

The Magic of Carol Singing

1st December

This is a story from a long time ago, over a hundred years ago. It takes place in a small country village and is about two young boys called Daniel and David.

It was the day before Christmas Eve and Daniel and David were planning on going carol singing. They had been practising all the carols they knew and they hoped that by going round to all the houses in the village, they could make a little extra money for Christmas.

They started off at Dan's house, where they sang for Dan's mother. She said they sounded very nice and gave them a cake each to eat as they set off.

"Make sure you're polite and respectful," she said to them. "And if it starts to snow, don't stay out too long."

The boys were very excited about this.

"It would be wonderful if it snows," said David.

"Not so great if you get lost in the snow," said Dan's mother. "No one will be very pleased if we have to come out and look for you."

2nd December

Dan promised his mother they would be careful, and so they set off.

They started with the houses nearby, who were all pleased to see them. Dan and David sang their best carols and their audience told them they sounded very nice. But these were poor people who didn't have much money to spare, especially at Christmas, so the boys didn't mind that they collected just a few pennies. They knew that they could get more at the bigger houses in the village, and so they went there next.

3rd December

In the village, the shops were just beginning to close for the night and the last few people on the streets were making their way home. Inside the houses, lamps were being lit and fires kindled and everything looked very cosy. Through the windows, Dan and David could see the candles and holly decorations and hoped that the people inside were feeling as festive as their houses looked. When they knocked at the door of the first house and started singing, their voices sounded clear and bright in the peaceful evening. A mother opened the door to them and two young children peeped out from behind her skirts. They listened appreciatively, and at the end, the children clapped. The mother opened her purse and gave them some money; not a lot, but enough to make David and Dan happy. They thanked the family politely before moving onto the next house.

"If we go on like this, we'll make lots of money," said David.

4th December

And so they went on from house to house, singing all the carols they knew. Most people were pleased to see them. Some people gave them money, which they carefully collected in a special purse to share out later. Other people gave them nice things to eat, like mince pies and Christmas sweets. They ate these as they walked around.

They didn't stop until they came to the last house in the village. The Vicar and his family lived there, and they invited the boys in for a drink and a piece of cake. The vicar was interested to know what they were going to do with all the money they had made. When he heard that they were planning on using it to buy presents for their families, he approved, but he also said that he hoped they would remember the poor.

"After all, it is our Christian duty to help those who are in need at Christmas," he said.

"Well, we must be going now," said Dan, and he and David hurried out before the vicar could persuade them to give up some of their money.

5th December

"That was close," said Dan.

"All the same, I might give some of my money to the church collection," said David. "I don't need the money as much you."

"But you have more family to buy presents for," pointed out Dan. "You won't have any left after buying presents for all of them."

"Maybe not," admitted David. "Never mind. What shall we do now? It's getting very cold. Should we call it a day?"

Dan turned and looked up the hill behind them. In the distance, he could see a small light glowing.

"If you really want to do something worthwhile, we should go and sing for Mr and Mrs Allen," he said.

David looked puzzled. "How will that help them?" he asked. "They don't have much money to spare."

"We don't need to take their money," said Dan. "We'll just sing for them and see if they're alright. It must be quite hard for them living up there on the hill on their own."

"Good idea," said David. "But it does look as if it's going to snow soon."

"All the more reason to go quickly," said Dan. "Come on."

6th December

So the two boys raced each other up the path that led up the hill. Mr and Mrs Allen were an old couple who lived on the hillside in a small cottage. They were a quiet couple who kept themselves to their selves. Mr Allen was a shepherd and he spent long days in the fields with the sheep. Dan and David went up on the hills sometimes and walked past their cottage. If they saw Mr Allen out with the sheep, they would wave and he would wave back, but that was all. Once a week, Mrs Allen came down to the village to buy groceries but she never stayed very long. She got on with her shopping and didn't stop to gossip. Dan wondered if they ever found it hard living alone on the hillside.

7th December

Sure enough, as they climbed the hill, the snowflakes began to fall. It made the boys whoop with joy and they jumped around in delight. But the wind was blowing cold and fierce, so they ran the rest of the way to the cottage. Inside, just a single light was burning. Dan and David went up to the front door and knocked. Then, as was the way, they started singing, choosing "While Shepherds watched their flocks by night" in honour of Mr Allen's job. They had to sing quite loud over the wind.

At first, the door stayed closed and the boys couldn't hear any movement inside. They sang a little louder, but the door still didn't open, even when the carol came to an end.

"Maybe they're already in bed," whispered David. "I suppose Mr Allen has to get up early to look after the sheep."

"What shall we do?" asked Dan.

8th December

Just at that moment, they heard the sound of the door being unlocked from the inside. The boys waited, putting on their most friendly faces, and finally saw the face of Mr Allen peering out at them.

"Who's there?" he called in a croaky voice.

"Mr Allen," said David. "It's David Waltham. You know my father, the Squire. This is my friend Dan."

The door opened a bit wider. Mr Allen looked out. "Oh, so it is," he said. "What brings you up here this late in the day?"

"We came to sing to you," said David. "We've been carol singing all around the village and we didn't want to miss you out."

9th December

"Carol singing, eh?" said Mr Allen. "I used to do that when I was a boy. Yes, yes, I always liked carol singing. Well, let's hear you then."

Dan and David looked at each other and after a quick whispered discussion, they launched into "Noel", because it also mentioned the shepherds.

Mr Allen seemed to enjoy the carol. He stood smiling with his crooked old teeth. When the carol was done, he clapped his hands.

"Well done, well done," he said. "You sing very nicely, Master David. And it's good of you to come up here, in such bad weather too. Now, you wait here and I'll see what I have to give you."

"You don't need to give us anything," said Dan quickly. "We just wanted to wish you and Mrs Allen Merry Christmas."

"Is Mrs Allen there?" asked David. "I know my father will be pleased to know that I've seen you both."

"Oh, she's here, but she's not very well just at this moment," said Mr Allen.

10th December

Then, from behind him, they heard Mrs Allen calling. "Who's there, Jo? Who are you talking to?"

Mr Allen turned back into the cottage. "It's young Master David and his friend, come a-carol singing," he said. "Isn't that good of them, to remember us?"

"But it's snowing," Mrs Allen said. "Don't leave them outside in the cold. Bring them in."

So Mr Allen opened the door fully and ushered the boys in. Dan and David looked around at the cottage as they entered, but it was not easy to see much. Apart from a small fire burning in the grate and a couple of candles on the mantelpiece, it was very dark inside the cottage. Nor was it very much warmer than being outside. Looking around, blinking, they could just make out Mrs Allen, sitting in a rocking chair beside the fire. She was so wrapped up in blankets that they could just see her tiny head poking out. But they could see that she was smiling to see them.

11th December

"Master David," she said. "How good of you to come and see us like this. You'll have to excuse me but I haven't been very well recently. But don't let that worry you."

"We only came to sing you some carols," said David. "You don't need to give us anything."

"I do like a nice carol," said Mrs Allen. "Do you know the one about Joseph and the Cherry Tree? That was always my favourite."

"We'll sing it for you," said Dan. So he and David sang once more. Mr Allen sat down next to his wife, and Mrs Allen looked very happy as she listened. At the end, they both clapped.

"Oh, how nice," said Mrs Allen. "I wish we had something to give you."

"It really doesn't matter," said Dan. "Some people gave us mince pies, but we've already had lots of them, so I don't think we could eat any more."

"That's good, because we don't even have any mince pies to give you," said Mr Allen.

"No mince pies?" said David in surprise. His eyes were getting used to the dark and he took a good look around the cottage. "Mr Allen, I hope you don't mind me asking, but is anything wrong? Things don't seem right here."

"Well, to tell you the truth, things aren't so good for us this Christmas," said Mr Allen. And he went on to tell them a very sad story.

12th December

Mr and Mrs Allen had no children of their own, but they did have a nephew; he was the only son of Mrs Allen's brother, who was now dead, and the nephew, Jack, had no family except for the Allens. Jack lived in the city, but every year, at Christmas, he would travel to the village to spend some time with his Aunt and Uncle. But this year, they had had a letter from him to say that he was very ill and he wouldn't be able to come. Mr and Mrs Allen were very worried about Jack but they couldn't go to him because Mr Allen couldn't leave the sheep. Instead, they had taken all the money they had been saving for Christmas and sent it to Jack to help him while he was ill and speed his recovery. They had been very relieved to hear that he was getting better, but it had left them very short of money for themselves.

13th December

"Not that it matters, just for us," said Mrs Allen. "We don't need lots of money to celebrate Christmas."

"But things took a turn for the worse when Mrs Allen took ill," said Mr Allen. "I've been worried about her, but she won't let me send for the doctor."

"Doctors cost money," said Mrs Allen. "I don't need it."

"I wish you'd come to my father and asked for help," said David. As the shepherd, Mr Allen worked for the Squire. David was sure his father would have helped if he'd known the problem.

"Well, I haven't been so well myself, truth be told," said Mr Allen. "I've just about managed to look after the sheep, but not much else. If you speak to your father, Master David, you be sure to tell him that I have been tending to the sheep."

14th December

"Of course I will," said David. "Actually, Dan, we really should be going. We promised your mother not to stay out late. And it is snowing."

"Oh, I suppose so," said Dan, in surprise. He turned and whispered to David. "Shouldn't we stay and do something to help them?"

"I do want to help them but I'll explain outside," David whispered back. Then he spoke to the Allens. "We must be going now, but would it be alright if we came back tomorrow? After all, it is Christmas Eve tomorrow and that's a special day."

"You won't want to be traipsing all the way up here on Christmas Eve," said Mr Allen.

"Especially not if this snow sets in," said Mrs Allen.

"I don't mind all that," said David. "I know our cook has baked heaps of mince pies, and I'm sure Father wouldn't mind if I brought you some. It wouldn't be fair for us to have lots and you to have none."

"That's very kind of you," said Mrs Allen. "I've always said you were a good boy Master David."

15th December

David and Dan said goodbye and hurried out of the cottage. It was much colder and darker now, and they had to be very careful as they made their way down the hill.

"I think you must have a plan," said Dan. "Are you going to tell me what it is?"

"I was hoping you would help me," said David. "Listen, we made quite a lot of money from our carol singing. I don't mind what you do with your share of the money, but I'm going to use mine to buy some nice things for the Allens. I hate to think of them spending Christmas cold and lonely and with nothing nice to eat."

"That's just like you," said Dan. "You always want to help people. Of course I'll help you. But where do we start?"

"Meet me first thing in the morning, and I'll have a proper plan in place," said David. "I had better get home. My Father will be wondering where I am."

16th December

So the boys said good night and went off to their homes. Neither of them slept well that night, they were both worrying about the Allens. When Dan woke on Christmas Eve, he found that the village was buried under a thick blanket of snow. His mother had a nice fire warming the house and a breakfast of warm porridge, but it made Dan even more worried about the Allens in their cold, empty house.

He and David met outside David's house. They couldn't resist having a play in the snow, which was soft and thick and perfect for snowballs. Dan wanted to make a snowman, but David insisted that they had important things to do and should get on with them. So they found a sheltered spot in the garden and began to discuss their plans.

17th December

"This is all the money I made," said David, holding out the nice little hoard of pennies and shillings.

Dan took his money out of his pocket and added it to the pile. "Here, add mine," he said.

"You don't have to do that," said David. "You need it for yourself."

"I don't really need it," said Dan. "I'm not letting you give up all your money while I keep mine."

David's smile was beaming. "Thank you," he said. "Now, here's what we'll do. We'll split it up so we have some for each shop. This is for the butchers, this for the baker, this for the general store, this is for the coal man."

Dan counted up the money and frowned. "This isn't going to get us very much stuff," he said. "It's not enough money."

"Don't worry about that," said David with a mischievous twinkle in his eyes. "That's where my plan comes into action. Let's go to the butchers first."

18th December

It was quite busy in the butchers shop. There were quite a few customers collecting their orders for Christmas day. They were all quite surprised to see the boys entering the shop. Because David was the Squire's son, they made way for him, so David went up to the counter and spoke to the butcher.

"Good morning," he said in a loud voice. "Can you help me please? I want to know what nice meat I could get with this money." And he held out his hand with the money allocated for the butcher.

The butcher looked at the money, and then he looked at David in confusion. "Master David, I'm very happy to help you, but why would you be needing to buy meat? Your cook has already bought plenty of meat for your family."

19th December

"It's not for me," said David. "It's for Mr and Mrs Allen. I saw them yesterday. Mrs Allen hasn't been very well, and they've sent all their money to their nephew, so they haven't got anything for themselves. So Dan and I decided to help them with the money we made from our carol singing."

The butcher and his wife were very interested to hear what David had to say, and so were the other customers. David was made to tell his story again, which he happily did, giving more details about the Allens cold, miserable cottage and their lonely, hungry Christmas.

"That's not good to hear," said the butcher. "I want to help too." And the customers agreed. Soon, between all of them, they had added enough money to David's to have enough to buy a nice leg of lamb, some sausages and some bacon. David thanked them all profusely.

"Can I come back and collect it later?" he asked. "Dan and I are going back up to their house this afternoon."

"Of course you can, Master David," said the butcher. "What a good, kind boy you are."

20th December

As Dan and David left the shop, Dan laughed. "That's very clever," he said.

"I know," said David with a big grin. "Come on, let's go to the bakers next."

And so in the bakers, they went through the same thing again. Once again, the shop was busy with customers, who were all just as shocked to hear the sad case of the Allens. The boys' money would not have been enough to buy very much, but with donations from all everyone else, there was enough to buy bread, cakes and mince pies. David and Dan thanked everyone and promised to collect the provisions later that day. Then they went to the general store and did it all over again. David told his story over and over again, adding a little more detail each time. Dan noticed that Mrs Allen sounded a little bit more ill each time David told the story.

21st December

By midday, it seemed that they had told their tale to nearly everyone in the village and they had most of the things that Mr and Mrs Allen could possibly need for a very merry Christmas. But they had spent nearly all of their own money and they hadn't obtained any coal from the coal merchant. Dan suggested they go to the pub and buy some beer. David said he didn't think the Allens needed lots of beer, but Dan said they might be able to raise the money for coal in the pub. Sure enough, the men who were drinking in the pub, getting into the Christmas spirit early, were feeling generous and donated enough money to buy plenty of coal to keep the Allens warm all over Christmas.

22nd December

When the boys went back to collect all their shopping, they found a crowd of villagers waiting to help them. More people had heard about the Allens and had brought other things to help the poor old couple. There was tobacco for Mr Allen's pipe, sweets for Mrs Allen, and a new, warm quilt for their bed. And amongst them, David's father, the Squire, was waiting for the boys.

"You'd better tell me all about it too," he said.

So once again, David explained how he and Dan had gone up to the cottage to do some carol singing and had found the Allens in such a terrible state.

"I knew you'd want to help the, Father," said David. "But I thought it would be good if everyone in the village could help. Do you mind?"

"Of course not," said the Squire. "I'm very proud of you. And now it's my turn to help. I'll pay for the doctor to go up there and take a look at Mrs Allen. It's the least I can do."

"Thank you, Father," said David.

23rd December

So it wasn't just the two boys who went up the hill that afternoon, but a very big party from the village. They were loaded up with all the food and supplies for the Allens. It was much more than Dan and David's carol singing could have bought and far more than they could have carried. When they reached the cottage, everyone began singing carols. Mr and Mrs Allen came to the door in surprise and were astonished by what they saw.

"I said we'd come back," said David. "Some other people wanted to help, when they heard." And the villagers went into the cottage and laid out all the wonderful food on the table; the meat, the fresh bread, a fine Christmas pudding, a heap of mince pies, bottles of beer, fresh fruit and vegetables, gingerbread biscuits and even an iced Christmas Cake.

24th December

Mrs Allen was crying with happiness and Mr Allen went around everyone, shaking their hands and saying thank you, over and over again. Inside the cottage, the villagers set to building up the fire and lighting lamps and candles to make the place bright and warm again. They decorated the place with holly and mistletoe and filled the cupboards with all the supplies. When they were done, the cottage looked nothing like the dim, miserable place it had been the day before. Then the doctor arrived to take a look at both Mr and Mrs Allen and prescribed them some medicine which would help them get better. And the Squire announced that Mr Allen should take a rest over the Christmas period, so he would get someone else to look after the sheep until he was better.

"Thank you Sir," said Mr Allen. "I'm sure I just need a nice rest and I'll be able to look after the sheep again."

"That's good, because no-one else could do as good a job as you," said the Squire. "And I want you to promise me that if you ever need help again, you will come to me."

"That's very good of you, Sir," said Mr Allen. "I'm so grateful to you. And your son. None of this would have happened if he and his friend hadn't come up here yesterday."

"Yes, it's all thanks to carol singing," said Mrs Allen. "I always did like a nice carol."

And everyone agreed that David and Dan had done a very good job with their carol singing.

Merry Christmas