

THE GIRL WHO DISAPPEARED - Extract

One evening, the growl of a mass of low-flying aircraft, perhaps thirty or so German bombers overhead, disturbed Emily and Richard at home in their cottage. He identified them from the card given to him at school; there could be no doubt about it but what were they doing flying over Pecket's hills? They watched intrigued, but not really alarmed; bombers occasionally flew nearby on their way to targets in Leeds or Huddersfield, but many weeks had passed since they last did so.

Suddenly, the sky lit up; the bombers circled and started dropping flares but surely sheep and heather would be all they could see? Then Emily remembered that Pecket mill manufactured, so she believed, secret war work. She firmly bolted the door and made her son lie under the bed. Were they going to have an air raid? Having thoroughly frightened her, the planes flew on and she spent a restless night worrying about whether they might return.

The following afternoon to her astonishment, Walter arrived unannounced in an army jeep driven by an attractive blond sergeant in her twenties, the first time she had seen or heard from her husband since visiting him in the Isle of Man. Emily and Richard were having tea; the boy jumped up from the table, spilling the milk in his excitement, and rushed over to hug his father with shouts of: 'Daddy, daddy'.

Walter wore battle dress and Emily noticed that the revolver in a holster was tied to his wrist by a lanyard. 'Don't you touch that gun,' he warned his son as he gave him a quick hug and Emily a peck on the cheek. 'It's loaded. I'm not on leave; I'm here on army business. My sergeant is out in the lane looking for any sign of suspicious activity in the village.'

He questioned them about what they had seen the previous evening. 'So it's true, Emily; we suspected that it might be a silly rumour. The Home Guard will have to cope initially, but we'll reinforce them when we know what we're up against.'

Emily frowned: 'You can hardly regard the local Home Guard here as a serious force, even if it does have a certain amount of ingenuity. Its principal weapon consists of twenty or so heavy circular concrete blocks deposited in a line just below the crest of the hill high above the main road

to Hebden Bridge. If enemy vehicles attempt to use the road, the idea is to roll the blocks down on top of them and crush whatever gets in the way.'

Walter exploded: 'Idiots; we're worried about enemy paratroops landing on the moors where there is absolutely nothing to stop them and these people think they're playing some kind of glorified marbles. If the Germans come, Emily, you must put the oak dining table on its side against the bed and hide underneath. Here's a telephone number where you can contact me if anything happens.'

He handed her a slip of paper, gave her another quick peck on the cheek and rushed out of the door before she could talk to him about Richard's education. She followed him out of the cottage to wave goodbye and discovered that the attractive sergeant sitting in the driving seat of the jeep greeted him not with a smart salute but a cheery smile.

This totally unexpected visit shattered Emily; not only did she have to bear the prospect of German paratroopers dropping in force on the moors nearby which destroyed any illusion about the cottage being safe; but her husband never gave her a proper cuddle. They always hugged; his failure to do so distressed her and why did he call her Emily instead of Betty?

Could it be that he had found a new younger more attractive lady friend, that girl sergeant certainly looked gorgeous? Everyone talked about wartime romances, but surely her Jimmy wouldn't betray her, would he? Suppose he only met her rival after being posted to Manchester; she guessed he came from there because she recognised the contact telephone number which he had given to her as a Manchester number.

She did not have much sleep for the next few nights; other thoughts kept creeping into her mind. Walter's manner seemed to have fundamentally changed and she did not like it. Indeed, she realised with a shock that she now thought of him as 'Walter' rather than as 'her Jimmy'.

He used to ask people to do things for him and say 'please'; now she heard from the villagers that he shouted orders and expected to be obeyed. His abrupt departure made her suspect there would be no discussion of tactics with the Home Guard, it would be told: 'you are a shambles' and ordered what to do. Then again, why did he not let her know about being based so near Pecket and save her worrying about the war in the desert?

Walter's visit impressed the villagers; an officer and his family living in our village; imagine. It made a very different impression on Emily; if he started ordering her about, she could never tolerate that and life would become very difficult for both of them.

She thought: 'I do love my Jimmy but I'm in danger of losing him either to that blond sergeant or to the army, which is changing him from being the kind decent man that I married into an efficient fighting machine. I must do something about it urgently but what?'

The previous winter in the cold damp cottage ranked as the most miserable experience she had ever suffered. Bombing of British cities seemed to have become sporadic; she needed to be near her husband, now apparently based in Manchester; Richard needed a better school. She decided to move to Manchester as soon as possible, whilst they still could once more be together, but she worried how Walter would react. It took her a few days to pluck up the courage to ring the contact number and find out.