Winter in Thrush Green

Miss Read

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Extract

PART ONE

The Coming of Winter

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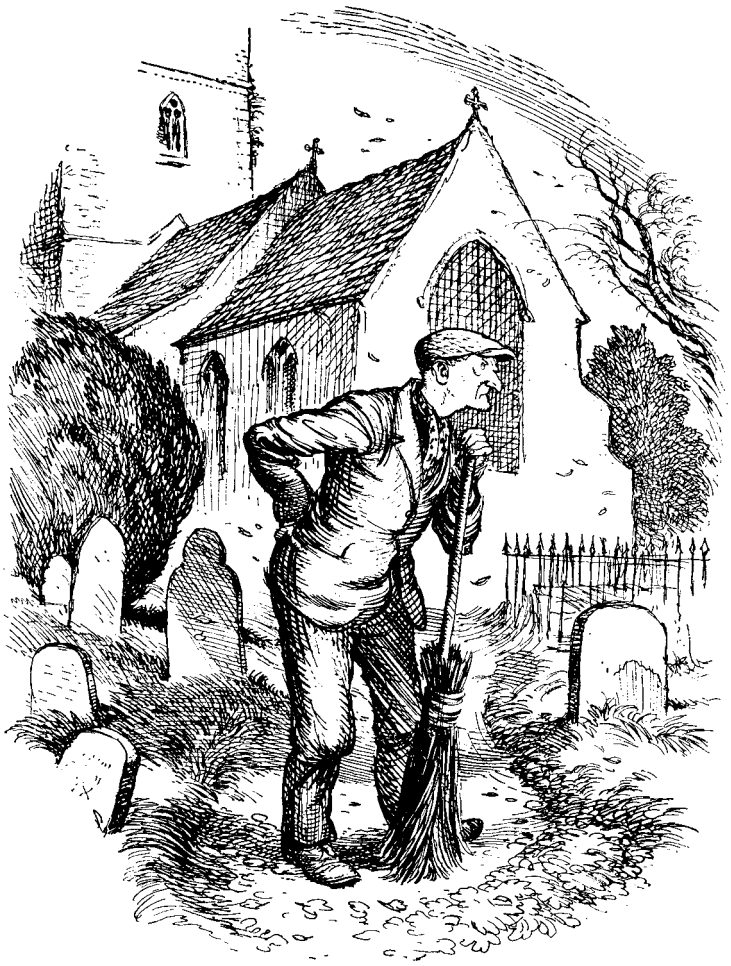

1. The Newcomer

Autumn had come early to Thrush Green. The avenue of horse chestnuts, which ran across its northerly end, blazed like a bonfire. Every afternoon, as soon as the children at the village school had finished their lessons, they streamed across the wet grass and began to bombard the trees with upthrown sticks as their fathers had done before them. The conkers, glossy as satin, bounced splendidly from their green and white cases and were pounced upon greedily by their young predators.

In the porch of The Two Pheasants, next door to the village school, swung a hanging basket filled with dead geraniums and trails of withered lobelia. All summer through they had enlivened the entrance, but now their bright day was over, and the basket was due to be taken down and stored in the shed at the back of the little inn until summer came again to the Cotswolds.

Chrysanthemums of red and gold glowed on the graves in St Andrew's churchyard, while Mr Piggott, the gloomy sexton, swept the bright pennies of dead leaves from the paths and cursed fruitlessly as the wind bowled them back again into his newly-swept territory.

The creeper, which climbed over the walls at Doctor Bailey's house and the cottage occupied by two old friends, Ella Bembridge and Dimity Dean, had never flamed so brilliantly as it did this October. The sparkling autumn air, the unusually early frosts and the heavy crop of berries of all sorts made the weather-wise on Thrush Green wag their heads sagely.

'We'll be getting a hard winter this time,' they said in tones of mingled gravity and satisfaction. 'Best get plenty of firing in. Mark my words, it'll be a real winter this one!'

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Mr Piggott straightened his aching back, clasped his hands on top of the broom, and surveyed Thrush Green morosely. Behind him lay the bulk of the church, its spire's shadow throwing a neat triangle across the grass. To his right ran the main road from the Cotswold Hills down into the sleepy little market town of Lulling, which Thrush Green adjoined. To his right ran a modest lane which meandered northward to several small villages.

Within fifty yards of him, set along this lane, stood his cottage, next door to The Two Pheasants. The village school, now quiet behind its white palings in the morning sunshine, was next in the row, and beside it was a well-built house of Cotswold stone which stood back from the green. Its front windows stared along the chestnut avenue which joined the two roads. The door was shut, and no smoke plumed skywards from its grey chimneys.

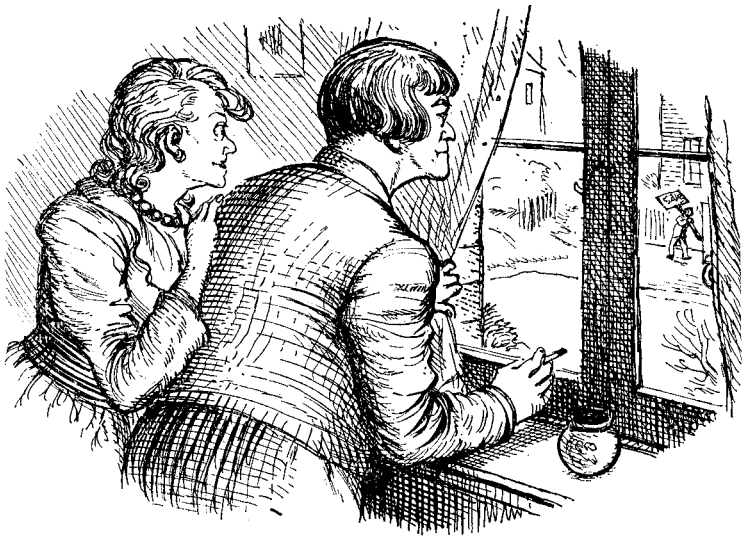
The garden was overgrown and deserted. Dead black roses drooped from the unkempt bushes growing over the face of the house, and the broad flagged path was almost hidden by un-swept leaves.

Mr Piggott could see the vegetable garden from his vantage point in the churchyard. A row of bean poles had collapsed, sagging under the weight of the frost-blackened crop. Below the triumphant spires of dock which covered the beds, submerged cabbages, as large as footballs, could be discerned. Onions, left to go to seed, displayed magnificent fluffy heads, and a host of chirruping birds fluttered excitedly about the varied riches of the wilderness.

Mr Piggott clicked his false teeth in disapproval at such wicked waste, and shook his head at the FOR SALE board which had been erected at the gate the week before.

'Time someone took that over,' he said aloud. 'What's the good weeding this 'ere if all that lot's coming over all the time?' He cast a sour look at the leaves which still danced joyously in his path. Everlasting work! he thought gloomily.

The clock began to whirr above him before striking ten. Mr Piggott's face brightened. Someone came out of The Two Pheasants and latched the door back to the wall hospitably. The faint clinking of glasses could be heard and a snatch of music from the bar's radio set.



Mr Piggott propped his broom against the church railings and set off, with unaccustomed jauntiness, to his haven.

Across the green Ella Bembridge was also looking at the empty house. She had just made her bed, and was busy hanging up her capacious tweed suit in the cupboard, when the sight of a small van drawing up by the FOR SALE board, caught her eye. She folded her sturdy arms upon the window-sill and gazed with interest.

Two men emerged and Ella recognized them. They worked at the local estate agents and lived, she knew, at the village of Nidden a mile or two from Thrush Green. She watched them go inside the gate and start to wrench at the post supporting the board.

'Dim!' called Ella, in a hearty boom, to her companion downstairs.

A faint twittering sound came from below.

'Dim!' continued Ella fortissimo. 'They're taking down the board from the corner house! Must be sold!'

Dimity Dean entered the bedroom and joined her friend at the window. A slight, bedraggled figure, clad in an assortment of

grey and fawn garments, she was as frail as Ella was robust. She peered short-sightedly at the activity in the distance.

'Isn't that young Edwards? The boy who used to help in the garden?'

'Yes, that's Edwards,' agreed Ella watching the figure heaving at the post.

'Then he's no business to be doing such heavy work!' exclaimed Dimity, much distressed. 'That poor back of his! You know I always wheeled the barrow for him after he slipped that disc.'

'More fool you!' said Ella shortly. 'Bit of exercise will do him good, lazy lout.'

Dimity shook her head mournfully, her eyes filling with sympathetic tears. Of course dear Ella was probably quite right, but Edwards had been such a sweet boy, with an ethereal pale face which quite made one think of Byron. She was relieved to see the board suddenly lurch sideways and the two men carry it out to the van.

'Well,' breathed Dimity, 'I suppose we can look forward to new neighbours now. I do hope they'll fit in at Thrush Green. Quiet people, you know – like us.'

'People who like whooping it up aren't likely to come to Thrush Green,' pointed out Ella, turning her back upon the sunshine. 'Tell you what, we'll see if Winnie Bailey's heard anything when she comes in this morning.'

Dimity clapped a skinny hand to her mouth to stifle a scream.

'Oh, Ella, what a blessing you mentioned her! I'd quite forgotten. I must rush down and get the coffee ready!'

She scuttled down the stairs like a startled hen leaving Ella to speculate upon the future owners of the empty house.

Winnie Bailey was the wife of Doctor Bailey who had been in practice in Lulling and Thrush Green for almost half a century. He still visited a few old patients and occasionally took surgery duty, but since he had retired through ill-health, his young partner Doctor Lovell did more than three-quarters of the work and throve on it.

Life was good to Winnie Bailey. Now that her husband was less busy she found more time for informal visiting, for reading

and for the quiet cross-country walks which did so much to refresh her happy spirits.

Thrush Green had changed little since she came first to it as a young wife. True, there were new houses along the lane to Nidden and a large housing estate further west, and in Lulling itself there were twice as many inhabitants. But the triangular green, surrounded by the comfortable Cotswold stone buildings, had altered very little. Winnie Bailey had known those who lived in them, had watched them come and go, grow from children to men and women, and followed their fortunes with an interest which was both shrewd and warm-hearted.

As the wife of a professional man she knew the wisdom of being discreet. Many came to Winnie Bailey for advice and comfort. They went away knowing full well that their confidences would go no further. In a small community discretion is greatly prized.

She too that morning noticed that the board had gone from the corner house and speculated upon its new owner, as she selected some apples to take to Ella and Dimity who owned no apple trees. She hoped it might be a chess player. Donald, her husband, had so few people to play with these days, and she was no march for him. She picked up a Cox's Orange Pippin and smelt it luxuriously. What a perfect thing it was! She admired its tawny streaks, ranging from palest yellow to glowing amber, which radiated from the satisfying dimple whence its stalk sprang.

She rubbed it lovingly with the white linen cloth, now so old and soft that it crumpled in her hand like tissue paper, and put it carefully in the shallow rush basket among its fellows. Ella would appreciate the picture she was creating, she knew, for beneath Ella's crusty and well-upholstered exterior was a fastidious appreciation of loveliness, which expressed itself in the bold, and sometimes beautiful, designs which she printed for curtains and covers. It was strange, thought Winnie Bailey, that those thick knobbly hands could execute such fine workmanship, while Dimity's frail fingers coped so much more successfully with lighting fires, baking cakes and cleaning the cottage.

The doctor's wife delighted in this incongruous pair. She had known them now for over twenty-five years, and despite their

oddities and Ella's brusqueness, was grateful for their unfailing friendship.

She looked at the kitchen clock, which said a quarter to eleven. Donald Bailey was still in bed resting after an unusually busy day. His wife ran up to see him before she set forth with her basket, reflecting as she mounted the stairs on the uncommon devotion of Ella and Dimity.

'I really don't think anything could ever part them,' commented the doctor's wife, addressing the tabby cat who minced past her, *en route* to the kitchen from the doctor's bed.

But, for once, Winnie Bailey was wrong, as the oncoming winter would show.

'Well, tell us all the news,' said Ella, half an hour later. She leant back in the sagging wicker armchair, which creaked under her weight, raised her coffee cup and prepared to enjoy her old friend's company. 'First of all, how's your husband?'

'Very well really. Rather tired from yesterday. Old Mrs Hoggins wanted him to see a grandchild who is staying with her, and he insisted on going as she's such an old friend, but it rather knocked him up.'

Dimity fluttered between them, proffering first the sugar, then biscuits. From Winnie Bailey she received smiles and thanks; from Ella a fine disregard.

'And what have you heard about the corner house?' queried Dimity, settling at last in her chair, after her moth-like restlessness. 'Who's taken it? Have you heard?'

'Only in a roundabout way from Dotty Harmer,' said Winnie. She stirred her coffee serenely, as though the matter were closed.

Ella snorted, drew out a battered tobacco tin from her pocket and began to roll a very untidy cigarette. The tobacco was villainously black and Mrs Bailey knew from experience that the smoke would be uncommonly pungent. She noticed, with relief, that the window behind her was open.

Ella lit up, drew one or two enormous breaths and expelled the smoke strongly through her nostrils.

'Well, come on,' pressed Ella impatiently. 'What did Dotty say?'

'Nothing actually,' said Winnie, enjoying the situation.

'Then who did?' boomed Ella, jerking her shoulders with exasperation. The coffee cup tilted abruptly and spilled the rest of its contents into Ella's lap.

'Darling,' squeaked Dimity, rising to her feet. 'How dreadful! Let me get a cloth.'

'Don't fuss so, Dim,' snapped her friend, taking out a grubby handkerchief, and wiping the liquid from her lap to the rug with perfunctory sweeps. 'It's your fault, Winnie, for being so perfectly maddening. Do you or do you not know who is coming to the corner house?' She pointed a tobacco-stained forefinger at her guest.

'No,' said Winnie.

Ella threw her handkerchief on the floor with a gesture of despair and frustration. Dimity, anxious to placate her, hastened in where angels would have feared to tread.

'Winnie dear,' she began patiently, 'do you mean "No, you *don't* know" or "No, you *do* know who is coming"?'

'For pity's sake,' roared Ella, 'don't you start, Dim! If Winnie sees fit to drive us insane with her mysteries, well and good. One's enough, in all conscience. For my part, I don't wish to hear who is coming, or not coming, or what Dotty said or did not say, or anything more about the corner house *at all*.'

Exhausted with her tirade she leant back again. 'Any more coffee left?' she asked in a plaintive tone.

Dimity hastened forward.

As she filled the cup, Winnie Bailey relented.

'Then I'll just tell Dimity what I've heard, dear, and you need not listen,' she said gently.

Ella growled dangerously.

'Betty Bell, who helps Dotty, as you know, has been keeping the corner house aired since the Farmers left, and she has seen most of the people who have looked over it. Three men with families have been, someone from the BBC –'

'Television or sound?' asked Ella eagerly. 'Our television's appalling lately. Everything in a snowstorm or looping the loop. I must say it would be jolly useful to have someone handy to see to it.'

'Oh, not that sort of *useful* person,' exclaimed Winnie, 'just a producer of programmes or an actor, I think.'

'Pity!' said Ella, losing interest.

'Well, who else called?' asked Dimity.

'Several middle-aged women who all found it too large and inconvenient –'

'Which it is,' interrupted Ella. 'D'you remember that ugly great wash-house place at the back? And the corridor and stairs from the kitchen to the dining-room? The soup was always stone cold at Mrs Farmer's parties.'

'And two middle-aged young men, as far as I can gather, who had something to do with ballet,' continued Mrs Bailey, closing her eyes the better to concentrate, 'and then this last man.'

'And what did he do?' pressed Dimity.

'Nothing. I mean he had retired,' said Winnie hastily, as Ella drew a deep breath ready for a second explosion.

'From what?' asked Ella, ominously. 'The army, the navy, the church or the stage?'

'None of them, so Mrs Bell says. I think he's been abroad. Hong Kong or Singapore or Ghana. Maybe it was Borneo or Nigeria, I can't quite recall, but *hot* evidently. He was worried about getting his laundry done daily.'

'Done daily?' boomed Ella.

'Done daily?' quavered Dimity.

'The man must be mental,' said Ella forthrightly, 'if he thinks he's going to get his washing done *daily*. In Thrush Green too. What's wrong with once a week like any other Christian?'

'I don't suppose he really expects to have it done daily *now*,' explained Winnie carefully. 'I imagine that he may have mentioned this matter – the habits of years die hard, you know – and it just stuck in Betty Bell's memory because it seemed so outlandish to her.'

'Seems outlandish to me too,' said Ella. 'When's he coming?'

Mrs Bailey raised limpid eyes to her friend's gaze. She looked mildly surprised.

'I don't know that he is. Betty Bell only told Dotty about the different people who had looked at the house. He was the last, but there may have been more since then. I haven't seen Dotty since last Thursday when I called for my eggs.'

Ella uncrossed her substantial legs, set her brogues firmly on the stained rug and fixed her friend with a fierce glance.

'Winnie Bailey,' she said sternly, 'do you mean to say that you have been going through all this rigmarole – this balderdash – this jiggery-pokery – this leading-up-the-garden – simply to tell us *in the end* that you don't know who is coming to the corner house?'

In the brief silence that followed, the distant cries of children, released from school, floated through the open window. It was twelve o'clock. Winnie Bailey, not a whit abashed, rose to her feet and smiled disarmingly upon her questioner.

'That's right, Ella dear. As I told you at the start, I simply do not know who has taken the corner house. You'll probably know before I do, and I shall expect you to let me hear immediately. There's nothing more maddening,' continued Winnie Bailey serenely, collecting her rush basket from the window-sill, 'than to be kept in suspense.'

'You'd have been burnt for a witch years ago, you hussy,' commented Ella, accompanying her to the door. 'And deserved it!'

2. Wild Surmise

Ella and Dimity were not the only ones interested in the fate of Quetta, the official name of the empty corner house. Built at the turn of the century for a retired colonel from the Indian army, the house had its name printed on a neat little board which was planted in one of the small lawns which flanked the gates. Apart from young children, who delighted in jumping over it, the name was ignored, and the residence had been known generally for sixty-odd years as 'the corner house'.

The Farmers had lived there for over twenty years and moved only when age and illness overtook them and they were persuaded by a daughter in Somerset to take a small house near her own. Their neighbours on the green missed them, but perhaps the person who mourned their disappearance most whole-heartedly was Paul Young, the eight-year-old son of a local architect who lived in a fine old house which stood beside the chestnut avenue within a stone's throw of the Farmers'.