Peter Quartermain / from *WHERE I LIVED AND WHAT I LEARNED FOR: PART ONE: GROWING DUMB*

One Sunday, when I was about fifteen and we were all marching regulation crocodile into Church at Brewood, a stoop-shouldered man with missing teeth, ragged whiskers and a battered grey suit stuck out his hand at me, me in my School blazer, and said "Excuse me sir, Are you Peter Quartermain? I'm Charlie Davis. Do you remember me?" Mr. Davis from Wheaton Aston. The shop was gone and his wife had died, Timmy and Peggy in separate foster homes, and he had no job, living in a Salvation Army shelter in Wolverhampton somewhere near St.Peter's Square, red-rimmed eyes and desperate beery breath, could I spare five bob. And I didn't know what to do, I only got a shilling a week pocket money, my School cap in my hand its silver badge warm from the mild sun, standing there in the churchyard while the rest of the boarders trooped past me into compulsory worship, the Sheep's Bell stopped calling its hurry-up, the church door began to close, a blackbird's abrupt song in the suspended silence and the double-decker bus changed gear as it went down Dean Street on the way back to town. I had to be in there, I was the Prefect that day I had to take the collection plate round and take it to the altar, and I didn't want to be seen talking to someone who looked like this the two of us in the churchyard, "I've only got sixpence," I said, I put my hand in my pocket and took it out again, I didn't give it to him, it wouldn't even pay his bus fare back to town; the gravestones around us, the path where we stood, me shifting from foot to foot my hands down by my sides, the whitewashed cottage across from the Admiral Rodney bright over the churchyard wall. I thought he might wait till we got out after the service but I didn't say anything else, my voice would be all strangulated, I couldn't think what with the church door closed and everybody wondering why I wasn't in there with them. He turned away. And in the church I began to think I should have taken him to the Headmaster and said who he was and could we help, or I

could send him to Henry Houston, that'd be easy easy enough he'd do something, we all liked him, you could see his cottage at the top of Dean Street just over the churchyard from where we'd stood, but when I got out after the service was over Mr. Davis was gone.

What demons of shame and indecision possessed me, where had I learned that hesitation, that I cringe to think of now.

"You're coming with me to deliver the bread," he'd said to me one day in Wheaton Aston. He put a big basket of bread on the handlebars of his bike and another over his arm and gave me a smaller one and door to door we went round the village. Two big loaves for the Joneses, a hovis and a malted for old Mrs. Crooks, four white and a brown for the Purdy family. We got back to the shop after about an hour, everything carefully counted and remembered, and he wrote it all down in a little book. Then we went out again. "Are you tired?" he asked. "We've got a long way to go." And he slung a great sack of bread over his shoulder, and gave me a bag with a shoulder strap, four two-pound loaves in it, crisp freshbaked crust warm against my coat. And in answer to my question, "We can't take the bike. Come on, then." And we set out across the fields, the long wet grass swishing against my socks, the odd thistle or burr scraping my legs. Watch out for the cowpats. Climb the stile. Open the gate. Close the gate. My bag of bread kept sliding down my shoulder and I kept hitching it up, holding it with my hand. "'Ere, let me move it to the other side," he said. "It's a lot further by the road," he said, "and it's 'arder on me feet." "It's Mrs. Philps," he said. "A big family. 'Er 'usband's in the Army. 'E's a sergeant. In the South Staffs regiment. Somewhere in the War. Overseas I think" — the short sentences punctuated by the grassy sound of walking. It was hot. I wanted something to drink. "There's a stream coming up, under that 'edge." My pace quickened a bit. Cupped my hand, licked up some water, splashed it in my face. It didn't taste very much. "In the winter," he said, "when it snows, they sometimes get cut off, and they 'ave to pinch to make do. It's a bit remote." We stopped for a bit of a rest. "Don't want to rest too much," he told me; "it gets 'arder to start each time. Come on." My bag of bread was a bit damp from the grass, and my crisp loaves of sandwich bread were beginning to lose

their sharp four-square edges. "Don't worry about that," he said; "not much farther." My bag kept getting closer to the ground, dragging on the odd tussock. They usually fetch the bread themselves, he told me, every Wednesday. But this week they're poorly. I stopped. "Doesn't the bread get stale?" I asked. And he told me they wrap it in damp cloth. "You're just wrapping it a bit early," he said, looking at the sodden bottom of my bag. I thought of horrible soggy bread and bread-and-milk and made a face, and he laughed. "It gets a bit mouldy by the end of the week," he said, "especially in the summer. Cut the mould off." I was glad we lived in the village. "And you can toast stale bread," he added; "makes good toast." He looked at me and winked. "Or fresh it up a bit in the oven." And then we were there. A red brick cottage, patch of garden, a gate, some chickens out the back. Mrs. Philps gave me a drink from the pump, and chuckled as she looked at my battered loaves of bread. "You're a bit of a small one for that long hike," she said. Friendly. Glad. "Couldn't 'ave managed without 'im" Mr. Davis said, and he ruffled my hair. My socks were covered with burrs. I could smell my own sweat and I said "I liked that" and felt proud. We turned round and walked the mile-and-a-half to a big cup of tea at home, with sugar.

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So we got away from the Air Raids and we escaped the shelters, but Alice didn't stay in Wheaton Aston very long, she went back to Birmingham late in 1939, I think to get married, and Our Kid was inconsolable, she'd looked after him most of his life and they were thick as thieves, he was old enough to really miss her and to think she'd deserted *him.* Sixty years later he'd tell me he was devastated and couldn't get over it, cried and cried and cried, but I can't remember that at all, and can hardly remember Alice. Mum once said that Dad gave her five pounds for a wedding present, more than a week's wages, but that didn't mean anything to me until I was an undergraduate a dozen or so years later living on half that, two pounds ten a week. Nothing much was scary in the village. The dreaded Mr. Button looked after the senior boys in their room of the

school, and us smaller ones were in the hands of a young woman who I only knew as "Miss." She had us do a lot of reading aloud out of the schoolbook, and I was good at that, I liked the sound of it and I liked reading, all of us liked long words and in one bit I was reading there was a description of a church and the high-up windows in the clerestory, clerestory I said without a pause I liked the rhythm of it, it sounded right, but she said "clear story." Years later Mum said her name was Miss Chapman, she can't have been much more than nineteen years old, and I didn't find out she'd got it wrong till I was about eleven, at Brewood, when Nosey Parker was talking about churches in Scripture class. When he said "clerestory" after asking what those windows were called I was glad I'd kept my mouth shut and not said "clear story." I was pretty good at spelling, and that meant I could usually get the sound of the words right too. Some days Nosey Parker would read us a story out of some religious pamphlet, we only got him twice a week thank goodness, he knew he had a terrible temper and was never really cut out to be a Teacher. One day when he had some sort of work to do of his own he sat at the side of the class and had me read the story out, his head bent over some paper he was scribbling away and then stopping and thinking, he must have been writing his sermon for next week or something, it was a story about the Romans and some Christians in jail, was it about St. Peter? I must have been reading for about half an hour, it was a long story, all the kids sitting quiet, glad not to be slogging through something in the Bible, and for about the three dozenth time I read "and they cast him into goal" or "the goalers said" or "an angel visited him in goal," something like that, and he looked up irritably and said "Jail, boy, j-a-i-l. Don't you know anything?" "Please Sir," I said going all hot and red, "it's g-a-o-l, goal" and he said "UmpPh. That's another way of spelling j-a-i-l. It's unusual, yes, but you should know better," and he shrugged impatiently and settled down again, leaving me feeling daft and resentful, it wasn't like getting it wrong with Miss Chapman. In Wheaton Aston Miss Chapman taught us everything, and when we started Arithmetic the bigger ones in the class would help the younger ones do simple sums. It was a two-room school, I didn't

learn much, but we did do a bit of French, geography and history of course, and a lot of reading. Hengist and Horsa were supposed to be heroes, but I couldn't sort them out from Ethelred the Unready and the Alfred who burnt the cakes. It didn't seem to matter — perhaps we knew we wouldn't be there very long — and the War was never very far away, we could feel its effects all right.

Cold raw weather, getting chilblains and not knowing what they were, shivering outside and eating a great doorstep of bread with nothing on it. Rationing began to bite into us, there was never enough coal to keep a good fire going and you couldn't get really warm, or if you did, stay warm for very long. Timmy and Peggy told us that some of the village kids would be slathered all over their chests with goose grease in October and sewn into their underwear for the winter, we didn't really believe them until Our Kid ended up sitting next to one of them in school, "I changed desks as quickly as I could," he told me when we talked about it years later, I'd forgotten all about it till he reminded me, "by the time December rolled round they were pretty ripe I can tell you" and they'd stay that way till March. But Our Kid started going to Brewood Grammar School three miles away in January 1940 as a weekly boarder, so he missed that, and we all sneered at the rough London and Walsall townies billetted with village kids, "They all think milk comes in bottles!" Mum laughed, and us kids thought that was true. "Bunch of ignorant little B's," Mrs. Davis called them, they all got slathered with Vick's Vaporub every night or had great wodges of some patent cotton wool, Thermogene, bright orange and smelly, sewn in their vests, itchy stuff, we bet — we weren't quite sure whether to laugh or to be jealous. We all had terrible colds all the time, and it wasn't long before we wore Thermogene too, only ours was held with safety pins front and back inside your vest. Phil remembers asking one of the townies where he came from and he said "Wa'sa'", Our Kid was amazed that he spoke English at all if he'd come from Poland, but when he said that to Mum she made a face and laughed and said something about working-class Staffordshire townies, "those rough children, just urchins really," she could hardly understand a word they said either. We didn't have much to do with them at all, us four

kids would go down and play by Lloyd's stream below the farm at the end of the village. We only saw Dad at weekends when he got away from the store in Birmingham — he had a petrol ration because farming was an Essential Activity and now and again he'd drive, but not very often. Usually he took the bus, it must've been an uncertain and tedious journey what with lots of changes getting about inside Birmingham and then to Wolverhampton and then to Wheaton Aston, and there were so few buses from Wolverhampton he must've got a bit anxious, especially if they were held up by an Air Raid, and he'd get in on a Saturday night, in the middle of our bathtime if not after we'd gone to bed, and he'd leave again on Sunday. The car looked ever so funny with a cowl hooding its headlights so that only a little shaft of light could get out, it was easy to drive off the road at night and one weekend he was late because in the car he got caught in an Air Raid and couldn't get through for hours, and another he didn't get in at all because he was in an accident. There wasn't any phone, but he'd got a message through somehow, and when we came downstairs to breakfast and we asked "Where's Dad?" Mum must have been worried sick, but I don't think we particularly noticed. Grown-ups worried all the time.