

# 8

## *School*

Willie sat down to breakfast in a clean grey shirt and jersey, pressed grey shorts and polished boots. He stared out at the graveyard. It was a dull day.

'Eat up, boy. Soon be time to go to school,' said Tom, placing a paper bag on the table. Inside were two apples and a thick egg sandwich.

'You can come back here for dinner if you wants, or have it with the others. Best take yer cap and mackintosh. Looks like ram.' He picked up Willie's label from the top of the bookcase and handed it to him.

They walked together through Dobbs's field and Tom stood by the gate and let him walk on his own up the lane. Zach was sitting on the Littles' dilapidated gate waiting for him. Willie met him and turned to look at Tom. They waved to each other and Sammy immediately shot forwards.

'Samuel,' said Tom firmly. 'Here!' He stopped, glanced at his master and then bounded back to him. Tom picked him up and watched the two boys disappear round the corner.

George and the twins were standing in a crowd outside the village hall. Two old cars drew up with eight children and two anxious-looking mothers inside.

'I say,' said Zach. 'It's awfully crowded, isn't it?'

'It ent usually like this,' said Carrie.

'They've had to get an extra teacher,' added her sister.

'And,' said George, 'we have to share the school with some Catholics. We're havin' it in turns. Look!' and he pointed in the direction of two nuns surrounded by a horde of children. 'If it stays like this we ent goin' to have much school at all,' and he grinned with pleasure.

The five of them went into the hall together. The blackout curtains which were rolled neatly above the windows stood out starkly against the light green walls and wooden skirting boards. Mr Bush was seating the small children cross-legged on the polished wooden floor. The older children were to sit in the back half of the hall which was filled with rows of chairs. At the front end was a small raised platform with curtains on either side.

'I say,' said Zach excitedly. 'There's a stage!!'

'Quickly,' said George, tugging at one of Zach's well-darned sleeves, 'let's grab them chairs afore the big 'uns get them.'

They ran towards them, Willie following as fast as he could, climbing over several small children on the way.

Everyone else had grabbed seats at the back and, when it was too late, George suddenly realized why the particular seats they had chosen had been left empty. They were sitting in the front line of chairs. The rest of the children were seated on the ground so that all five of them were now very exposed.

'Drat it,' cursed George. 'I got some humbugs I was goin' to slip in me mouth.'

Mr Bush and Mrs Hartridge were talking to an elderly lady.

‘That’s Mrs Black,’ whispered Ginnie. ‘She must be the extra teacher.’

Mr Bush dealt with the older children first and placed a few evacuees with them at the back. It was very noisy. There was a lot of shouting and shuffling amongst the newcomers, most of whom were feeling bored and restless and had spent too long in the country already.

Mr Bush announced the times when the older ones were next needed and dismissed them.

George, Carrie and Ginnie were to be in Mrs Hartridge’s class again. She was taking the eight- to eleven-year-olds. The twins had had their tenth birthday in the holidays and George was eleven.

Mrs Black was to have all the local children and non-Catholic evacuees from five years old to eight.

Willie watched Mrs Hartridge approach him and Zach. Zach told her his age, which was nine, and spelt out his name, apologizing for it at the same time. She smiled. Willie handed her his label and said nothing. Her long flaxen hair was coiled up in a thick plait at the top of her head. Willie gazed with pleasure at her soft, pink-cheeked face and then suddenly his heart fell.

She leaned over to Zach and said, ‘Now, Zacharias.’

‘You can call me Zach if it’s too much of a mouthful.’

‘I think I can manage, thank you. Now tell me, what were you doing at your last school? You can read and write, can’t you?’

At this juncture, Willie’s ears filled up. Zach’s chattering was only a faint rumbling echo in the distance. He felt her hand on his shoulder.

‘Now, William,’ she said. ‘How about you? Can you read and write?’

He remained silent. He didn’t dare look at the others. What would they think of him?

‘What did you say, William?’

‘No,’ he answered, and he picked at one of the nails on his fingers and stared at the floorboards wishing he could disappear into them.

‘Oh, I’m sorry about that, William. I would have liked you in my class. You’ll have to go and sit with Mrs Black’s class,’ and she pointed to the little ones seated on the floor. Willie looked up in anguish and quickly down again.

The burning inside his ears seemed to spread into his jaw. He rose as if in a daze, found a space on the floor and sat down. He clasped his hands tightly together and bowed his head. He felt utterly humiliated.

Mrs Hartridge’s class were dismissed. They were to have school in the afternoons and wouldn’t be starting until Friday.

Willie was left with Mrs Black and she and the remaining children filed over to the school. There were two girls even older than him who also couldn’t read, but it didn’t make him feel any better. One of them ignored everyone including Mrs Black and just filed her nails and stared out of the window.

Tom was weeding the graveyard when Willie returned. He watched his dejected figure walk past him into the cottage and, after allowing a few minutes to elapse, followed him in and discovered him sitting at the table in the living room, his bag of apples and sandwich lying untouched.

‘I could just do with a cuppa,’ he said brightly. ‘You too, William?’

Willie gave a nod.

He pushed a mug of tea towards him. 'How was it then?'

Willie scraped the toes of his boots together.

'Bad, was it?'

Willie nodded.

'Best tell me then.'

He raised his head. It was difficult to look at Tom without his lips trembling.

'I'm with the babies.'

'Oh, and whose class is Zacharias in then?'

'Mrs Hartridge's.'

'Why ent you? You're near enuff the same age, ent you?'

'Yeh, but he can read.' He paused. 'And write.'

'And the ones that can't are with Mrs Black, that it?'

'Yeh.'

'I see.'

Tom stood up and looked out at the freshly-weeded graveyard.

'Mrs Black'll teach you to read. Did you learn anythin' today?'

'Gas drill,' he mumbled.

'What's that?'

'Gas drill,' he repeated, only louder. 'We did gas-mask drill.'

He blew the top of his tea and sipped it.

'There ain't even enuff pencils.'

Tom had seen some of the roughnecks that gentle old Mrs Black would have to deal with. Most of her time, he reckoned, would be taken up trying to keep discipline.

'We'll begin this evenin',' he said sharply. 'That do?'

'Wot?'

'Learnin' to read and write. I'll teach you to write yer own name fer a beginnin'.'

Willie's eyes stung as the ground moved in a gentle haze beneath him. He beamed. 'Aw, mister,' was all he could manage to say.

Tom was surprised to find a lump in his own throat.

'Go and have a run with Sammy,' he growled huskily. 'I'll get supper.'

Sammy, who had sensed Willie's misery and had until now remained motionless, began to bark and run after his tail.

'Go on with you, boy,' said Tom.

Willie rose and clattered down the hallway. He ran through the gate, down the lane and across to the dirt track faster and faster, leaping and jumping. He wanted to yell for joy but when he tried he couldn't get any sound out. He felt annoyed at first but then he realized that he was running far better than he had been the previous day and that he wasn't even trying. It takes time and practice, that's what Mister Tom had said.

After supper had been cleared Tom put a piece of paper and a pencil in front of him. On the paper were several straight lines and in between each pair was a series of dots.

'Now, William,' said Tom. 'You jest join up the dots from the top downwards and when you done that, yous'll have written yer name. Now jest takes yer own time.'

Willie held the pencil nervously and then pressed it hard onto the paper. The lead snapped. Tom sharpened it again.

'Easy now,' he said, handing him back the pencil. 'You got plenty of time.'

Willie stared frantically at the paper.

'I can't,' he said, 'I can't.'

Tom looked sharply at him. Willie was frightened. His face had turned quite pale and beads of perspiration had broken out across his forehead.

'I won't beat you, if that's what's bothering you. Come on, let's have a go,' he added reassuringly. 'I'll sit beside you and tell you how yer doin'.'

Willie placed the lead on to the paper and slowly followed the dots down and up, down and up, making the letter W.

He sat back and looked at it.

'It's bad, ain't it? Ain't it, Mister Tom?'

Tom peered at it. He was surprised.

'No,' he said with honesty. 'No, it ent,' and Willie knew by the certainty in his voice that he was telling the truth.

'Ain't it?' he queried.

'No,' he repeated. 'It certainly ent. You carry on. You'se doin' fine.'

Willie returned to the dots and apart from the occasional wobble he wrote 'William' in a remarkably smooth hand.

'That's good,' said Tom.

'Is it?'

'Do it again.'

Willie carried on following the dots between the lines and then stopped.

'Mister Tom,' he said. 'I can look at my name and draw it. Is writin' like drawin'?'

'I don't think so. Show me what you mean.'

Willie found a clean unlined space, looked at what he'd done, drew two straight lines and wrote William in between them.

'Those lines are almost straight,' gasped Tom. 'Where you learn to do that?'

'Nowhere,' said Willie. 'I jest looked at 'em and done it.'

Tom was speechless for a moment. When he had recovered, he picked up a pencil and ruler, drew two straight lines, wrote 'Beech' in between them and handed the pencil to Willie.

Willie drew the two lines again and, while carefully scrutinizing the new word, copied it.

'That's very good,' remarked Tom.

'Is it?'

'Don't you know?'

He shook his head.

'You've jest written yer name, boy.'

'Have I?' and he stared down at the letters. He couldn't understand why those shapes were his name. Tom took his hand and made him point to the letters, going from left to right, sounding out each one. Willie joined in the second time round.

'Good,' said Tom. He was about to suggest that he had a break when Willie pointed to the letters and sounded them out on his own. He became stuck at the double ee sound.

'Wot was that one agin, Mister Tom?'

'ee.'

'B... ee...'

'Wot's that?'

'ch.'

He started again and succeeded in sounding all the letters through.

'You picked that up very quick,' said Tom. 'Very quick.'

'It's copyin', though, ain't it?'

'Yes, I suppose so.'

'Mister Tom,' said Willie after some thought, 'ain't that bad?'

'Copyin'?'

'Yeh.'

'Not when yer learnin',' said Tom, 'only if yer bein' tested, like.'

'Oh,' he said, 'I thought it were bad.'

There was a knock on the front door. Sam started barking.

'Now who can that be?' said Tom.

'Mister Tom?' said Willie. 'Does that mean that, if I copy, I won't go to hell?'

'Hell!!' said Tom in amazement as he strode out of the room. 'Don't be daft, boy. Whatever put such a thought in yer head.'

Willie felt enormously relieved and returned to his writing. He was interrupted by voices in the hallway. He turned, and George and the twins walked in.

'Before you ses anythin',' said Carrie as Willie stood up, crimson, 'we've jest come to tell you that we're miserable about you not being in our class and that we still wants you to come round with us like.'

'Yes,' interjected Ginnie.

'And,' said George, 'yer not to feel bad about not bein' able to read and that. Anyway, it ent all that good when you can. You jest gits given more lessons.'

Carrie, at this juncture, gave him a poke.

'What we wanted to tell you,' she continued, 'was that we'se goin' up the woods on Saturdee and we was wonder-in' if you'd come with us like.'

Willie opened his mouth to speak but was interrupted by another loud knock. Tom was hardly out into the hallway when in burst Zach.

'Will,' he said breathlessly and stopped in midstream. 'I say, what's going on here? Is this a party?'

Tom closed the door and was about speak when a further rally of knocks was hammered on it and Charlie Ruddles, the warden, strode angrily in.

'The front door wuz open, Mr Oakley, and I saw a definite chink of light from where I wuz situated.'

'Oh, and where would that be, Mr Ruddles?' asked Tom, a little perturbed at so many dramatic entrances in one evening. 'Would that be from lying on the hall floor with yer nose under the door?'

The twins at this point turned hurriedly away and bit their lips. Charlie stood back aghast.

'I won't go into the legalities, Mr Oakley. There were a definite chink. Don't you know there's a war on!' and with that he slammed the door and everyone except for Willie, who was feeling somewhat stunned, erupted into gales of laughter.