

Message in the Rubble

by Jillian Powell

Tim's head had scarcely touched the pillow when he heard the familiar nagging whine of the siren.

"Tim, Laura! Dressing gowns and coats on, hurry," Mum called. "Don't forget your gas masks."

The Anderson shelter stood at the bottom of the garden. Its rounded tin roof protruded like a gleaming skull from the banks of turf dad had heaped around it.

"Why did you have to dig ours so deep, Reg?" Mum scolded Dad. "It's like going into your grave."

"You'll be glad of it one day Ethel," Dad had said as he dug out the earth where dahlias had once bloomed. Mum had been adamant: there was no way their children were being evacuated to live with strangers. The shelter must be their protection from Jerry's Dorniers and Heinkels.

Tim and Laura hated the Anderson. It was cold and cramped with narrow bunks squashed against the arc of the corrugated tin walls. From inside, they could hear the menacing drone of the German bombers, and the walls occasionally reverberated with the sound of falling bombs. Tonight they sounded louder than ever. Dad stood with his arms outstretched like a cross, shielding the door of the shelter. "They're miles away," he repeated as Tim and Laura huddled with Mum in the cavernous dark, lit only by a feeble oil lamp. Tim watched gloomy shadows dance and morph on the walls as the dull thud of the bombs got louder and louder, until suddenly there was a deafening crash. The shelter seemed to judder and lift out of the ground. Earth spewed down the steps.

It was getting light when the all-clear sounded. They crawled out of the shelter into a cold dawn. The garden was shrouded in dust and smoke. An acrid smell hung in the air, it reminded Tim of the time they had tried making toffee apples and Mum had burned the saucepan. As rays of morning sun sliced through the murk the family stood staring in silence. Their home had been dissected by a German bomber. It looked like Laura's dolls house with the front taken off. The flowery wallpaper in Mum and Dad's bedroom was blotched with smoke. The wardrobe's door was missing,

a crumpled dress hung alone. A row of china cup handles hanging on hooks was all that was left of the pantry.

"Oh, they've taken our home Reg," Mum said, too stunned to cry.

"We are all in one piece, that's the main thing," Dad said, but Tim could hear the choke in his voice.

"Where are we to go?" Mum said. Now she began to cry.

"They'll find us somewhere, don't fret Ethel," Dad said. His eyes were taking in a panorama of desolation. It had been a direct hit and where their neighbours' houses had been were piles of rubble exuding clouds of brick dust that mingled with the smoke from burning fires.

"The Harris' shelter. It's gone!" Mum said.

"What about Mr Harris' pigeons?" Tim said, but he could already see, the pigeon loft had gone too. Shrapnel had demolished everything in its path. Timbers stuck up like bones from piles of debris. An air raid warden was picking his way through. "All survivors must report to the rest centre," he informed them. They stared in mute horror. Tim saw his mum turn her gaze to him and Laura. He knew what she was thinking.

"I want Rosie!" Laura cried. Tim took her hand; finding Laura's most precious possession seemed impossible, but he knew they must try. Carefully, they negotiated the smoking rubble.

"Listen!" Tim said. "Did you hear that, Laura?" He could hear a muffled sound. Tim squatted, the dust making him cough. "It's a pigeon!" He said. The bird was trapped between a timber joist and a pile of bricks. Tim spoke to it gently as he began to move the bricks aside.

"Poor thing," Laura said.

"It's one of Mr Harris'," Tim said. "It must have been heading home." The bird was alive, its eyes blinking, its pulse racing. Tim cupped his hands, carefully lifting it out. "I think it's broken its leg," he said. Then he spotted it: a tiny canister attached to the pigeon's leg. "It's carrying a secret message Laura," Tim said. "We have to take this pigeon to the police station. It's carrying a message from behind enemy lines!"