

Chamberlain Announces

Tom had to be in the church early, to see Mr. Peters, the vicar. He went on ahead while Willie staggered on after him. It was difficult for him to move in his new boots. They cut into his ankles and he couldn't bend his feet to walk in them, but apart from the slight discomfort, he felt very protected and supported in them. They clattered on the flagstoned pathway, and it pleased him to hear himself so clearly. His bony legs, which usually felt as if they would collapse beneath him, felt firmer, stronger.

He found the back door of the church already open and Mister Tom talking to a tall, lanky man with piebald black and grey hair.

"Ah, William," he exclaimed, turning towards him. "Mr. Oakley tells me that you're going to give us a hand. Those are the hymn books," he continued, indicating a pile of red books on a table by the main door. "Put four on each bench, and if there are any over, spread them across the rows of chairs at the front and at the back. Do you think you can do that?" Willie nodded.

"Good." He turned back to Tom. "Now, where's the best place acoustically for this wireless of mine?"

Willie walked over to the table and picked up some books, feeling totally bewildered. Mum

had said red was an evil color, but the vicar had told him to put them out so it couldn't be a sin. He had also said that he was good. Mum had told him that whenever he was good she liked him but that when he was bad, she didn't. Neither did God or anyone else for that matter.

It was very lonely being bad. He touched the worn, shiny wood at the back of one of the pews. It smelled comfortable. He glanced at the main door. Like the back door it was flung open, revealing a tiny arched porch outside. Sunlight streamed into the church and through the stained-glass windows, and a smell of grass and flowers permeated the air. A bird chirruped intermittently outside. P'raps heaven is like this, thought Willie.

He laid the books out neatly on the benches, his new boots echoing and reverberating noisily around him, but the vicar made no comment and went on talking quite loudly, for someone who was in a church.

He was arranging the books in the back row so that they were exactly parallel to each other, when two boys entered. They were both three or four years older than him. They sat on the second row of choir benches to the left of the altar.

Suddenly it occurred to Willie that the church would soon be filled with people. He hated crowds and dreaded the Sunday service and its aftermath, which was usually a good whipping. He felt a hand on his shoulder. It was Mister Tom.

"Stay with me, boy," he said in a low voice, and Willie gratefully followed him into one of the pews.

Within minutes, the tiny church was flooded with men, women and children. Four more boys sat by the altar. On the right of the altar were three men. Willie recognized Mr. Miller from the corner shop and the young man behind the mesh in the post office.

In the pew opposite Willie were two ginger-haired girls—obviously twins—trying to smother their giggles. Their long carrot-colored hair had been fought into plaits while the remainder stuck out in frizzy, uncontrollable waves. They wore pale lemon-and-green summer dresses with short puffed sleeves and a cross-stitching of embroidery round their chests. Their faces and arms were covered with the biggest freckles Willie had ever seen. Like him, they carried their gas masks over their shoulders. A lady at their side glared down at them.

She must be their mother, Willie thought. Sitting next to her was a tall man with bright red hair, and beyond him a young dark-haired girl.

Mr. Peters and his wife stood by the main entrance greeting the congregation as they entered.

Their three teenage daughters, their cook and the assortment of evacuees they were housing filled two of the pews in front.

A hacking cough from the porch heralded the arrival of Nancy Little and the Doctor. Willie gave a short gasp. She was wearing trousers to church! He watched the vicar's face, waiting for the thunderous "thou shall be cast into the eternal fires" glare, but he only smiled and shook her hand. He was surprised to see Miss Thorne behind them.

"Mister Tom," he whispered urgently, tugging at his sleeve. "Does that book lady live here?"

Tom nodded.

A short, dumpy woman in her forties accompanied her. "That's her sister, Miss May," Tom said in a low voice. "They lives in one of them cottages with the straw rooves. Thatched, that is. They got a wireless."

Willie turned to find the Fletchers with two of their sons moving into their pew. Mrs. Fletcher leaned towards them.

"Mr. Oakley," she whispered, "I begun the balaclava."

Tom frowned her into silence. It was Willie's birthday on Thursday, and he wanted it to be a surprise.

The wireless stood on a small table below the pulpit. The vicar fiddled with one of the knobs and the church was deafened with "How to Make the Most of Tinned Foods," before it was hurriedly turned off. The twins had caught the eye of one of the boys sitting in the front row

of the choir. He was a stocky boy of about eleven with thick, straight, brown hair. With heads bent and shaking shoulders, the three of them buried their laughter in their hands.

Mrs. Hartridge and her uniformed husband entered. Willie gazed at her, quite spellbound. She was beautiful, he thought, so plump and fair, standing in the sunlight, her eyes creased with laughter.

"Them be the Barnes family," whispered Tom as a group of men and women came on in behind them. "They own Hillbrook Farm. Biggest round here fer miles."

Mr. Fred Barnes was a brick-faced, middle-aged man whose starched white collar seemed to be causing him an obstruction in breathing. Three healthy-looking youths and two red-cheeked young women were with him. His wife, a short, stocky woman, was accompanying two evacuees, a boy and a girl.

"Trust ole Barnes to pick a strong-lookin' pair," muttered Tom to himself.

Lucy and her parents sat in front of Tom and Willie. She turned and smiled at them, but Willie was staring at the colours in the stained-glass windows and didn't notice her. When everyone was reasonably settled, Mr. Peters stood in front of the congregation and clasped his hands.

"Good morning," he began. "Now I know we have several denominations gathered here today, especially amongst our new visitors, who I hope will be happy and safe inside our homes. If any one of you is troubled or needs help, please don't hesitate to contact me or my wife. And now if you would all open your hymn books at number eighty-five, we shall sing 'Lead thou me on.' "

Mr. Bush, the young headmaster of the village school, was seated behind the pulpit at the organ. He gave an introductory chord. Willie didn't know the tune, and as he couldn't read he couldn't even follow the words. He glanced aside at the ginger-haired twins. They were sharing a hymn book and singing. He envied them.

"La it," he heard Tom whisper. "Go on, la it."

Willie did so and soon picked up the melody until he almost began to enjoy it. The hymn was followed by a passage from the New Testament, another hymn from the choir and some simple prayers. The vicar looked at his watch and walked towards the wireless. All eyes were riveted on him, and anyone who had seating space sat down quietly.

The wireless crackled for a few moments until, after much jiggling with the knobs, the voice of Mr. Chamberlain, the Prime Minister, became clear.

"I am speaking to you," he said, "from the Cabinet room at Ten Downing Street. This morning the British Ambassador in Berlin handed the German Government a final note stating that unless we heard from them by eleven o'clock that they were prepared at once to withdraw their troops from Poland, a state of war would exist between us.

"I have to tell you now that no such undertaking has been received and that consequently this country is at war with Germany."

A few people gave a cry. The rest remained frozen into silence, while others took out their handkerchiefs. A loud whisper was heard from the brown-haired choirboy: "Does that mean no school?"

He was silenced very quickly by a frown from Mr. Bush, and Mr. Chamberlain's message was allowed to continue undisturbed.

"I know that you will all play your part with calmness and courage," he said. "Report for duty in accordance with the instructions you have received. ... It is of vital importance that you should carry on with your jobs. Now may God bless you all. May he defend the right. It is the evil things that we shall be fighting against—brute force, bad faith, injustice, oppression and persecution—and against them I am certain that the right will prevail."

Mr. Peters turned the wireless off. After what seemed an interminable silence he spoke. "Let us pray."

Everyone sank to their knees. Willie peered over his clasped hands in the direction of the choir. The brown-haired boy had caught the eyes of the twins again and was desperately attempting to relay some kind of message to them. After prayers, various announcements were made from the pulpit. Volunteers and those already involved with the A.R.P. or Civil Defense work were asked to meet at the village hall.

Women and children were to report at the school in the morning to make arrangements for the care and education of the evacuees.