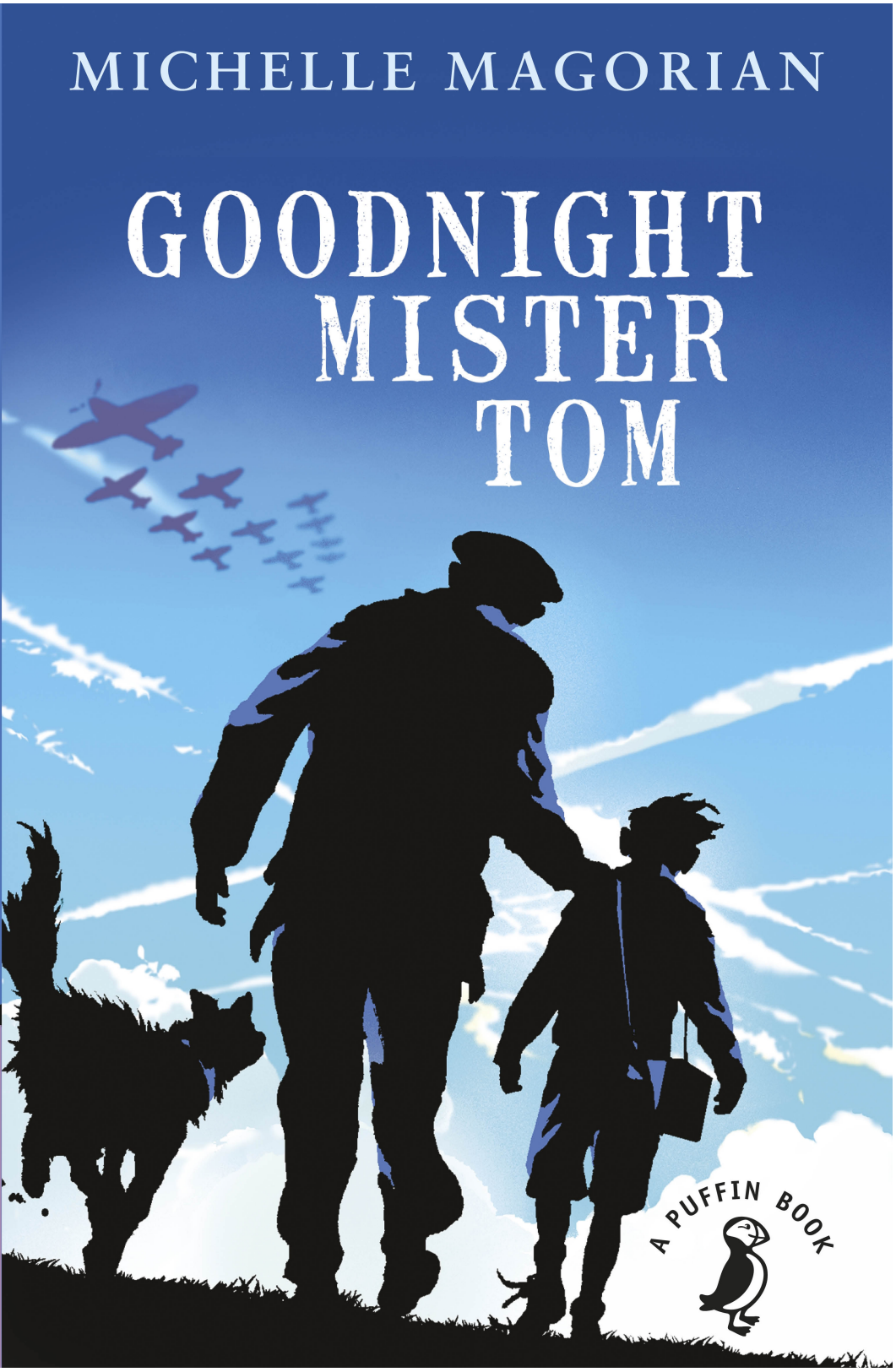
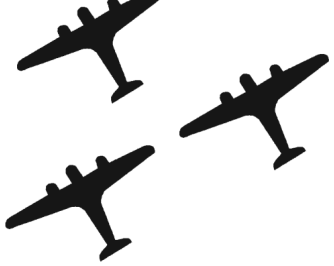




1. Meeting

'YES,' said Tom bluntly, on opening the front door. 'What d'you want?'

A harassed middle-aged woman in a green coat and felt hat stood on his step. He glanced at the armband on her sleeve. She gave him an awkward smile.

'I'm the billeting officer for this area,' she began.

'Oh yes, and what's that got to do wi' me?'

She flushed slightly. 'Well, Mr, Mr . . .'

'Oakley. Thomas Oakley.'

'Ah, thank you, Mr Oakley.' She paused and took a deep breath. 'Mr Oakley, with the declaration of war imminent . . .'

Tom waved his hand. 'I knows all that. Git to the point. What d'you want?' He noticed a small boy at her side.

'It's him I've come about,' she said. 'I'm on my way to your village hall with the others.'

'What others?'

She stepped to one side. Behind the large iron gate which stood at the end of the graveyard were a small group of

children. Many of them were filthy and very poorly clad. Only a handful had a blazer or coat. They all looked bewildered and exhausted. One tiny dark-haired girl in the front was hanging firmly on to a new teddy-bear.

The woman touched the boy at her side and pushed him forward.

'There's no need to tell me,' said Tom. 'It's obligatory and it's for the war effort.'

'You are entitled to choose your child, I know,' began the woman apologetically.

Tom gave a snort.

'But,' she continued, 'his mother wants him to be with someone who's religious or near a church. She was quite adamant. Said she would only let him be evacuated if he was.'

'Was what?' asked Tom impatiently.

'Near a church.'

Tom took a second look at the child. The boy was thin and sickly-looking, pale with limp sandy hair and dull grey eyes.

'His name's Willie,' said the woman.

Willie, who had been staring at the ground, looked up. Round his neck, hanging from a piece of string, was a cardboard label. It read 'William Beech'.

Tom was well into his sixties, a healthy, robust, stockily-built man with a head of thick white hair. Although he was of average height, in Willie's eyes he was a towering giant with skin like coarse, wrinkled brown paper and a voice like thunder.

He glared at Willie. 'You'd best come in,' he said abruptly.

The woman gave a relieved smile. 'Thank you so much,' she said, and she backed quickly away and hurried down the tiny path towards the other children. Willie watched her go.

'Come on in,' repeated Tom harshly. 'I ent got all day.'

Nervously, Willie followed him into a dark hallway. It took a few seconds for his eyes to adjust from the brilliant sunshine he had left to the comparative darkness of the cottage. He could just make out the shapes of a few coats hanging on some wooden pegs and two pairs of boots standing below.

'S'pose you'd best know where to put yer things,' muttered Tom, looking up at the coat rack and then down at Willie. He scratched his head. 'Bit 'igh fer you. I'd best put in a low peg.'

He opened a door on his left and walked into the front room, leaving Willie in the hallway still clutching onto his brown carrier bag. Through the half-open door he could see a large black cooking range with a fire in it and an old threadbare armchair near by. He shivered. Presently Tom came out with a pencil.

'You can put that ole bag down,' he said gruffly. 'You ent goin' no place else.'

Willie did so and Tom handed him the pencil. He stared blankly up at him.

'Go on,' said Tom, 'I told you before, I ent got all day. Now make a mark so's I know where to put a peg, see.' Willie made a faint dot on the wall beside the hem of one of the large coats. 'Make a nice big 'un so's I can see it clear, like.' Willie drew a small circle and filled it in. Tom leaned

down and peered at it. 'Neat little chap, ent you? Gimme yer mackintosh and I'll put it on top o' mine fer now.'

With shaking fingers Willie undid his belt and buttons, peeled off the mackintosh and held it in his arms. Tom took it from him and hung it on top of his great-coat. He walked back into the front room. 'Come on,' he said. Willie followed him in.

It was a small, comfortable room with two windows. The front one looked out on to the graveyard, the other to a little garden at the side. The large black range stood solidly in an alcove in the back wall, a thick dark pipe curving its way upward through the ceiling. Stretched out beneath the side window were a few shelves filled with books, old newspapers and odds and ends and by the front window stood a heavy wooden table and two chairs. The flagstoned floor was covered in a faded crimson, green and brown rug. Willie glanced at the armchair by the range and the objects that lay on top of the small wooden table beside it: a pipe, a book and a baccy jar.

'Pull that stool up by the fire and I'll give you somethin' to eat.' Willie made no movement. 'Go on, sit down, boy,' he repeated. 'You got wax in your ears?'

Willie pulled a small wooden stool from a corner and sat down in front of the fire. He felt frightened and lonely.

Tom cooked two rashers of bacon and placed a slab of bread, with the fresh bacon dripping beside it, onto a plate. He put it on the table with a mug of hot tea. Willie watched him silently, his bony elbows and knees jutting out angularly beneath his thin grey jersey and shorts. He tugged

nervously at the tops of his woollen socks and a faint smell of warm rubber drifted upwards from his white plimsolls.

'Eat that up,' said Tom.

Willie dragged himself reluctantly from the warmth of the fire and sat at the table. 'You can put yer own sugar in,' Tom grunted.

Willie politely took a spoonful, dunked it into the large white mug of tea and stirred it. He bit into the bread but a large lump in his throat made swallowing difficult. He didn't feel at all hungry, but remembered apprehensively what his mum had said about doing as he was told. He stared out at the graveyard. The sun shone brilliantly, yet he felt cold. He gazed at the few trees around the graves. Their leaves were all different colours, pale greens, amber, yellow . . .

'Ent you 'ungry?' asked Tom from his armchair.

Willie looked up, startled. 'Yes, mister,' he whispered.

'Jest a slow chewer, that it?'

He nodded timidly and stared miserably at the plate. Bacon was a luxury. Only lodgers or visitors had bacon and here he was not eating it.

'Mebbe you can chew it more easy later.' Tom beckoned him over to the stool. 'Put another spoon of that sugar in, boy, and bring that tea over 'ere.'

Willie did so and returned to the stool. He held the warm mug tightly in his icy hands and shivered. Tom leaned towards him.

'What you got in yer bag, then?'

'I dunno,' mumbled Willie, 'Mum packed it. She said I weren't to look in.' One of his socks slid halfway down his

leg, revealing a large multicoloured bruise on his shin and a swollen red sore beside.

'That's a nasty ole thing,' Tom said, pointing to it. 'What give you that?' Willie paled and pulled the sock up quickly.

'Best drink that afore it gits cold,' said Tom, sensing that the subject needed to be changed. Willie looked intently at the changing shapes of the flames in the fire and slowly drank the tea. It thundered in his throat in his attempt to swallow it quietly. Tom left the room briefly and within a few minutes returned.

'I gotta go out for a spell. Then I'll fix your room, see. Up there,' and he pointed to the ceiling. 'You ent afraid of heights, are you?' Willie shook his head. 'That's good or you'd have had to sleep under the table.' He bent over the range and shovelled some fresh coke into the fire.

' 'Ere's an ole scarf of mine,' he muttered, and he threw a khaki object over Willie's knees. He noticed another bruise on the boy's thigh, but said nothing. ' 'Ave a wander round the graveyard. Don't be scared of the dead. Least they can't drop an ole bomb on yer head.'

'No, mister,' agreed Willie politely.

'And close the front door behind you, else Sammy'll be eatin' yer bacon.'

'Yes, mister.'

Willie heard him slam the front door and listened to the sound of his footsteps gradually fading. He hugged himself tightly and rocked backwards and forwards on the stool. 'I must be good,' he whispered urgently, 'I must be good,' and he rubbed a sore spot on his arm. He was such a bad boy, he knew that. Mum said she was kinder to him than most

mothers. She only gave him soft beatings. He shuddered. He was dreading the moment when Mr Oakley would discover how wicked he was. He was stronger-looking than Mum.

The flames in the range flickered and danced before his eyes, crackling in sudden bursts though not in a venomous way. He felt that it was a friendly crackle. He turned to look for something that was missing. He stood up and moved towards the shelves under the side window. There, he was being bad again, putting his nose in where it didn't belong. He looked up quickly to make sure Mr Oakley wasn't spying at him through the window.

Mum said war was a punishment from God for people's sins, so he'd better watch out. She didn't tell him what to watch out for, though. It could be in this room, he thought, or maybe the graveyard. He knelt on one of the chairs at the front window and peered out. Graves didn't look so scary as she had made out, even though he knew that he was surrounded by dead bodies. But what was it that was missing? A bird chirruped in the garden. Of course, that was it. He couldn't hear traffic and banging and shouting. He looked around at the room again. His eyes rested on the stool where the woollen scarf lay. He'd go outside. He picked it up, and wrapping it round his neck he went into the hall and closed the front door carefully behind him.

Between him and the graveyard lay a small flat garden. Along the edge of it were little clusters of flowers. Willie stepped forward to the edge where the garden ended and the graveyard began. He plunged his hands deep into his pockets and stood still for a moment.

The graveyard and cottage with its garden were surrounded by a rough stone wall, except for where the back of the church stood. Green moss and wild flowers sprang through the grey stonework. Between the graves lay a small, neat flagstoned pathway down the centre. It broke off in two directions: one towards a large gate on the left where the other children had waited and one leading to the back entrance of a small church to his right. A poplar tree stood in the far corner of the graveyard near the wall with the gate and another near Mr Oakley's cottage by the edge of the front garden. A third grew by the exit of the church; but the tree which caught Willie's attention was a large oak tree. It stood in the centre of the graveyard by the path, its large, well-clad branches curving and hanging over part of it.

He glanced down at a small stone angel near his feet and began to walk round the gravestones. Some were so faded that he could barely see the shapes of the letters. Each grave had a character of its own. Some were well tended with a little vase of flowers on top as if they were perched upon a tablecloth, some were covered with a large stone slab with neat, well-cut grass surrounding them, while others had weeds growing higgledy-piggledy over them. The ones Willie liked best were the gentle mounds covered in grass with the odd surviving summer flower peeping through the coloured leaves. As he walked around he noticed that some of the very old ones were tiny. Children's graves, probably.

He was sitting on one Elizabeth Thatcher when he heard voices. A young man and woman were passing by. They

were talking and laughing. They stopped and the young woman leaned over the wall. Her long fair hair hung in a single plait scraped back from a round, pink-cheeked face. Pretty, he thought.

'You're from London, ent you?' she said.

He stood up and removed his hands from his pockets. 'Yes, miss.'

'You're a regular wild bunch, so I've heard,' and she smiled.

The young man was in uniform. He stood with his arm around her shoulder.

'How old are you, then?' she asked.

'Eight, miss.'

'Polite little lad, ent you? What's your name?'

'William Beech, miss.'

'You can stop calling me miss. I'm Mrs, Mrs Hartridge.' The young man beamed. 'I'll see you on Monday at school. I expect you'll be in my class. Goodbye, William.'

'Bye, miss, missis,' he whispered.

He watched them walk away. When they were out of sight he sat back down on Elizabeth Thatcher, tugged at a handful of grass and pulled it from the earth. He'd forgotten all about school. He thought of Mr Barrett, his form master in London. He spent all day yelling and shouting at everyone and rapping knuckles. He dreaded school normally. Mrs Hartridge didn't seem like him at all. He gave a sigh of relief and rubbed his chest. That was one ordeal he didn't think would be too terrifying to face. He glanced at the oak tree. It seemed a sheltered, secluded sort of place. He'd go and sit beneath its branches.

As he walked towards it he tripped over a hard object. It was a tiny gravestone hidden by a clump of grass. He knelt down and pushed the grass to one side to look at it. He pulled away at it, plucking it out in great handfuls from the soil. He wanted to make it so that people could see the stone again. It looked forgotten and lost. It wasn't fair that it should be hidden. He became quite absorbed in this task until he heard a scrabbling noise. He turned. Sniffing and scratching among the leaves at the foot of the tree was a squirrel. He recognized its shape from pictures he had seen but he wasn't prepared for one that moved. He was terrified and remained frozen in a crouched position. The squirrel seemed quite unperturbed and carried on scuffling about in the leaves, picking up nuts and titbits in its tiny paws. Willie stayed motionless, hardly breathing. He felt like the stone angel. The squirrel's black eyes darted in a lively manner from place to place. It was tiny, light grey in colour with a bushy tail that stuck wildly in the air as it poked its paws and head into the russet and gold leaves.

After a while Willie's shoulders relaxed and the gripping sensation in his stomach subsided a little. He wriggled his toes gingerly inside his plimsolls. It seemed as though he had been crouching for hours although it couldn't have been more than ten minutes.

The little grey fellow didn't seem to scare him as much, and he began to enjoy watching him. A loud sharp barking suddenly disturbed the silence. The squirrel leapt and disappeared. Willie sprang to his feet, hopping on one leg and gasping at the mixture of numbness and pins and needles in the other. A small black-and-white collie ran

around the tree and into the leaves. It stopped in front of him and jumped up into the air. Willie was more petrified of the dog than he had been of the squirrel.

'Them poisonous dogs,' he heard his mother's voice saying inside him. 'One bite from them mutts and you're dead. They got 'orrible diseases in 'em.' He remembered the tiny children's graves and quickly picked up a thick branch from the ground.

'You go away,' he said feebly, gripping it firmly in his hand. 'You go away.'

The dog sprang into the air again and barked and yapped at him, tossing leaves by his legs. Willie let out a shriek and drew back. The dog came nearer.

'I'll kill you.'

'I wouldn't do that,' said a deep voice behind him. He turned to find Tom standing by the outer branches. 'He ent goin' to do you no 'arm, so I should jest drop that if I was you.'

Willie froze with the branch still held high in his hand. Sweat broke out from under his armpits and across his forehead. Now he was for it. He was bound to get a beating now. Tom came towards him, took the branch firmly from his hand and lifted it up. Willie automatically flung his arm across his face and gave a cry but the blow he was expecting never came. Tom had merely thrown the branch to the other end of the graveyard and the dog had gone scampering after it.

'You can take yer arm down now, boy,' he said quietly. 'I think you and I 'ad better go inside and sort a few things out. Come on,' and with that he stepped aside for Willie to go in front of him along the path.

Willie walked shakily towards the cottage, his head lowered. Through blurred eyes he saw the tufts of grass spilling up between the small flat stones. The sweat trickled down the sides of his face and chest. His armpits stung savagely and a sharp pain stabbed at his stomach. He walked through the front door and stood in the hallway, feeling the perspiration turn cold and clammy. Tom walked into the front room and stood waiting for him to enter.

'Don't dither out there,' he said, 'come on in.'

Willie did so but his body felt as if it no longer belonged to him. It seemed to move of its own accord. Tom's voice grew more distant. It reverberated as if it was being thrown back at him from the walls of a cave. He sat down on the stool feeling numb.

Tom picked up a poker and walked across to the fire. Now he was going to get it, he thought, and he clutched tightly onto the seat of the stool. Tom looked down at him.

'About Sammy,' he heard him say. He watched him poke the fire and then he didn't hear any more. He knew that Tom was speaking to him but he couldn't take his eyes off the poker. It sent the hot coke tumbling in all directions. He saw Tom's brown wrinkled hand lift it out of the fire. The tip was red, almost white in places. He was certain that he was going to be branded with it. The room seemed to swim and he heard both his and Tom's voice echoing. He watched the tip of the poker spin and come closer to him and then the floor came towards him and it went dark. He felt two large hands grip him from behind and push his head in between his knees until the carpet came into focus and he heard himself gasping.

Tom opened the front window and lifted him out through it.

'Breathe in deep,' Willie heard him say. 'Take in a good sniff.'

He took in a gulp of air. 'I'll be sick,' he mumbled.

'That's right, go on, I'm 'olding you. Take in a good sniff. Let yer throat open.'

Willie drank in some more air. A wave of nausea swept through him and he vomited.

'Go on,' he heard Tom say, 'breathe in some more,' and he was sick again and again until there was no more left inside him and he hung limply in Tom's arms.

Tom wiped his mouth and face with the scarf. The pain in Willie's stomach had gone but he felt drained like a rag doll. Tom lifted him back into the cottage and placed him in his armchair. His small body sank comfortably into the old soft expanse of chair. His feet barely reached the edge of the seat. Tom tucked a blanket round him, drew up a chair by the fire and watched Willie fall asleep.

The tales he had heard about evacuees didn't seem to fit Willie. 'Ungrateful' and 'wild' were the adjectives he had heard used or just plain 'homesick'. He was quite unprepared for this timid, sickly little specimen. He looked at the poker leaning against the range.

' 'E never thought . . . No . . . Surely not!' he murmured. 'Oh, Thomas Oakley, where 'ave you landed yerself?' There was a sound of scratching at the front door. 'More trouble,' he muttered. He crept quietly out through the hallway and opened the door. Sammy bounded in and jumped around his legs, panting and yelping.

'Now you jest shut that ole mouth,' he whispered firmly, 'there's someone asleep.' He knelt down and Sammy leapt into his arms, lathering his face with his tongue. 'I don't need to 'ave a bath when you're around, do I?' Sammy continued to lick him until he was satisfied just to pant and allow his tail to flop from side to side. Tom lifted him up and carried him into the front room. As soon as he saw Willie asleep in the chair he began barking again. Tom put his finger firmly on his nose and looked directly into his eyes.

'Now you jest take a rest and stop that.' He picked up his pipe and baccy jar from the little table and sat by the range again. Sammy flopped down beside him and rested his head on one of Tom's feet.

'Well, Sam,' Tom whispered, 'I don't know nothin' about children, but I do know enuff not to beat 'em and make 'em that scared.' Sammy looked up at him for a moment and flopped back onto his foot. 'I don't know,' he said anxiously, 'I ent 'ad much experience at this 'ere motherin' lark,' and he grunted and puffed at his pipe. Sammy stood up, wriggled in between Tom's legs and placed his paws on his stomach.

'You understand every blimmin' word I say, don't you? Least he ent goin' to bury bones in my sweet peas,' he remarked, ruffling Sammy's fur. 'That's one thing to be thankful about.' He sighed. 'S'pose I'd best see what's what.' He rose and went into the hallway with Sammy padding after him. 'Now you jest stay there,' he said sternly and Sammy sat obediently on his haunches, though Tom knew it would not be for long. He took some steps that were leaning on the wall beside the coats and placed them

under a small square trapdoor above him. He climbed up, pushed the trapdoor open and pulled down a long wooden ladder which fixed firmly into place on two strong clips along the opening.

The ladder was of thick pine wood. It was a little over forty years old, but since his young wife Rachel had died soon after it was made, it had hardly been used. He moved the steps to allow room for the ladder to reach the hall floor. A thick cloud of dust enveloped his head as he blew on one of the wide wooden rungs. He coughed and sneezed.

'Like taking snuff,' he muttered. 'S'pose we'd best keep that ole ladder down fer a bit, eh, Sammy?'

He climbed down and opened the door opposite the front room. It led into his bedroom. Inside, a small chest of drawers with a mirror stood by the corner of the front window. Leaning up against the back wall was a four-poster bed covered in a thick quilt. At the foot of the bed, on the floor, lay a round basket with an old blanket inside. It was Sammy's bed, when he used it, which was seldom. A blue threadbare carpet was spread across the floor with bits of matting added by the window and bed.

Beside the bed was a fitted cupboard with several shelves. Tom opened it. On the top two shelves, neatly stacked, were blankets and sheets and on the third, various belongings of Rachel's that he had decided to keep. He glanced swiftly at them. A black wooden paint-box, brushes, a christening robe she had embroidered, some old photographs, letters and recipes. The christening robe had never been worn by his baby son, for he had died soon after his mother.

He picked up some blankets and sheets and carried them into the hall. 'I'll be down for you in a minute, Sammy,' he said as he climbed up the ladder. 'You jest hang on there a bit,' and with that Sammy was left to watch his master slowly disappear through the strange new hole in the ceiling.