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New Beginnings

Lucy stood by the pencil sharpener and peered through one of the windows on the long wooden-panelled wall that separated the two classrooms. She had felt miserable when she had heard that Willie was to leave her class. It was Monday morning in the third week of January. Her first day without him. She pressed her cheek against the glass and gazed wistfully into Mrs Hartridge's class.

'Lucy,' said Mrs Black. 'This is the third time you've sharpened your pencil in the last fifteen minutes. There won't be anything left of it, and looking through the window won't help either.'

Lucy blushed and hurried back to her table.

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.

Willie sat in the front row and shared a double desk with Patsy Finch, a dark-haired, easygoing nine-year-old with light brown eyes. Although their desks were joined they had separate benches which folded up and down. Each desk had an inkwell hole and a long groove for pencils and pens. Some of the pupils had white porcelain inkwells, which were filled with pale blue watery ink, and then slotted into the holes.

It was Willie's first proper desk. He felt so exhilarated with it that he tingled every time Mrs Hartridge asked them to take a book out or put a book away.

To his left in another double desk sat eleven-year-old Fred Padfield and Zach. Fred had been moved from the third row to the front for being lazy. Zach sat on his left by one of the windows. Carrie and Ruth Browne, one of the evacuees at the vicarage, sat behind them and behind Willie and Patsy sat Ginnie and Herbert Woods, one of the absent children. George, who was now twelve, sat behind Ginnie in the third row and the eldest in the class sat in the fourth row.

A long funnelled stove stood opposite the corridor between the four rows of desks. On it was perched a large saucepan of simmering milk and surrounding it was a square fire-guard where several pairs of steaming socks were hanging. To the left of the stove was the door which led into a hallway.

There were three large windows in the classroom. Two at the back and one on the left. The panes were criss-crossed with wood and had looked very pretty when the first snow had settled in the corners. On the right of the room beside the panelled wall stood the nature table.

Mrs Hartridge sat at a high oak Dickensian desk with a fixed seat. Underneath the desk, facing the class, was a door which opened, revealing a row of shelves with books on them. Behind the desk and around the walls were low bookcases filled with books. A blackboard on an easel stood diagonally in front of Zach and Fred and behind that was a tall cupboard with paper and scissors, paints and brushes, old magazines, textbooks and chalk and crayons inside.

On the left wall and at the back of the class were two paintings, a Nature chart, the names of the monitors for that week and a picture of Christ in a white robe surrounded by children of every nationality.

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 next to 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 jotter, 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 practised 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 learnt 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 revise your tables. William, I'd like you to begin seven times table and I'll give you some sums of your own. For the rest, take these down,' and she walked over to the board and chalked up four sums.

After arithmetic they had an English language lesson which was 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 jotter.

'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-coloured woollen blouse, a russet-coloured cardigan and a green woollen 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 it now the weather was so cold. She poured it into cups and Patsy carried them two at a time to each desk.

'Those of you who don't have gumboots 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-coloured plaits and tapped it nervously on her shoulder.

'It's jest 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 up.

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 conflag,' 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 has,' gasped Ginnie. 'She wouldn't dare.'

'She jolly well has.'

'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 jest fine,' said Willie.

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

'No, I doesn't. It 'aint 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 on to 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, colouring 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 gumboots 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 would a' told you, anyway.'

'How would I have stopped you?'

'Oh, you're so sensible. All you'se 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 blackcurrant 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 swapped books with the person next to them and put crosses or ticks as Mrs Hartridge told them the correct answers. When Patsy handed back his book, she stared at him.

'You got eight out often,' she said in wonder. 'And it 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 welled 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 paint-brush 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 lamp post 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 carried on, 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 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 banks and through the still naked trees Willie could make out the chimney of Spooky Cott. 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 range, slung on his gumboots, 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. 'She'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. She had spoken to her 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 swotting, and her mother allowed her to miss out on 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' 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 range. He glanced at Willie and listened quietly to his chatter. Willie told him about the picnic on Saturday, how Zach was playing Toad and he was to play Mole, and that he was meeting Zach the following afternoon, and while he talked non-stop he untied his boots and placed them on newspaper and proceeded to warm his hands by the range.

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.'