Margrave of The Marshes

John Peel and Sheila Ravenscroft

Chapter One

Sheila and I are babysitting today and our grandson, Archie, isn't happy. He doesn't like the tomato, yam and basil mixture his mother, Alexandra, our daughter, sent over with him this morning. I'm not sure I would either. He also seems unenthusiastic about the harness that secures him in place in his highchair. I'm with him most of the way on that one too. Do I really remember the pressure, the chafing, even the smell of the various harnesses that held the infant John Robert Parker Ravenscroft in place? There was, I know for a fact, a brown leather lead that Nanny used when she took me walking and I can remember the smell, even the taste, of that. It may have had bells on it.

I was born, I have always told people, at the age of four in a woodcutter's cottage in the Black Forest, but the disappointing truth is that I was born in Heswall Cottage Hospital a few days before the outbreak of the Second World War. The Cottage Hospital is a private home now and the family living there has been in touch with me twice. Once when the father sent me a brick from a wall they had removed, and more recently when I was playing Chibuku in Liverpool - it's a club, not a board game - and his sons invited me to stay in the building in which I was born. If we hadn't already been booked into the Racquets Club and I hadn't recognised that a lot of red wine would have to be taken to get me through the night, I'd have accepted too. You'd be amazed at the number of people who've suggested some sort of link between my birth and the outbreak of war. 'So it was your fault,' they've chortled, but I've never laughed - any more than I have at the people who have greeted me in more recent years with the words, 'D'yer ken John Peel, then?' Several of these are buried in shallow graves on B roads off the A505. The police have confessed themselves baffled.

Naturally I don't remember much about the war. Father was away, eyeball to eyeball with the Germans in North Africa. Mother was in her bedroom. Sometimes I'd be carried to the air-raid shelter at the top of the garden, out of the French windows from the sitting-room, across the crazy paving and up the former tennis court we called the Big Lawn. Later, I would be joined by Francis Houghton Leslie Ravenscroft; conceived, it was explained to me years later, in London, when Father was halfway home on leave. On the big blue radio in the air-raid shelter we heard, without

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understanding what it meant, of the war in Europe. Somehow, though, we understood that the words on the radio were linked to the aircraft-recognition books we were shown from time to time, with the barrage balloon that came down in the field across the road, with the strange powdered foods we ate and with the fact that Father wasn't there. Father, I decided, probably didn't exist at all, remaining, for the first six years of my life, a figure as remote and improbable as the characters in *The Blue Fairy Book*, less real to me than Dame Washalot, Moonface and the other folk of Enid Blyton's Faraway Tree.

The aircraft-recognition books were useful though. I knew to look for black crosses on the wings and had been warned that under no circumstances was I to venture into the top half of a garden that was about the size and shape of a football pitch, with a path running along, as it were, the halfway line between the sandstone wall and what would become, when Father came home, the hen run. One afternoon, I had toddled up the path from the kitchen door, past the tool shed, the greenhouse, the cesspit, the gooseberries, the rows of peas and beans, the rhubarb and the rubbish dump, with Francis, intriguingly yellow as a child and rarely awake, tottering unsteadily at my side. When we reached the path that divided the garden in two, I indicated to my brother that it was my intention to venture into the forbidden half. He demurred, in as much as an eighteen-month-old child can do serious demurring, as I took my first step as a free thinker. As I did, a plane - a German plane - hurtled low over the garden. Several years of peace had passed before I crossed the halfway line again.

I, it has already been established, was a child that liked to keep itself to itself. At home, if the weather was fine, I climbed trees and read. Thanks to Nanny, christened Florence Horne but re-christened Trader, in honour of the famous sea captain, by our father, I could read before I went to kindergarten. My favourite reading tree, a sappy, flaky pine, overlooked the field that separated our house from our neighbour's, a field in which, at appropriate times of the year, German prisoners of war worked. These prisoners worked unsupervised, showing as they did, I suppose, little enthusiasm for deserting the relative safety of a Cheshire farm for a profoundly uncertain future on, say, the Russian Front. In halting but rather charming English, they would warn me of the dangers of climbing pine trees. I have since claimed that on feast days they would give Francis and me presents carved from scrap wood, but an inner voice tells me that I have made this up.

Apart from the Whittimores, who farmed the fields across the lane that led to the Behrends' house some distance away in the trees, and Mr Hughes, who farmed across the main road, we had few visitors. Colin and Martin Whittimore were about the same ages as Francis and myself, and in the absence of any other children we could play with, we spent a lot of time with them. Francis even went through a form of marriage with Colin Whittimore, a marriage unrecognised, alas, by any of the major religions, but one that the Church of England might nowadays look upon in a friendlier spirit. (Note to self: check Church's position on same-sex marriages between consenting three-year-olds.)

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