you'd see them again . . .

Footsteps sounded above them. 'Kitty. *Bist Du das?*'

George shot a look up at the ceiling and back at Kitty.

'My grandfather. We live in the apartment upstairs.' She slid past him and darted to the foot of the staircase. '*Opa. Eine Minute.*' She turned back to face George. 'I was going to invite you up for something to eat and drink. But perhaps you would not like to, how do you say it, take tea with the enemy?'

He felt his cheeks redden. 'Er . . . well . . . thanks, but I'd better not.'

She tilted her head and fixed him with a steady-eyed gaze. 'What is the matter? Do you think we might try and



poison you or something?'

'No. It... it ain't that.' He threw a glance over his shoulder. 'Oh, all right then. But I can't stay long. I'm meant to be guarding the potatoes.'

She raised a dark eyebrow. 'I did not realize they could be so dangerous.'

'They're not, they're... Oh. Ha ha! Very funny!' He rolled his eyes.

Her lips twitched. 'You will come then?'

He nodded.

'Good! She turned and called up the stairs again. 'Opa? We have a visitor.' Flashing George a quick smile, she gripped hold of the banister and started to climb.

He held back for a moment. He had a bad feeling about this. If someone pinched them potatoes while he was gone, Bill Jarvis would kill him. And Spud too. But it was too late now. Kitty's granddad was expecting him.

Giving his hair a quick smooth, George took a deep breath and plodded up the stairs after her.