



And All's Well

Bertie came every Sunday after that. Sometimes it couldn't be for long because he had detention back at school, or maybe I'd have to send him away because Father was down for the weekend, shooting pheasants in the park with his friends. We had to be careful. He *did* mend my best box kite, but after a while we forgot all about flying kites, and we just talked and walked.

Bertie and I lived for our Sundays. In those next two years we became, first, good companions, and then best of friends. We never told each other we were, because we didn't need to. The more I

got to know him, the more I believed everything about Africa, and about "The White Prince" in the circus somewhere in France. I believed him too when he told me again and again how somehow, someday he would find his white lion, and make sure that he'd never have to live behind bars again.

The school holidays always dragged interminably because Bertie wasn't there on Sundays. But at least there were no lessons to endure with Nolips. She always went off in the holidays to stay with her sister by the sea in Margate. Instead of her lessons though, Nanny Mason would take me on endless nature walks – "walks on the wild side", she called them.

I grumbled and stamped my feet. "But it's so boring," I'd tell her. "If we had zebras and water buffaloes and elephants and baboons and giraffes and wildebeests and spotted hyenas and black mamba

snakes an
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snakes and vultures and lions, I wouldn't mind. But a few deer, a fox's hole, and maybe a badger's set? A dozen rabbit droppings, one robin's nest and some cuckoo pint?" Once, before I could stop myself, I said: "And do you know, Nanny, there's white lions in Africa, real white lions?"



"Fancy that," she laughed. "You and your fairy tales, Millie. You read too many books."

Bertie and I didn't dare write letters to each other in case someone found them and read them. But school term came

round again and he'd be there under the wych elm on the first Sunday at three o'clock without fail. What we found to talk about all the time I cannot honestly remember. He sometimes said how he could never look at a circus poster without thinking of "The White Prince". But as time passed, he talked less and less of the white lion, and then not at all. I thought that maybe he had forgotten all about him.

We both grew up too quickly. We had one last summer term together, before I was to be sent off to a convent school by the sea in Sussex, and he was to go away to a college under the shadow of Canterbury Cathedral. We treasured each meeting, knowing how few we had left. We were silent in our sadness. The love between us stayed unspoken. We knew it when our eyes met, when our hands touched. We were just so sure of each other. Before he left me that last Sunday

he gave me a kite he had made in carpentry lessons at school and told me I had to think of him every time I flew it.

Then he went his way to his college and I went mine to my convent, and we didn't see each other again. I was always very careful where I flew the kite he'd given me, just in case I lost it up a tree and couldn't get it back again. I thought that if I lost the kite it would be like losing Bertie for ever. I kept it on top of my cupboard in my bedroom. It's still up there to this day.

Now we did write because we were away from home and it was safe to do so. We wrote letters that talked to each other just as we had done all those years on Wood Hill. My letters were long and rambling, about



tittle-tattle at school, about how much happier it was at home now that Nolips had left. His were always short and his handwriting so tiny you could hardly read it. He was no happier shut inside the walls of his cathedral precinct than he had been before. There were bells, he wrote, always bells – bells to wake you up, bells for meals, bells for lessons, bells, bells, bells cutting his days into thin slices. How we both hated bells. The last thing he heard at night was the nightwatchman walking the city walls outside his dormitory window, ringing his bell and calling out: "Twelve o'clock. A fine night. And all's well." But he knew, as I knew, as everyone knew, that all was not well, that a great war was coming. His letters, and mine, were full of the dread of it.

Then the storm of war broke. Like many storms, it rumbled only distantly at first, and we all hoped it would somehow

pass us by. But it was not to be like that. Father looked so grand in his khaki uniform and shiny brown boots. He said goodbye to Nanny Mason and me on the front steps, climbed into his car and was driven away. We never saw him again. I can't pretend I grieved much when the news came that he had been killed. I know a daughter should grieve for a dead father, and I tried to. I was sad of course, but it is difficult to grieve for someone you never really knew, and my father had always been a stranger to me. Worse, so much worse for me, was the thought that the same thing might one day happen to Bertie.



I just hoped and prayed that the war would end whilst he was still safe at college in Canterbury. Nanny Mason kept saying it would all be over by Christmas. But Christmas came each year and it never was over.

I remember Bertie's last letter from college by heart.

Dearest Millie,

I am old enough now to join up, so I shall. I have had all I can take of fences and walls and bells. I want to fly free, and this seems to be the only way I can do it. Besides, they need men. I can see you smiling at that. All you remember is a boy. I am over six foot now, and I shave twice a week. Honestly! I may not write again for some time, but whatever happens I shall be thinking of you always.

Your

Bertie

And that was the last I was to hear of him
- for a while, at least.

