

You loved your last book...but what
are you going to read next?

Using our unique guidance tools, Love**reading** will help you find new
books to keep you inspired and entertained.

Opening Extract from...

Christmas with Miss Read

Written by Miss Read

Published by Orion Books Ltd

All text is copyright © of the author

This Opening Extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

CHRISTMAS
with MISS READ

* * * * *

Comprising
CHRISTMAS AT FAIRACRE
A COUNTRY CHRISTMAS

Miss Read



An Orion paperback

This omnibus first published in Great Britain in 2011
by Orion Books,
This paperback edition published in 2012
by Orion Books Ltd,
Orion House, 5 Upper St Martin's Lane,
London WC2H 9EA

An Hachette UK company

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Copyright for this omnibus © Miss Read 2011

For further copyright details see page 507

The moral right of Miss Read to be identified as the author
of this work has been asserted in accordance with
the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be
reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted,
in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical,
photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior
permission of the copyright owner.

All the characters in this book are fictitious,
and any resemblance to actual persons, living
or dead, is purely coincidental.

A CIP catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978-1-4091-2092-6

Typeset at The Spartan Press Ltd,
Lymington, Hants

Printed in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

The Orion Publishing Group's policy is to use papers that
are natural, renewable and recyclable products and
made from wood grown in sustainable forests. The logging
and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to
the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

www.orionbooks.co.uk

Foreword by Miss Read

I am delighted to see this winter collection from my writings about the imaginary village of Fairacre and its surroundings.

Winter may not be everyone's favourite season, but of all the year's festivals Christmas takes pride of place, and has lost none of its magic. This, no doubt, is partly because we hark back to the excitements of childhood Christmases but also because we look forward to renewing friendships and to taking part in the foremost of the church's festivals.

But the fact that Christmas Day falls in the dreariest time of the year also highlights its impact. We are usually in the grip of winter's cold, early darkness, frost and snow, and all the ills that they bring. Doubly precious, therefore, are our domestic comforts – a blazing fire, sustaining food, the comfort of friends and, at the end of the day, a warm bed.

In this collection of my writings about winter you will find many of these things. The celebrations and adventures mostly take place in the imaginary village of Fairacre, especially the school, the nearby market town of Caxley, or in that neighbourhood. Outside, the winter landscape has a beauty of its own: bare branches against a clear sky, brilliant stars on a frosty night and perhaps a swathe of untouched snow. But these beauties are best when seen from the comfort of

one's home, with a good fire crackling and the smell of crumpets toasting for tea.

Although more than just the season of Christmas is covered in *The White Robin*, I am very pleased that this story has been included since it rather stood on its own.

That is the charm of the winter season, the contrast between the cold and the warmth, the light and the dark. I hope you will enjoy Christmas and the winter-time in the book before you.

Miss Read 1991

CHAPTER ONE

Albert Piggott Makes a Decision



‘I know there’s a saying that “if March comes in like a lion, it will go out like a lamb”,’ said Winnie Bailey, gazing out of the kitchen window, ‘but is there a saying about this dreadful December wind?’

Jenny, her housekeeper and friend, paused from slicing the carrots she was preparing for lunch and looked through the window, too. The branches of the sturdy chestnut trees on the green – all their leaves gone by now, of course – were being vigorously blown about. Rooks made slow progress across the sky, using their big black wings to balance themselves against the sudden gusts.

‘My mother,’ Jenny said, resting her knife on the chopping board, ‘always used to say that there’s no such thing as *bad* weather. Whatever the weather, it is bound to suit someone.’

‘Well, I’m not sure who’s going to benefit from this

Miss Read

gale. Look, the litter bin on the green has blown over and the contents are scattering all over the place.’

Winnie turned away from the window and watched as Jenny resumed her chopping. There was going to be a nice Irish stew for lunch, with crusty herb dumplings and carrots. She was devoted to Jenny, and the feeling was mutual. It was not that Winnie disliked cooking – in fact, she prided herself on her cherry cake, which invariably won a prize at the village’s summer fête – but Jenny had a passion for cooking and Winnie was more than happy to indulge her.

Jenny had come to live with Winnie Bailey after Winnie’s husband, Donald, had died some years before. Winnie had found she was a little nervous of living alone in the house which, she had to admit, was really much too big for her. She had thought briefly – but very briefly – of moving somewhere smaller but she loved the house, which stood well back from the road in a pretty garden, and could not bear to leave it. She had lived here for over fifty years with Donald, and there were memories everywhere of him.

There was the little mirror in the hall that they had bought in Swaffham when on holiday in Norfolk one year; they had collected most of the pictures together; and every time Winnie took a safety pin out of the little china bowl on her dressing-table, she remembered Donald buying it for her as a joke. The lettering round the inside of the bowl, ‘Greetings from Torquay’, was a little faded now, but the memories were still as sharp as if it had been yesterday.

Christmas at Thrush Green

It was not long after Donald's death that Jenny had arrived at work one morning with the news that her elderly parents had at last got a place in an old people's home. It was just in time, too, because their crumbling terrace cottage was scheduled to be pulled down: the whole row had been condemned. She lived there with her parents, looking after them, and Winnie was initially concerned about where Jenny would now live. Then the pieces of the jigsaw fell into place: Jenny needed somewhere to live, and Winnie needed companionship. And so it was that Jenny came to live in the rooms on the top floor of Winnie Bailey's house, an arrangement that suited them both.

‘“The north wind doth blow and we shall have snow,”’ began Jenny, as she swept the chopped carrots into a saucepan.

‘“And what will poor robin do then, poor thing?”’ they both said together, and laughed. They were very content in each other's company.

‘I wonder if it'll snow this Christmas?’ mused Jenny, lifting the lid of the casserole that she had just taken from the oven. With the pointed end of a knife, she gently tested a piece of lamb to see if it was cooked.

‘It would certainly please the children if it does snow,’ replied Winnie, looking out of the window again, ‘but I have to admit I'd be perfectly happy if it didn't. It makes such a mess of the church we shall no doubt have spent hours cleaning when everyone tramps in with snowy boots.’ She turned from the window and sniffed the air

Miss Read



appreciatively. ‘My goodness, that does smell good, Jenny! What a treasure you are.’

Jenny beamed. She had been a little worried about Winnie a few weeks ago when the old lady had had to spend several days in bed with a nasty bronchial chest, but that seemed to have gone now and it was comforting to see her in such good spirits.

Winnie Bailey’s house was the tallest on the green, standing on the east side of the large expanse of grass which was the hub of the village. Next door lived Frank and Phyllida Hurst in a cottage called Tullivers. Phil Prior, as

Christmas at Thrush Green

she had been then, had bought it for herself and her young son Jeremy. To ensure that she could give as much time as possible to the boy – she was estranged from her husband at the time – Phil was anxious to have a job she could do from home. She had always had a good ear for words and so tried her hand at writing short stories. She had been delighted when first one, and then more stories were accepted by a London magazine.

She was a most attractive woman, and her solitary state caused not only a good deal of sympathy from the residents of Thrush Green, but also a few male hearts to flutter.

Phil's settled life was suddenly shattered when news came through that her absent husband had been killed in a car crash. Everyone in Thrush Green rallied round and Phil was always grateful to them for their kindness. But it was not a local man who won Phil's heart, but Frank Hurst, the editor of the magazine that was publishing her stories. When they married, the whole village wished them the happiness they deserved.

Frank and Phil were now in their sitting-room, each with a diary open on their knees. A fire burned in the little hearth and occasionally a gust of the strong wind outside would rattle down the chimney and make the flames dance.

'The problem with giving a drinks party,' said Phil, flicking through the pages of her diary, 'is that one has to find a day when no one else is.'

Miss Read

‘At least,’ Frank replied, looking up at his pretty wife, ‘no one who is going to invite the same people as us.’

Phil giggled. ‘Yes, I don’t expect we’ll clash with any parties that take place in the Woodstock Road.’

‘Now, now!’ reproved her husband, but he was smiling, too.

The lane down the east side of Thrush Green, past Winnie Bailey’s house and Tullivers, ran into the Woodstock Road, in due course reaching that attractive little town and, further on, interesting places such as Stratford-upon-Avon. As with all Cotswold villages, planning regulations were very strict within the designated conservation areas. However, the authorities were less demanding further out and, as everyone grudgingly accepted, new homes had to be built. The houses in the Woodstock Road nearest the green were mostly ones built between the wars but further out, they were newer. An occasional turning would lead off the Woodstock Road into a modern close. Where once there had been fields with contented cows chewing the cud, wildflowers for children to pick, and butterflies to chase with nets, now there was just a spread of look-alike houses. It wasn’t that the people who lived here weren’t friendly; it’s just that they didn’t really involve themselves in Thrush Green activities.

‘We haven’t received any invitations yet,’ said Phil, looking at the mantelpiece. ‘At least, nothing that would clash with a drinks party. If we are going to go to that charity concert in Lulling, we should do something about the tickets now.’

Christmas at Thrush Green

‘You go if you want,’ said her husband, ‘but personally I’m not too good on string quartets. It’s the wrong time of year for that sort of music. I think good, rousing Christmas oratorios are the right kind of music for the festive season.’

‘I agree,’ said Phil, and she got to her feet, removed the invitation from the mantelpiece and put it on the fire. ‘There might be a performance of *The Messiah* on in Oxford. I’ll check the local paper on Friday. But let’s make a note of going to the carol service at Lulling. I see from the parish magazine that they are having that on the Sunday before Christmas.’

‘Agreed!’ and they both wrote in their diaries.

‘But we are no further forward about the date for our party,’ sighed Phil.

There was silence for a minute or two, broken only by the gentle tick of the clock on the mantelpiece, and the occasional crackle from the fire. ‘Do you think,’ mused Phil, her pencil in her mouth, ‘that we might have it on the 20th, *after* the Nativity service?’

‘No, we’ll be whacked,’ said Frank, shaking his head.

‘Nonsense! Our contribution will be done and dusted by then,’ countered his wife.

Frank and Phil had combined to write the text for the Nativity play that was going to be performed in St Andrew’s church the Saturday before Christmas.

‘Don’t you think everyone will want to get off home? And what about the people who come to the service who we wouldn’t ask to the party? Won’t they be offended?’

‘I don’t think they need know. And, anyway,’

Miss Read

continued Phil, 'the people we'd be asking are those involved in the play, so we could call it a post-Nativity party for the workers.'

'Ah, that would be all right. Also, it's unlikely that anyone else is planning a party on the evening of the Nativity play. Yes, my dear, I think that's an excellent day.'

Once more pencils were applied to the diaries.

Frank looked up at Phil. 'That's the easy part. We must now get down to the invitation list, and get them sent out as soon as possible before anyone else has the same bright idea.'

'I need to pop down into Lulling this afternoon, so I'll pick up some invitation cards at Smith's.' Phil looked at her watch. 'And now I must get us some lunch. Will cold lamb and salad do you?'

'Indeed it will, especially if I can have some of that delicious chutney to go with it.'

'Of course!' said Phil, and lightly kissed the top of her husband's head as she made her way to the kitchen.

Although Frank was much older than Phil – in fact, one of his grandchildren was about the same age as Jeremy – the marriage was a very happy one. The inhabitants of Thrush Green thoroughly approved of the Hursts, who played their part in village life to the full.

