

George said his good-nights and left the church with the others.

Willie could hear their voices drifting away into the distance, singing "Hark the Herald" and laughing over something. He leaned on the organ.

"I'll play you somethin' I ent played in years," said Tom. "Don't know if I can remember it all. It were one of Rachel's favorites."

Willie rested his chin in his cupped hands and listened.

Unlike the jaunty tunes of the carols, these notes were long and lingering. They throbbed and shook the frame of the organ, sometimes dying to the gentlest and saddest of sounds, only to crescendo and fall again. Willie had never heard anything so beautiful. As Tom lifted his fingers from the organ, the music seemed to sink and fade into the very walls of the church. Tom sat back and flexed his fingers several times until his knuckles cracked.

"Bit out o' practice, like," he said.

"Mister Tom," said Willie, his eyes welling with emotion, "it were real fine."

"Hmph," Tom grunted. "Thank you, boy. Must admit I enjoyed it meself."

New Beginnings

There were usually fifteen pupils in Mrs. Hartridge's class, ranging from nine to fourteen years of age. On this particular Monday there were only ten present. Three children who had a two-mile walk to the school hadn't arrived because of the snow, and Harry Padfield and Polly Barnes were helping out on their parents' farms.

At a quarter to nine Willie had walked in, accompanied by Zach. The twins had followed soon after. By five minutes to nine George had arrived, looking very pale and swollen eyed and wearing a black armband. He smiled weakly at Willie. His brother Michael had been reported "Missing, believed dead." A memorial service had been held for him the previous day, and the village had given the vicar money towards a plaque to be placed in the church.

Willie had stood awkwardly while the others moved into their seats. Mrs. Hartridge had smiled at him and asked him to sit in the front next to a girl named Patsy. They had stood up for prayers and sat down.

"I'm sure we would all like to welcome William Beech to our class," she had said, turning to him. "We know what excellent progress you've made and how hard you've worked."

Willie had tried to cover his embarrassment by scowling, but Patsy had smiled so sweetly at him that the scowl didn't last long. Mrs. Hartridge gave him a history and geography textbook, a spelling and arithmetic book, a nature and English book, a notebook, a pencil and, what thrilled him most of all, his own pen. It had a long slim wooden handle with a nib fastened at the end.

"Take care of it," she had said. "I'll see how your writing is this week, and if it's good enough you can begin writing in ink next week."

Willie had laid the pen carefully in his desk and now his first lesson had begun. First they all had to chant their twelve times tables. Willie managed to get up to six. He had practiced them long enough. By the time the class had reached twelve only Carrie and Ruth were still chanting.

"Same two again," said Mrs. Hartridge. "Hands up who managed to eleven." Three hands were raised. "Ten?" Two more went up. "Nine? Eight? Seven? Six?" Willie raised his hand. "Well done, William. I know you've only learned up to six. Five?" George raised his hand at three but she didn't scold him.

"Today we're going to do long multiplication. George and Frederick, I'd like you to review your tables. William, I'd like you to begin seven times table, and I'll give you some problems of your own. For the rest, take these down," and she walked over to the board and chalked up four problems.

After arithmetic they had an English language lesson on nouns. Willie's head was spinning. He turned to look at Zach and saw Carrie passing him a note. Zach glanced surreptitiously at it on his knee. Checking to see if Mrs. Hartridge was looking, he turned back and nodded. She looked a little scared. Then he saw Zach mouth "Good luck" to her and return quickly to chewing the end of his pencil and scribbling something in his notebook.

"Don't look so worried, William," said Mrs. Hartridge as she went over the nouns. "It's only your first day. If you're stuck and you need help, don't be afraid to ask. That's what I'm here for."

Willie nodded.

How beautiful she was with her violet blue eyes and her single long flaxen plait. She was wearing a cream-colored woolen blouse, a russet-colored cardigan and a green woolen skirt flecked with browns. She was plumper than usual, round and comfortable.

"Pencils and books away. Time for break. Patsy!"

Patsy was the milk monitor for the week. Mrs. Hartridge had taken to heating the milk, now the weather was so cold. She poured it into cups and Patsy carried them two at a time to the desks.

"Those of you who don't have gum boots or galoshes are to stay in," she said as she handed out the dried socks, but today everyone had.

Willie saw Zach winking at Carrie. Slowly she left her desk and walked up to Mrs. Hartridge's desk, where she was sorting out some books.

"Excuse me, Mrs. Hartridge."

"Yes, Carrie," she said, surprised. "Is there something wrong?"

"Not really."

Carrie took hold of one of her flame-colored plaits and tapped it nervously on her shoulder.

"It's jes' that . . ."

"Yes?"

"Can I speak to you on yer own, like? It's very important."

"Now?"

Carrie nodded.

"All right. We'll go somewhere private."

"Thank you, Mrs. Hartridge."

"When you've all finished your milk, go outside."

Patsy collected the empty cups and took them on a tray down the hall and into a kitchen, where Mrs. Bird washed them.

Zach, Ginnie, George and Willie fled into the playground.

"I say," said Zach, "it's wizard to have you in our class."

"And don't worry about everythin' bein' new," said Ginnie. "We'll help you."

"Ta," said Willie. He was about to grumble about how he felt bottom of the class when he remembered that George's tables were worse than his and that he had just lost his brother. He bit his lip and kept silent.

"Where's Carrie?" said Ginnie. "I saw her going up to Mrs. Hartridge."

"Perhaps they're having a little conflab," said Zach.

"She would have told me if anything was wrong," said Ginnie.

"Oh, there's nothing wrong. Yet," he added mysteriously.

Ginnie was astounded. "Do you mean you know what it's all about?"

Zach nodded. "I'll say I do."

"But—but I'm her sister!"

"She thought you might try and stop her."

"Stop her? Stop what?"

"Well," said Zach hesitantly, "I suppose you'll find out soon enough."

"Find out what?" exclaimed Ginnie in exasperation.

"Go on," said George. "Stop huggin' it all to yerself."

"Yeh. Tell us," joined in Willie.

Zach took a deep breath.

"She's asking if she can take the exam for the high school."

"She never is," gasped Ginnie. "She wouldn't dare."

"She jolly well is."

"But they ent even puttin' in any of the boys for it, they hasn't fer two years."

"So?"

"She's a girl!" cried George.

"I say, is she really?"

"I think it's jes' fine," said Willie.

"You would," retorted George. "You think anything he ses is fine."

"No, I doesn't. It ain't his idea anyway. It's Carrie's."

"Let's not quarrel," said Ginnie, who was feeling a little hurt that Carrie had confided in Zach and not her.

By the end of break there was still no sign of Carrie. Rose Butcher rang the bell and everyone queued up in the playground and filed in. Carrie was sitting at her desk, looking very flushed. Before they could ask her any questions, Mrs. Hartridge had pinned a map onto the board and told them to take out their geography books.

"Turn your desks round to face each other," she said. "Ginnie, go to the cupboard and hand out two sheets of paper to each desk. When you have the paper, tear each one in half."

Ginnie tried to catch Carrie's eye, but she was staring down at her desk. She caught hold of Ginnie's hand and gave it a gentle squeeze.

"Now, which ports do we get our fish from?"

Willie watched the hands go up. He sighed. Everything takes its own time was what Mister Tom was always saying. Maybe if he just sat back and listened he might catch up. The rest of the period was taken up with drawing maps of England, coloring in the sea, putting red dots to mark the ports and drawing little fishes next to them.

After geography came nature study. Here George and Ginnie shone. They loved animals and plants. Carrie knew the odd name of a flower, but Ginnie and George far excelled her and loved identifying them. Willie was very surprised. He had always thought that boys who liked flowers were sissies, but George was the strongest in their group of five. He had already taught Willie a little about the habits of squirrels, moles, rabbits and, of course, badgers. As

the boy next to Ginnie was away, Mrs. Hartridge allowed George to join Ginnie, Patsy and Willie.

Rose rang the dinner bell and the five raced out of the classroom, slung their coats, hats and gum boots on and ran out into the snow.

Zach grabbed Carrie. "What did she say?"

"She ses she'll think about it and make inquiries. It'd mean Mr. Peters giving me extra coaching like and havin' to do special work. No girl here 'as ever done one afore, see. So it ent yes and it ent no."

She turned to Ginnie.

"I'm sorry I didn't let on, but I thought you'd try and stop me. I know we always does everythin' together but I wanted to do it on me own and I woulda told you, anyway."

"How would I have stopped you?"

"Oh, you're so sensible. All yous at home think I've odd ideas and that, I didn't want you down on me. And I know that if I really want to go to the high, I've to stop grousin' and do something. If nothin' happens I shall have to think of somethin' else, but at least I know that I've tried."

"Theys'll think you're odder if you gits in," said George.

"Well, I'd rather be happy and odd than miserable and ordinary," she said, sticking her chin in the air.

"Hark at her. She's gettin' snooty already."

"I am not!"

"Let's go eat in my shelter," suggested Zach. "It's freezing out here." And he blew some warmth into his gloves.

They ran towards the little shelter, where Aunt Nance brought them cups of hot black-currant juice.

When they returned to school, Zach took Willie aside.

"How are you liking it?" he whispered.

"I feel very stupid," said Willie.

"Well, you jolly well are not, so don't try telling yourself that you are."

During the first lesson of the afternoon, Mrs. Hartridge read out a passage from *Treasure Island* and wrote up ten questions on the board for them to answer.

"Remember," she said, "that you start your answer with a statement, so that if I say, 'What is your name?' you write, 'My name is John Smith' or whatever."

She came over to Willie to give him an English exercise book and to show him how to lay out the date and the subject. It was difficult for Willie to write the answers, but he managed to finish somehow. They each swapped books with the person next to them and put crosses or checks as Mrs. Hartridge told them the correct answers. When Patsy handed back his book, she stared at him.

"You got eight out of ten," she said in wonder. "And it's only yer first day."

"Who has full marks?" asked Mrs. Hartridge.

Carrie raised her hand and flushed. Mrs. Hartridge smiled.

"Nine out of ten?"

Ruth raised her hand.

"Eight out of ten?"

Zach and Willie put up their hands.

Zach whooped with delight when he saw how well Willie had done. The rest of the class gasped.

"That will do, Zacharias," said Mrs. Hartridge, trying hard not to smile and not succeeding very well.

"Well done, William," she said, and Willie swelled with pleasure. "And now put away your books. Who are the paint monitors this week?"

Zach and a girl called Alison in the fourth row left their desks. Fred cleaned the board.

"The subjects for this afternoon are 'A Rainy Day' or 'A Rainy Night,' and one at a time at the pencil sharpener." She turned to Willie. "From what I hear, I think you'll be all right on your own," and she gave him another of her heavenly smiles. One day, thought Willie, I'll draw you real good. He looked down at the large white sheet in front of him and lifted his pencil from the groove.

Forty minutes later he raised his paintbrush for a moment and looked up while the blackouts were being put up. Dusk was already settling in and everyone had been squinting in the fading light. But after the lights were turned on, Willie resumed painting and grew deaf to his surroundings. Patsy took a glimpse now and then over his shoulder. His picture frightened her a little.

Mrs. Hartridge walked down the aisle looking at each person's work.

"That's very good, Ruth," she said. "You're improving, Frederick. Another heroic rescue, Zach, only this time in the rain. Well tried." She glanced down at Willie's painting and gave a start. She had heard that he was good, but hadn't expected him to be quite as good as she perceived at that moment.

The painting was set at night in a gloomy back street in a city. An old lamppost stood alight on a corner. Squatting down by a wall was a blind beggar in a shabby raincoat, his white stick

lying beside him. His cap lay on the street in front of him and he stared out with dead sad eyes.

The rain swept across the old man's face so that his white hair hung limply and rain trickled down his cheeks. Hiding in an alleyway on his right were two grinning boys. They were eyeing the money in the cap.

"That's excellent, William. Do you think you could finish it in fifteen minutes? Then I could leave it out to dry. I'd like to put it on the wall."

Ginnie and George glanced over his shoulder. He was embarrassed at first, but soon became so absorbed in his painting that he continued, oblivious of the clatter of slamming desks, the washing of pots, the laying out of wet paintings on newspapers near to the stove and the cleaning of brushes.

Mrs. Hartridge picked up Hans Christian Andersen's *Fairy Tales* and was about to begin "The Shepherdess and the Chimney Sweep" when Willie raised his hand.

"Please, Mrs. Hartridge. I've finished."

"Good," she said. "Lay it down by the others. You can clear up afterwards."

Willie did so and sank back to listen to the story. When it was finished, Rose rang the bell for the end of school and everyone clustered round the paintings. Afterwards George, Zach, Willie and the twins played in the field behind the school house. George left early with a headache, and the twins left soon after. Zach and Willie sauntered slowly homewards and talked endlessly outside the Littles' dilapidated front gate. Willie's first day in Mrs. Hartridge's class was over.

One Friday morning, in the first week of March, Willie looked out of his window to find that the snow had thawed completely, and piebald fields of brown earth and tufts of grass now lay exposed all around the village. The river was almost bursting its bank. Two blackbirds cawed their way past the graveyard and headed in the direction of the woods. Willie unfastened his window a little. It was a beautiful day, clear and sunny. He breathed in the cool crisp air and was filled with so much energy that he too felt like the swollen river.

After putting on his clothes and making his bed, he clambered down the ladder with his chamber pot.

"Sammy," he called. "Sam, 'ere, boy."

A loud barking came from the garden. No sooner had he opened the back door than Sam came flying in. Tom stuck his head out of the air-raid shelter. He was pumping out water.

"You looks full o' beans," he said. "You might as well go for a run now. I'll 'as yer breakfast started when you comes back."

Willie ran back into the house, put some coke in the stove, slung on his gum boots, overcoat and balaclava while Sam twirled round and round his ankles. They spurted through the back garden and headed out towards Tom's field and beyond.

"Yahoo!" he yelled. "Yahoo! Yahoo! Yahoo!" And as he sprinted along the lane, he began to laugh. Sam scampered on ahead, showing off, chasing his tail and enjoying Willie's excitement. Eventually Willie turned back and Sammy followed him home. The balaclava hung back from his face exposing flushed cheeks and two red ears.

That Friday was to be a special day. Zach, George, he and the twins had at last arranged to meet at Zach's, after school, to discuss plans about visiting Spooky Cott. They were to bring tea so that they could leave Zach's immediately to go to a meeting in the village hall to hear which play Miss Thorne had chosen to produce next.

After breakfast Willie helped Tom make up sandwiches, and then spent ten minutes going over yards, feet and inches before leaving for school. He met Zach in the arched lane and they talked about the Spooky Cott enterprise and the possible new play.

"I think it's going to be another Dickens," said Zach, as they walked into the school hallway. "Miss Thorne's awfully keen on him."

Alison Blake rang the bell and they sauntered into class.

George had been moved into the second row next to Ginnie, and Carrie had been moved to the back row with the elder ones. Although she was ten she had already reached the standard of a thirteen-year-old. Since most children left at fourteen, Mrs. Hartridge hoped that Carrie would obtain a scholarship—otherwise she would have to spend the next three or four years working on her own. The teacher had spoken to Carrie's parents the weekend after their talk and had explained that Carrie was bright enough to take the exam. Her mother had objected at first.

"What about uniform?" she had said.

Mrs. Hartridge had assured her that there were always people who were willing to sell uniforms that their children had grown out of.

"And she ent even taken this here examination yet, Madge," Mr. Thatcher had added. "Let's take one thing at a time." Secretly he was rather proud that one of his daughters wanted to take it. The war was encouraging girls to be more independent now. They both finally agreed. Most of her evenings were now spent doing homework and cramming, and her mother allowed her to skip some of the household chores as long as she made up for them after the exam.

Willie had by now settled happily into his new class. He adored being near Mrs. Hartridge, and he watched her stomach gently expand with each passing week. He loved the way she moved and smiled and the soft cadence of her voice.

However, he, like the others, couldn't wait for the hours to fly that Friday. Eventually school ended and they all fled to the Littles' cottage and up to Zach's bedroom. They discussed plans for the Spooky Cott expedition, which was to take place on Saturday, and later made their way to the play meeting. Miss Thorne announced that they would be presenting *Toad of Toad Hall*.

When they had left the village hall, Willie and Zach chatted briefly at the Littles' gate and arranged to meet the following afternoon.

Willie sang as he walked down the lane. He was still bursting with energy. He swung open the gate into Dobbs's field, which was now empty. Dobbs was still in winter residence at the Padfields'. The ground was muddy and an icy wind blew down his neck. He wound his scarf tightly around him and tucked it deep into his overcoat.

"I don't care if there's even an air-raid drill tonight," he said, grinning and twirling around. He ran into the cottage, flinging the back door open, his cheeks flushed with both pleasure and the cold wind. He tore off his coat, balaclava and scarf and burst into the front room.

Tom was standing by the stove. He glanced at Willie and listened quietly to his chatter. While Willie talked nonstop he untied his boots and placed them on newspaper and proceeded to warm his hands by the stove.

Tom didn't make any comment. He gazed down at Sammy, who was slumped miserably over his feet. Willie looked up and noticed that Tom was holding a letter.

"What's the matter?"

"It's from yer mother," he said, indicating the paper. "She's ill. She wants you to go back for a while."

Home

Dobbs clopped on towards Weirwold, Tom and Willie sitting on the cart behind her. They hadn't exchanged many words on the journey. They had both felt too numb. Willie held Sammy tightly next to him and stared through blurred eyes down at the leather and brass harness, the moving flank of Dobbs and the rough road beneath them. Occasionally he lifted his head to gaze at the fields, only to look quickly downwards again.

Tom kept his eyes on the road. The blacksmith's at the edge of the village could be seen faintly in the distance. He had tried persuading Willie's mother to come and stay in Little Weirwold, but to no avail. She had written that she only wanted Willie to stay with her for a while till she felt better. He spoke to the Billeting Officer, but there was nothing she could do. Mothers were always taking their children back and they had the legal right to do so.

They left Dobbs and the cart at the blacksmith's. Tom helped Willie on with his old rucksack. It was filled with books, clothes and presents he had acquired during his stay. In the carrier bag that he had carried on his first day were his few original possessions.

Willie trembled. A blast of wind swept into his face and he shivered. Tom squeezed his shoulder firmly and walked with him towards the railway station, holding Sammy on a makeshift leash.

They sat on a bench on the platform and gazed at the hedgerows on the other side of the railway tracks.

"Don't forgit to write, William," said Tom huskily, and with shaking hands he took his pipe out of his pocket and began to fill it.