Chapter 12 - The Show Must Go On

November had been a damp and drizzly month, bringing shorter days and causing aggravation to those people who found it increasingly difficult to travel in the blackout.
Tom had meanwhile dug up his turnips and set to work hedging, digging ditches and helping out with the other farms, when the extra labor was needed. Willie would return from school to find the living room filled with the musky perfume of freshly cut branches burning in the stove. All evacuees had left the village and outlying countryside, except Willie and Zach, Robert and Christine King up at Hillbrook Farm, and the four Browne children at the vicarage. David Hartridge had become a fullfledged pilot and was looked upon as a hero. His few short visits to the village caused great excitement.

While Little Weirwold was returning to normalcy, events in the larger world continued to escalate. Hitler had escaped a bomb blast in a Munich beer cellar. German aircraft had parachuted mines into the Thames estuary. A British merchant cruiser had been sunk by German battle cruisers. Finland had been invaded and Helsinki had been bombed. But these events of war didn't really disturb Little Weirwold except for Miss Emilia Thorne, who had to recast the Christmas show as each evacuee left for home. It was now the first week in December. The last of the swallows had gone long ago, and now the black outlines of rooks could be seen flying around the plowed fields looking for grubs. Cold icy winds swept under the gaps of cottage doors, rattling them fiercely. It looked as though it would be a hard winter. Willie had completed the last of the "Learning to Read" books. His reading was up to standard for Mrs. Hartridge's class and his writing was progressing well. He now needed to learn his tables up to six times and also be able to do multiplication, addition, subtraction and division, tens and units, shillings and pence and have a basic knowledge of simple weights and lengths. It all seemed quite endless. Tom had thought that once Willie finished his final reading book, he wouldn't want him to read to him anymore, but Willie loved to sit back and listen to his voice, and so the stories continued. They had now almost finished Exodus and were in the middle of *The Wind in the Willows.*

With Christmas only three weeks away the days were hectically filled making presents, hanging up decorations and rehearsing. The show that Miss Thorne was producing was an adaptation of *A Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens. Zach was playing Bob Cratchit, Mr. Fezziwig, the ghost of Christmas present and the ghost of what might be. Carrie was cast to play Mrs. Fezziwig and the young woman who had fallen in love with the youthful Scrooge, while Ginnie hid in the school happily making costumes with Miss Thorne's older sister. George had been tried out in a variety of parts, but each time he stepped on the stage he would stand with his legs and arms splayed out and drone monotonously. Miss Thorne suddenly hit upon the idea of casting him as the ghost of Marley, Scrooge's ex-partner. It would need no acting ability from George. One winter afternoon, while they were rehearsing, something happened that stunned everyone involved in the play. Willie had already helped paint the scenery, but had been asked to take over as prompter when Matthew Browne had been suddenly whisked off to boarding school. He usually sat with the prompt book, next to Miss Thorne. His head still spun slightly as he followed the words and looked upwards intermittently to see, by the expression of a face, if someone had

forgotten the lines. But after a while he soon knew large chunks of the play off by heart and could occasionally prompt without looking at the book. It was difficult at first.
Initially he whispered the line, but it was embarrassing to have to continually repeat himself, after a series of "pardons" and "whats?" and he soon discovered that if he spoke a line clearly and loudly he wasn't noticed as much.

On this particular afternoon Willie sat as usual with the prompt book resting on his knees, his forehead frowned into a tense concentration. The blackouts were already pulled down over the hall windows. Willie liked it that way. It gave an air of mystery and excitement to the rehearsals. Carrie was the only one onstage. She stood with her hands clasped tightly together and stared frantically at the curtain rail, her face racked with pain.
"Carrie, dear," said Miss Thorne, "you look as though you've got wind."
"It ent fair," she retorted, scowling fiercely.
"Isn't," corrected Miss Thorne.
"It isn't fair," said Carrie. "I feels daft pretendin' to speak to someone who ent, *isn't*, there."
Miss Thorne gave a sigh. Her long willowy legs splayed outwards into a balletic second. Although she was terribly fond of the children, she found that working with them was like banging her head against a brick wall. Zach was the only one who showed any real talent, and he was more of a performer than an actor. He played himself all the time, using his characters to display his many theatrical talents. He was still trying to persuade her to have a tap routine in the play. She stared up at Carrie, slapping her forehead with the palm of her hand.
"Has anyone seen Christine or Robert King?" she asked, turning to the others, who were sitting at the back of the hall.
"No, Miss," piped Lucy.
Robert was playing Scrooge.
"We'll do the crone scene then."
"Christine's in that," chorused three at the back.
"So she is," said Miss Thorne. "This really is too bad. We've two weeks to go and we are nowhere near being ready."
She glanced at Willie. "William, stand in for Christine."
"But it's a girl's part," said George.
"Well, we'll just have to have a male crone for today," replied Miss Thorne in a dangerously quiet voice. Willie crept nervously onstage with the prompt book in his hand and was joined by the others.
"Begin!"
He read out Christine's part, giving an imitation of all the inflections in her voice, at the same time prompting those around him when they forgot their lines.
"No, no, no!" cried Miss Thorne. She looked around. "Someone else prompt."
"But then he won't be able to say his lines," said Carrie. "Er, will he?" she added nervously as Miss Thorne glared threateningly at her.
"I'll prompt," said Zach.
Miss Thorne didn't think this was too good an idea, but time was precious, so she agreed.
"Now, William," she said. "Do you think you can remember the moves?" He shrugged helplessly.

"Well, let's try, shall we? And William?"
"Yes, Miss?"
"Imagine that it's very cold and dark, that you're old and hungry and that you love stealing and making trouble for people." Willie looked at her dreamily.
"Did you hear that?"
He nodded.
"Good. You have the first line. Start when you're ready."
"Ready?" he asked, feeling a little puzzled.
"When you feel that you're that horrible old man."
Willie withdrew into himself. He remembered an old tramp he used to watch down by the underground station near where he lived. He was hunched and he dragged his feet when he walked. He also remembered times when he himself was so hungry that he couldn't stand straight for the cramps in his stomach. Miss Thorne watched him grow visibly older. His shoulders were pushed up by his neck and his stomach caved in. He looked cold and miserable and bad tempered. Zach found himself totally mesmerized and placed his finger on the page so that he wouldn't lose his place.

Then Willie began speaking. His voice was harsh and mean. The others onstage stared at him and someone giggled.
"Go on," interrupted Miss Thorne firmly. The three onstage with Willie joined in as best they could, but they sounded as if they were reading out lines from a schoolbook. Willie continued imagining that his dirty feet were wrapped in rags and newspapers, and when the scene came to an end he shuffled slowly off the stage.
"I say," whispered Zach.
"You'll say nothing for the moment," said Miss Thorne. "Let's do that scene again. You're beginning to get the idea, William."
They rehearsed the scene over and over again, and as they repeated it Willie believed more than ever that he was the old man. He found himself suddenly reaching out and touching someone or making some wild arm movement without thinking. He didn't understand what Miss Thorne meant when she told him to keep a gesture. How could he keep something that just happened? When Miss Thorne finished working on the scene, he heard his companions sigh with relief.
"I'm fair done in," one of them said. How strange, he thought, I'm not tired at all. I could easily have gone on. He came down the tiny steps at the side of the stage and sat beside Zach.
"You're good," whispered Zach.
"Good? How d'you mean?"
"You're a good actor."
Willie didn't understand. He thought that being an actor was tap dancing and playing the fool. All he'd done was to make a picture of someone in his head and worm his way inside it. He took the prompt book back from Zach and began his old job again. For the next half hour the rehearsals took on a sudden lift, and everyone began to dare to try things out without feeling foolish. The only thing that spoiled it was the absence of Robert. He was in nearly all the scenes. Finally Miss Thorne refused to wait any longer and told them to take a short break while she left the hall to make a phone call to Hillbrook Farm. Willie found himself immediately surrounded. Lucy slipped her hand into his. He flushed and pulled it away.

"Dunno what you're on about," he said quietly in response to their praise. "I jes' pretended I was someone else, that's all."
"I really believed you was that horrible old man," said Carrie in admiration.
But so did I, thought Willie. He was puzzled. He didn't understand why they were making so much fuss.
"You're a natural," said Zach. "When you talked it was like you'd just thought of it. How did you do it?"
"I jes' listened to what someone said and answered them, like."
All the sudden admiration unnerved him. He felt lonely being so different. To hide his fear he asked Zach to tell a joke and do his funny Buffalo step. Zach hesitated at first, but luckily someone who hadn't seen him do any tap dancing egged him on. Willie was soon forgotten and became mixed into the group again. Zach stopped. He heard Miss Thorne open the outer door of the hall. She flung the inside door to one side, was about to slam it. but changed her mind and closed it behind her in a quiet and controlled manner. Her face was pale and she was wringing her hands in agitation.
"Sit down everyone, please."
They did so immediately.
She walked slowly towards her chair, sat down, folded one leg over the other and placed her clasped hands over her knee.
"I'm afraid I've just had some rather bad news. Robert and Christine's mother came early this morning and took them back to London. It seems she felt they were being used as unpaid labor. This means that we have no Scrooge."
"Oh no!" cried Zach amidst the loud wails of disappointment.
"Does that mean we can't do it?" asked Carrie.
There were only two weeks till the performance. They had all helped with scenery and costumes. Did this mean that all their hard work was wasted?

Miss Thorne turned to Willie.
"William," she said quietly, "I'd like you to play the part of Scrooge."
Willie felt an intense tingle pass from his toes to the roots of his hair. He looked up at her. Everyone's face was turned to him as if he was their last chance.
"Will you?"
He nodded.
"Oh, well done," cried Zach. "Hip, hip, hurray!"
"That's enough," interrupted Miss Thorne firmly. "We have a lot of work to do. We'll start with Act One, Scene One. Those not in the scene will have to take turns prompting. We must all pull together and help." She turned to face Willie. He was standing quite still, feeling paralyzed and yet at the same time filled with a flood of energy.
"Don't hurry," she said.
"Everythin' has its own time," he whispered, and he blushed. "That's what Mister Tom ses."
"That's right," and she gave him a warm smile. "We'll go through the blocking first. Take my script and pencil for now." The blocking was all the various moves which made up the pattern of each scene. This was to give it movement and life and to ensure that the focus of attention was never blurred for the audience.
Willie half mumbled and half read the script as he penciled little letters around the sentences. Miss Thorne had taught them all the names of the different stage areas. There

was downstageright and left and upstage right and left, up center, down center and of course center plus many others such as "left of so and so."
To the ones who were watching, Willie seemed very bad. He stumbled and droned and scribbled in his book like someone half asleep. But Miss Thorne knew that as soon as he had got rid of the book and started working on the character of Scrooge, he would be very different. It was strange that she had never thought of him before, for she now remembered how quickly he had learned poetry when she was helping him learn to read. But then hardly anyone noticed him when he was around. They only noticed his absence.
She stopped rehearsing when they reached the end of Act One.
"Well done, William," she said encouragingly. "Well done, everyone. You've all worked very hard."
Willie looked up a little bewildered and then back down at his script. The words were beginning to cease being just shapes and pictures. There was something else in them. He felt breathlessly excited.
"William," said Miss Thorne, interrupting his thoughts. "Keep my script and look over the scene we've blocked. The next rehearsal will be on Monday night after school. We'll block Act Two then."

Willie walked shakily out of the inner door to the porch. Zach had already put on his coat and cap, and was waiting to tell him something, when Ginnie and Miss Thorne's elder sister burst in.
"Whatever's the matter, May?" asked Miss Thorne.
"Haven't you heard the news yet?"
"About the Kings?"
"No. About Mr. Bush."
"What about him. Has he had an accident?"
"Worse. He's been called up!"
"But he's a teacher. They aren't calling them up, surely?"
"It's his own fault. He's on reserves and they say that we already have more than our quota per
pupil than most other places."
"Who's going to teach the seniors?"
"I don't know. The vicar, I suppose."
"What about the Carol Service?" interrupted George. "It's on in three weeks' time."
May Thorne turned to her sister.
"What's this about the Kings, then?"
"It's all sorted out. I'll explain later."
"What's been goin' on?" burst out Ginnie.
Zach and Willie slipped out into the darkness.
"I say, Will," said Zach, taking Willie's arm, "a jolly exciting night, eh?"
"Yeh," replied Willie, still dazed.
"I think you're, how do you say it? Fine. Yes, I think you're fine."
Willie smiled.
"We're both jolly jolly fine," Zach yelled and he dragged Willie on behind him. They stumbled and laughed down the tiny lane to the Littles' cottage, where they parted.
Willie walked quickly towards Tom's cottage. He clutched the script tightly under his arm. It

felt so good tucked there, so snug and firm under his armpit like it was a part of him. He ran into the cottage, flinging his cap and coat onto his peg.

Tom was sitting at the table, gluing colored paper chains together. He'd hung the clusters of holly that Willie had painted silver onto the walls. Willie looked up at them.
"Pretty, ent they?" he remarked.
"You's beginnin' to sound like me," Tom said.
Willie stood by the table, holding the script in his hand. Pushing a chair gently to one side, he placed it on the table and sat down. Tom was unusually quiet. He put the chains down and stood up. Sammy followed him, tugging at his trouser legs. He lifted him up absently, sat in the armchair and stared into the open stove.
"Shall I make us some tea?" suggested Willie.
"H'm," grunted Tom, a little startled. "What?"
Willie walked over to the kettle and filled it with water from the pitcher.
"I'll make us some."
"Yes, that's right, boy, you do that."
Willie suddenly became aware of how pale Tom looked and he felt alarmed for a moment. Perhaps he was ill. Sammy was sitting on his lap panting in a bewildered fashion. He gave a small whine. Tom looked up and caught Willie's worried gaze.
"Is you all right?" asked Willie, sitting on the stool.
"Just had a bit of a wake-up, so to speak."
"Wake-up?"
"You heard about Mr. Bush?"
He nodded.
"I been asked to take over the choir like, for the concert, play the organ. . . ."
"Can you play?"
"Used to when Rachel was alive."
"Who's Rachel?"
"A gentle-hearted wild young girl I once loved."
"Where's she now?"
Tom pointed to the window behind him with his thumb.
"She's the one under the oak tree. Died after she had a baby. She had scarlatina, see. . . ."
"What happened to the baby?"
"Died soon after. Buried together." He glanced at Willie. "Same name as yours, too."
"William?"
He nodded and gave a deep sigh. "It's a long time since I touched that organ. It'll take a good bit of practice."
"You goin' to do it then?"
Tom leaned back and paused for a moment. "Yes," he said at last, and he glanced across at the table. "What's that then?" he asked. "A new book?"
"It's the script of *Christmas Carol.*"
"Oh? What you doin' with it then?"
"I've been asked to be in the play."
" 'As you?" said Tom, leaning forward.
"Yeh."
"I take it you's goin' to do it then?"

Willie smiled, his cheeks burning with excitement. "Yeh."
"Reckon we'll both be needin' that tea extra sweet tonight, eh, boy?"