

# Children of the Blitz

## Act 1

### Scene One: Before the War.

*An empty stage. The lights dim to black then a single spotlight fades up on Helen.*

Helen I'm Helen Fisher, Lenny to my friends. I'm not particularly special -not special at all. There's no real reason why this story should have been about me, it could have been about any one of thousands - millions even - of children just like me. Perhaps it's because I'm so ordinary that I was chosen. But in the war ordinary people did the most extra-ordinary things.

In 1938 I was eleven years old. Like most children I didn't take much notice of the news. We all knew about Hitler of course: we'd seen him on the newsreels at the cinema. It seemed stupid that people should be afraid of him - the way he danced about and shouted all the time, waving his arm up and down. He always reminded me of Mr Punch from a show I'd seen on the beach at Eastbourne! He seemed such a little man to be so important. But over the next few years whenever people talked about what Germany was doing, I always saw Germany as that one man - Hitler.

People had been talking about war for ages but it didn't really mean anything to me. It all seemed so far away - it was something for grown ups to worry about, not me. I was more worried about passing my exams and getting into Grammar School. But in the months from January 1938 to September 1939 so many things happened that I couldn't ignore it all together. We talked about War as if it was a game - and to us it was. At playtime in school playgrounds all over Britain, Hitler was never far away...

*A school handbell rings. the rest of the stage is illuminated and children run on as if for school break. They gather in small groups playing games. Two newspaper sellers stand each side of the stage next to billboards. As they call out they turn the boards to show the appropriate headline and date.*

Newseller1 Evening Standard. Get your Evening Standard! Germany occupies Austria! Read all about it! Germany occupies Austria.

*As he finishes, attention shifts to one group of children playing.*

Child1 'ere, where's Austria.

Child2 Dunno. In't it in Russia?

Child3 No, it's near Africa. My uncle went to live there. It's where Kangaroo's come from.

Child4 What does Hitler want wiv Kangaroos?

Child3 Dunno.

Child5 My dad's volunteered for the ARP's.

Child1 What - like the angels.

Child5 No A.R.P.. Y'know. Air Raid Precautions. He showed me how to put out an incendiary bomb.

Child4 Show us then.

Child5 Can't - you need a stirrup pump and a fire bucket.

Child1 What if you ain't got 'em then?

Child5 You just get blown up!

*They carry on playing.*

Newseller2 Daily Mirror. Get your Mirror 'ere. Germany threatens Czechoslovakia. Chamberlain to meet Hitler. Daily Mirror.

*Highlight on the next group of children.*

Child1 You seen what they're doin' in the park?

Child2 No. What?

Child1 Digging.

Child3 What for?

Child1 They said it was for air-raids. Great big trench it was.

Child4 What are you supposed to do then.

Child1 Jump in it and put your hands over your head.

Child5 That's daft. You won't be able to see anything.

Child2 Yeah. You won't catch me in a stupid ditch. I wanna watch.

*The children start a mock dog-fight.*

Child5 Anyway my brothers in the army and 'e says there won't be a war.

Child4 No - worse luck.

*They move off and continue to play.*

Newseller1 Evening Standard. Get your Evening Standard. Munich Pact agreed. Chamberlain announces "Peace in our Time!"

*Focus in on next group of children.*

Child1 Ere, if there aint gonna be a war, why we still got to have stupid gas masks.

Child2 I hate 'em. The smell makes me sick.

Child3 I was sick after gas drill yesterday.

- Child1 Sir looks really stupid waving that rattle around, doesn't he.
- Child4 Not 'arf. And he really gets annoyed when you breathe out and it makes that farting noise.
- Child5 Yeah (Blows a raspberry and the rest giggle)
- Child2 Yesterday was like a real gas attack though.
- Child5 Yeah no wonder sir was so angry.
- Child1 Why?
- Child4 Well because of the noise the masks make, half the kids in the class had been passing wind during the drill.
- Child2 Stupid thing was we only found out when we took the masks off!
- All Phew

*Their expressions show the effect of a rotten smell as the move off.*

- Newseller2 Mirror. Get your Daily Mirror. Germany occupies Czechoslovakia. Conscription announced.

*Focus on next group of children.*

- Child1 My big brother got a letter today saying he'd been called up.
- Child2 My brother got one yesterday. Mum was really upset but dad told her not to be stupid because there wasn't going to be a war.
- Child3 I'm sick of Hitler. I hate him.
- Child4 My dad's joined the civil defence. He says we've all got to do our bit.
- Child5 We put sticky tape on our windows last night. It told us to do it in that book that came.
- Child1 What for?
- Child5 In case there's an air raid.
- Child1 Sticky tape won't keep the bombs out!

*They act out a bomb falling and blowing up.*

- Newseller1 Standard. Evening Standard. Germany and Russia sign agreement. Thousands return from Europe. War expected.

*Focus on next group of children.*

- Child1 I'm fed up of all this stuff about war. It's boring.

- Child2 My teacher said that if there's a war they're going to send us all to live in the country.
- Child3 I don't want to go to the country. That would be like running away. We should stand and fight.
- Child4 Yeah, if there's going to be a war I don't want to miss it.
- Child1 I was helping mum make blackout curtains last night.
- Child2 That's easy. I had to help dig up our garden for an air raid shelter. Dad and me brother have been building it.
- Child3 We've cleared out under the stairs just in case.
- Child5 My dad says that there won't be a war. He says that in the paper only one out of five people thinks there will be a war.
- Child4 Which five people?
- Child5 Dunno - he didn't say.
- Child1 I think they should have the war and get it over with!

*They move off.*

- Newseller2 Daily Mirror. read all about it. Germany invades Poland. War imminent. Blackout enforced.

*From off stage comes the cry.*

- Warden Oi! Turn those lights out!

*There is a blackout on stage. A flashlight flashes across the stage.*

- Warden You kids. Get off home. Clear the streets.

*The children leave the stage. As they do so the light comes up on Helen.*

- Helen September 1st, 1939. The day Hitler invaded Poland. I'll always remember that day. On that day I became involved in the biggest mass movement of civilians ever to take place in this country. The plans had been made for years but I didn't know anything about them until that day. All the decisions were made by the officials of course.

*Lights down on Helen. She exits. Lights up on the two officials either side of the stage.*

- Official 1 The need for evacuation was first discussed in 1924.
- Official 2 By the end of the first world war in 1918, there had been 103 air-raids on Britain causing 1,400 deaths.
- Official 1 Evidence suggested that with advances in the design of aircraft the role of bombing in any future conflict would be considerable.

- Official 2      Obvious targets would be areas of dense population and manufacturing centres. London would clearly be a primary target.
- Official 1      In the event of war, such areas would need to be cleared of superfluous civilians whose presence would merely hinder the war effort. Children, pregnant women and the blind were identified as falling into this category.
- Official 2      We expressed concern at the time that some of the small children who come from London would not be the kind of children that would be welcomed too ardently, even by patriotic householders.
- Official 1      Through the 1930's we continued to develop our strategies. In 1933 we made the plans for an evacuation known to the public for the first time.
- Official 2      We decided that evacuation would take place prior to the outbreak of war. Our proposals indicated that we would move some three to four million people within the scheduled time limit of 72 hours.
- Official 1      Relying almost totally on the railways of course.
- Official 2      As the crisis worsened we divided the country up into danger, neutral and reception areas.
- Official 1      Children would be evacuated from the danger areas and moved to billets in their reception areas. Where possible schools would be kept together and the children would be accompanied by their teachers.
- Official 2      Children under five would be accompanied by their mothers.
- Official 1      In June 1939 war was felt to be likely. Messages were broadcast on the radio recalling children and their teachers to school.
- Official 2      To avoid panic, regular evacuation practices held.
- Official 1      On September 1st, 1939, His Majesty's government delivered an ultimatum to Hitler.
- Official 2      With war now inevitable the plans for evacuation were put into operation.

*The lights dim and the two officials exit. As they do so the school children, carrying assorted suitcases, bags and boxes, enter and move into position.*

### **Scene Two: Evacuation.**

*The East End school children sit to one side of the acting area and the North London children are on the other. When one group is "on" the other is frozen.*

- Carol            'ere, 'ow many times 'ave we done this now?
- Claire           Dunno.
- Carol            It must be at least three times this week.
- Fay                Four! We did it twice on Tuesday.

Carol Oh yeah.

Claire Waste of time if you ask me. We never go anywhere.

Kittie I know, it's stupid in'it. I've said goodbye to my mum every day this week thinking that I would be evacuated.

Asha Yeah, my mum made a real fuss on Monday. She was crying an' everything. Today she said "Ta ra then" and just got on with me dad's breakfast.

Audrey Last night when I got in my mum just said "Oh you're still 'ere then are ya" and sent me off to get some chips.

Gas Mask I reckon my mum'll be glad when I've gone.

*Pause*

Carol Do you reckon there really will be a war?

*Freeze. Action switches to the North London Group.*

Helen Daddy says that if Hitler invades Poland there is bound to be a war. He says that Chamberlain will have no choice.

Sarah But Miss said that everything would be alright.

Pamela Well she has to say that doesn't she. She's just trying to keep our spirits up.

Shiela She's not doing a very good job then. She always seems terrified when we go down to the station.

Pamela Well you know why that is don't you.

Shiela She doesn't want to get blown up?

Pamela No silly. How can she get blown up. She'll be going into the country with us to avoid the bombing.

Helen What's she worried about then?

Pamela Well, her boyfriend is in the RAF. She'll have to leave him behind.

Sarah Miss has got a boyfriend! How do you know?

Pamela I saw them kissing when we went to the station on Wednesday. He drove up in a little sports car - I think she telephoned him. They went into a little room by the ticket office and they thought no-one could see.

Veronica Are you sure it was her boyfriend. Couldn't it have been her brother.

Pamela Not by the way they were kissing!

*They all giggle.*

Veronica How were they kissing then.

Pamela You know...

Veronica No.

Helen Was it like this?

*She turns her back to the audience and wraps her arms round her back to make it look like she is in embrace.*

Oh my darling, How can I live without you. The minutes will seem like hours with you gone. Mmmmm... .

*They all giggle.*

Pamela A bit like that yes.

Veronica Miss was doing that! But she's a teacher.

Helen A teacher and (with emphasis) a woman!

Sarah It's disgusting. She's really old. Thirty at least.

Shiela What was he like.

Pamela Actually he was scrumptious. He looked really handsome in his uniform. He was an officer. He had a little moustache like Clarke Gable.

Helen Clarke Gable! Aaaahh! (She swoons into the arms of one of the girls)

*Freeze. Back to the East End group.*

Peter Spitfires are best.

Robert No they're not Hurricanes are better.

Peter Don't be daft. Spitfires are miles quicker.

Robert 'Ow do you know.

Peter My dad told me.

Robert 'Ow does he know!

Peter He just does.

Fay Shut up you two.

Vicky I hope we don't 'ave to wait much longer. This is boring.

Kittie It's better than doing sums. They're too hard.

Fay We haven't had to wait this long before.

Asha Perhaps they're really going to evacuate us this time.

Vicky            You really think so? I was going to have fish and chips tonight.

Fay                I've already eaten my sandwiches.

Vicky            They don't have fish and chips in the country.

Audrey          They don't have anything in the country - just trees and animals.

Peter            We won't go today. They haven't even declared war yet.

Robert          My dad says "the sooner, the better. It's about time we gave Hitler a bloody nose"

Peter            My dad could give Hitler a bloody nose on his own.

Robert          My dad could duff him up good and proper.

Fay                He's only little though.

Robert          No he isn't he's huge.

Fay                But I saw him on the newsreel at the cinema. He didn't look very big.

Robert          You saw my dad on the newsreel!

Fay                No not your dad - Hitler!

Robert          Oh yeah - Hitler's a little squirt. I could duff him up.

Peter            Couldn't.

Robert          Could.

Peter            Couldn't.

Robert          Cou... 'ere what's that smell?

Vicky            Eeurghh.

Kittie            Oh no, it's Gas Mask - he's farted.

Gas Mask        Sorry!

Peter            Blimey, that's horrible even by your standards Gas Mask.

Fay                They should parachute Gas Mask into Germany. The Nazi's would surrender overnight!

Audrey          Hang on - one of the teachers is coming. It must be our turn now.

*Freeze. Change to North London group.*

Sarah            I wonder how Hilary and Sally are getting on.

Shiela            Do you know where they've gone?

Sarah            They're staying with an aunt somewhere in Sussex I think.

Veronica        I wish I was going to stay with someone I knew. It's horrible not knowing.

Ruth             We could end up anywhere - with anybody.

Shiela            We might get to stay in some huge old mansion.

Ruth             With a creepy butler and millions of ghosts!

Shiela            Don't.

Sarah            At least the whole school will go to the same area. We'll still see each other.

Veronica        Without Hilary we'll be short in the lacrosse team.

Lucy             I don't think we'll be playing lacrosse for a while.

Helen            My Father says that if there is a war that it will be over by Christmas. Hitler is like any bully - once someone stands up to him he'll just run away with his tail between his legs.

Lucy             I hope you're right.

*A boy enters the scene.*

Michael        Hallo Sis. Have you got your stuff ready?

Veronica        Michael! What are you doing here?

Michael        One of my masters dropped me at the gates. He said that the only way we could be sure of being together was by my coming over.

Veronica        You mean we're really going this time?

Michael        That's what my Master said. He said mother had asked him to make sure we stayed together. My school has already gone to the station. They won't tell anybody where the trains are going you see.

Ruth             There are trains at the station!

Michael        Yes. Some have already left. He thinks we should all be going to the same place but he can't be sure. Most of the boys with sisters in this school have come across here aswell.

Pamela         Then it's really happening. We're being evacuated! Gosh, what a lark.

Helen            A real adventure. Wizard.

Pamela         A hol in the country - without parents.

*A girl enters.*

Girl            Come on you lot. Miss says you're to get all your belongings together and assemble outside. We're about to march down to the station. There are quite a few parents at the gates waiting to see people. The headmistress is giving out little flags for us to wave!

*They all bustle about putting their things together. A girl enters.*

June            Katherine, Katherine.

Helen           June, what are you doing? You should be with your class.

June            But they say we're really going Katherine, I'm frightened.

Helen           Look June, don't worry. I'll make sure we stick together, just like mummy and daddy said.

June            I want mummy. Will she be at the station?

Helen           I don't know. I'm sure she will be if she can.

June            Is Hitler going to drop bombs on us?

Helen           No, of course not. The grown ups will sort him out, you see.

June            Can't I walk with you to the station. I don't want to get lost.

Helen           I'll ask Miss. It will probably be alright. Be brave June. We'll be fine.

Pamela        Come on you lot, let's go. (Begins singing) It's a long way to Tipperary, its...

*The song is taken up by the others as they gather up their things and exit. As they exit we become aware of the east-end children singing "Ten green Bottles". As the light comes up on them they are clearly bored.*

Barbera       I'm fed up of this. If nothing happens soon we'll have to start singing about a thousand green bottles, not ten.

Peter           (Singing over the top of the others) And if one stick of dynamite should accidentally fall, there'll be no bloomin' dynamite and no bloomin' wall.

*As this is said the teacher enters.*

Teacher        That will be quite enough of that, thankyou.

Peter           Sorry miss.

Teacher        Now come along children. It's time to go. Pick up your things and make sure you don't leave anything behind.

Fay             Do we really have to cart our cases down to the station Miss? This thing's so heavy that me arms nearly drop off.

Teacher        You certainly will. Now listen children. Today when we go to the station there will be a train waiting to take us to the countryside.

Vicky Really miss? We really goin'?

Teacher Yes, we're really going. Now I want you all to hurry up. We will form a crocodile and march out with our heads held high.

*The children form a line of pairs, all rather struggling with their burdens.*

Teacher Right. Forward march.

*She goes out followed by the somewhat ragged column of children.*

### **Scene Three: At the Station**

*The sound of train whistles, engines letting off steam, carriages shunting etc are heard. Smoke is in the air. In the following scene the Evacuees enter one or two at a time. Some freeze into position, others have lines to say before they too freeze to form the "waving goodbye" photograph.*

Pamela I thought it was great at the station. Really exciting. The platforms were packed with children and there were soldiers there too. There was noise everywhere. A little brass band was playing in the station entrance.

Sarah I was trying to see my mum. The children were on the platform and all the parents were on the other side of a barrier. I couldn't see her anywhere.

Peter The box I had me stuff in split on the way to the station. I was too busy trying to keep hold of everything to worry!

Carol It was horrible - all noise and steam. I didn't know what was going on really. I was too young to understand. I hadn't seen my mum at all. I thought I must have done something wrong.

Vicky I just hugged my teddy bear. It reminded me of home I suppose. Right then, it seemed the most important thing in my whole life - if I held on to my teddy I would be all right.

Shiela I'd seen my mum and dad and said goodbye. I felt like crying but I wouldn't let myself. I thought that if I cried Hitler would win!

Edward I felt really proud. It was like I was part of a huge machine that was beginning to turn and this machine would crush Hitler and the Nazi's. Loads of kids were in tears but I didn't feel like crying - I wanted to cheer!

Robert I couldn't understand why mum was crying. She'd given me a bucket and spade - I thought I must be going on holiday and she was crying because she couldn't go!

Barbera I could still see mum. She was crying and waving - most of the mums were doing the same. She kept telling me to be good and not eat all me sandwiches at once.

Ruth Mummy came on to the platform to see me off but daddy didn't. He said he had to go back to work. I thought he was horrible and just didn't care. Years later I found out he hadn't gone to work - he just didn't want me to see him cry. He didn't want me to worry.

Veronica It was only then, as I was waving to my parents that I truly realised what it was all about. There was going to be a war and I was being sent somewhere safe. that meant my mum and dad would be in danger. Bombs were going to drop on them. I might never see them again. Suddenly I didn't want to go anywhere without them.

Gas Mask I didn't care really. Where ever I went, it couldn't be worse than home. Dad was in the merchant navy - mum was dead. I stayed with an auntie most of the time, and she didn't like me. I just didn't care.

Helen I was too busy looking after June to worry for long about me. She was terribly upset. The last thing mum said to me before we left was "Look after June. Make sure you don't get separated". It made me feel grown up.

Jill When we walked to the station I looked at all the houses. I wondered if they would still be there when I got back. Funny, I didn't think about people at all.

*Everyone now freezes into position and we see the complete photograph.*

Guard (Off) All aboard.

*The scene now comes to life. Children wave, cry, cheer, hug each other etc.*

Guard (Off) All aboard!

*The guard continues to call, whistles blow, sound of trains. In the background the sound of singing "We'll meet again". The children now begin to exit as if boarding the train. Vicky with her teddy bear looks lost and bewildered. She moves stage centre holding the bear an ear. She sobs. Carol runs on in the background.*

Carol Come on then!

*She grabs the smaller girl by the arm and rushes off. The singing increases. The sound of whistles and a train pulling out of the station.*

#### **Scene Four: In the Country**

*Sounds of the country side are heard. Two girls enter.*

Jemima This is awful. Are we really going to have to go to the village school?

Penny It will only be for a little while. Daddy is going to try to get us into the nearest grammar school.

Jemima But that's about ten miles away. How will we get there?

Penny I don't know. Perhaps daddy will drive us.

Jemima But Daddy said he would have to spend more time in London because of the crisis.

Penny He'll sort something out.

Jemima It's not fair. I hate Hitler. I was going to get into the first team for Hockey this term. Miss Sanders said I would.

Penny            You would look funny running round the Hockey pitch with great big tanks all over the place.

Jemima         Tanks? Is that what they've taken over the school for? Tanks!

Penny            I think so. I heard daddy talking to mummy about it.

Jemima         I thought it was all supposed to be a secret! The germans will probably bomb the school and we'll never go back.

*A group of children enter.*

Dorothy         Hello, you two. Haven't you gone back to school yet?

Penny            We're not going. The school's closed. It's been taken over by the army.

Mary            How long for?

Jemima         The duration of the crisis!

Mary            Shouldn't be long then. My dad says that when we get over there we'll soon have the germans on the run.

John            I keep on telling you, there won't be a war. Hitler will back down.

Penny            Where are you all going, anyway.

Dorothy         School.

Penny            School! But it's saturday.

Mary            I know. We got a message last night. The vicar came round with some woman.

Sally            Mrs Bishop, she was called. I heard 'im say.

Jemima         I say, the vicar is going round with a bishop!

John            That's the third time I've heard that joke this morning. And it wasn't funny the first time.

Jemima         I thought it was quite quite good. What are you going to school for anyway?

Sally            It's to do with them refugees.

Penny            What refugees?

Dorothy         Not refugees. Vacuees. You know townees.

*Another group of children enter.*

Pauline         Come on you lot. The vicar and Mrs Bishop have just told us that they expect the first ones in about an hour.

Liz              They want as many locals there as they can to help welcome them.

Mary But I don't want to welcome them. I don't want hundreds of townee kids in the village.

Penny You mean we're going to have hoards of slum children here!

Jemima Where are they going to stay though.

John That's what the vicar was sorting out. That Mrs Bishop, she was the ... what did she say her job was?

Pauline Billeting officer. The city kids will be staying with local families. She just marched into our house and said we had a spare room that would take three of 'em. My dad said 'e'd only take one though. He says he wants a lad to help out on the farm now that our Jack's been called up.

Mary You'll probably have to have loads of 'em with all the space that you've got.

Penny I can't stand it. First they close my school and then they fill up my house with filthy urchins from slums.

Dorothy You don't know they're from slums. Some of them will be alright. Anyway, it's not their fault is it.

Sally I don't see why they have to come 'ere though.

Dorothy Well they think that when the war begins that Hitler will bomb all the cities. It's so they'll be safe.

Liz But if they move the kids to the country then Hitler will bomb here!

John Don't be stupid. They're bombing the buildings, not the people!

Jemima They wouldn't bomb here though, would they?

Betty Of course not. There's nothing here to bomb is there!

Pauline What do you think they'll be like - these townees?

Penny Filthy and common, I expect.

Sally Just like me then!

*The children giggle. the girls do not.*

Penny When daddy takes us to London, he won't let us go anywhere near the east-end. He says its a frightful place

John It must be strange to live in the city. Our teacher told us that some children from cities have never seen a tree!

Sally Go on - they must have. They have trees in London surely.

Pauline I can tell you one thing - I certainly wouldn't like to have to leave home just like that. Stuck on a train and whisked off to goodness knows where. And all on their own too, some of them. I bet some are really frightened.

Betty I dunno - they'll probably be glad to get away from where they live some of 'em. It'll be like a holiday for 'em.

Sally For them perhaps - not for us. I don't want to have to share my house with a stranger.

Liz Nor me.

Mary Me neither.

*Anne enters in the background. She is noticed by the others and "fetched" across.*

John Hello Annie. Where you been?

Sally Yeah, why haven't you been at school this week?

Anne It's my mum. She's been ill again. I'm having to stay at home to see to things.

Betty You're always at home these days. You never come out.

Anne My dad don't like me goin' out.

Betty But what about school? I thought you were studying for those exams to go to grammar school.

Jemima But how could Annie afford to go?

Sally They thought she might get a scholarship or summat like that - didn't they Annie.

Anne Miss thought I had a chance. Not that it matters any more. Dad says I've got to stay at home and help work the farm. He thinks there's no point in learnin'.

Pauline You comin' to see the vacuees?

Anne What vacuees?

Liz Aven't you heard about all them Londoners coming here.

Mary The invading hoardes!

Anne Oh that. Dad says that we can't have any.

Betty He can't stop them. If you've got the room, you've got to have them.

Pauline You're not allowed to turn them away.

Anne Oh well, it's not up to me. I've got to go,

*She leaves and another girl goes with her to "have a chat".*

Betty We'd best be going too. We don't want to miss them arriving.

Sally I wouldn't like to be a kid who got stuck down at Annie's place. You know what 'er dad's like.

*Knowing nods and murmurs from the rest.*

John            Come on then. Let's go.

*They begin to leave except for the two girls.*

Mary            Are you two comin'?

Jemima        I should think not. I'll put off having to meet these "vacuees" for as long as I can thank you.

*The two girls exit in the opposite direction.*

### **Scene five: En route**

*The teacher enters at the head of the column of children. They are clearly tired and struggling with their burdens. They freeze in position, a single spotlight shines on the teacher.*

Teacher        The train journey was horrendous. Around London it was a neverending series of stops and starts. We seemed to just be shunting to and fro - never actually getting anywhere. School parties got hopelessly mixed up. I ended up looking after my children and a party of East-end kids. Poor little mites.

Once we got out of London things got worse. The carriages didn't have corridors so no toilet facilities. The older one's usually lasted till we stopped at a station but some of the little ones just couldn't help themselves. Twelve hours it took us. It was dark when we stopped. The bus had gone. We had to stay the night sleeping on the floor of the waiting room. Most of the children slept though - they were exhausted.

In the morning one of the girls - Helen - told me her sister hadn't got off the train last night. A lot of telephone calls later she was traced to the next station up the line. Arrangements were made to have her brought to Thresham village hall - which was where we were heading. No bus arrived, so we had to walk.

### **Scene six: Reception**

*A table stands to one side of the stage. On the table are two large plates of sandwiches. Around the table stand a group of the rural children, obviously waiting.*

Pauline        When are they goin' to get here then? We've been waitin' about two hours already.

Maureen      Mrs Bishop said they spent the night at the station. They didn't arrive till two in the mornin'.

Dorothy       If they don't hurry up these sandwiches will be all dried up.

Betty          I don't know about dried up - eaten up more likely. Leave them alone!

*She smacks the hand of child who is reaching to take another sandwich.*

John           Waste not, want not. Don't know why we have to feed 'em anyway.

Dorothy       Don't be mean. They'll be hungry. they've come a long way.

Pauline        *(Looking at the sandwiches, intending to take one)* Well what the eye don't see...

*Sally enters.*

Sally        They're here! They're here!

Maureen     Where? Outside?

Sally        No but they're coming down the hill. A line of them - walking.

John        What happened to their bus then?

Sally        Dunno. Someone ought to fetch Mrs Bishop.

Pauline     I'll go.

Maureen     What are they like then?

Sally        Couldn't tell really. Some big 'uns. Some little 'uns. They're all carrying stuff.

*Mrs Bishop and Pauline enter.*

Mrs Bishop   They've arrived then?

Sally        Should be here any minute now!

Mrs Bishop   Get yourselves ready then.

*The children move into formal greeting positions around the table.*

Mrs Bishop   Now remember. These children are a long way from home. Be nice and friendly. Give them a warm welcome. Smile!

*The children adopt fixed grins which disappear as soon as Mrs Bishop turns away. The teacher enters.*

Teacher     Hello. I do hope I've got the right place. Thresham village hall?

Mrs Bishop   That's right dear. I'm Mrs Bishop - the billeting officer. Are the children outside?

Teacher     Yes. Shall I bring them in? They'll be glad of the rest.

Mrs Bishop   I'm sure they will. Yes, wheel them in.

*Teacher heads off stage and calls*

Teacher     It's the right place everyone.

*A desultory cheer is heard off.*

Teacher     Come on in.

*The children enter. They are extremely tired. They come in and drop their burdens with some relief. Some slump to the floor - others remain wearily standing.*

EE1 Blimey - I couldn't have walked another step!

EE2 Me neither. It must have been miles and miles.

Helen It wasn't that far!

EE2 All that way and not a house in sight.

NL2 Isn't it beautiful round here. I thought it was a lovely walk.

Fay I've never seen so much green: green fields, hedges, trees - everything's green!

EE4 Do you reckon cows are dangerous?

EE5 Dunno.

EE4 I didn't like the way they were lookin' at me.

EE6 Weren't they big! I didn't know cows were so big. I wonder how they get the milk out?

Michael You put a bucket underneath and push the tail up and down. Then the milk squirts into the bucket!

EE6 Blimey!

*The North London children giggle. The teacher and Mrs Bishop are talking in the background. The rural children are working up the courage to say hello.*

Betty Go on then.

Dorothy Why me?

Betty Someone's got to.

Dorothy Why not you then?

Sally Oh for goodness sake - I'll do it.

*She boldly strides over to Edward.*

Sally Hello - my name's Sally. What are you called?

Edward My name's Edward. Pleased to meet you.

Sally Do they call you Ted?

Edward No!

*John has wandered across to another evacuee.*

John Alright?

EE4 Yeah.

Dorothy        Would you like a sandwich?

EE7            What? Free you mean?

Dorothy        Yes, of course.

EE7            Great I'm starvin'.

*He takes a sandwich.*

EE8            Did you 'ear that? Free sarnies!

*All the East end children race to the table. What sandwiches they cannot eat or hold they stuff in their pockets. Everyone else looks on amazed. The sandwiches disappear in seconds and the children return to their places.*

Mrs Bishop    Goodness me. Healthy appetites!

Teacher        Yes. They haven't eaten much since yesterday.

Mrs Bishop    Perhaps we could whisk up some more. Girls go into the kitchen and see if you can make up a few more sandwiches.

Betty          Yes, Mrs Bishop.

*She exits with Pauline.*

John          Did you see that!

Dorothy        Their manners you mean. My dad'd kill me if I snatched food like that.

John          Like a load of pigs at the trough!

Maureen       Some of them smelt like it as well.

Dorothy        I'm not sure mum will like having any of them to stay.

*Mrs Bishop steps forward.*

Mrs Bishop    Now could I have your attention please? I know that many of you are tired but could you all assemble into a line please.

*The children do so.*

Mrs Bishop    In a little while people will be arriving to take you away with them. These are the people you will be staying with so I hope you will try to make a good impression on them.

Dorothy        Mrs Bishop, mum and dad said it was alright for me to choose which ones we had.

Mrs Bishop    Well go ahead then dear.

Edward        I feel like I'm on sale!

Michael It's like picking teams at school. I wonder who will be last?

Dorothy Mum said we could have two girls - about my age.

Mrs Bishop Right oh.

*Dorothy goes over to two of the North London girls and begins to talk to them. The Vicar enters.*

Vicar Ah Mrs Bishop. I see our visitors have arrived. How are things going?

Mrs Bishop Ooh, it shouldn't be long before we have everything sorted out.

Vicar Good. How are they all?

Mrs Bishop Rather tired and hungry most of them.

Vicar From the look of some of them a diet of country air should do them some good.

Mrs Bishop You're right there. I think we might have problems placing one or two though.

*Dorothy goes to Mrs Bishop.*

Dorothy Right, I've sorted it out. I'm having ..... ..

Mrs Bishop (Ticking off the names) Well you'd best take them off home with you dear.

Dorothy Come on then you two.

Vicar Ah, I do believe I can see some of the locals arriving.

Mrs Bishop Right, stand up straight everyone.

*The children do so. The lighting changes. We do not see the adults doing the selecting. Instead a spotlight tracks over the waiting evacuees. We only hear the voices of the "selectors".*

Mvoice I'm looking for a decent sized lad to help out on the farm. You'll do.

Michael I can't be separated from my sister.

Mvoice S'alright. We'll 'ave 'er too. Always lots to be done on a farm.

*Michael and his sister pickup their bags and leave.*

Fvoice What about you m'dear.

Helen I can't go yet. I'm waiting for my sister.

Fvoice Never mind. I'll take you then.

*Another NL girl leaves.*

UCFvoice Now I would like two girls to keep my two daughters busy. Their school has been closed so a little companionship should do them good up at the hall. Now then, who plays Hockey?

*Two hands go up.*

UCFvoice      Right, I'll have you and you. Take your bags to the car outside. Baker will look after you.

*Two girls go. The vicar takes two of the Eastend children.*

Mvoice        I want a lad to take our Jack's place and the Missus says we can 'ave two girls an' all.

*Edward and two girls go.*

Fvoice        And what's your name?

Gas Mask     Gas Mask. I mean Eric.

Fvoice        Oh, well I think I'll take these two.

*Peter and Robert leave.*

Fvoice        Goodness - that child smelled awful. Don't they have baths in London!

Voice        I'll have that one.

Voice        I can take two.

Voice        No, not you - I can only have girls.

Voice        Ah - now you two are sweet aren't you. Come along with me dears.

Voice        You'll do.

Voice        No not you, the one behind you.

Voice        I've got room for two.

Voice        Come along with me then.

Voice        It's a bit of a walk I'm afraid.

Voice        I've got to have three but I don't want no troublesome ones.

Voice        Might as well have you two as any.

*During all this the stage gradually empties as children leave. The rural children leave also. Gas mask, Helen and another girl are left.*

Fvoice        Ah goodness, there's not many left. Now then dear I've only room for one. Would you like to live with me?

Helen        I'm sorry. I'm still waiting for my sister.

Fvoice        Are you sure? I've a lovely little cottage.

Helen        I've got to wait.

Fvoice        Never mind. What about you then?

*The other girl nods and leaves.*

Mrs Bishop    Well just you two left. I'll go and see if anyone else is coming.

*She exits. There is a pause.*

Helen        What's your name?

Gas Mask    They call me Gas Mask.

Helen        Is that your nick-name?

Gas Mask    Yeah. It's because I smell.

Helen        What's your real name?

Gas Mask    Eric.

Helen        Not much fun this is it Eric.

Gas Mask    No. Don't think anyone would want me. If I was them I wouldn't want me either.

Helen        Oh, I'm sure that...

*She is interrupted as June rushes in.*

June        Helen. Helen.

Helen        June, where have you been?

*She hugs June.*

June        I thought I would never see you again.

Helen        What happened?

June        Miss forgot to put me off with you. She was asleep. It's been horrible Helen.

Helen        Well, never mind. You're here now and that's what matters.

### **Scene seven: Billeted!**

*Helen and June stand together. Gas Mask stands slightly apart from them.*

June        Oh Helen, I'm sorry. I've really messed things up!

Helen        Don't be silly June, it's not your fault. The teachers should have sorted it out.

June        I was really frightened Helen. I thought I wouldn't see you or mum and dad again.

Helen Well you're fine now. There hasn't been any body in to look us over for a while though. I hope we can get somewhere.

June If we don't will they send us back to London.

Helen I shouldn't think so.

Gas Mask I hope we don't get sent back - nobody wants me there either.

Helen Don't be like that Gas Mask - someone is bound to want you.

Gas Mask I don't think so. Nobody chose you because you were waiting for your sister. I've got no excuse - they just didn't like the look of me. Still can't blame 'em I suppose.

Helen Come on. Chin up!

June That's not your real name is it - Gas Mask?

Gas Mask No 'course it isn't. Me real name's Eric.

Helen Well, it's nice to meet you Eric.

June *(Aside to Helen)* He whiffs a bit doesn't he!

Helen That's why they call him Gas Mask. Hang on, someone's coming.

*Mrs Bishop enters.*

Mrs Bishop Right, well it's just you three left. It doesn't look as though anyone else is going to be coming along so we're going to have to take you to a billet. According to my records there are two rooms at Mrs Holden's place. She'll be able to put you up. Gather your things together and we'll be on our way.

Gas Mask Is it far?

Mrs Bishop No, just on the edge of the village.

Gas Mask Good.

Mrs Bishop Right, Come along now.

*The lights fade briefly. As they do so Anne enters. She is wearing an apron and carrying a tea-towel.*

Anne But Mrs Bishop, I keep on telling you - me dad says we weren't to have any vacuees.

Mrs Bishop It was stated quite clearly on the papers we sent my dear that you have no choice in the matter. You have two spare bedrooms so you can easily take these three. We could make you take more, you know!

Helen We don't want to be any trouble.

Mrs Bishop Don't you worry dear, we'll soon have this sorted out. There is a national emergency Annie. We all have to do our bit.

Anne But my dad said no. I've got my mum ill upstairs you know.

Mrs Bishop Then I should think you would be glad of the help.

Gas Mask I hope it's nothing catching.

Mrs Bishop I'm sure that when your mother's well again, everything will be fine.

Anne The doctor says mum ain't going to get well.

Mrs Bishop I'm sorry to hear that Annie. But this has got to be done. Now I've got work to do.

Anne But you're not going?

Mrs Bishop Of course I am. I've got to do the rounds and see that everyone is nicely settled in.

Anne But you must wait and see dad for me.

Mrs Bishop I'm sorry Annie, I can't. I'll pop back tomorrow and talk to him. (To the others) Now you three be good. I hope I'll see you in church tomorrow morning. Bye now.

*She leaves.*

Gas Mask Church! Blimey.

*There is an awkward silence.*

Helen I'm awfully sorry - we don't mean to be a nuisance.

Anne I know it's not your fault. I told him we had to have vacuees. He never listens though.

Helen I'm Helen, this is my sister June and this is Ga... Eric.

Gas Mask &  
June Hello

Anne Hello. I'm Anne. Well I suppose I had better show you to your rooms. The beds haven't been aired or anything.

Helen Not to worry.

Anne I can sort you out some sheets and blankets though.

Helen That will be fine.

Anne But just one thing. When my dad gets back don't do any thing to upset him.

Helen We won't.

Anne He's easily annoyed you see. Come on then.

*She goes off leading the others As they follow June turns to Helen.*

June           Helen, I don't like it here.

Helen           Don't worry. We'll be alright.

*She takes June's hand and leads her off. Shortly after they have left Mr Holden and Arthur enter.*

Mr Holden     We should have that field finished by the end of tomorrow with a bit of luck.

Arthur         Yes dad, so long as the tractor keeps going.

Mr Holden     That damned heap of rubbish. That's the last time I hire anything off that idiot Jones.

Arthur         'ere what's all this? (Indicating the bags and cases)

Mr Holden     Don't ask me. Something that sister of yours is up to. (Shouting) Annie! Annie where are you? Come and get this rubbish shifted. Have you put me tea on yet? Annie? Where is the damned girl?

*Anne enters.*

Anne           Hello dad.

Mr Holden     Don't hello me. Get this lot out of the way and get our tea sorted.

Arthur         Some of us have been workin' all day you know!

Anne           Did you see Mrs Bishop on the way in?

Mr Holden     Will you hold your silly questions and get on.

Anne           But dad.

Mr Holden     Clear this mess away now!

*Helen, June and Gas Mask enter.*

Mr Holden     And what are these doin' ere. I've told you not have anyone round.

Anne           They're vacuees dad. They've been billeted here.

Helen          Hello Mr Holden. Nice to meet you.

June           Hello.

Gas Mask      Hello.

Mr Holden     (Ignoring them) What did I tell you about vacuees.

Anne           It wasn't my fault. Mrs Bishop said...

Arthur         Can't you do anything right Annie!

Mr Holden     I told you not to let any of 'em in. And what do I find - three of 'em. Three!

Anne           Dad I...

Mr Holden     *(Grabbing her wrist)* How we goin' to feed 'em eh! Tell me that.

Anne           We get money for 'em dad. Mrs Bishop said. You're hurtin'

Mr Holden     More mouths to feed. Useless townee kids cluttering up the place. You stupid, stupid girl.

Anne           Dad!

Mr Holden     I can't trust you to do nothing! *(He throws her from him and she falls to the floor)*

Anne           I'm sorry dad.

Mr Holden     Just shut up. Get this stuff out of my sight.

*He exits*

Arthur         Looks like you made the usual mess of things doesn't it.

Anne           It's not fair. It's not my fault.

Arthur         You should know better by now. *(He surveys the others and stares at Gas Mask)*  
Boo!

*As Gas Mask jumps, Arthur exits.*

June           Helen, I don't like it here. Take me home!

Gas Mask      Can I come with you?

Helen          Lets take our things upstairs. Are you alright Anne?

Anne           Yes, yes. I'm fine. It's nothing. He doesn't really mean it you know. He'll soon get used to you.

*They gather the things together and exit as the lights fade.*

### **Scene eight: Sunday, 3rd September.**

*Helen reappears stage centre.*

Helen          It was an old rambling farmhouse - just the place for a holiday. Only this wasn't a holiday - we were going to be living here. I was really angry with June. If she had got off at the right station, we might have been placed somewhere better - where we were wanted at least.

Of course I didn't tell her that. I was responsible for her. She held on to my hand just like she held on to mum's when we went shopping. I was twelve years old and trying to act like a grown up but inside I wanted a hand to hold onto aswell. June cried herself to sleep that night.

Gas Mask? Funny kid. He smelt dreadful. Can't imagine when he last had a bath. He just seemed to accept everything that happened as if it was normal.

Next morning we went to church. We met lots of the other evacuees as well. They all had stories tell about where they were staying.

*Other Evacuees and some of the rural characters come stage.*

- Pamela It's great. We're staying up at the hall. It's wonderful. Huge gardens. They've got a tennis court and a swimming pool. The two girls there are great fun. They've said that we can all go riding together.
- Claire The lady I'm staying with is really nice. She gave me some boiled sweets and put a hot water bottle in my bed. I like her.
- Edward I don't think it's fair. I had to get up at six o'clock this morning to help see to the cows. They say I've got to do it every day. I don't know anything about cows.
- Fay Well, it's alright I suppose. They gave us some dinner and I started to eat it but they were all quiet. Then I realised they were prayin'! They told me it was sinful to eat without thankin' God first. I had to join in. They say I've got to come to church every Sunday an' all.
- Gemma It was 'orrible. I woke up dead early an' there were these noises outside. I looked out the window of me room and these men were hitting a big pig with sticks. It was squealin' like anythin'. I asked Mrs Higgins why they were doin' it and she said it was 'cause the pig was gonna be slaughtered and it improved the colour of the meat. I didn't eat the bacon she gave me for breakfast.
- Lucy The country side is lovely. The people who I'm staying with are very kind. They have a goat and some ducks. They say I can feed the ducks in the mornings.
- Audrey It's borin' and it smells funny round here. I wanna' go back 'ome. I'd rather have bombs dropping on me 'ed than be 'ere. I wanna go back to London.
- Michael It's alright I suppose. They don't call us evacuees though. They call us vackies or townees. The daughter of the people next door is called Sally. I caught her looking at me. I think it could be fun staying in the country after all.

*The gathered children begin to sing a hymn. As they do so, the vicar enters.*

- Vicar Today is a special day. Today we welcome into our small community many adults and children who recently arrived from London and other distant cities. It is unfortunate that our visitors arrive under the shadow of approaching war rather than in times of peace. Indeed it is that threat of war that has necessitated their presence amongst us.

I am confident that all members of our community will understand the sadness and upset caused to the children in particular, many of whom have been separated from their parents for the first time in their lives. It must indeed be a strange and discomfoting experience to set off to school in the morning and then a few hours later find yourself hundreds of miles away from home, surrounded by the faces of strangers, wondering when parents, home and friends will be seen again.

Let us hope, therefore, that all the Evacuees will be made to feel welcome and loved. For we must show the evil forces that are intent upon sweeping Europe that their threats to us will only succeed in binding us together even more strongly.

The presence of the evacuees amongst us is indeed a coming together of town and country - almost of two different cultures. I hope we will respect our differences and celebrate what we have in common. In this time of crisis tolerance and understanding will indeed be two very great virtues.

I am sure that all the residents of our community will do all they can to make our visitors feel welcome and at home. And let us pray that even at this late hour decency and honour may yet prevail and that war may be averted thus allowing our visitors to return in confidence to the security of their own families and homes.

If, however, our destiny lies along the path of war and confrontation let us be assured that we are in the right and that with the indomitable spirit of the British people and God's help we will surely emerge victorious.

Let us pray...

*The children bow their heads. The radio at the back of the stage is illuminated. We hear Chamberlain's broadcast to the nation announcing that Britain is at war with Germany. A siren sounds. The lights fade.*

**End of Act I**