

The great house which Lenny had come to was very old. It had countless rooms. Lady De Vass, who owned the place, lived in one part, Nanny in another. The army of servants who had once looked after the house and garden had now shrunk down to Mrs B. who cooked, Nelly who helped with the cleaning and washing up, and an old gardener called Bill Penny.

The evacuees had their breakfast in a kitchen as big as the synagogue Lenny went to at home. It was warm in there but Lenny was shy and miserable. Nelly smiled at him.

There was porridge with plenty of milk and thick slices of bread and marge. But Mrs B. was cross when Lenny would not eat the bacon she gave him.

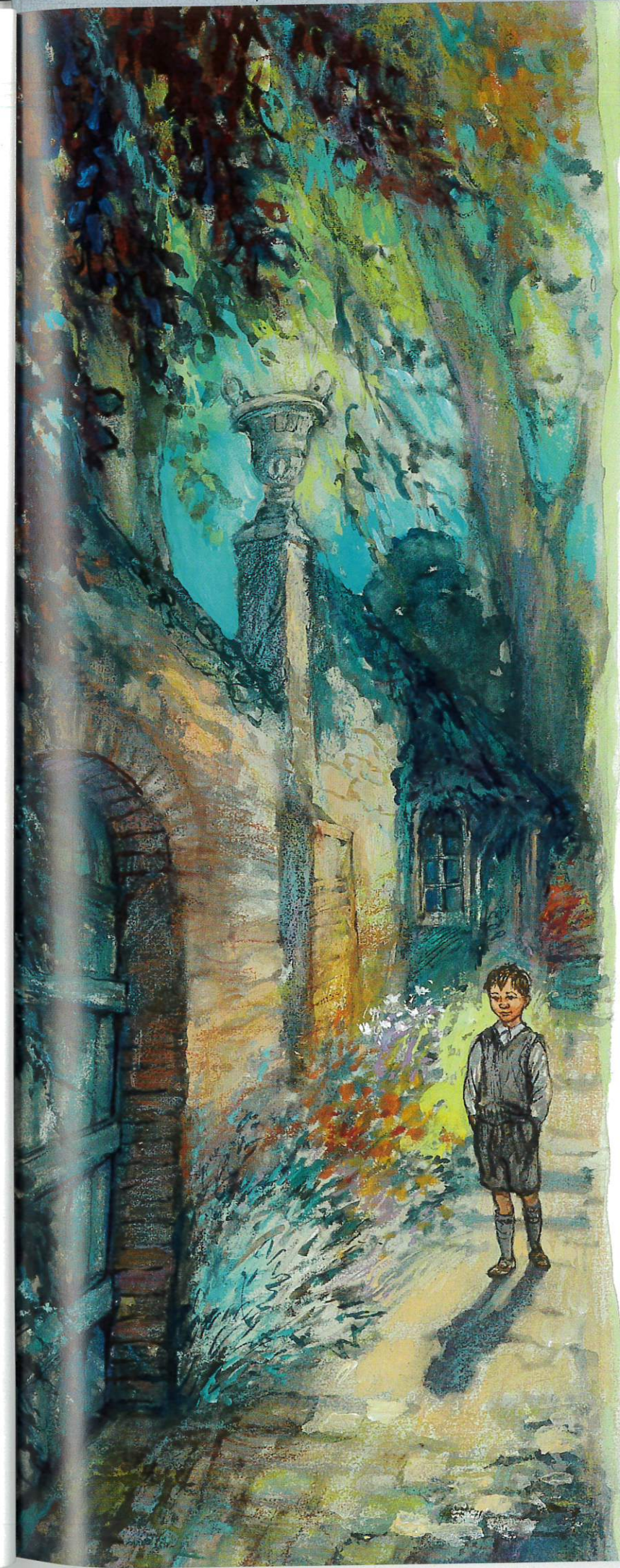
'There's good food wasted! I'll not have that!' she scolded.
'We don't eat bacon in our family,' said Lenny in a low voice.

Everyone stopped eating and stared at him. Joyce's eyes were as round and as hard as marbles. Even Winnie stopped grizzling. Lenny felt his ears turning pink. But he was stubborn. He thought of Mum and Dad and he still wouldn't eat the bacon. In the end Mrs B. gave in and told the children to take their dirty plates into the scullery and get out from under her feet.



The girls went off giggling, trailing Winnie after them. Lenny did not know what he was supposed to do so he wandered off into the yard, through a big gate and into the gardens.

He walked along paths with wide overgrown flowerbeds and peeped into long greenhouses. He found a goldfish pond like the one in the park at home but it was choked with weeds and the fish had gone.



There was a summerhouse half hidden in ivy and beyond it, set in a high stone wall, a wooden door.

It was not the door to somebody's house, Lenny knew that. It was a garden door. He remembered hearing somewhere about a secret garden that was locked up for years and years and nobody ever went in.

Cautiously he pushed the door. It creaked open.





Inside was a little garden, like a room without a roof. It had criss-cross mossy paths lined with knee-high hedges and stone seats. In the centre was a great rose bush with trailers which swept the ground.

It was very quiet in there. Then a bird flew up with a great clatter of wings and Lenny saw something on the far side of the garden, high up on a pedestal by the wall. At first he thought it was something alive and watching him. But it was too still to be alive. He went over to it.

It was a unicorn, carved in stone, just like the one on his badge. It did not look fierce. Strong, perhaps, and very beautiful, with its curved neck and long mane. Prancing there alone in the shadow of the wall it seemed as lonely as he was.

Lenny felt a huge relief to have found this place. It made him feel more like himself again. He made up his mind to come back there whenever he could.



On Monday morning the evacuees started at the village school. The children were not friendly. They looked at Lenny blankly as though he wasn't there. When the bell went for morning prayers Lenny had to stay alone in the classroom, sitting at a desk.

In the playground Joyce, Patsy and Winnie went off together. Lenny was not included in the boys' football game. He stood by the wall until it was time to go home, clutching Dad's badge in his pocket and pretending he didn't care.



On Saturday nights the evacuees had a bath and Nanny inspected their heads for nits. The bath was huge and had iron feet with claws like a lion. They were only allowed four inches of hot water (it was rationed, like almost everything else) and by the time it was Lenny's turn it wasn't even hot any more.



Joyce was Nanny's favourite. Nanny curled her hair for her and pressed her hair ribbons for church on Sunday. Joyce put on a special cute voice when she talked to grown-ups, but when the evacuees were on their own she was sharp-tongued and treacherous.



Lenny spent a lot of time wandering alone in the gardens where no one bothered him. One afternoon when he pushed open the door of the walled garden he found somebody else there. A young man with one leg was sitting on one of the stone benches. He was wearing an old tweed jacket with patched elbows. His empty trouser leg was pinned up and his crutches were propped neatly against the bench beside him.

'Hello there,' said the man. 'It's all right – I do live here. I was just trying to do a bit of weeding.'

'Are you Bill Penny's helper?' Lenny asked him.

'Sort of,' said the man. 'I used to shoot rabbits and pigeons when they got into his vegetable garden but I don't any more. This is one of my favourite places.'

Lenny hovered by the gate, not sure what to say next.

'My name's Mick,' the man continued. 'Don't let me having one leg bother you.'

'How did you lose it?' Lenny wanted to know.

'I left it on a beach in France,' the man told him. 'But I'll be getting a new one soon.'

'Will it be wooden?'

'No, light metal, I think. With joints.'

There was a friendly silence. Then Lenny remembered he was not to talk to strangers. He was not sure whether as this man lived here he counted as a stranger or not, but he thought he had better be on the safe side.

'I've got to go now,' he said.

Mick just waved.



On wet days Lenny sometimes followed Nelly about the house and they chatted while she dusted and polished.

In the great hall there was a suit of armour, swords hanging on the walls and pictures of battle scenes with soldiers in red coats. There was one full-length portrait of a very grand officer in splendid uniform.

'That's Lady De Vass's grandfather,' said Nelly. 'They've got a lot of soldiers in the family. Lady De Vass's husband was killed fighting in the First World War and her son's a war hero. He's got medals and all.'

'My dad's in the army,' Lenny told her.

'I'm joining up myself soon,' said Nelly. 'Women's Land Army.'





Lenny longed for Mum to come but she wrote to say that she would not visit 'until he had settled down'. She was working in a fireman's canteen. She was not a good writer and her letters were short. But she saved up her sweet ration and sent Lenny a bar of chocolate now and again.

Lenny saw Mick about the place sometimes, helping Bill Penny or Lady De Vass, but he never came into the kitchen for his meals.

'There's something been killing rabbits in my vegetable garden,' said Bill one afternoon when he was supping up his tea. 'Not that I mind,' he added, 'I'm glad of it.'

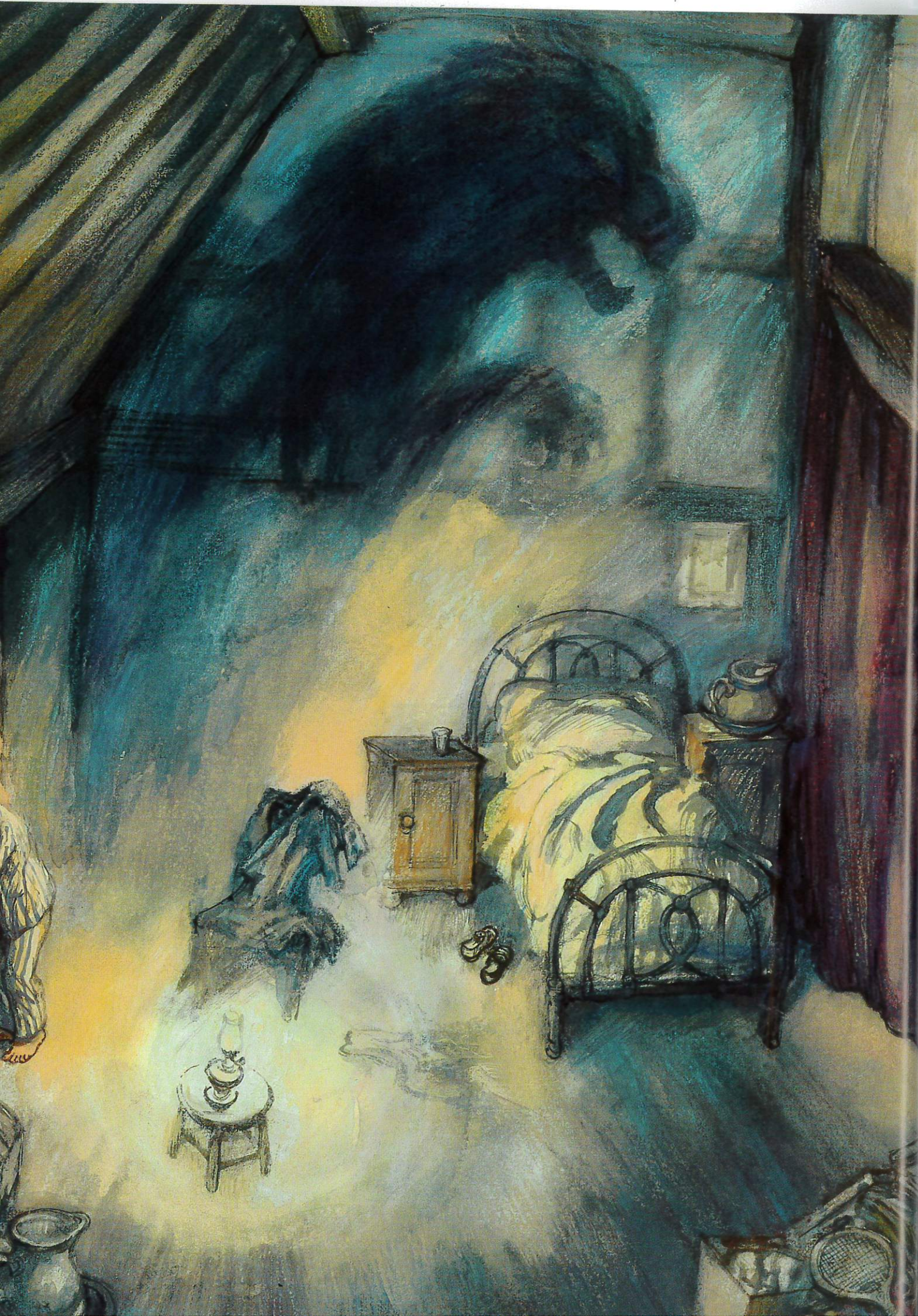
'A fox?' suggested Mrs B.

'No, it's never a fox. More like a big cat. It got some pigeons too.'

'It'll be one of those wild cats that's living in the barn,' said Mrs B. 'Very fierce, they are.'

'Or perhaps a lion escaped from the zoo,' said Joyce slyly, looking sideways at Lenny. 'Lions kill people. They wait in the dark and spring out at you and tear your stomach out.'





That night, long after the others had gone to sleep, Lenny lay awake, listening to the night noises outside. Far away in the dark he thought he heard a growling, purring sound, then a shriek of an animal in pain. He got up and peeped through the curtains. Was there something prowling about? A black shadow moving alongside the hedge?

He hurried back into bed and pulled the blankets over his head.

