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Friday

Mrs Fletcher was bending over the last of a bed of weeds, hoping finally to rid herself of them before her husband returned from the potato harvesting. Her thoughts were interrupted by the sound of heavy footsteps and loud barking. She looked up vacantly. It was Tom Oakley. Easing herself gently to her feet she leaned slowly backwards. Her spine gave a soft cracking sound.

'Back early, ent you?' she remarked. 'You'se ent finished, has you? I ent started tea fer Ben yet.'

'He's stayin' on,' said Tom. 'I decided I'd come home early tonight. Boy's got friends comin' round. Your George fer one.'

'So he said.'

Tom grunted.

'I jest thought I'd be around like, in case he needs anythin'. Tends to git over-excited.'

A strand of auburn hair fell across Mrs Fletcher's eyes. She brushed it aside.

'Don't seem so long since his birthdee, do it?'

'Two months,' commented Tom absently, and he gazed down the road remembering how he watched Willie's thin little hunched body stumbling after Sammy on that first day.

'You heard from his mother yet?'

'I had a letter last week. Mostly about him bein' bad and me watchin' him, like. I wish he would be bad. He says "Yes" or "dunno" to every blessed thing I ses.'

Mrs Fletcher laughed.

'I wish George would.'

She picked up a bucket filled with weeds.

'What about this six shilluns contribution then?'

'That's what she wrote about. Ses she can't pay yet but it'll be on its way. Ses it means she won't be comin' to see the boy fer Christmas.'

'Shame on 'er,' tutted Mrs Fletcher.

'Oh, I dunno,' said Tom. 'He's changed quite a bit in these last few weeks.'

So has you and all, thought Mrs Fletcher.

'Yes,' he went on, 'I almost fancy he's grown a bit. It won't do him no harm to be out of his mother's apron-strings fer a bit longer. She puts the fear of the divvil into him anyways.'

He leaned across the gate in a confidential manner.

'Do you know, Mrs Fletcher, last week he laughed. It were a bit of a nervous one like, but he actually laughed. It were the first time I ever heard him do it. Didn't think he had a sense of humour in him.'

Mrs Fletcher looked steadily into his eyes. His forehead had lost its old furrowed look. The deep pitted wrinkles above his eyes had softened outwards. Behind his scowling

manner was a kindly old man and if it hadn't been for the arrival of a rather insipid little boy, she might never have known, nor might anyone else for that matter.

A breeze shook a half-naked tree, causing a handful of leaves to cascade into the garden.

'Well,' said Mrs Fletcher, 'now that you're here you might as well take the jersey and socks. I finished them last night.'

After Tom had collected the woollens he walked home feeling remarkably relaxed. Sammy scampered leisurely in front of him while he stopped intermittently to pick up sweet chestnuts on the way.

Willie had scraped the potatoes, chopped up carrots and turnips, buttered a few slices of oddly-cut bread and filled Sammy's bowls with fresh water and scraps. His boots were laid out on a newspaper, and had been scraped and polished. He was sitting cross-legged on the floor giving a finishing touch to them when Tom walked in. He looked up, and rubbed his forehead excitedly leaving another smudge of brown shoe polish above his nose.

'I finished me readin' book today and I starts the last one on Mondee. And Mrs Black ses I can do joined-up writin',' he added, scrambling to his feet. 'By half term I might have finished the last one. Then I can read good enuff fer Mrs Hartridge.'

'Good. You've worked hard fer it and you're bright.'

'Bright?'

'Got it up here,' said Tom, tapping his head with his hand.

It was after they had cleared supper and were sitting by the range with a cup of tea that the first person to arrive knocked at the front door. Willie, whose stomach had been steadily growing tighter, almost spilt his tea over his shorts. He was wearing the new jersey that Tom had collected from Mrs Fletcher. It was navy blue with a rolled-topped neck. The cuffs were well turned back and the jersey came half-way down his shorts.

'Ent you goin' to answer it then?' said Tom.

Willie placed the mug carefully on to the table and made his way nervously out of the door and down the small dark passageway.

It was Zach. Willie was glad that he had come first. He showed him into the living room where Sammy greeted him, wagging his tail.

'Unusual jersey, that,' commented Tom. It was the first time he had seen Zach's 'Joseph' jersey.

'Unique, I'd say,' replied Zach.

'I'll go put the blacks up and light the lamp,' said Tom.

Willie and Zach waited at the foot of the ladder while Sammy scabbled around the first rung.

A square of amber light shone down on them from the open hatch.

'I say, it's magnificent!' gasped Zach. 'Like rays from Heaven.'

Tom climbed down the ladder.

'All yours,' he said.

Sammy by now had wormed his way up to the third rung where he was floundering and panting breathlessly.

'You want Sam with you?'

'Won't you be lonely without him, Mr Oakley?' asked Zach.

Tom was a little taken aback at this candid question.

'No. I can do some jobs that he gits in the way of. But if he becomes a nuisance, William,' he added, 'you bang on the floor and I'll pick him up.'

'Ta,' said Willie gratefully and between him and Zach they carried Sammy up the ladder.

Willie had grown used to the changes in his room so that he was pleasantly surprised at Zach's excitement over it. Two of the walls were covered with his drawings and paintings and on one wall were shelves that Tom had fixed up for his clothes and treasures.

Zach gazed round at the tiny wooden bed under the eaves. The flickering lamp above their heads and the patches of colour round the walls gave the room a cosy lived-in air.

After a brief glance at the two boxes of apples which were stacked in the corner, he sat on the end of the bed with Willie and talked about the poem he was writing.

It was in 'the epic vein' which for him meant a long rhyming poem about knights in armour. Sammy, who had been sitting quietly by their feet, jumped up and began barking. There was a loud knock on the open trap-door and Carrie and Ginnie's heads came into view.

'Ent it beautiful,' commented Ginnie.

'Like a workroom of one's own,' sighed Carrie enviously.

They were interrupted by an impatient voice from below.

'Stop spoonin'. I want to see. Hurry up.'

They clambered up onto the floor, followed eagerly by George who practically fell over them in his clumsy desire to get in. All three of them stared silently at the walls.

'You never done these, did you?' said George.

There was a drawing of the oak tree, two brave attempts at Sammy, a painting of five children blackberrying, one of a library with people sitting and walking round and several sketches of boots and flowers and half-eaten sandwiches.

'Sheer genius, aren't they?' said Zach thrusting his nose upwards. 'Wizard choice of friends I have, don't you think?'

'Why has you got all them words written under them?' asked George.

Willie flushed.

'Is it fer learnin' to read?' said Carrie.

He nodded.

'I starts the last readin' book on Mondee, and joined-up writing.'

'I say, well done,' exclaimed Zach.

'Don't know why yer botherin',' grunted George. 'You gits to mess around more in your class. Anyways, if I could draw like you, I wouldn't bother about nothin' else.'

'Anythin' else,' corrected Carrie. 'And you don't bother about anythin', anyways.'

'I does. They jest don't teach interestin' things at school. Who wants to read books? Books ent no good. They don't feed animals and plough fields, does 'ey?'

Carrie groaned.

'You'm jest pig ignorant.'

'Good,' said George. 'I likes pigs and pigs is useful.'

'Are you two going to spend this evening ranting again?' interrupted Zach.

'Yes, come on,' said Ginnie. 'Let's talk about the Gazette.'

It was obvious to everyone from the moment they sat down that Zach was bursting to tell them something.

'Come on, reveal all,' said Carrie, imitating his theatrical way of speaking.

'Guess what!' he half squeaked. 'Miss Thorne is producing a children's Christmas show for the war effort and she needs all the help she can get.'

Ginnie gasped.

'I couldn't go on stage. I'd hate it.'

'You needn't act in it. You could help backstage.'

'You could do your sewin',' suggested George.

Ginnie's face lit up. 'I could make costumes.'

'Well spoken, that man,' said Zach. 'That's a wizard idea.'

George cleared his throat and beamed. 'I does have the odd unbeatable one,' he said smarmily.

'I'm glad to hear that,' said Zach, 'because I'm going to ask you for another good suggestion.'

George visibly preened himself. 'Go ahead,' he said.

'What are *you* going to do in the show?'

His face fell.

'Me!' he spluttered. 'Me! I ent doin' no fancy theatricals with ole corny thorny. She's nutty as a fruitcake.'

'Coward,' said Carrie.

'I ent goin' to do it,' he protested. 'And that's a fact.'

'I vote we bring this meeting to order,' said Ginnie sharply.

Zach looked at George.

'Well,' he said. 'Are you going to be courageous or not?'

'Coward,' repeated Carrie.

'Oh, all right,' said George crossly. 'I'll do it.'

'Wizzo. That's two.'

'What about you, Zach?' asked Carrie.

'Oh, I expect I'll volunteer for one of the leads,' he said, leaning back and crossing his long brown legs nonchalantly. He turned to Willie.

'I ain't bin near a theatre. Me Mum ses...'

'It isn't exactly a theatre,' interrupted Zach earnestly. 'It's the hall. It's just that we're going to make it into a theatre.'

'Yeh, but...'

'You needn't perform. You could help with the scenery.'

'Paintin', like,' said Carrie.

He smiled nervously.

'Yeh, all right.'

'I'll volunteer too,' said Carrie. 'I don't mind what I do so long as I don't have too many lines to learn.'

'Wizzo,' yelled Zach. 'That's the five of us.'

He studied Sammy who was chewing the toe of one of his large stuffed boots.

'No,' said George and the twins in unison. He looked at Willie.

'Three against two,' said Carrie.

'Oh, all right,' he sighed wearily, 'I give in.'

'My turn now for news,' said George. 'We'se goin' to have a big Carol Service in the church on Christmas Eve. Mr Bush started rehearsin' us last night and he could do with some extra voices, like.'

Carrie opened her mouth.

'Boys only,' he added.

'Ent it a blimmin' cheek,' she exclaimed angrily. 'Boys gits all the chances. The grammar school in Weirwold only takes boys,' she said in protest to Zach, 'and they never bother to put girls in fer the high school. And here's me dyin' to go and him,' she said waving a finger at George, 'havin' all the chances, and him hating books.'

'Mebbe now there's a war on,' said Ginnie, gently touching her sister's arm, 'it'll be different for girls.' She knew how much learning meant to her.

'I hope so. But it don't seem no different being at war really, do it? 'Cept there's more goin' on in the evenin's with First Aid and the like.'

There was a short silence.

'Well,' said George, glancing at Willie and Zach, 'you two interested?'

'I'd like to,' said Zach, 'but I never go to church so it'd be a bit strange if I sing in it, won't it, me not even being a Christian.'

'Ain't you a Christian?' asked Willie in alarm.

He shook his head.

'No. I thought you knew that.'

Willie expected at any moment to see the tips of two red horns slowly emerging from under his hair, but they didn't.

'You could always ask the Vicar,' suggested George.

'But what if I had to say your prayers. I might have to say things I didn't believe in. It leaves me in a bit of a dilemma, don't you see.'

'Di-what?' said George.

'Quagmire,' said Zach, and he gave a sigh and threw his hands up in the air. 'I mean I'd really like to, but I've already been shouldered out of the Nativity play. It's rotten, rotten luck. I know the story quite well too. I mean your Jesus that you believe was God was Jewish, wasn't he? Joseph, his father, was Jewish and so was his mother. And here's me dying to act and I can't be in it because I'm Jewish.'

'Now you know how I feel about the high school,' said Carrie.

'Oh, git the hankerchiefs out fer a weep,' groaned George, pretending to play the violin.

'I'll do it,' said Willie suddenly. 'I'll s...s...sing.'

George beamed.

'Rehearsals every Thursdee. I'll give you a hand in the readin' if you gits stuck.'

'That's two bits of news for the Gazette,' said Ginnie.

'We need to do somethin' a bit more excitin', like,' said George impatiently. 'Let's go lookin' fer badgers or even their holes. How about it? Who's for goin'?'

'I'd like to,' blurted out Willie.

They all stared at him in surprise. It was unusual for him to volunteer without persuasion.

'I'll come too,' said Zach. 'I don't know anything about badgers, but it might be useful. Who knows, perhaps one day I may have to play one.'

Carrie and Ginnie looked at each other.

'We'll come too,' they sighed in a tone of resignation.

'I ent forcin' you,' said George.

'I say,' said Zach. 'What was that mysterious place you were talking about at Aunt Nance's?'

Ginnie paled.

'Spooky Cott,' she whispered.

'Couldn't we go and look at that as well?'

George and the twins gave no answer and Willie felt a cold prickle crawl up his back and into his hair.

'Oh come on,' cried Zach. 'It can't be that frightening, can it?'

All three of them nodded silently.

'We ent bin there for two years now,' said George.

'I say, what happened?'

'Nothin' you could exactly put yer finger on, like,' said Carrie ominously. 'But there was a strange eery feeling in the air. The trees,' she swallowed, 'the trees, they seemed to groan and wave their arms about.'

'Let's go. I mean, if we all go together we can protect each other.'

'When was you thinkin'?' asked George in an unusually timid voice.

'How about tonight!' whispered Zach.

Ginnie gave a shiver.

'Or,' he continued, 'Halloween!' and he gave a shrieking imitation of a cackling witch.

George and the twins yelled and Willie clutched Sammy who had started barking.

Zach gave a long ghostly moan and raised his hands. With wide, blank eyes he shuffled towards them. They stumbled backwards. Willie tried to calm Sammy who was jumping about excitedly.

'That's enuff,' said Ginnie crossly.

'Oh, all right, spoilsports,' he said, feeling disgruntled, and he sat down, missed his cushion and landed with a painful thump on the floor. This time it was the others who laughed. He rubbed his bottom vigorously, looking very hurt.

They were interrupted by a knocking on the hatch.

'Blimmin' heck,' said Carrie.

'Now we're for it,' whispered her sister. 'I told you we was makin' too much noise,' and she glared at Zach.

'Don't foist all the blame on I,' he retorted.

Willie lifted it up to find Tom standing on the steps, with a large tray in his hands. On it was a jug of lemonade, five cups, a plate of ginger snaps and a bowl of nuts. Beside it was a small saucer of salt.

'Hot chestnuts,' yelled Willie. 'They has them in London when it's Christmas. I see'd them sell them in the streets lots of times but I ain't never tasted them like.'

'Thought mebbe you could use them.'

'Rather,' cried Zach. 'Mister Tom, you're a real brick.'

'Am I?' he mumbled. 'Humph!'

He looked around at their delighted faces and began to feel embarrassed.

'You'd best eat them afore they gits cold.'

Sammy wriggled into his arms and pushed his head underneath Tom's chin.

"Ad enuff have you, boy?" he said picking him up and with that he gave them all a brisk wave and disappeared down the steps, closing the hatch quickly behind him.

'He's a real decent sort, Will,' said Zach. 'You're awfully lucky being landed on someone like him.'

Willie smiled. He'd known that since that first bewildering day.

'I'm lucky too,' he went on, 'with the Doctor and Aunt Nance.'

'That's a cos they're daft like you,' said George through a mouthful of ginger biscuit.

'I don't think Christine and Robert King are very happy,' said Ginnie. 'They'se stayin' at one of the tied cottages at Hillbrook Farm and they has to earn their keep. Specially now that John's gone.'

'Robert fell asleep in History on Monday,' said Carrie.

'Don't blame him,' said George.

'And Christine told me,' continued Ginnie, 'that Mr Barnes threatened to have their dog put down if they didn't work hard enuff.'

'Here, have a chestnut,' said Carrie flinging one into her sister's hands.

'Yes, let's eat,' added George.

After they had devoured the nuts and drunk the lemonade they discussed who would write what for the Gazette. It was unanimously decided that any drawings or illustrations would be done by Willie. Zach was to finish his epic poem and write a report on the Christmas Show. Carrie would put in a bit of news regarding how the wai was affecting the supply of sweets. Ginnie was to write about the wonders of the First Aid Group and George about his beloved badgers.

The meeting had ended, with everyone feeling very satisfied. They scrambled down the ladder, yelling their good-byes. Willie watched them as they ran through the graveyard and climbed over the wall to the lane. He closed the door, walked into the living room and sank happily into the armchair.

Tom glanced at him. The last time Willie had had so many children at the cottage he had been sick. Tonight he looked healthily tired.

'Let's have a look at that ole arm of yours,' he said.

Willie sleepily pulled his jersey and shirt off and slid to the edge of the armchair. Tom squatted down in front of him. Very gently he cleaned a sore and put some ointment on it. It was the last one.

'This time next week, should be gone,' he muttered, but Willie didn't hear him. His eyelids were already fluttering into sleep.

Tom helped him into his pyjamas, carried him up the ladder on his back and put him to bed.

When Willie woke the next day, there was something altogether unusual about the morning. He lay in bed, for some time, and stared up at the ceiling trying to puzzle it out. Finally he gave up and clambered out of bed. It was only when he started automatically to strip it that he realized what it was that was so different. There was no need for the sheets to be washed that day. They were dry.