

Candleman

A Christmas Miracle

Harry was restless like most young children at this time. He looked once again at the Christmas tree and the Advent Calendar with three more doors yet to open, and then sat down in front of the Christmas Crib he and mother had assembled. 'The Christmas miracle', he said aloud.

'What's that ?' his mother called from the kitchen.

Harry got up and went out to her. She had her hands in a bowl of water, peeling potatoes. 'I was looking at the crib,' he explained. 'I said, the 'Christmas miracle'. That's what Miss Carter said it was.'

'I could do with a Christmas miracle,' mother replied. Ever since Grandad had been for lunch she had been in a bad mood. She peeled the potatoes with such force you could imagine tears coming out of every eye. 'But it'll take more than a miracle to shift your Grandad,' she sighed.

Harry went back into the sitting room. He sat thoughtfully for a little while. Miss Carter had said Jesus' being born was a miracle. She called their Crib the 'Christmas Miracle'. Amy Roberts who always asked questions wanted to know what a miracle was. Everybody knew what a miracle was, except it's not something you can say in words. Miss Carter told them a miracle was something God does that we can't do - like Mary having God's baby. It's something ordinary,' she said, 'done in a special way at the best time which changes everything.' Amy had nodded as though she agreed with Miss Carter, but Harry thought she probably didn't understand it anymore than he did. Anyhow, what that had to do with Grandad he wasn't sure. He knew Mum was cross with Grandad. She wanted him to come and live in the empty bungalow next door, but he wouldn't. He preferred to stay in his little cottage down by the river. 'That's what she means !' Harry thought he understood now. 'A miracle ! God moving Grandad when Mum couldn't. But what if Grandad really didn't want to go. Mary had said, 'all right then' when God wanted to work a miracle for her. How could God do something ordinary in a special way for Grandad.'

It was all too much for a nine year old mind. Harry turned on the television. Christmas seemed so far away. He had watched for only a few minutes, when Mum called him from the kitchen. 'Harry,' she said

when he appeared. 'Grandad forgot to take his washing. Take it down to him for me before it gets dark. It looks as though it's going to rain again before long. If the water's coming out, you come back straight away, mind.'

Harry was pleased to be able to go down to Grandad's cottage. Usually Grandad asked him to, but he had stormed out without saying anything when Mum had shouted at him. It wasn't very far to the cottage. Harry walked through their little estate of houses, over the stile and down the lane through the wood to the river. He was amazed to see the river. The water was right up to the top of the banks and flowing very fast. He turned off the lane as it approached the low bridge and took the path along the river bank to grandad's cottage.

It was a tiny cottage. The garden looked bare now, but in the summer Grandad always had lots of beautiful flowers in. Grandad said he had lived here for over sixty years and a lot of those with grandma before she died. 'I'm not moving from my home till I have to.' Harry remembered him saying that to Mum. 'You'll have to carry me out.' He was not sure what that meant and did not warm to the picture of Grandad struggling while Mum and Dad pulled him through the front door.

Arriving at the cottage Harry was surprised to find the back door shut. He knocked and waited. There was no sound. Perhaps Grandad had gone to the Church across the river. 'It's that old church you don't want to leave,' Mum had shouted at him. 'You almost live there, cleaning and polishing brass, and all for a few old ladies to look at once a fortnight!' Grandad did spend a lot of time at the Church. Harry often went with him. Grandad looked after it, and in the summer was always cutting the grass or the hedges. 'I like to be here,' Grandad had said once. 'It's God's house and I feel very close to him when I'm here.' Harry remembered how happy he had looked when he said that.

Harry went down the long garden to grandad's garage and shed. He was not there. He went inside the long shed, switched on the light and put the bag of clean washing on Grandad's workbench. All around him were the familiar smells of wood and candlegrease. Grandad was always making things of wood, and making candles. He made candles for lots of people in the village. They really were beautiful with different coloured patterns and wax shapes in them. Harry looked for the Christmas candle, but of course it would be at the Church. Grandad always made a

special Christmas candle for the church. It stood on the side of the altar, gold and green and red with a white centre like a spire. Grandad always lit it at the midnight service on Christmas Eve. Harry had gone with him and Mum last year and watched.

Suddenly, the light went out. Harry tried the switch, being careful to turn it off again. The power had gone. He could not see much in the shed now. It had become dark quite quickly. He opened the door. The rain suddenly thundered on the shed roof. It fell in torrents and in no time at all there was a huge puddle at the shed door. Harry pulled it shut again and waited in the dark. In a while the noise eased and Harry decided he would have to go now. As he ran up the garden path, pulling his hood firmly over his head, he saw a river of water ahead of him. The river itself was over its banks and flooding into the garden.

Harry was frightened. He had never seen the river like this. He ran along the higher ground splashing through water till he reached the roadway leading to the bridge. The rain had stopped but now it was getting darker. He wondered where Grandad could be. He ran to the bridge to see if there was a light in the church. The waters roared under the bridge. He knew he had to get back home before it was really dark.

Headlights cut through the gloom. A car was turning at the end of the lane. The lights swept round again as the car reversed. Harry had turned his head from the glare. In a flash he saw the church and the lane to it from the bridge - and the unmistakable colours of grandad's bright green and yellow scarf. 'I don't know how you can walk about in that old thing', Mum had scolded him.

The scarf was still around grandad's neck. From the brief moment of light Harry could see him sitting under the big oak tree on the path to the church. 'Shall I go home and get help,' Harry thought quickly. 'Or shall I go across the bridge to Grandad?' He couldn't leave Grandad. He ran across the bridge. The waters were already across the road the other side. In no time he was running up the path to the church calling, 'Grandad. Grandad !'

Grandad was very wet and cold. He had fallen and couldn't get himself up. 'My leg won't go' he told Harry. 'I thought I was here for good.' With Harry's help, he managed to get on his knees and pull himself up against the tree. 'We'll go to the church', he said. It took ages. They

stumbled along the path in the dark towards the looming black shape of the church. The wind blew showers of rain from the beech trees. Grandad was leaning so heavily on Harry he thought his shoulder would break.

At last they had Grandad half sitting in the church porch. 'The key's in my pocket,' he said. His voice sounded as though he was in pain. Harry soon found the key and had the heavy door open. It took a while for his eyes to get used to the dark. He felt his way in. He tried the light switch he remembered was just inside the door. There was still no power.

Now he had the job of getting Grandad inside. Another heavy storm of rain hammered on the roof. It was quite a struggle to get the old man down the two steps. But at last he was lay on a mat on the floor by the font. They were both shivering with the cold and Grandad was obviously in great pain. He told Harry where he could find some old curtains in the choir vestry. And see if you can find a candle and some matches in the drawer. Harry felt his way. After a long search he found the matches, but no candle. Striking matches he found the curtains and made his way back to Grandad. He wrapped both of them in the curtains.

'Couldn't you find any candles ?' Grandad sounded surprised. 'I know where your Christmas candle is,' said Harry. 'We can't light that,' Grandad snapped. 'I'll have to go back to get help,' Harry said. 'No !' Grandad spoke sharply again, then said. 'It's not safe. With this rain the water will be rising. It could be over the bridge now and in any case you can't see the way.'

'How will anyone know we're here ?' Harry asked. He was really frightened now. Mum knew I was going to the cottage. She won't know we're here !'

'You'll have to find the candles.' Grandad insisted.

'I'll have to light the Christmas candle' the boy pleaded.

Grandad said nothing.

'Please, Grandad.'

Grandad heard the panic in the boy's voice and went through that experience when many thoughts crowd into one single moment. Love battled with pride. 'I always light the Christmas candle.' He reasoned with himself. 'I've done it now every year since Rachel died.' He knew

he and the boy were getting colder. The pain in his leg was no easier. 'What if I'm not here to light the candle for the service? But I'm not going to be at the service anyway. I'm being stupid, but

'Grandad', said Harry, fighting back his tears. 'Grandad. Would it be better if I brought the candle.. and you lit it. !'

It was the tiny pinpoint to burst a great bubble of pride.

'Please, Grandad !' Harry whimpered after another long silence.

'No. You light it, Harry. You're right. Light it and take it up the tower steps to the window facing the village. Someone will soon see.'

By the time rescue came and Grandad and Harry were bundled into an ambulance, they were both exhausted. Dad was there too. Harry broke away from his hug, 'Dad, I must put the candle out and put it back on the table.' Dad wanted to do it for him, but Harry insisted. It seemed important to him.

Christmas afternoon, Mum came back from visiting Grandad. She flopped into an armchair, tired but smiling. 'It's a miracle', she said. 'He's changed. He's agreed to move out of the cottage. He even agreed that he's been stubborn and awkward !'

'The Christmas miracle'. said Harry. He couldn't put it all into words, but somehow he felt he understood what Miss Carter had said, 'Something ordinary, done in a special way at the right time which changes everything.' Grandad always said he felt God was real in the church and God had made a miracle - with a candle !