

## CHAPTER XIII

Bill Wellings and Dave were walking about the camp, neither saying much. The sun was hot and its warmth comforting and soothing. Dave knew all about Wellings' background. He hailed from Liverpool and possessed the inimitable Liverpuddlian accent. Before the war he had worked as a clerk with a shipping firm and had hated the dull routine and regimen the daily task imposed. It was eight till five, and often no-one was prepared to leave until the head clerk had downed tools and quit. Then it was on to the RAF, where he had graduated as a bomb aimer. Mission had followed mission, and he felt that he had a charmed life and, like all aircrew personnel, was indestructible. However, a raid on Essen had proven his undoing. The bombs had been delivered and the return flight seemed a piece of cake, when the Lancaster had been mortally wounded by cannon shells from an enemy fighter. The crew baled out coming down in Belgium, but had been scattered. The next morning, while Bill was walking along a country road, he was approached by a young woman who asked in English was he a member of the plane that had been shot down the previous night. Being in RAF battledress and feeling that the girl was sympathetic and friendly, he admitted that he was. She then led him to a small house about 2 kilometres distant, where he bathed, ate and was given civilian clothing. The Germans had occupied nearly every Western European nation and the penalty for harbouring the enemy was death. Thus the family housing Bill was exceedingly brave. On the third day, Bill was given instructions to walk straight down the road for about a kilometre where he'd see a man standing with a bicycle and his hat in his left hand. He was to follow him at a respectable distance and on no account was he to communicate or make any sign of recognition. This person would lead him to his new sanctuary. The journey was quite long, but worth it for on arrival at his new abode he was reunited with his skipper and navigator, looking strangely out of place in civilian clothes instead of the customary officer's uniform. There was a joyous reunion and questions asked and answered about the other members of the crew. Apparently, all had baled successfully, but the rest of the crew had been picked up by the enemy who were still scouring the area for the three evaders. They were confined to the house for a week and exercised indoors, played cards, slept and ate. Then the escape routine was repeated by walking to the railway station - being previously provided with tickets - boarding a train that went to Brussels and so finishing up in the capital. This journeying from place to place went on until they reached an hotel in Paris, where the Gestapo swooped and rounded up not only the three in question, but also about twenty other evading airmen. Then it was to Fresnes, the Gestapo prison in Paris.

'Fresnes must have just about driven you mad, Bill? Dave said unexpectedly. 'I know I would have gone bonkers if they'd locked me up there.'

'Dave, you've got no idea of what it's like. I tell you I nearly went around the bend. When you're locked up in solitary with no-one to confide in, your troubles seem mountainous and insoluble. It's either very quiet, not a sound, or you hear some poor bastard wailing or crying. The Gestapo were either beating shit out of him or he'd gone off his head. It wasn't hard to do.'

'Did they beat you, Bill?'

'No, they didn't actually inflict any physical punishment, I suffered mentally. They interrogated me about the Underground and where had I been? Whose house had I been in? What were the names of the people who had cared for me et cetera? Thank God I didn't know. No-one told us their real names or where we were, as they felt it was better that way. I was scared stiff they might take me back to where I was shot down and try and make me find the place where I went first. I freeze up when I think of it. One piece of information and they'd unravel the knot and then God help the Resistance.'

'Your six weeks must have seemed like years, Bill?'

'It was the longest and worst six weeks of my life. Jesus, I feel sorry for Docker, he was in Fresnes ten months. No wonder the poor bastard is as grey as a badger and he's only twenty-three. They must have given him the treatment.'

'What do you intend doing when the war's over? Is it back to the shipping office?'

'Like bloody hell! I just couldn't stand the monotony. I'd tell the head clerk to get stuffed. The pompous arsehole. A little power makes some people drunk. He ought to be in aircrew, then he'd be levelled out.'

The two walked on, and then Dave suggested, as they were in the vicinity, that they drop in on Corporal McLeod and find out what crap he was shooting around. The grand old man, as usual surrounded by his devotees or those who wanted a laugh to relieve the monotony, was expatiating upon his favourite topic. He'd just been asked what gonorrhoea was like and how it affected one, and his reply was vivid, humorous and colourful. Then the crowd dispersed.

'How are you today, Mac?' enquired Bill.

'Bloody awful! I feel like my guts have been taken out, chopped up, salted and peppered, and then put back in and my belly sewn up with a red hot poker. Jesus, I feel sick!'

'It's your past catching up with you, Mac,' said Dave jocularly. 'They say that too much poking doesn't do anyone any good, and it tends to rot the guts and the penis.'

'Horseshit!' was McLeod's emphatic reply. 'There's nothing wrong with my cock. It's as good as ever it was, for it's been in retirement for five years, but my guts are giving me hell. It's this bloody food and the flies. They eat you alive and shit all over the food, so what do you expect? It's a wonder we're not all dead.'

'We'll be out of here before long, Mac, and then everything will be peaches,' comforted Bill. 'You can go back to Singapore for another dose of clap, and I'm for Blighty.'

'You're a bloody optimist then. We'll be here for years yet, and the Japs will be in Singapore for another decade. There's too much on our plate. Shit, my gut is killing me! I'm off to the quack. I haven't time to educate bastards like you,' and with that McLeod took his farewell, leaving Bill and Dave a little crestfallen at the news imparted.

They made off in the direction of their hut, neither saying much but ruminating upon McLeod's prophecy of the war's ending. Dave felt he couldn't and didn't want to do another winter as a captive. The bloody cold went through you and your state of health was deteriorating. The diet and privations took their toll and this was evident by the number of repatriations. When X-rayed by the Red Cross doctors the incidence of tuberculosis had been high amongst those who had been prisoners for a number of years. There were too many problems ahead and Dave didn't relish the future.

Dave broke the silence. 'What do you think about McLeod's forecast!'

'You mean about the war dragging on? McLeod gives me the shits. He's always crapping on about something he knows bugger all about. He should stick to sex and not make pontifical statements about the military situation.'

'The war news is good in the West. The British and American armies are screwing the balls off the Germans and Montgomery is showing the Yanks how a modern war should be fought. It's the Eastern front I can't fathom. When we came here in July, the Ruskies were steamrolling their way eastwards and it looked like Warsaw would fall. And what happened? We heard on the BBC news the Russians had asked the Polish Underground to rise up, take over the city and kill the German garrison. The Ruskies were only about 30 kilometres from the outskirts of Warsaw at that time, and what have they done since? Bugger all! They've just sat on their arseholes and kept a friendly eye on things, while the poor old Poles are being slaughtered. Buggered if I can understand it.'

'Don't worry, Dave!' Old Stalin's a cunning bastard. He's most probably giving his armies a breather and regrouping. You watch within a week they'll be on the march again.'

'He'd better pull his finger out then or there won't be any Poles in Warsaw left to liberate.'

The news from the East was disconcerting and worrying for the advance from that direction had come to a complete halt in the Central sector. Both Dave and Bill hated the thought of enduring another winter in captivity. It was hot now, but in the bitter cold of a European winter your body cried out for nourishment in the form of a good meal and warmth in the shape of a bed and plenty of blankets.

'Jesus, Bill, McLeod said that the Japs will still be fighting in ten years' time. We'll be a fine pair of bastards if the European war goes on even half that time. It won't be worth going home, for no-one will want us.'

'You can say that again, Dave. We'll be the forgotten men of yesterday, and even our girlfriends will have given us the big heave-ho. Just my luck!'

'Don't worry. She'll be waiting for you, Bill, even in five years' time. You told me that Mary was something out of the top drawer, so there's no need for second thoughts on the matter.'

'I haven't had a letter for three months. A man's morale needs reassuring from time to time, and mail from home is the best booster there is.'

Dave knew this to be true for he hadn't received a letter for several weeks and felt discarded and unwanted. Perhaps Joan had forgotten; found someone else; a mess pot was on the way et cetera. It was a topsy-turvy world with everyone being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Here he was in German Occupied Europe while he longed to be in Wales. Then, again, the Yanks, Australians, Canadians et cetera were in England and, he supposed, wished to be back on native soil. The thought of so many eligible men parading around back home gave rise to further apprehension – Joan could be married to an American by the time he was out of the cage. Everything was so uncertain and unpredictable. The war, according to the kriegies, was always going to be over by Christmas, but it seemed never-ending. If there was a definite date that one could look forward to then the uncertainty would disappear and the mind set at ease. However, each big military advance by the Allies buoyed the confidence, only for it to be seriously deflated by a reversal, such as the inexplicable lack of movement by the Russian armies in front of Warsaw. What could the Ruskies be doing? Surely, they ought to go on with the advance and help the Polish Resistance in that city? Dave felt depressed, but had no wish to convey his thoughts to Bill. Everyone had his problems, despite the bravado, the sexual anecdotes by McLeod, Bolland, Mackie et cetera, and the feigning of indifference when the mess pot arrived. However, Dave consoled himself that shifting from camp to camp wouldn't help the delivery of letters and, further, no mail had been received by him from anyone, so no news was good news.

'What's wrong, Dave? queried Bill. 'Got the shits or something. You seem unusually quiet.'

'Bugger all's wrong with me.' lied Dave. 'Let's go back to the hut for I'm going to have a shower.'

'You wouldn't catch me going under the bloody 'waterfall', it would turn my balls into ice-blocks. The sudden change in temperature can't be good for them. I reckon you become sterile if you had too many of those cold showers.'

'How else do you shower then, Bill? There are no hot showers or they haven't told us about them. These soldier wallahs might be keeping it a secret. Jesus, in the winter I'd just stink. I wouldn't be able to stand the waterfall. Too bloody cold.'

'Okay, let's go! And don't forget I warned you about becoming sterile.'

'Piss off! I'll tell you what? I'll consult with McLeod about the effect of cold water on the knackers. He's sure to tell me an interesting tale,' laughed Dave.

The repartee about testicles, sterility and McLeod had helped to liven things up and make the two of them forget temporarily their personal problems,