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# A Christmas Song

by H E Bates

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## About the author

Herbert Ernest Bates was born in 1905 in Rushden, Northamptonshire, in the Midlands of England. Known as 'H E' from a young age, Bates was educated at Kettering Grammar School and after leaving, he worked as a journalist and a clerk on a local newspaper.

From an early age, Bates knew that he wanted to be a writer. He published his first book, *The Two Sisters*, when he was 20. In the next 15 years, he acquired great popularity with his stories about English country life. He loved the rural areas of the Midlands and went for long walks there, often at night.

In 1931, Bates married Madge Cox, whom he had known since he was a boy. They moved to Kent where they raised their four children. Their house, where Bates lived all his life, had an acre of garden in which he took great pleasure, and he also wrote books about plants and flowers.

During World War II, Bates was a Squadron Leader in the Royal Air Force. He was commissioned by the RAF to write stories about the war. Some of his stories of service life, such as *How Sleep the Brave* (1943), were written under the pseudonym of 'Flying Officer X'. They were first published in the *News Chronicle* and later appeared in book form as *The Greatest People in the World* and *How Sleep the Brave*. Bates was then posted to the Far East. He wrote two novels about Burma, *The Purple Plain* and *The Jacaranda Tree*, and another set in India, *The Scarlet Sword*.

After the war, Bates continued to write, and produced, on average, one novel and a collection of short stories every year. In 1958, *The Darling Buds of May* was published, the first in a series of popular novels about a country family called the Larkins. After Bates died, this book was made into a TV series by his son, Richard. Many other stories were adapted for TV and others for films. The most famous are, perhaps, *The Purple Plain* starring Gregory Peck, and *The Triple Echo*.

H E Bates died in 1974, having written more than 100 novels and collections of short stories. He also wrote essays, plays and a story for children, *The White Admiral* (1968). Described by Graham Greene as 'Britain's successor to Chekhov', he was successful and respected in his lifetime. However, perhaps his greatest success came after his death with the TV adaptations of *The Darling Buds of May* and its sequel, *My Uncle Silas*. His works have been translated into many languages.

## About the story

*A Christmas Song* was first published in 1950 in *Woman's Own* magazine. In 1951, it was included in the collection *Colonel Julian and Other Stories* under the title *A Song to Remember*.

## Background information

### Evensford

The town where the story takes place is based on Bates's home town of Rushden. It is his first use of the name which appears again in some of his later fiction.

Evensford is an industrial Midlands town with *many hilly little streets above the river*, and a gasworks<sup>1</sup>. There must also be a leather factory, as the Williamson family in the story are successful leather manufacturers.

### Music

At the time the story was written, music shops sold sheet music and gramophone records. In the shop where Clara works, there are *gramophone cubicles*, where customers can listen to records before buying them. Clara sells *jazz sheet music* to the factory workers, and the author mentions Danny Kaye, an American comedy actor who had several 'hits' in the 1950s with light-hearted songs for children. These would have been particularly popular at Christmas.

### Schubert

Franz Schubert (1797–1828) was an Austrian composer. He wrote opera, symphonies, liturgical music and over 600 *lieder*. A *lied* is a European romantic song, typically arranged for a single singer and piano. The song which features in the story is Schubert's *Standchen*.

<sup>1</sup> a factory where gas for fuel is produced

## Summary

It may help you to know something about what happens in the story before you read it. Don't worry, this summary does not tell you how the story ends!

Clara is a talented young music teacher who works in a music shop in a small Midlands town. Every Christmas, she hopes that it will snow so that the town will look prettier. She has a sister, Effie, who is not so talented but is much more popular with the young men of the town.

Every Christmas, the Williamsons, a family of successful leather manufacturers, hold a big party to which Clara, Effie, and their parents are always invited. Clara decides that this year, she will not go, as she never enjoys it. Effie insists that she must go and warns Clara that the Williamsons will force her to go in the end.

On the night of the party, a young man comes to the music shop. He wants a particular song but he cannot remember the name or the composer. Clara sings several songs, but none is the correct one. She asks if it is a love song and the man says it is. Clara encourages the man to return to the shop if he remembers the tune.

At nine o'clock, Clara is sitting at the piano in her dressing gown<sup>2</sup> when one of the Williamson sons, Freddy, arrives and insists on being let in. Clara gives him a drink and he tries to kiss her and touch her. Clara finally agrees to go to the party with him. As they are leaving, the young man (who had been looking for the song) appears again at the door. He has remembered some of the words to the song. Clara sits at the piano and plays the song, which is by Schubert. Freddy is angry and goes out to sit in the car. Clara finds the record for the young man, who is very grateful. Will Clara go to the party?

## Pre-reading exercises

### Key vocabulary

This section will help you familiarise yourself with some of the more specific vocabulary used in the story. You may want to use it to help you before you start reading, or as a revision exercise after you have finished the story.

2 a robe like a long loose coat that you typically wear before dressing

## Vocabulary connected with music

Clara works in a music shop in England around the mid-20th century. Here is some of the vocabulary from the story which is related to music.

1 Match the words in the box below to the correct definitions.

1 voice-training	a) to make musical sounds with your lips closed
2 sheet-music	b) (old fashioned) a machine for playing records
3 to hum	c) one of the sections in a line of music; each contains several notes
4 carol	d) a series of musical notes in a fixed order from the lowest to the highest, or the highest to the lowest
5 bar	e) learning how to sing
6 record	f) a traditional song sung at Christmas
7 gramophone	g) a large round black piece of plastic containing music or other sounds
8 scale	h) music printed on pages that do not form part of a book

2 Complete this paragraph with an appropriate word from the box above.

At Christmas, the most popular songs are, of course, .....  
When I was a child in the 50s, I remember my mother .....  
'Silent Night' as she moved about the kitchen. She had had no  
professional ..... but she was an excellent singer and  
pianist. Every day she practised her ....., playing from low  
notes to high and back again. On Christmas Day, she would take  
out the ..... from the drawer, sit down at the piano and  
play the first ..... of our favourite songs. The whole family  
would then break into song. When mother was tired, she would  
stop playing and we would open up the ..... and put on the  
..... we had bought each other for Christmas.

## Winter weather

It is Christmas time in the story and Clara is hoping for snow. The vocabulary below describes different aspects of the weather and the winter landscape.

3 Look at the definitions in the box below, then answer the questions that follow.

**frost** a thin white layer of ice that looks like powder and forms on things outside when the weather is very cold  
**crisp** (adj) firm, dry and fresh  
**to glisten** if something glistens, it shines because it is wet or covered with oil  
**to glitter** to shine with a lot of small quick flashes of light  
**to sparkle** to shine with small points of reflected light  
**to crackle** to make continuous short sounds like the sound of wood burning

Look at the verbs which mean *to shine*? Which of the verbs would you use to describe the following:

- pieces of broken glass in the sunlight
- someone's skin after they have been running fast
- the noise of frost under your feet

## Verbs describing actions

The factory owner's son, Freddy Williamson, is portrayed as a clumsy<sup>3</sup>, loud and vulgar young man. Look at these verbs which are used to describe his actions.

**to bawl** to shout in a loud angry way  
**to stamp** to put your feet down hard and noisily on something  
**to grasp** to take and hold something or someone tightly  
**to smack** to make a loud noise with your lips and tongue  
**to stump** to walk hitting the ground hard with your feet as you go  
**to blunder** to move in a careless way, creating problems as you go  
**to seize** to suddenly and firmly hold something or someone by a part of their body or clothing

4 Now find the verbs in the story, and write an example of how each is used below.

to bawl *Freddy Williamson had bawled out 'Good old Clara!'*

to stamp

3 moves in a way that is not graceful, and breaks things or knocks against them

to grasp

to smack

to stump

to blunder

to seize

5 Write your own sentences, using the verbs above.

## Colloquial expressions and 'slang'

The author uses a lot of colloquial expressions and 'slang' in this story. 'Slang' describes words or expressions that are very informal and are not considered suitable for more formal situations. Some slang is used only by a particular group of people. In this story, the author has used slang expressions so that the characters' speech sounds colloquial and therefore is more authentic and real. Many of these expressions are still used in everyday English. Some examples are listed below. Some have a similar meaning; some are rude. You may have heard them before in general conversation or in films.

**go to hell** *slang, impolite* used for telling someone angrily to stop annoying you  
**fair enough** *colloquial, polite* used for saying that you understand and accept what is being said  
**damn** + adjective/noun, used for emphasis or intensifying, meaning 'really' or 'very'. This is colloquial, rather than slang, and is still used in modern English. For example: – 'damn cheek' used to describe someone's behaviour or comment as rude or disrespectful; – 'damn glad' means very pleased  
**cool** *slang* calm, relaxed, fashionable; used as a compliment by young people; (in this story, it means 'very impertinent/cheeky'). Other modern uses for the word 'cool' include 'be cool' and 'stay cool' meaning to tell someone to be or remain calm; and 'cool!' meaning 'fine' or 'okay'  
**Let the blinds up!** *slang; unusual* a way of telling someone to lose their inhibitions; used to encourage someone to relax and be more open  
**Let yourself go!** *slang* allow yourself to feel and express emotions without trying to control them  
**Snap out of it!** *slang, colloquial* make an effort to stop being unhappy, upset, overly thoughtful or worried  
**Get ready!** *colloquial* prepare yourself (to go out, to run a race, etc)  
**Good old ...** *colloquial, friendly* used before the name of someone or something that always does what you want or expect  
**How did it go?** *colloquial* enquiring about an event in the past, perhaps something that the person was worried about  
**awful / awfully** + adjective/noun *old-fashioned* used for emphasis, eg 'an awful bind', 'awfully silly' meaning 'very'

**6 Choose one of the expressions above to complete the following sentences.**

Bill was daydreaming again, staring into the distance. He was obviously worried about something. '.....!', said Laurie. Bill had had a shower and was still wearing his wet towel around his waist. 'And for goodness sake, Bill, .....! 'We're going to be late!' But Bill did not want to hurry, and he was sick of listening to Laurie complaining. '.....!' he mumbled. 'All right, all right!' said Laurie, '.....! You've been so tense lately. You need to relax – let's get to this party and you can ..... . You know you need it!' Bill knew she was right – he should relax and have some fun. '....., sorry', he said. And he went upstairs to get dressed. '..... Bill', said Laurie, '– always gets ready eventually!'

### Main themes

Before you read the story, you may want to think about some of its main themes. The questions will help you think about the story as you are reading it for the first time. There is more discussion of the main themes in the *Literary analysis* section after the story.

#### Life in a small, industrial town

Bates gives us a brief but convincing portrayal of life in Evensford and its class structure. The factory workers are described as *long columns of working class mackintoshes*; the *gentlemen* of the town play billiards and card games in the club; the factory owners, in this case the Williamsons, are prosperous and dominate the social scene with their annual Christmas party.

**7 As you read the story, ask yourself:**

- How does a young woman like Clara fit into the social structure of Evensford?
- Would Clara be happier living somewhere else?

#### Cultural aspirations

Clara longs for a change from the monotony of life in Evensford. She is a trained musician but there are not many opportunities for her to share her interests. In general, the customers at the shop are not very unadventurous, and always ask for the same type of music. Her songs are not fully appreciated or understood. She escapes in her mind by imagining Evensford as an Alpine<sup>4</sup> town covered in snow, and herself as a singer of Mozart to an appreciative audience.

**8 As you read the story, ask yourself:**

- Is Bates's portrayal of the limitations of small-town culture convincing?
- What does he suggest about the cultural aspirations of most of the people in Evensford?

#### Romance

When a young man appears in the music shop asking for a love song, Clara makes every effort to help him. He is shy and admires her talent. He is, in fact, the complete opposite of Freddy Williamson, the factory owner's son who tries to seduce Clara in a clumsy and insensitive fashion. Clara does not enjoy Freddy's attentions, but she does not completely reject them either. She lives in a world of her own, in which everything is more refined and romantic.

**9 As you read the story, ask yourself:**

- What kind of person does Clara want to fall in love with?
- Is the young man who comes to the shop attracted to Clara?

#### Christmas

The story takes place at Christmas time, a festival full of traditions – religious, cultural and family-orientated. It is a time associated with 'good will', peace, and hope. It is also associated with being kind to others. Christmas celebrates the birth of Jesus and many people go to church and sing carols to mark the occasion. Traditionally, Christmas is an occasion for families to share food and gifts, and spend time together. It is also a time of parties and festivities. Some families enjoy a quiet Christmas, and prefer to spend time together at home; others prefer to go out and celebrate with friends and neighbours. In the US

<sup>4</sup> relating to high mountains, particularly those in the European Alps

and the UK, 'a white Christmas' is a traditional image, and people enjoy the anticipation of waiting to see if there will be snow or not.

The story describes various features and styles of Christmas, and we see it from various points of view – Clara wonders about snow, and for her, it's a time of longing and wondering about the future. Freddy sees it as an excuse to have a party. Effie can get attention for her singing. As you read the story, think about the different attitudes and atmospheres of Christmas that Bates describes.



## A Christmas Song

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She gave lessons in the long room above the music shop. Her pupils won many examinations<sup>5</sup> and were afterwards very successful at local concerts and sometimes in giving lessons in voice-training to other pupils. She herself had won many examinations and everybody said how brilliant she was.

Every Christmas, as this year, she longed for snow. It gave a **transfiguring** gay<sup>6</sup> distinction to a town that otherwise had none. It lifted up the squat<sup>7</sup> little shops, built of red brick with upper storeys of terra-cotta<sup>8</sup>; it made the roofs down the hill like glistening cakes; it even gave importance to the stuffy gauze-windowed club where local gentlemen played billiards and solo whist<sup>9</sup> over **meagre** portions of watered whisky. One could imagine, with the snow, that one was in Bavaria or Vienna or the Oberland, and that horse-drawn sleighs, of which she read in travel guides, would glide gracefully down the ugly hill from the gasworks. One could imagine Evensford, with its many hilly little streets above the river, a little Alpine town. One could imagine anything. Instead there was almost always rain and long columns of dreary working-class mackintoshes<sup>10</sup> floating down a street that was like a **dreary** black canal. Instead of singing Mozart to the snow she spent long hours selling jazz sheet-music to factory workers and earned her reward, at last, on Christmas Eve, by being bored at the Williamsons' party.

Last year she had sung several songs at the Williamsons' party. Some of the men, who were getting **hearty** on mixtures of gin

5 an unusual way of saying *pass an examination*; Bates may be suggesting that Clara has won competitions

6 *old-fashioned*: happy and excited

7 wide and not very tall or high

8 a brown-red clay used for making bowls, plates, roofs and houses

9 a card game

10 *old-fashioned*: a coat that stops you getting wet in the rain



and port wine, had applauded in the wrong places, and Freddy Williamson had bawled out 'Good old Clara!'

She knew the men preferred Effie. Her sister was a very gay person although she did not sing; she had never passed an examination in her life, but there was, in a strange way, hardly anything you felt she could not do. She had a character like a chameleon<sup>11</sup>; she had all the love affairs. She laughed a great deal, in rippling infectious scales, so that she made other people begin laughing, and she had large violet-blue eyes. Sometimes she laughed so much that Clara herself would begin weeping<sup>12</sup>.

This year Clara was not going to the Williamsons' party; she had made up her mind. The Williamsons were in leather<sup>13</sup>; they were very successful and had a large early Edwardian house with bay-windows and corner cupolas<sup>14</sup> and bathroom windows of stained glass overlooking the river.

They were fond of giving parties several times a year. Men who moved only in Rotarian<sup>15</sup> or golf circles turned up with wives whose corset suspenders<sup>16</sup> could be seen like bulging pimples under sleek dresses. About midnight Mrs Williamson grew rowdy and began rushing from room to room making love<sup>17</sup> to other men. The two Williamson boys, George and Freddy, became rowdy too, and took off their jackets and did muscular and noisy gymnastics with the furniture.

At four o'clock she went upstairs to close the windows of the music-room and pull the curtains and make up the fire. It was raining in misty delicate drops and the air was not like Christmas. In the garden there were lime trees and their dark red branches, washed with rain, were like glowing veins in the deep blue air.

11 someone who changes their opinions, ideas or behaviour to fit any situation; a type of lizard whose skin changes colour to match the colours around it

12 crying because you are unhappy or experience another strong emotion

13 in the leather manufacturing trade

14 a part of a roof shaped like half a ball, often covered in shiny material

15 Rotary Club: a local club that is part of Rotary International, a charity whose members are business people or local people

16 the buttons on a woman's stockings

17 old-fashioned: to flirt or speak in a romantic way to someone

As she was coming out of the room her sister came upstairs. 'Oh! There you are. There's a young man downstairs who wants a song and doesn't know the name.'

'It's probably a Danny Kaye<sup>18</sup>. It always is.'

'No it isn't. He says it's a Christmas song.'

'I'll come,' she said. Then half-way downstairs she stopped; she remembered what it was she was going to say to Effie. 'By the way, I'm not coming to the party,' she said.

'Oh! Clara, you promised. You always come.'

'I know; but I'm tired, and I don't feel like coming and there it is.'

'The Williamsons will never let you get away with it,' her sister said. 'They'll drag you by force.'

'I'll see about this song,' she said. 'What did he say it was?'

'He says it's a Christmas song. You'll never get away with it. They'll never let you.'

She went down into the shop. Every day people came into the shop for songs whose names they did not know. 'It goes like this,' they would say, 'or it goes like that.' They would try humming a few notes and she would take it up from them; it was always something popular, and in the end, with practice, it was never very difficult.

A young man in a brown overcoat with a brown felt hat and an umbrella stood by the sheet-music counter. He took off his hat when she came up to him.

'There was a song I wanted –'

'A carol?' she said.

'No, a song,' he said. 'A Christmas song'

He was very nervous and kept rolling the ferrule<sup>19</sup> of the umbrella on the floor linoleum. He wetted his lips and would not look at her.

'If you could remember the words?'

'I'm afraid I can't.'

'How does it go? Would you know that?'

He opened his mouth either as if to begin singing a few notes

18 a song by Danny Kaye, the American singer and comedian

19 a piece of metal or rubber fixed to the end of a stick to prevent it being damaged

or to say something. But nothing happened and he began biting his lip instead.

'If you could remember a word or two,' she said. 'Is it a new song?'

'You see, I think it's German,' he said.

'Oh,' she said. 'Perhaps it's by Schubert?'

'It sounds awfully silly, but I simply don't know. We only heard it once,' he said.

He seemed about to put on his hat. He ground the ferrule of the umbrella into the linoleum<sup>20</sup>. Sometimes it happened that people were too shy even to hum the notes of the song they wanted, and suddenly she said:

'Would you care to come upstairs? We might find it there.'

Upstairs in the music room she sang the first bars of one or two songs by Schubert. She sat at the piano and he stood respectfully at a distance, leaning on the umbrella, too shy to interrupt her. She sang a song by Brahms and he listened hopefully. She asked him if these were the songs, but he shook his head, and finally, after she had sung another song by Schubert, he blurted out:

'You see, it isn't actually a Christmas song. It is, and it isn't. It's more that it makes you think of Christmas –'

'Is it a love song?'

'Yes.'

She sang another song by Schubert; but it was not the one he wanted; and at last she stood up. 'You see, there are so many love songs –'

'Yes, I know, but this one is rather different somehow.'

'Couldn't you bring her in?' she said. 'Perhaps she would remember?'

'Oh! No,' he said. 'I wanted to find it without that.'

They went downstairs and several times on the way down he thanked her for singing. 'You sing beautifully,' he said. 'You would have liked this song.'

'Come in again if you think of it,' she said. 'If you can only think of two or three bars.'

Nervously he **fumbled** with the umbrella and then quickly

<sup>20</sup> a hard flat substance with a shiny surface used for covering floors

put on his hat and then as quickly took it off again. He thanked her for being so kind, raising his hat a second time. Outside the shop he put up the umbrella too sharply, and a breeze, catching it, twisted him on the bright pavement and bore him out of sight.

Rain fell gently all evening and customers came in and shook wet hats on bright pianos. She walked about trying to think of the song the young man wanted. Songs by Schubert went through her head and became mixed with the sound of carols from cubicles<sup>21</sup> and she was glad when the shop had closed.

Effie began racing about in her underclothes, getting ready for the party. 'Clara, you can't mean it that you're not coming.'

'I do mean it. I'm always bored and they really don't want me.'

'They love you.'

'I can't help it. I made up my mind last year. I never enjoy it, and they'll be better without me.'

'They won't let you get away with it,' Effie said. 'I warn you they'll come and fetch you.'

At eight o'clock her father and mother drove off with Effie in the Ford<sup>22</sup>. She went down through the shop and unbolted the front door and let them out into the street. The stars are shining,' her mother said. 'It's getting colder.' She stood for a second or two in the doorway, looking up at the stars and thinking that perhaps, after all, there was a touch of frost in the air.

'Get ready!' Effie called from the car. 'You know what the Williamsons are!' and laughed with high infectious scales so that her mother and father began laughing too.

After the car had driven away she bolted the door and switched off the front shop bell. She went upstairs and put on her dressing-gown and tried to think once again of the song the young man had wanted. She played over several songs on the piano, singing them softly.

At nine o'clock something was thrown against the sidestreet

<sup>21</sup> a small enclosed area in a room, separated from the rest of the room by thin walls or curtains

<sup>22</sup> a make of car

window and she heard Freddy Williamson bawling:

'Who isn't coming to the party? Open the window.'

She went to the window and pulled back the curtain and stood looking down. Freddy Williamson stood in the street below and threw his driving gloves at her.

'Get dressed! Come on!'

She opened the window.

'Freddy, be quiet. People can hear.'

'I want them to hear. Who isn't coming to whose party? I want them to hear.'

He threw the driving gloves up at the window again.

'Everybody is insulted!' he said. 'Come on.'

'Please,' she said.

'Let me in then!' he bawled. 'Let me come up and talk to you.'

'All right,' she said.

She went downstairs and let him in through the shop and he came up to the music room shivering, stamping enormous feet.

'Getting colder,' he kept saying. 'Getting colder.'

'You should put on an overcoat,' she said.

'Never wear one,' he said. 'Can't bear to be stuffed up<sup>23</sup>.'

'Then don't grumble because you're starved to death.'

He stamped up and down the room, a square-boned young man with enormous lips and pink flesh and small poodle<sup>24</sup>-like eyes, pausing now and then to rub his hands before the fire.

'The Mater<sup>25</sup> sends orders you're to come back with me,' he said, 'and she absolutely won't take no for an answer.'

'I'm not coming,' she said.

'Of course you're coming! I'll have a drink while you get ready.'

'I'll pour you a drink,' she said, 'but I'm not coming. What will you have?'

23 wrapped up tightly so that you cannot breathe

24 a dog with thick curly fur

25 *old-fashioned*: mother

'Gin' he said. 'Clara, sometimes you're the most awful bind<sup>26</sup>.'

She poured the drink, not answering. Freddy Williamson lifted the glass and said:

'Sorry, didn't mean that. Happy Christmas. Good old Clara.'

'Happy Christmas.'

'Good old Clara. Come on, let's have one<sup>27</sup> for Christmas.'

Freddy Williamson put clumsy hands across her shoulders, kissing her with lips rather like those of a heavy wet dog.

'Good old Clara,' he said again. 'Good old girl.'

Songs kept crossing and recrossing her mind, bewildering her into moments of dreamy distraction. She had the feeling of trying to grasp something that was floating away.

'Don't stand there like a dream,' Freddy Williamson, said 'Put some clothes on. Come on.'

'I'm going to tie up Christmas presents and then go to bed.'

'Oh! Come on, Clara, come on. Millions of chaps<sup>28</sup> are there, waiting.'

She stood dreamily in the centre of the room, thinking of the ardent<sup>29</sup> shy young man who could not remember the song.

'You're such a dream,' Freddy Williamson said. 'You just stand there. You've got to snap out of yourself.'

Suddenly he pressed himself against her in attitudes of muscular, heavier love, grasping her about the waist, partly lifting her from the floor, his lips wet on her face.

'Come on, Clara,' he kept saying, 'let the blinds up<sup>30</sup>. Can't keep the blinds down for ever.'

'Is it a big party?'

'Come on, let the blinds up.'

'How can I come to the party if you keep holding me here?'

'Let the blinds up and come to the party too,' he said. 'Eh?'

'No.'

'Well, one more kiss,' he said. He smacked at her lips with

26 to be annoying, difficult or not convenient

27 refers here to a kiss

28 *British, old-fashioned*: a man, especially one you like

29 *literary*: showing very strong feelings of love towards someone

30 *colloquial*: a way of telling someone to lose their inhibitions



his heavy dog-like mouth, pressing her body backwards. 'Good old Clara. All you got to do is let yourself go. Come on – let the blinds up. Good old Clara.'

'All right. Let me get my things on,' she said. 'Get yourself another drink while you're waiting.'

'Fair enough. Good old Clara.'

While she went away to dress he drank gin and stumped about the room. She came back in her black coat with a black and crimson scarf on her head and Freddy Williamson said: 'Whizzo<sup>31</sup>. That's better. Good old Clara,' and kissed her again, running clumsy **ruffling** hands over her face and neck and hair.

When they went downstairs someone was tapping lightly on the glass of the street door. 'Police for the car,' Freddy Williamson said. 'No lights or some damn<sup>32</sup> thing,' but when she opened the door it was the young man who could not remember the song. He stood there already raising his hat:

'I'm terribly sorry. Oh! You're going out. Excuse me.'

'Did you remember it?' she said.

'Some of it,' he said. 'The words.'

'Come in a moment,' she said.

He came in from the street and she shut the door. It was dark in the shop, and he did not seem so nervous. He began to say: 'It goes rather like this – I can't remember it all. But something like this – *Leise flehen meine Lieder – Liebchen, komm zu mir* –'

'It is by Schubert,' she said.

She went across the shop and sat down at one of the pianos and began to sing it for him. She heard him say, 'That's it. That's the one,' and Freddy Williamson **fidged** with the latch<sup>33</sup> of the shop door as he kept one hand on it, impatient to go.

'It's very beautiful,' the young man said. 'It's not a Christmas song, but somehow –'

Freddy Williamson stamped noisily into the street, and a second or two later she heard him start up the car. The door-catch rattled where he had left it open and a current of cold air blew into the dark shop.

31 *old-fashioned*: an expression of approval

32 *impolite*: used for emphasis, especially when we are annoyed about something

33 a metal object for keeping a door fastened shut

She had broken off her singing because, after the first verse, she could not remember the words. *Softly fly my song – Loved one, come to me* – she was not sure how it went after that.

'I'm sorry I can't remember the rest,' she said.

'It's very kind of you,' he said. The door irritated her by banging on its catch. She went over and shut it and out in the street Freddy Williamson blew impatiently on the horn of the car.

'Was it the record you wanted?' she said. 'There is a very good one –'

'If it's not too much trouble.'

'I think I can find it,' she said. 'I'll put on the light.'

As she looked for the record and found it, she sang the first few bars of it again. 'There is great tenderness in it,' she began to say. 'Such a wonderful tenderness,' but suddenly it seemed as if the young man was embarrassed. He began fumbling in his pocket-book<sup>34</sup> for his money, but she said, 'Oh! No. Pay after Christmas. Pay any time,' and at the same moment Freddy Williamson opened the door of the shop and said:

'What goes on<sup>35</sup>? After hours<sup>36</sup>, after hours. Come on.'

'I'm just coming,' she said.

'I'll say good night,' the young man said. 'I'm very grateful. I wish you a Happy Christmas.'

'Happy Christmas,' she said.

Outside the stars were green and sharp in a sky without wind; the street had dried except for dark prints of frost on pavements.

'Damn cool<sup>37</sup>,' Freddy Williamson kept saying 'Damn cool.'

He drove rather fast, silent and a little sulky, out towards the high ground overlooking the river. Rain had been falling everywhere through all the first weeks of December and now as the car came out on the valley edge she could see below her a great pattern of winter floodwater, the hedgerows cutting it into

34 wallet

35 happens

36 after closing time; after the time when a place such as a bar or a shop usually closes

37 here, used to mean impertinent, cheeky

rectangular lakes glittering with green and yellow lights from towns on the far side.

'I'd have told him to go to hell,' Freddy Williamson said. 'I call it damn cool. Damn cool.'

'See the floods,' she said. 'There'll be skating<sup>38</sup>.'

'The damn cheek people have,' Freddy Williamson said. 'Damn cheek.'

He drove the car with **sulky** abandon into the gravel drive of the big Edwardian house. Dead chestnut leaves swished away on all sides, harsh and **brittle**, and she could see frost white on the edges of the big lawn.

'One before we go in,' Freddy Williamson said. She turned away her mouth but he caught it with clumsy **haste**, like a dog **seizing** a bird. 'Good old Clara. Let the blinds up. It's Christmas Eve.'

'Put the car away and I'll wait for you,' she said.

'Fair enough,' he said. 'Anything you say. Good old Clara. Damn glad you come.'

She got out of the car and stood for a few moments looking down the valley. She bent down and put her hands on the grass. Frost was crisp and hard already, and she could see it sparkling brightly on tree branches and on rain-soaked stems<sup>39</sup> of dead flowers. It made her breath glisten in the house-lights coming across the lawn. It seemed to be **glittering** even on the long wide floodwaters, so that she almost persuaded herself the valley was one great river of ice already, wonderfully transformed.

Standing there, she thought of the young man, with his shy ardent manner, his umbrella and his raised hat. The song he had not been able to remember began to go through her head again – *Softly fly my songs – Loved one, come to me –*; but at that moment Freddy Williamson came blundering<sup>40</sup> up the drive and seized her once again like a hungry dog.

38 the activity of moving around on ice, wearing special shoes with a blade called ice-skates

39 the long thin central part of a plant from which the flowers and leaves grow

40 *old-fashioned, literary*: extremely careless or stupid

'One before we go in,' he said. 'Come on. Good old Clara. One before we go in. Good show<sup>41</sup>.'

**Shrieks** of laughter came suddenly from the house as if someone, perhaps her sister, had ignited little fires of merriment that were crackling at the windows.

'Getting worked up!' Freddy Williamson said. 'Going to be good!'

She felt the frost crackling under her feet. She grasped at something that was floating away. *Leise flehen meine Lieder – Oh! my loved one –* how did it go?

41 *old-fashioned, colloquial*: very good, well done

## Post-reading exercises

### Understanding the story

- 1 Use these questions to help you check that you have understood the story.
- 1 What is Clara's job? Where does she work?
  - 2 What time of year is it?
  - 3 What does Clara want to happen? What difference will it make to the town?
  - 4 What did Clara do last Christmas?
  - 5 Who is Effie and how is she different to Clara?
  - 6 Who are the Williamsons? What has Clara decided in connection with their party?
  - 7 What does Effie mean when she says *You'll never get away with it*?
  - 8 What does the young man in the brown overcoat want?
  - 9 Why does Clara go upstairs? Does she find what the young man wants?
  - 10 When do Effie and her parents leave for the party?
  - 11 Why does Freddy Williamson come to Clara's house? What is his attitude towards Clara?
  - 12 Who arrives when Clara and Freddy are leaving for the party? What does he want?
  - 13 Why is Freddy annoyed?
  - 14 What does Freddy do when they arrive at the party?
  - 15 What does Clara do while Freddy is putting the car away? What does she think about?

### Language study

#### Punctuation: the use of the semi-colon

Semi-colons (;) are often used instead of full stops, in cases where sentences are grammatically independent, but where the meaning is closely connected.

- 1 Look at the second paragraph of the story [page 13] and answer the questions:

*It lifted up the squat little shops, built of red brick with upper storeys of terra-cotta; it made the roofs down the hill like glistening cakes; it even gave importance to the stuffy gauze-windowed club where local gentlemen played billiards and solo whist over meagre portions of watered whisky.*

- a) How many sentences are there?
- b) What does *it* refer to at the beginning of each sentence?
- c) How are the sentences connected? Do they have similar themes?

Now look at the fourth paragraph [page 132].

- d) Where does the author use semi-colons?
- e) How is the meaning of the sentences connected?

### Phrasal verbs and idiomatic expressions

Bates often uses phrasal verbs, which tend to make a text sound more informal. These verbs sometimes form part of an idiomatic expression. Look at these examples from the story:

*This year Clara was not going to the Williamsons' party; she had made up her mind.  
Men **turned up** ... with wives whose corset suspenders could be seen like bulging pimples under sleek dresses.  
'The Williamson's will never **let you get away with it**,' her sister said.*

*To make up one's mind* means to decide something.

What is the meaning of *to turn up* and *to let someone get away with something*?

- 2 Write a suitable form of one of the verbs or expressions in the sentences below.

pull back   snap out of   let yourself go   break off   turn away  
put away   get out of

- 1 He told her to relax and ..... herself .....
- 2 It was so cold outside that she did not want to ..... the car.
- 3 When I had looked at the photographs, I ..... the album ..... in a drawer.
- 4 It was very dark in the room so he ..... the curtains to let the sunshine in.
- 5 The girl was in a dream and could not ..... it.
- 6 They had been laughing, but they ..... and fell silent when he came into the room.
- 7 When Freddy tried to kiss her, Clara ..... her face .....

## Literary analysis

### Plot

- 1 What kind of place is Evensford? Why do you think Bates writes so much about what it *would* look like in the snow?
- 2 When do we first learn the name of the main character in the story? Why do you think Bates waits so long to tell us her name?
- 3 Does Effie have a big part in the story? Why do you think she is included?
- 4 What impression of the Williamson's does Bates give us in paragraph 5 [page 132]?
- 5 How does Bates describe the young man who is looking for a song? What is your impression of him?
- 6 Why do you think Clara takes trouble to help the young man?
- 7 Look again at the paragraph where Bates describes the young man's departure from the shop [pages 134–5]. What impression does this give?
- 8 How does Freddy Williamson arrive at Clara's house? What are his motives for coming to the house?
- 9 How would you describe the conversation between Clara and Freddy? How is it different to Clara's conversation with the young man in the shop?
- 10 Why do you think Clara changes her mind and eventually agrees to go to the party?
- 11 What effect does the return of the young man have on Freddy? And on Clara?
- 12 Why do you think Clara says *Pay any time* when the young man offers to pay for the record?
- 13 What is Freddy's conversation mainly about in the car? How does Clara respond?
- 14 How do you think Clara feels about going to the party? What do you think is the significance of the final paragraph?

### Character

- 15 How would you describe Clara? Do you think she will ever be happy?
- 16 How is Effie different to Clara? What do you think her future will be?
- 17 Describe the young man who comes to the shop. Do you think that Clara is attracted to him? What is his attitude to Clara?

- 18 How would you describe Freddy? Which animal does Bates compare him to?
- 19 Is Freddy believable as a character? How do you feel about the contrast Bates makes between him and the young man?
- 20 How do you think Clara feels about Freddie? How would you describe her attitude to him?

### Narration

- 21 What do you think Bates's attitude is towards Clara? Do you think he feels sympathy towards her?
- 22 Is there a good balance in the story between third-person narrative and direct speech? Which do you think predominates?
- 23 Bates is noted for his naturalistic dialogue. How does he convey the young man's shyness and Clara's response to him?
- 24 Think about the conversation between Freddie and Clara. Is there real communication between them? How would you describe Freddie's way of talking?
- 25 Bates often writes about people trapped by circumstances. Do you think he portrays Clara as a victim?

### Atmosphere

- 26 The story takes place at Christmas time. How do you think the people in the story want to feel at this time? Think about Clara, Effie, Freddie and the young man. Do they want different things?
- 27 How does Bates communicate the restrictions of small-town life? Think about Clara's reflections on the town and her memories of the Williamson's parties.
- 28 How would you describe the atmosphere of Clara's encounters with the young man? Are they different to the atmosphere of her meeting with Freddie?
- 29 Find places in the story where Bates describes the landscape around the town. How does he convey its beauty? Are there other moments of beauty in the story?

### Style

- 30 Look at the first two paragraphs of the story. Notice the repetition of *lessons in voice training, won many examinations, one could imagine, dreary*. What effect does this repetition have?

- 31 Freddy is often compared to a dog: *small poodle-like eyes, lips rather like those of a heavy, wet dog* etc. Find some more examples. What effect do they have?
- 32 Look at the first conversation between the young man and Clara [pages 133–4]. How many questions does Clara ask? What is the effect of this?
- 33 Look at the conversation between Clara and Freddy [pages 136–7]. How does Freddy speak? How does Bates convey his character?
- 34 Look at the passage where Freddy drives Clara to the party [pages 139–40]. Notice how descriptions of the sky or landscape alternate with Freddy's comments. What does this show about Clara's state of mind?

*Guidance to the above literary terms, answer keys to all the exercises and activities, plus a wealth of other reading-practice material, can be found on the student's section of the Macmillan Readers website at:*  
[www.macmillanenglish.com/readers](http://www.macmillanenglish.com/readers).



**silk** (n) thin, smooth cloth made from fibres produced by an insect called the silk worm

**startled** (adj) suddenly frightened or surprised by something

## A Christmas Song

**bay window** (n) a large window that sticks out from the main wall of a house

**brittle** (adj) hard and easily broken into pieces

**carol** (n) a traditional song sung at Christmas

**clumsy** (adj) not careful or graceful, breaking things and knocking against them

**dreary** (adj) making you feel bored or unhappy

**fidget** (v) to keep making small, quick movements with parts of your body because you are bored, nervous or impatient

**fumble** (verb) to try to hold, move or find something, using your hands in a way that is not skilful or graceful

**gauze** (n) thin white material with holes often used for making curtains

**gay** (old-fashioned) happy and excited

**get away with something**  
PHRASAL VERB to manage to do something bad without being punished or criticized for it

**glittering** (adj) bright and shining with a lot of quick flashes of light

**grind** (v) to press something down onto a surface using a lot of force

**haste** (n) great speed in doing something because of limited time

**heartly** (adj) friendly, loud and over-enthusiastic

**infectious** (adj) an infectious disease is one that can spread from one person to another

**meagre** (adj) smaller, or less than you want or need

**rowdy** (adj) noisy and causing trouble  
**ruffle** (v) to touch someone's hair in a friendly way

**seize** (v) to suddenly and firmly hold someone by a part of their body or clothing

**shriek** (n) a high, loud shot of excitement, surprise or fear

**sulky** (adj) feeling angry or unhappy and not wanting to talk to anyone or be with other people

**transfigure** (verb) to change the appearance of someone or something, especially in a way that makes them look more beautiful

## The Sensible Thing

**agony** (n) great pain

**back out** (v) to decide not to do something that you agree to do

**boast** (v) to proudly tell people about what you have or do in order to make them admire you

**casual** (adj) relaxed, informal  
**cheery** (adj) feeling or showing happiness

**compel** (v) to force someone to do something

**consistent** (adj) not changing in behaviour, qualities or attitude

**dazzle** (v) to blind with strong light  
**dissipate** (v) to make something gradually disappear

**distort** (v) to change something such as information so that it is no longer true or accurate

**distraught** (adj) extremely worried, upset or confused

**dumb** (adj) (*mainly American*) stupid; (*old-fashioned*) unable to speak (in modern English 'speech impaired')

**dusk** (n) the period of time at the end of the day just before it becomes dark

**eagerly** (adv) to do something with enthusiasm

**flee** (v) to run away