When Olive and her little brother Cliff are taken to the cinema as a treat by their older sister Sukie they find themselves in the midst of an air-raid, and Sukie, last seen by Olive talking to a young man, has vanished. Olive escapes major injury but the siblings are promptly evacuated to Devon. At first they are billeted with their next-door neighbour’s sister Queenie, the local postmistress, but when Queenie takes in an angry and prickly young girl named Esther whom Olive had already had an altercation with on the train, Olive and Cliff find themselves staying with the enigmatic lighthouse keeper Ephraim instead. Cliff make instant friends with lighthouse keeper’s dog and Olive soon becomes an indispensable gopher delivering parcels to the villagers.

She is convinced something secretive is going on with the locals and that her sister must somehow be involved. When Olive discovers a coded message in the lining of her mother’s coat, last worn by Sukie, she is thrilled but can make neither head nor tail of the code.

This is a well-plotted mystery with plenty of intrigue and a satisfying ending. There is a lot packed in here as an underlying theme of prejudice is woven throughout; Esther turns out to be a Jewish refugee and when a German pilot’s plane crashes near the lighthouse it is Olive who stands up for the injured pilot as the villagers are too suspicious to help. By the end most of the village pull together to help a boatload of refugees. This is a heart-warming and affirming novel of the indomitableness of the human spirit and that compassion and family love can win through. The plight of the refugees is just as relevant today. Various differing points of view are aired but with subtlety and never over-cooked. In some ways Olive seems a little too knowing for her age but the characters are nevertheless believable and genuine. This is an excellent addition to the cannon of WW2 literature.

Source URL (retrieved on Dec '19): http://booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/225/childrens-books/reviews/letters-from-the-lighthouse

Links: