Letters from the lighthouse - pages 74 to 81

Questions are at the end of the chapter.

# LOOSE LIPS SINK SHIPS

As I ran down the main street, other people were coming out of their houses: women still tying on pinnies, old men in undervests, children rubbing the sleep from their eyes.

I was glad to find Cliff almost immediately, standing with Queenie on the steps of the post office. I tried to hurry him back inside, thinking the cellar would be a good place to shelter.

‘Oh give over, Olive!’ Cliff cried. ‘No one else is going in.’

Incredibly, there was no air-raid warden, nor any sign of one on their way. We might as well have been watching a horse race or a carnival procession for how relaxed everyone seemed. Determined not to leave Cliff on his own, I muttered crossly how foolish it was not to go inside.

Everyone was gazing out to sea. It was a bright winter’s day, the sun so low and glarey you had to shield your eyes, yet the dark shapes of the Luftwaffe were clearly visible in the sky.

‘If Jerry bombs my cabbages,’ said a man with shaving foam still on his cheeks, ‘he’ll have me to answer to!’

‘Oh, Jim,’ Mrs Moore who ran the bakery called across the street. ‘They’re heading for Plymouth, you daft ha’porth, not your garden!’

What bothered me was the planes were getting closer. And louder. There were six of them: one out in front, two flying higher, two directly below, one bringing up the rear. They flew parallel to the coast, close enough to see the distinctive black crosses on the planes’ sides. Close enough to be almost level with the long, low platform of rocks on which stood the lighthouse.

‘Let’s go, Cliff,’ I said again.

‘In a minute.’ He shrugged off my arm. ‘This is the cat’s bananas!’

‘They’re German fighter planes – *real* ones,’ I said through gritted teeth. ‘It’s not some film at the Picture Palace.’ I didn’t like that he’d used Sukie’s phrase either, *and* got it wrong.

Someone shouted: ‘Look! They’re turning inland by the lighthouse!’

Just a few hundred feet above the lighthouse, the German formation was changing shape.

‘That bleeding lighthouse,’ said old Mr Watkins, whose tobacco ration I delivered every day. ‘Them Jerry pilots are using it to find their way. Look at them! Clear as day they are!’

‘Not surprised,’ Mrs Moore replied. ‘It stands out like a beacon.’

I watched in despair as the first plane turned almost at right angles. The others followed close on its tail. It was obvious that they were, like the man said, using the lighthouse to guide them in. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Queenie bend down and pick something up off the ground.

Within moments, the sky above us darkened. Everyone cowered down. I grabbed Cliff and we clung to each other; it was terror on my part, though Cliff was grinning madly.

At little more than roof height, the planes went over. You could see numbers on their undersides. The sections of metal held together with rivets. The stench of burning engine fuel made my throat catch. And the *noise*. It was so horribly high-pitched, I thought my ears would burst.

‘Jeez!’ Cliff yelled.

I couldn’t bear to look any more. It was then I noticed Queenie. She was the only person in the street not cowering. Her arm raised, she was hurling stones at the planes. I don’t know if she hit them: it was her face that shocked me more. Glasses askew, teeth bared, she looked almost *savage*.

Once the last plane had gone over, a stunned silence fell. It made the ringing in my ears even worse. Then all at once everyone was talking in that jokey, shrill way people do when they’ve been scared and are relieved it’s over.

Finally, Cliff let me drag him back to the post office where, once inside, we started babbling with nervous excitement.

‘If they’d turned their guns on us we’d all be dead.’ I snapped my fingers. ‘Just like that.’

‘It was amazing, Olive.’

‘*Terrifying*, more like.’

‘The plane was *so* close, wasn’t it? Did you see what their pilots did? It was like the lighthouse was a signpost or something, telling them where to turn.’

‘Did *you* see what Queenie—’ I stopped, reddening.

Queenie had come in so close behind us, I thought she’d overheard. Luckily though she was deep in conversation with Mrs Henderson.

‘Ephraim wouldn’t take her,’ Mrs Henderson was saying. ‘He’s too busy with the lighthouse.’

‘Huh!’ Queenie tutted irritably. ‘And the rest of us *aren’t* busy, I suppose, so it’s easy for me to take her?’

I wondered who they were talking about.

‘It’s probably just his way of saying—’

‘– that he doesn’t want her finding out before it’s all arranged,’ Queenie cut in. ‘We mustn’t get her hopes up.’

It sounded rather mysterious to me.

Mrs Henderson nodded. ‘You know how he is, dear. He doesn’t get attached to anyone, does he? He’ll never marry that one, not after what his father was like when his mother died. Poor Ephraim’s seen enough heartbreak to last him a lifetime.’

‘We all have,’ Queenie retorted. Though she honestly didn’t seem heartbroken, not like Mum did. She looked as tough as steel. Then she sighed. ‘All right, one more won’t make much difference. She can double up with Olive in the attic.’ Before I fully realised what was happening there were three people, not two, in front of us. ‘Cliff, Olive, you’d better meet our new evacuee.’

It was Esther Jenkins.

‘Crikey,’ Cliff said under his breath. ‘Just our luck.’

My heart sank horribly. We’d been doing all right here with Queenie these past few days. It felt like we were settling in. Now I’d a nasty sense that that was all about to change.

‘Why don’t you show Esther to your room, Olive dear?’ Mrs Henderson suggested.

‘I’ll take her,’ Cliff offered, seeing my face. ‘Come on, Esther.’

Sullen and silent, Esther picked up her suitcase. She followed Cliff through the door at the back of the shop that led to the rest of the house.

‘Go with them,’ Mrs Henderson mouthed, shooing me away.

I shot Queenie a pleading look, but she ignored me. So reluctantly, I did as I was told. As I left Mrs Henderson said something I didn’t catch.

‘She did *what*?’ Queenie gasped.

‘Sssh! Not so loud!’ Mrs Henderson hissed. ‘You’re the only house left with any room. I could hardly put her in my goats’ shed, could I?’

On the other side of the door, I hesitated before closing it: they were talking about Esther.

‘It was probably a misunderstanding,’ Mrs Henderson went on. ‘Esther swears she explained bacon wasn’t kosher – that was why she wouldn’t eat it. She wasn’t making a fuss for no reason.’

I knew what ‘kosher’ meant. It was the types of food a Jewish person could eat, according to their beliefs, which must mean Esther was a Jew.

Queenie breathed in sharply. ‘That chicken won’t be kosher, either. None of our meat is. Have you spoken to Mrs Drummond?’

I didn’t catch the answer. Something was happening upstairs. A door slammed at the top of the house. Then footsteps clattered down the attic stairs, stopped, and went back up again.

‘That’s my room,’ Cliff was saying in a rather pained voice. ‘I’m not sharing with a girl.’

By the time I reached the first-floor landing, Cliff was sounding more desperate.

‘No, Esther, you can’t just take over …’

Something bumped across the floor overhead. There was another thud. A laugh.

‘Stop it! Those are Olive’s!’ Cliff cried.

In a rush of anger, I charged up the attic stairs. The cheek of it! She’d only been here five minutes and was already interfering with our things.

Then Esther said, ‘Your sister’s got a lot of socks.’

My heart stopped.

She was in my sock drawer, where I’d hidden Sukie’s note.

‘Put that back, it’s not yours,’ Cliff protested.

Esther laughed. ‘Is it a love letter? Has Olive got a sweetheart?’

I stormed into my room. The floor was strewn with clothes – *my* clothes. Esther was in the process of clearing the top two drawers. She’d also moved my books from the windowsill.

‘What are you doing?’ I cried.

‘Making space for my things,’ she said as if it were obvious. ‘By the way, I found this.’

Between her fingers she twirled Sukie’s note. It had been very recently opened.

I licked my lips.

‘*Is* it a love letter?’ Esther asked again.

‘No,’ I stammered. ‘I … I … don’t think so.’

‘Don’t you know what it says?’ She was surprised. ‘So it’s a secret code? Isn’t that a bit *dangerous*?’

I wiped my palms on my skirt: I knew what she was implying, and took a step towards her.

‘Are you calling my sister a *spy*?’

Esther Jenkins slowly smiled. ‘I don’t think I mentioned a *sister*, did I?’

I realised then what I’d done: I’d put my size five foot right in it.

Q1. What does the chapter title ‘Loose lips sink ships’ mean?

Q2. ‘Everyone cowered down’; why did Olive and Cliff react to the sound of the planes in this way?

Q3. In the previous chapter you explained why the German pilots had taken ‘a liking to’ the lighthouse. How has your opinion changed after reading this chapter?