

Just Whistle And I'll Come

By Sarah Mather

For days the snow had fallen steadily, a menace to parents but ready to enrich the lives of the children. Now beneath a full moon and clear skies the children Of North Terrace gathered outside Gordon Parkers gate to be counted by Gordon.

"Thirteen, there's one missing who's not here!" he cried.

"I'm not," said Geordie McGregor in a muffled voice. Gordon laughed and said.

"You can say that again Geordie". His eyes went to each covered head. Suddenly he pounced and drew forward a little girl by the pom poms on her pixie hood. She got such a shock she dropped the big black handbag off her wrist into the snow. Gordon bent towards her and shouted in her ear.

"Where's your Sally?"

"She's keeping me muther company so lay off me hat!" Little Lottie picked up her bag and settled it on her wrist then she crossed her arms over her narrow chest and looked daggers at Gordon.

"Come on man lets start the game!" yelled Mattie Gallon.

"Aye It'll be time to finish before we start!" shouted Billy Armstrong. "Or there'll be an air raid or something." He blew hard on his fingers.

Delphine Waller said.

"You lads are hopeless you need me to organise you!"

"No" shouted the others all together.

Gordon gave a telling look towards Sally's gate, then, reluctant to lose his standing as their leader he gave way to the others, he pointed to the untouched snow in the middle of the terrace and cried.

"Forward!"

Together the children set about spoiling the Winter scene.

Little Lottie was eight and a bit of a bother so she was told to stay in the cul de sac and to make a snowball as big as herself. The others kept to the middle of the terrace where the snow was deepest and they could dive about in it and wallow in it, pelt each other and stuff it down warm necks.

A slide was made and when it was good and slippery it was left to the girls to play on while the boys made an igloo in the cul de sac. It didn't take long for there were six boys making it. When they'd finished they reckoned it was as good as any eskimo's for they'd made sure that all the soft blocks were patted firmly into place. They put their shovels behind the privet then stood looking at their masterpiece well satisfied.

At number eleven Sally Candlish sat on the fender pretending to read by the light of the fire. Her mother sat nursing Sybil the baby who was now fast asleep. Sally looked up at her mother and felt she knew why she stared into the flames so

sadly. She was worried that because John her eldest son had died in the war in some strange land the same might happen to her only other son Luke. He had told them in his last letter home that they could expect him sometime around Christmas and right up until Christmas morning they had waited for him. His leave was cancelled and they had heard nothing since and it was now two weeks later.

Sally's thoughts were interrupted by the whoops and cries of delight coming from behind the black out curtains. She laid her book downwards on her knees and put a finger in each ear then bent her head to her knees. She closed her eyes and again her thoughts returned to Christmas and the dark of Christmas morning. What joy to wake that morning, to reach out in the cold, fumble about and then grasp that stocking. Then lying away from her sleeping sisters on the very edge of the bed to eat an orange, an apple, and a tuppenny bar of chocolate. Then suddenly had come that knock which took her quickly from her bed to stand shaking on the cold landing. She bent over the banister and looked down upon her fathers fair head shining beneath the gaslight. He was holding a telegram. Her Mother called from the scullery.

"Who is it?"

Sally saw her Fathers shoulders straighten and he gave a glad little cry before answering.

"It's a telegram, Luke's leave has been cancelled!"

The lovely smells from the scullery and kitchen were drifting up

the stairs. This was to have been a special Christmas for her sisters Olive and Nancy who were in the A.T.S. were home for the weekend and Mary didn't have to go to work today. Her Mother had borrowed extra points to get the ingredients for a cake and a Christmas pudding. For dinner there was the meat ration saved for a fortnight to enable them to get a big piece of pork for today and there was sausage meat for the stuffing. Mmm pork! with lovely golden crinkly rind, even now she could smell it and taste it. Poor Luke he'd never know what he missed. Her toes curled on the cold oil cloth, she would suffer no more but would go back to bed. Then before she could move there was the sound of what could only be an iron pan rolling about the stone floor in the scullery. Her Father yelled something and she leaned over the bannister to hear.

"Well pick it up woman! What are you crying for, crying isn't going to bring him home."

"I know that."

"Been jittery and crying wont help him!"

"I know! I know, I just can't help it!" her Mother cried.

"He'll be back soon you'll see the war can't last much longer, we're winning."

The news had never been as bad, Sally realised her Father was talking just for talkings sake.

"I read the papers," her Mother sniffed.

"Then you'll know then what I say's true. Lord all mighty he'll be home for good and back at his job before you can turn around."

"Job!" her Mother said in a hard voice." Will his job still be there for him!"

"Of course! Don't be so pessimistic woman!"

"Places have been bombed, mens jobs have gone!"
her mother cried.

"Of course there'll be jobs! war brings change. Your lad has a trade now which is more than I got out of the first war."

"I wouldn't say you got nothing, you got gassed and you got a couple of medals that haven't seen the light of day." Then her mother cried out.

"Trade! Alex? A soldiers trade's killing!"

"It's kill or be killed in war Emma! There's no asking permission."

Sally heard the back door slam and running over the cold floor to the bedroom window she watched her Father hands clasped behind his back in that tell tale way walk slowly down the terrace.

Below in the kitchen her Mother turned on the wireless and a Christmas congregation from somewhere sang. 'O Come All Ye Faithful'.

Now another excited cry brought Sally back from her thoughts of Christmas morning. Then another whoop had her jumping

up from the fender and at the window pushing the black out curtain to one side. Delphine's head went whizzing by above the snowy bushes, then Rose and Dorothy, Violet, and Gordon, oh Gordon. Her heart beat faster.

"Sally come away from that window!" Her Mother said angrily. Sally lowered the curtain and said.

"The gaslight's not on so there's nothing to see."

"Sit down and read, try to be content." said her Mother returning her gaze to the fire.

Sally stood at her Mother's shoulder and looked down at her little sister, called the baby, though she was past three. Sybil she thought was too big to be nursed though she had been ill, she didn't seem to want to wake up somehow, she keeps making those funny slurping noises and screwing up her face and rolling her eyes.

"I wish she would stay awake," Sally whispered to her Mother.

"Well I don't!" hissed her Mother. "Sleep will do her more good than anything."

Sally sat down again on the top of the fender. She sighed heavily and her Mother gave her a look. Sally's eyes followed their shadows up the wallpaper to the ceiling where their shadows did battle with the bars on the grate and the dancing flames.

A snowball hit the window and startled her Mother, Sally pretended it hadn't happened.

"I bet you wish my father was here instead of me," she said. "Or Eva! or Lottie?"

"Your Father has his A.R.P. duty to do you know that. He's hardly ever in anyway these days". Sally saw her Mothers lips tremble a little.

"Your eyes are glistening in the firelight." she informed her Mother who closed her eyes a second and blinked.

"Would you like me to stand in the queue's tomorrow?, I will if you'd like."

"No! You must stay in the house. The weather's not likely to change now is it." Her Mother sighed. "You know your shoes take in so we'll have no talk about going out." Her voice softened when she said. "I'm going to try to get you a pair of wellingtons Coupons and funds allowing so hush Sally for now, be content."

It was a favourite word of her Mother's' content', how could she be content when that silly noise by those stupid children out there was driving her mad.

She put her chin on clenched fists.

"I'm lonely without Eva and Lottie." she said softly.

"Oh why Sally you have me here."

"Mm yes, Mother why do you hold Sybil so tightly. Do you think she will fall off your knee, would she not be better off in bed?"

"Not for a while," said her Mother who began rocking

gentle backwards and forwards. She looked at Sally and her look seemed to say, understand Sally.

Sally felt hot tears smart her eyes, she blinked them away as she turned her head to the window.

"Listen, just listen to them they'll waken the poor bairn up! Just listen Mother!" she ended wildly.

"Sally!"

Her Mother's eyebrows seemed to shoot up and her lips came tightly together. Sally moaned and buried her burning cheeks in the palms of her hands. Presently she said in a shaky voice.

"Shall I put the wireless on."

"No." said her Mother, "I'm weary of bad news, sick of hearing about bombing and folk been killed."

"Shall I put another shovel of coal on then."

"No love not yet awhile, there's not much left so lets save a good fire for when we're all in together."

"Would you like a cup of cocoa then?"

"No thank you Sally I would not!"

Sally went to sit at her Mother's feet, she laid her cheek against the apron that never seemed to come of these days. The smell of soap, dirt, and sweat came to her nostrils, she loved the smell because it was her Mother. Then just as she remembered from what seemed a long time ago her hair was being stroked gently and her Mother said softly.

"It wasn't just the fact that your shoes took in that

kept you here with me Sally. I needed you to stay by me."

Sally looked up at her and said in a rush of feeling.

"I know but please say I can go out! The snow wont last forever, it might rain or a bomb might drop and melt it,oh Mother let me go out!"

She stared up hopefully at her Mother in what seemed a long silence.

"Go on then, you've plagued me long enough but on your own head be it. Put a bit of cardboard over the holes in your shoes. When you get outside tell Eva and Lottie to come in."

Within minutes Sally stood before her Mother and her little sleepy headed sister who had now woke up. Sally was an incongruous sight. Paper peeped out of her shoes. Around her neck and tucked down the front of her coat was her eldest sister's white fox fur. Over her thick brown hair was the black balaclava that had belonged to her brother John. Over her wrists and knuckles was the tops of her Father's old socks. She looked down at her thin legs and grimaced when her eyes met her shoes. Remembering she'd been Titania in the school play before Christmas she tried to keep up appearances by bringing two tendrils of hair down on her brow from beneath the balaclava. She wriggled her fingers in front of her Mother and Sybil.

"There you see I'm alright," she turned to the wireless smiling, turned the knob and stood back to hear.

"Heavy losses are reported," Quickly Sally turned the wireless off.

She faced her Mother.

"I'm sorry I thought Music Hall or else Hippodrome might be on, oh I'm sorry!." With all the wisdom of her eleven years she retreated without looking back.

"Misery Mother misery that's what you are!" Sally let the sneck of the back door fall into place and turned around slowly. When she lifted her head she was looking at what had been a very ordinary back garden dug over for the winter. Now it shimmered gold through her tears. With tight fists she wiped away her tears and the snow became deicately blue in the moonlight. It was a magical place. The bottom of the thicket looked black against the snow and each twig was clearly interlaced with another. The air raid shelters facing one another were now caves, caves of crystal with icicles of Mother of Pearl. Her tree was loveliest of all, tall and slender and laden with snow blossom. The tree which last summer had protected her as she'd lain among it's branches and watched high above the leaves, searchlights chase each other across the sky.

"Oh there you are Sally! Are you coming to play?"

Sally looked down from the porch step to see her friend Rose.

"Yes I'm coming," Happily she stepped into the snow and followed Rose up the side path lifting the snow high in the air from the tops of her shoes. Before they reached the gate a figure

vaulted the hedge and landed in deep untouched snow in the front garden. It was Gordon who shook the snow off himself like a cheeky puppy would. His cap had fallen from his ginger hair, he picked it up from the snow put it on and flung back his scarf with a flourish.

"Ill met by moonlight proud Titania." He was never going to let her forget that fateful play he had seen at her school with his mother. She opened the gate and ran to the top of the slide as fast as the snow would allow her. Once there she slid down with arms held wide then fell willingly into the deep soft snow at the bottom.

Lottie was pushing a snowball as big as herself the work made harder because of the handbag over her wrist. Once this handbag had belonged to Nancy, one of the spoils of war now that Nancy was in the A.T.S., it had remained in Lotties care ever since. It contained all Lotties possessions and other people's as well!.

"I wont go in!" Lottie said defiantly when she saw Sally heading towards her.

"Ah go on you've been out long enough".

Lottie looked at Sally with suspicion.

"You had better go in my Mother wants you."

"No she doesn't!"

"Yes she does. Besides if you stay out here you'll turn into a pillar of snow." Looking at Lottie Sally could almost

believe her own words.

"No I wont fibber! Lottie put her arms around her snowball as far as they would go. She had that look on her face which said. What's mine is mine and I'll have to have a very good offer to give it up.

"Swap you!" said Sally.

"Wh..What for?" Lottie removed her arms they were so stiff they remained outstretched a little. She looked interested though her teeth were chattering and the flaxen hair on her brow looked dark it was so wet. Sally hesitated only a second.

"I've got three sweets left off my ration. They're under my pillow".

Lottie lifted her bag higher on her arm pulled up her mitts then moved heavy feet towards home. There were some things she loved better than snow.

"I'm coming back if they're not there!". she threatened.

"Goodbye sweets ," sighed Sally.

She looked around for Eva but she was not there. At least twenty children of all ages were playing around. She remembered her mother telling Eva off for letting boy's chase her, "they don't" Eva had said ,"I chase them!". So thought Sally that's were she'll be chasing the older boy's. She was thirteen after all.

The slide was now a silver path on which silent figures moved.

Once at the bottom, tired they would huff and puff their way back through the thick snow to slide again with arms outstretched , becoming to the watchful Sally strange, mystical beings in a snowy wonderland. No light escaped through blacked out windows to remind them of food or warmth or war. They played in a world of their own.

When clouds full of snow came flooding the sky there was only six of them left to huddle in the igloo. Two candles were lit, one held by Gordon, the other by Matty. They were packed so close that Sally felt the bony knees of Gordon scrape against her own. Sally fell in love with Gordon that night for ever. Not just because he was handsome but because he recited a poem, they had all recited a poem or sang a song, but Gordon as he said his kept his eyes aglow with candlelight on her, "Just whistle and I'll come to you my love."

The words went round and round in her head. The other boy's laughed at his poem and called him a sissy, he took off his cap and clipped them over the ears playfully and told them to remember he was their leader. Delphine sang "I vow to thee my country" with such fervour that she burst into tears. Sally consoled her by patting her wet shoulder until she stopped. Gordon told them all about his fathers adventures in North Africa with such gusto his candle went out which was just as well as Sally had been watching the snow melting above them for ages. She told them about a wedding that was going to happen in her family. The bride in white

the bridesmaids in violet, the groom in khaki. Then Mattys candle went out too. They were too stiff and cold to move straight away and were still huddled together when the roof caved in around them. It was darker now , the moon was skidding through mountainous dark clouds and the wind was so cold it took their breath away. They pulled one another up into standing positions only half laughing they stamped their feet and shook their hands until life returned to their aching limbs.

Then it was gone , the fun, the joy, the sound of flirty laughter. Gordon stayed with Sally until his mother came out and took him back into the house. He had objected strongly and had been clipped over the head with his wet cap several times. Sally thought of her own mother who had hit her only once. Why doesn't she call me in , doesn't she care that I'm all alone in the dark?. But then she doesn't know.

Sally was putting ash over the slide for it had become too slippery and the men coming out to work in the shipyards early in the morning wouldn't take it too kindly if they fell on it and it made them lose work. It began to snow again, this time it was not the soft snow of days gone past but biting snow and hail. Above, the moon was playing hide and seek through wild grey clouds. The terrace was a shambles, the snow now ash covered was grey and dingy. Sally turned her head quickly and put the shovel down, she had heard something over there close to the bushes in the corner.

The fur around her neck was matted and frozen and was a weight around her. The cold pierced her through her thin coat and brought a smarting to her eyes. She should go in, yet she waited. From an upstairs window behind her she heard the angry voice of Gordons mother. In front of her she heard the scrunching of boots on snow. Then just for a moment through hail and snow the moon escaped the clouds and it's light fleetingly touched a khaki figure weighed down with his pack.

"Luke! is it you Luke?" she cried.

"Sally! what the devil are you doing out here alone!".

Now her feet felt free to move and she struggled through the deeper snow to reach him.

"You promised to come home for christmas!".

He dropped his pack and straightened his back...

"Are you telling me off before I get in, I've come three hundred miles to see you all", he plonked his tin hat on her head "and the buses were off when I got to the Central Station".

"You've walked all that way! poor thing, never mind I'll make you a nice hot cup of cocoa".

As she had spoken the words had sounded strange, she felt breathless and yet felt happy enough to sing. At the gate they heard a whistle, Sally looked up the terrace and said to Luke,

"Will you go in I'll only be a few minutes I need to get the bucket and shovel".

Sally stood beneath Gordon's window, she could barely see him as he leaned out.

"I heard you whistle so I came" said Sally shyly.
He too was shy.

"You were all alone in the terrace. I didn't want you to feel lonely, I was going to climb out of the window, me mother caught me!".

"My brothers just come home, isn't that good. Tonight's been lovely hasn't it?" there was no answer, she peered up to see a stout figure pulling Gordon away from the window.

"Your my girl Sally Candlish!..." Gordon cried as he disappeared into the blackness of his room.

A small fall of snow was dislodged from the sill above onto Sally's up turned face as the window shut.

At home that night it was just as Sally knew it would be once Luke was home, her father was happy, the shadows seemed to slip away from her mothers eyes and the war crept away too.