

6

One morning I was informed that I had been assigned to a new commando. At 7:00 a.m. prompt, 30 of us climbed onto the truck, which had pulled up outside the camp. We sat in three rows on wooden planks facing the front of the truck. I soon realized that it was going to be a very windy ride. The truck was open and there was nothing to protect us from the cold wind. We must have driven about half an hour when we arrived at a village called Clayton.

We stopped in front of an old abandoned farmhouse. There were tractors, cement mixers, as well as gravel, cement, and piles of curbstones and wooden planks around the building. We were shown into a room in the old farmhouse where we could leave our jackets if we wanted. The room had some crude benches and tables. In the corner was a tea urn, that is, a round copper container with a tap at the bottom. It was used to make hot water for tea.

A man entered the room with an interpreter. The interpreter introduced him as the engineer in charge of the building site and told us that our place of work was to be a housing estate. The houses to be built were called council houses. We, however, were to build the roads and manholes and lay the water and sewage pipes.

Before we started work they wanted to know who was a bricklayer, who could drive a tractor or a dump truck, and who had ever laid pipes before. To my surprise quite a few men put their hands up.

I myself was made a trench digger. There were two huge caterpillar tractors, which had already dug the outlines of the roads, and one

machine, which dug the trenches, but a lot of hand digging was still to be done. We were introduced to several civilians who worked for the contractor and were to be supervising us. My foreman was called Jack. He wore a shirt without a collar. Around his neck was tied a red handkerchief and his trousers were tied with a string above his boots. I figured he was in his early fifties. He was very small and chewed tobacco.

We shoveled and dug all day, wrestling with sticky wet mud. The weather was fair but cool. About 5:30 p.m. the lorry arrived to take us back to camp. On our way home it started to thunder. There was no place to shelter as the rain pounded mercilessly into our faces.

By the time we arrived back at the camp the rain had stopped. Since I was soaked through I walked around the camp, hoping to dry out a little before I lay down on my straw bed. The evening breeze helped somewhat, but my clothes were still very damp when I settled down for the night.

This sort of thing happened quite often. After a few days at the building site, digging, driving tractors, and working in mud, I longed to be working on a farm, removing manure from horse stables.

The building site we worked on was flanked by nice homes. Occasionally, when we happened to be working close by, some nice lady would come out and hand us a cup of tea. But only when she thought that she was not observed by anyone, because we were strictly forbidden to fraternize.

One morning, after we arrived at the site, the engineer told us through an interpreter that he needed more bricklayers and more men to lay pipes. Besides that he was looking for three carpenters who could build supports for the deeper trenches and do general timberwork, such as framing manholes.

I used to build model airplanes and even helped to build full-size gliders in my teens, so I was handy with wood. Since I was not too thrilled about working in dirt and mud, I raised my hand and said I was a timber-man. I nudged my friend Walter who stood next to me and motioned to him to put his hand up too. He said, "Ich hab doch keine Ahnung von Holzarbeit," (I have no idea how to work with wood). I figured I could show him the things he didn't know and finally he volunteered. One more timber-man put his hand up. After

that, everyone was told to go about his assigned tasks.

The three newly assigned timber-men, however, were taken into the office to be introduced to the man who would be our supervisor. He was an elderly person who, I supposed, had worked as a carpenter all his life and was now hired to finish his working days on the building site. He introduced himself as Bill and outlined what the job entailed. My English was sufficiently improved by now to understand simple conversations.

Bill showed us a blueprint of all the manhole positions. There were quite a lot of them. We were also shown a detailed blueprint of a manhole frame. Since I was a tool and die maker by trade I had no difficulty reading and understanding technical drawings. It was decided that I was to build the manholes with the help of my friend Walter. The other timber-man would reinforce the trenches to prevent them from collapsing before the pipes were laid.

I was given a saw, a claw hammer, a ruler, a setsquare, and a packet of nails. We went to work building our first manhole. Bill was with us most of the time and showed us how to go about it in a professional way. However, he liked to take a lot of tea breaks in his office. He was a friendly person and we got on well with each other. We learned that he had lost his wife and was living alone.

There was a narrow road running through the building site, which connected the two main streets on either side. It was frequently used by the people who lived in the nearby houses. I was working a lot near the walkway and I especially noticed a teenage girl who came by once or twice a week, always around the same time, which was about 4:30 p.m. to 5:00 p.m., just before we got ready to go back to camp.

I only ever saw her from a distance, but I wanted to get a closer look. I guessed she was about seventeen or eighteen years old.

One day, as she was coming in my direction, I made it my business to be near the road, pretending to do some measuring. As she walked by I managed to get a good look at her. She was very pretty, just a little smaller than I, with beautiful blue eyes, which seemed to sparkle. Her hair was dark blond and fell neatly to her shoulders. She had a beautiful complexion and was very dainty in stature. She must have noticed that I was looking at her because she blushed slightly. As she walked on, my eyes followed her all the way.

Driving back to camp that evening, I couldn't get the picture of that cute little face out of my mind. We had strict orders not to fraternize and were told that we would be severely punished if we were caught doing so. So my common sense told me to leave well alone.

A few days later, however, I saw her again, this time holding a small girl by the hand. I decided that I was going to talk to them, so I made my way over to the walkway. I would pretend to be busy measuring; it seemed the most sensible thing to do. I had to be sure that no one saw me but when they were just about level with me I looked up at them and said, "Good evening."

The girls gave me a quick look and also greeted me with a "Good evening." Then they seemed to quicken their pace a little. As I walked back to the manhole I kept glancing in their direction and noticed that at the very top of the building site they went into a house together. The small girl I assumed to be a relative.

That night I could not go to sleep for a long time. I had the urge to learn English properly. How I was going to go about this, I didn't know. Perhaps Bill, the foreman, could help me if I conversed with him as much as possible.

The next day I found many reasons to talk to him. I also told him that I wanted to learn English and asked if he would help me. He seemed very pleased with the idea. So, whenever I wanted to know a word, he would tell me how to pronounce it. But I wanted to write it down too.

One day, when I was talking to Bill about words, I asked him if he had something to write on. He handed me a pencil and a piece of scrap paper from his office. I started writing and he made sure I spelled the words properly. Before long I had many pieces of scrap paper with words on them. I looked after them as if they were gold.