



## The Little CAROL SINGER

“WHAT’S the matter with John?” said Grandfather in surprise. “He does look miserable!”

“Well, he’s got a cold, and so he can’t go out carol-singing with the school choir,” said John’s Mother. “He’s upset because he does so love carols—and he’s got a lovely voice, you know.”

“Yes, I know,” said Grandfather. “So had I when I was a boy like John. Tell John to come along to me. I’ve got something to tell him.”

John came, and went over to his Grandfather. The old man put his arm round him and smiled. “So you are disappointed because you can’t go carol-singing. What carols were you going to sing?”

“Oh—lovely ones: ‘Good King Wenceslas’, and ‘Nowel, Nowel’, and ‘The Holy Babe’—and ‘Here We Come A-wassailing’. I love that one,” said John. “I don’t know what ‘wassailing’ means, though.”

“It means a merry party, where wassail was drunk,” said his Grandfather. “It’s a very old carol, you know. I used to sing it as a boy too. I remember one time very well indeed.”

“Tell me about it, Grandfather,” said John. He liked to hear the old man’s stories of his long-ago boyhood.

“Well,” said Grandfather, “I was about six years old, I suppose, and it was winter-time, very cold and frosty. There were my Mother and I and my little sister Hannah, all living in a tiny cottage together.”

“Where was your Father?” asked John.

"He was dead," said Grandfather. "He left my Mother a little money but it soon went—and that winter, when Christmas was near, my poor Mother couldn't even pay the rent of the little cottage."

"What happened?" asked John. "Was she turned out?"

"The landlord was a hard man," said his Grandfather. "He said that unless she could find some money to give him, she must be turned out of her cottage with me and my little sister. We had nowhere to go, and it was bitter weather. I remember my Mother crying bitterly."

"What did you do?" asked John.

"Well, I made up my mind that I must get some money somehow," said Grandfather. "So I put on my cap and coat and out I went into the snow. But nobody wanted a little boy's work! Nobody wanted snow swept away, or errands run. I didn't get a single penny."

"Poor Grandfather," said John. "I would have given you everything in my money-box. Yes, even my bright silver sixpence!"

"I began to trudge home in the snow, cold and hungry," went on the old man. "I even remember how numb my hands were and how I put them under my arm-pits to try and warm them. And then, as it grew dark, I heard the sound of singing."

"What was it? Carol-singers?" asked John.

"Yes. It was a party of villagers, going from house to house, singing all kinds of carols," said Grandfather. "In those days the big houses threw open their doors to the singers, and welcomed them in, and gave them mulled wine and spiced apples, and little cakes."

"That sounds nice," said John. "I should like a spiced



"It was a party of villagers, going from house to house, singing all kinds of carols."

## THE LITTLE CAROL-SINGER

apple. What did you do next, Grandfather? Please tell me.”

“I thought of the spiced apples and little cakes,” said Grandfather. “And I was so hungry that I felt I really must have something to eat. So I joined the party of carol-singers, without being seen, and went with them up the long drive to the Squire’s house.”

“Were you found out?” asked John.

“I sang with them,” said Grandfather, remembering that long ago evening clearly. “We sang ‘Holy Babe’. I remember then the door opened, and the Squire himself welcomed us in. I went in too, scared but so cold and hungry that I longed to see a fire, and have something to eat.”

“Was there a nice fire?” said John.

“An enormous one,” went on Grandfather. “It was blazing up in the big hall. The Squire’s lady was there, pretty and kind and smiling—and on a big table there were jugs of warm drinks, and dishes of spiced apples and plates of little cakes. I could hardly take my eyes off them. But before we could eat and drink, we had to sing again.”

“What did you sing?” asked John.

“The carol you said you liked,” said his Grandfather. “‘Here We Come A-wassailing’. I sang too, because I knew the words and the tune. And I remember the villagers turning to stare at me and wondering how I came to be with them. I remember the Squire’s lady looking at me, and listening



“The Squire’s lady was there, pretty and kind and smiling—and on a big table there were jugs of warm drinks.”



“I suddenly found tears pouring down my cheeks. I was so ashamed. I tried to stumble to the door and go.”

to my voice. And at the end she said, “Little boy, you have a very sweet voice. I would like to hear you sing by yourself.”

“Oh Grandfather—what happened then?” asked John.

“I sang the chorus of ‘Here We Come A-wassailing,’” said Grandfather, “and everyone listened, because in those days I had a lovely voice. And then the Squire’s lady gave me something hot to drink, and a spiced apple and two little cakes. I drank my drink and ate the spiced apple—but I put the cakes into my pocket.”

“Why? To take home?” asked John.

“Yes. For my Mother and sister,” said Grandfather. “But one of the villagers saw me stuffing the cakes into my pocket and he was angry. I think he thought I had taken them from the table when nobody was looking. He began to scold me—and what with the hot drink, and the blazing fire, and the thought of going home to my Mother without anything at all to give her, I suddenly found tears pouring down my cheeks. I was so ashamed. I tried to stumble to the door and go.”



The Squire took me home to my Mother, and told her he had a little cottage she could go to.

“Did they let you?” asked John. “Poor Grandfather! What a horrid ending to your evening!”

“Oh, that wasn’t the end,” said Grandfather. “The Squire’s lady jumped up, put her arms round me and led me to a seat by the fire. ‘Now you tell me why you are sad,’ she said. ‘A boy with a voice like yours shouldn’t be sad! He should be glad!’”

“She was nice,” said John.

“So I told her everything,” said Grandfather. “About my Mother and sister, and how we had no money and how the next day we were all to be turned out in the snow. I told her I had no right to be with the carol-singers, or to eat her apples and cakes. By that time the others had gone on their way and I was left with the Squire and his lady.”

“Go on, Grandfather,” begged John. “This is a much nicer ending! It is all true, isn’t it?”

“Oh yes!” said Grandfather. “Quite true. The Squire took me home to my Mother, and told her that he had a fine little cottage she could go to the next day, and pay no rent for—but he wanted one thing in return.”

## THE LITTLE CAROL-SINGER

“What was it?” asked John.

“He wanted my Mother to let me learn singing and music, and to have my voice trained—and he said that when I grew up and earned money by my voice and music, then I could pay him back,” said Grandfather. “My Mother could hardly believe her ears!”

“Oh, Grandfather—and that was how you became such a famous singer and musician!” cried John. “All because you went carolling one night, hungry and cold!”

“Yes. So now you know why like you, I love the old carol ‘Here We Come A-wassailing,’” said Grandfather. “Let’s call Mother and go to the piano and sing it together, shall we? And I shall remember again the time when I too went ‘wassailing’ years and years ago!”



“He wanted my Mother to let me learn singing and music and to have my voice trained. My Mother could hardly believe her ears!”