Chapter 13 - Carol Singing

"Bah! 'Umbug!" he cried as he paced the floor. It was at least the fiftieth time in the past hour that Willie had uttered the words. He paused and read the nephew's lines, put down the script and began pacing the floor again. "If I could work me will, every idiot who goes abaht wiv Merry Christmuss on 'is lips should be boiled wiv his own puddin', and buried wiv a stake of holly through his heart. He should!"
Willie sat down on the end of his bed and gave a sigh. "I nearly got it," he muttered to himself. "I got to be a bit more grumpy." He rose.
"Nephew!" he said brusquely. "You keep Christmuss in yer own way and let me keep it in mine." He stopped and hit the open palm of his hand with his fist. "No! It don't feel right. I'm a bad-tempered man and I don't like bein' interrupted, like." He began again. "Nephew, you keep Christmuss in yer own way and let me keep it in mine."

A loud knocking at the front door made him jump. "Blow it!" he grumbled. "Jes' when I wuz gettin' it." He frowned and walked towards the trapdoor. Immediately he realized how Scrooge must have felt when he was interrupted. "Nephew," he repeated angrily, "keep Christmuss in yer own way and let me keep it in mine."
He gave a loud grunt and looked into his imaginary accounts book. "That's it!" he yelled. "I got it! I got it!"
A volley of louder knocks came from downstairs. Willie threw himself down the ladder and opened the door. It was George. He looked over Willie's shoulder. "Who else is in there?" he asked.
"No one," answered Willie.
"Who you yellin' at then?"
Willie looked at him blankly for a moment.
"Oh," he said, realizing what George was talking about. "I was jes' goin' over me words, like."
"I could hear you from here."
Willie blushed.
"Only from the front door, mind. Don't s'pose no one else did. You comin' then?"
"What?"
"Haven't you remembered? It's Thursdee, doughbag. We got Carols. Thought you'd be there first seein' it's Mr. Oakley's first practice, like."
"Oh, yeh," said Willie hurriedly, and he flung his scarf on. "Am I late?"
"No. We's all jes' a bit early."

Willie slammed the front door behind him. He ran after George along the pathway towards the back entrance of the church. Already there were people seated in the benches on either side of the altar. Tom was sitting at the organ, a large scowl on his face. Willie caught his eye and smiled at him. He knew that the scowl meant he was just a bit shy. Edward Fletcher and Alec Barnes came in at the front door and joined the men right of the altar. Edward's voice had now evened out into a wobbly tenor. Alec, a large, dark-haired sixteen-year-old, was looking very embarrassed. Everyone wanted to know if his father had been using the King children as "slave labor" or not.

Behind Alec sat Mr. Miller and Hubert Pullet, the son-in-law of Charlie Ruddles. He was a poker-faced, pale man in his fifties. Next to him sat the twins' father, a handsome frecklefaced man with thick wavy red hair. Ted Blakefield, a local thatcher, sat beside him. Theoldest member of the choir was Walter Bird, still wearing his tin hat and the only one with a gas mask. George sat in the second row, to the left of the altar, next to two older boys, while Willie
joined the younger ones in the front. Tom stood up and gave two short taps with his hand on the top of the organ.
"We'll begin with 'Hark the Herald,' " he said, smoothing out the pages of his music. He waited until everyone had found their places before playing the short introduction. After the first few notes he stopped. No one was singing. He leaned around the organ.
"What's the matter?" he inquired.
"We was jes' listenin' to you playin', like," croaked Walter. "You kept in toon, didn't you?"
Tom grunted.
"I ent 'ere to listen to meself. One more time."
The men suppressed a grin among themselves. Still the same short-tempered Mr. Oakley, they thought. Tom played the introduction once more and they joined in.
"You call that singin'?" he interrupted gruffly. "Sounds like a dirge."
"A dirge, Mr. Oakley?" interspersed Mr. Miller, his balding head shining with perspiration.
"A dirge," repeated Tom. "This is to be a Carol Service, not a funeral. Lift them *up* with yer voices. Don't bury them."
George gave a short laugh and slapped his hand sharply over his mouth. Tom glared at him.
"Put a bit of that laughin' in yer singin', boy," he said. That was what Rachel would have suggested, he thought, and he sat down and turned to the beginning of the carol.
"Once again."

They lifted up their books and sang with even more fervor.
"Gettin' better. Good cure for insomnia, though. Send at least the first four pews to sleep.
Now," he said, turning over several pages, "let's wake them up with 'Glory to the Newborn King.' 'Tis good news."
Willie took a deep breath and pictured in his mind a rainbow, its rays of colored light pouring down from massive clouds.
"In the triumph of the skies," he sang, "Glory to the newborn King."
"Good," said Tom when they had finished. "William, you's gettin' the idea, but you're singin' up to the ceiling. Sing it out front."
He turned to everyone.
"All of yous, sing it out through them doors and through the village."
Mr. Miller wiped his face with a handkerchief.
"I don't think I can sing any better, Mr. Oakley."
"Don't let Hitler hear you say that," replied Tom. "Now, one more time."
They sang it through twice, and then as a contrast followed it with a gentle rendition of "Silent Night." The rehearsal ended with a rousing version of "O Come All Ye Faithful."
"I think that'll do for tonight," said Tom, closing the *Book of Carols.*
"What time is it?" asked Edward.
"It's nine o'clock," cried Alec in alarm. "I've to do the milkin' tomorrow mornin'. Good night,
Mr. Oakley. Thank you," he yelled, running out of the church.
Willie left his bench and stood by the organ. George joined him.
"It were a real good rehearsal, Mr. Oakley," he said. "Real good. Weren't it, Will?"
Willie nodded.
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."