





# SHRAPNEL BOYS

When life is full of battles, you learn  
who your true friends are...



*To David and Eleanor Browne.*

*With thanks to the Imperial War Museum for reviewing  
the historical accuracy of this book.*

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JENNY PEARSON

SHRAPNEL  
BOYS



USBORNE





# CHAPTER 1

1939



It was the first Friday in September when Arthur Davey, Graham Talbot and Harry Scott, or *The Wreckers* as we'd later come to know them, were shipped off to the countryside with all the others, leaving me, Micky and Lugs nothing short of delighted. There'd been talk for a while of evacuating kids out of London to where they'd be safe if Hitler ever sent his bombs. Still, when the day came and we watched our rival gang, along with well over half our school, troop off down the road to the station, it was hard to believe they were actually going. War hadn't even been declared yet. I suppose this was just more preparation – like the gas masks we always had to carry and air-raid practices and the posters encouraging men to sign up.

They filed out of school, singing *The Lambeth Walk*, like they were off on holiday. A pack of mums chased after them waving and wailing and shouting that they'd be coming back home soon and to mind their manners whilst they were gone.

We weren't so emotional in our goodbyes, and while a tiny part of me wondered if we were missing out, I was glad to be

staying behind, and I reckon Micky and Lugs were too. And to show that, we'd given Arthur and his lot the three bare-bum salute as they were marched out the school gates. Arthur presented us with one of his fingers – one that caught a clip round the ear off Mr Hedley, the older years' schoolmaster, which was an added bonus.

We watched as the crocodile of kids disappeared round the corner, off to their new lives with not much on them but a change of clothes, a gas mask and the hope of an adventure. But I knew the adventure weren't about to happen where they were headed. They could bang on all they wanted about seeing green fields and real live cows, but the truth was that if war did come, they were going to miss it and seeing a few blades of grass and some sets of udders weren't ever going to make up for that.

Mum wasn't ever going to send me and Micky. She said that she couldn't bring herself to do it, that maybe it was selfish, but she'd miss us too much. Besides, I was twelve and Micky not far off – we weren't exactly babies. If she ever tried to pack us off to some folks we'd never met, I'd made it clear that I would march straight back to Deptford. She needed looking after, and since she'd finally kicked Dad out two years earlier, as the oldest, that was down to me.

As the last of the evacuees turned the corner, I jumped down off the wall I was sitting on. "Come on," I said, slinging my arms over Micky and Lugs's shoulders, "with those three gone, we're going to run this place."



“Ronnie and Michael Smith! Billy Missell! Here! Now!”

Billy is Lugs’s real name, but we call him Lugs on account of the size of his ears. Reckon he could take flight if the wind picked up enough. Lugs might not sound all that flattering, but it’s affectionate like. You can’t go round giving a lad a nickname that’s nice. I mean, he’s covered in freckles, but he’d never live it down if we named him after those.

“I said, here, NOW!”

We all swung round to face the source of the booming voice. Mr Etherington, our headmaster, was storming towards us. He was wearing the black suit and tie he always wore, and his white moustache was twitching with fury. He walked with a slight limp, which he’d have people believe was the result of a bomb blast from the Great War, but the rumour is he actually fell on a rake in his allotment when he was digging up spuds. I asked him about the rake once. Been gunning for me ever since.

“Yes, sir?” I said, as innocently as I could. “What can I do for you on this fine September morning?”

“Less of your cheek, Smith!” he spat.

“Which one, sir? Me left or me right?” I grinned and stared him square in the eyes.

Look, I knew nothing good came from winding up the headmaster, but sometimes I just couldn’t help myself. He was the sort that got off on making you feel like nothing. Like you were worthless. You have to stand up to bullies. Learned that from my dad – when he was around.

“Both!” he blasted and came to a stop right close to me.

He was a tall, broad man and full of fury. "You like to expose your backsides do you, boys? Think it's funny, do you?"

Micky gulped and shook his head.

"Only on special occasions, sir," I said, which made Lugs snigger, but did not amuse old Etherington that much.

He bent down and moved his face closer to mine. I kept my eyes on him and the smile on my face, even though inside all I wanted was to turn and scarper.

"Here's a special occasion for you!" he said, his breath hot and angry. "Miss Grimshaw, fetch the cane, quick about it!"

I didn't react. I wasn't particularly thrilled about copping a caning, but I knew there were nothing I could do about it now.

Miss Grimshaw, the younger years' teacher, trotted off eager to do Etherington's bidding. The headmaster straightened up, turned to the rest of the kids who were milling about the playground and barked. "Line up! Roll call!"

The kids rushed to their usual spaces, shuffling to fill in the gaps that our classmates had left, all the while snatching glances at us.

"Blinkin' hell, Ronnie," Lugs whispered. "You've gone and done it now."

Micky shook his head and scowled at me. "You and your bleedin' mouth."

Miss Grimshaw came back into the playground and handed the cane over with a smile. If you're thinking that 'cos she teaches the younger years she'd be all kind and sweet, think again. She's a Dobermann in a cardigan. Mum reckons if you

sent an army made solely of Miss Grimshaws we'd have the war done and dusted in a week.

Etherington held the cane aloft. It was pale in colour and had a slight curve to it – probably from all the backsides it'd whacked. "Turn round, bend over. You first, Mr Missell."

Three thwacks Lugs got, right across his buttocks. The whole school, or what was left of it, winced in unison each time the cane came down with a snap.

Lugs didn't make much of a sound, but his eyes were streaming when he straightened up and he was fighting to stop his chin from wobbling.

Etherington pushed back the limp strand of hair that had fallen in front of his eyes. "Michael Smith, you're next."

Micky didn't do so well, he yelped with each strike. Our Micky's always been a bit soft. He is the youngest though, and scrawny with it. He were born just over nine months after me, 'cos he was in a rush to get here – according to Mum. But I dunno why anyone would be rushing to get to ours. Our next-door neighbour, Vera Green, calls him a surprise miracle. I would have thought all miracles were surprises though, ain't that kind of the point? I told her that, but she weren't having none of it. Insisted on giving Micky a rub on his head for luck whenever he wasn't quick enough to duck out her way.

When he stood up, our Micky was trembling, and tears were flowing down his face. The look he gave me, well, that was hard to take. "It will be alright, Mick," I whispered. "Don't let him see you cry. Never let them see you cry."

“Oh, shut up, Ronnie,” he snapped back, rubbing his eyes furiously with his cuffs.

I put my gas mask on the ground and got into position with my hands on my knees before Mr Etherington asked. Dunno, felt better to do it than follow an order from him. I waited and braced myself for the sting of birch on me bum. I reckoned I was down for more than the other two, on account of my lip. Six of the best, most likely. I took a breath and clenched my jaw to bite away the anger and humiliation that were boiling inside of me. I'd been caned before – I knew how much it would hurt, how that strip of wood seemed to cut right into you.

But nothing happened. Instead, I heard the sound of Mr Etherington's footsteps heading across the playground.

I swung round and saw the looks on Micky's and Lugs's faces. Annoyance and anger on our Micky's, confusion on Lugs's.

“Sir! Sir? You forgot about me!” I called after him.

“Back to class! All of you!” he ordered, not even turning round to look.

“Mr Etherington. Sir?”

If he could hear me, he didn't acknowledge it.

A rage flew up inside me. That weren't fair. That weren't right. It was my fault. I should be caned too.

“Sir!” I shouted. “You need to come back here and cane me like the others!”

The kids who had started to walk back to their classrooms all stopped where they were. No one spoke to Etherington the way I was. No one told him what to do.

“Oi! SIR!” I bellowed.

Etherington stopped. Then turned round slowly.

“You need to punish me,” I said. “I need to be punished.”

Whispers rippled through the playground. Kids were looking at me like I’d lost the plot. Maybe I had, but the sense of injustice was burning in me so hot, I couldn’t stop myself. I needed to feel the same pain that our Micky and Lugs had.

“Who says I’m not punishing you?” Etherington said icily.

“I...I don’t understand.”

“You’re not a very bright boy, are you, Smith?”

“I dunno, sir. Me mum says I have my moments.”

“This cane won’t ever touch your skin again, Smith. You step out of line, and one of your friends will pay the price.” His eyebrows raised in this superior kind of way, and I thought about knocking them right off his face.

“I have my moments too, it would seem,” he said, like he was right pleased with himself.

“You can’t do that!” I said.

“But I can. You’ll learn, Smith. I shall teach you that, for boys like you, enemies are easy to make, but friends will be much harder to keep. Now back to class! All of you!”

And with that he marched off into the school building.

I didn’t know what to do with myself for a moment. My head was whirling, trying to make sense of what had happened. I just stood there, looking at the door Etherington had disappeared through. Don’t think I would have moved if it hadn’t had been for Lugs giving me a nudge.

“Don’t listen to him – what’s Etherington know about friends?”

I nodded, but something about my headmaster’s words had knocked me. I followed Lugs to the back of the line of kids and stood behind our Micky, who shot me another dark glare.

“You okay?” I whispered, trying to show I was concerned – that I was sorry.

Micky didn’t turn round, just said, “What do you think?”

Miss Grimshaw blew her whistle, spraying spit everywhere, and cleared her throat. “With so many children evacuated, those of you who remain will be taught together. By me.”

Lugs groaned behind me. “Today just keeps getting better and better.”

On the way home from school, Micky skulked along behind me, kicking a stone down the pavement, refusing to talk. It’s about a mile walk between the terraced houses to our place on Heston Street. I tried to hang back with him to see if I could cheer him up, to help me feel less guilty as much as anything else, but he wasn’t having any of it.

“Don’t worry, Mick,” I said. “I promise I’ll stay out of trouble and keep that backside of yours safe.”

“Yeah right,” he said and stormed off ahead.

When we got back to ours, Vera, our next-door neighbour, was standing at her garden gate, smoking a cigarette. Vera’s always

smoking a cigarette. She was wearing a headscarf, tied in a knot at the front, and an apron that was covered in flour. The sleeves of her blouse were rolled up, showing her impressive forearms.

“What’s happened to you, Micky?” she said, frowning. “You’re walking like you’ve had an accident.”

Micky glared at me. “Ask Ronnie.”

She raised her eyebrows. “What you gone and done now, Ronnie Smith?”

“It was Mr Etherington,” I said.

“You ought to keep your noses clean round him,” Vera said, momentarily disappearing into a cloud of cigarette smoke as she exhaled.

Micky jabbed his finger at me. “It was all his fault.”

She tutted, then coughed. Vera’s cough is really loud and sounds real phlegmy. “You should be looking out for him,” she said after she was done coughing, “you’re the eldest.”

“I can look out for myself,” Micky said and stropped off indoors. But that weren’t true then and it’s not true now.

I slung my bag and gas mask over the banister and went to see if there was anything to eat in the kitchen. It was one of Mum’s days off from working as a nurse at Lewisham Hospital, which meant there was a good chance she might have baked something. I stopped before going inside though, because I heard voices. Mum was sitting at the table in the front room with Mary from a few doors down. Mary looked in a right old state.

“I just don’t know if I’ve done the right thing,” she was saying.

I guessed she was talking about sending her Susan off to the countryside with all the others. I think she probably had done the right thing in Susan's case. She's a right prissy madam. She weren't the type to make the most of the excitement that was coming if war was declared.

"You just did what you thought was best." Mum rubbed her hand. "They'll be back by Christmas. That's what everyone's saying. Now, more tea?"

Mary crumpled into a sobbing mess and Mum turned to me and said, "Don't just stand there! Put the kettle on, Ronnie."

I opened my mouth to protest – I wasn't some ruddy charwoman, but Mum said, "Do not make me ask twice, Ronnie Smith."

I decided that one run-in was enough for the day and clattered off to the kitchen and set about making a pot of tea.

"Who knows..." Mum said, as I unceremoniously plonked the tea tray in front of them a few minutes later. "There might not even be a war."