Village Diary

Miss Read

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Extract

January

As I have been given a large and magnificent diary for Christmas – seven by ten and nearly two inches thick – I intend to fill it in as long as my ardour lasts. Further than that I will not go. There are quite enough jobs that a schoolmistress just *must* do without making this one a burden.

Unfortunately, the thing is so colossal that I shan't be able to carry it with me, as the adorable Miss Gwendolen Fairfax did hers, so that she 'always had something sensational to read in the train'.

It was a most surprising present for Amy to have given me. When we first taught together in London, many years ago, we exchanged two hankies each, I remember; and since she cropped up again in my life a year or so ago, it has been bath salts on her side ('To make you realize, dear, that even if you are a school

teacher there is no need to let yourself go completely') and two-hankies-as-before on mine.

When Amy handed me this present she remarked earnestly, 'Try to use it, dear. Self-expression is such a wonderful thing, and so vital for a woman whose life is – well, not exactly abnormal, but restricted!' This smacked of Amy's latest psychiatrist to me, but after the first reaction of speechless fury, I agreed civilly and have had over a week savouring this *bon mot* with increasing joy.

Mrs Pringle, the school cleaner, told me yesterday that Miss Parr's old house at the end of the village has now been turned into three flats. The workmen have been there now for months; they arrived soon after her death, but I hadn't realized that that was what they were doing. A nephew of Miss Parr's now owns it, and has the ground floor. A retired couple from Caxley evidently move into the top floor this week, and a widower, I understand, has the middle flat.

'A very nice man too,' Mrs Pringle boomed menacingly at me. 'Been a schoolmaster at a real posh school where the boys have to pay fees and get the cane for nothing. Not in his prime, of course, but as Mrs Willet said to me at choir practice, there's many would jump at him.' Mrs Pringle eyed me speculatively, and I can see that the village is already visualizing a decorous wooing, culminating in a quiet wedding at Fairacre Church, with my pupils forming a guard of honour from the south door, with the aged couple hobbling down the path between them.

I said that I hoped that now that the poor man had retired, he would be allowed to rest in peace, and went out to clean the car. This is my latest and most extravagant acquisition – a small second-hand Austin, in which I hope to be able to have wonderful touring holidays, as well as driving to Caxley on any day of the week, instead of relying on the local bus on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays as heretofore. So far I have not been out on my own as I am still having lessons from an imperturbable instructor in Caxley, who thrives on clashing gears, stalling engines and a beginner's unfortunate confusion of brake and accelerator. Miss Clare, that noble woman, who taught the infants at Fairacre for many years, says that she will come out with me 'at *any* time, dear, whether you feel confident or not. I am quite sure that you

can master anything.' Am touched, but also alarmed, at such faith in my powers, and can only hope that she never meets my driving instructor.

Miss Clare spent the evening with me recently and our conversation turned, as it so often does, to life in Fairacre in the early years of this century, when Miss Clare was a young and inexperienced pupil-teacher at this village school. I love to hear her reminiscing, for she has a tolerant and dispassionate outlook on life, born of inner wisdom and years of close contact with the people here. For Miss Clare, 'To know is to forgive,' and I have never yet heard of her acting in anger or in fear, or meting out to a child any punishment that was hastily or maliciously devised.

Her attitude to those who were in authority over her is as wide and kindly as it always was to the small charges that she taught for forty years.

We were talking of Miss Parr, who had died recently. She had been a manager of Fairacre School since the reign of King Edward the Seventh, and was a stickler for etiquette. It appears that one day she met Mrs Willet, now our caretaker's wife, but then a child of six, in the lane, and was shocked to find the little girl omitted to curtsy to her. At once she took the child to its mother, and demanded instant punishment.

'But surely—' I began to protest. Miss Clare looked calmly at me.

'My dear,' she said gently, 'it was quite understandable. It was customary then for our children to curtsy to the gentry, and Miss Parr was doing her duty, as she understood it, by correcting the child. No one then questioned her action. "Other days, other ways" you know. It's only that now, sometimes, looking back – I wonder—' She put down a green pullover she was knitting and stared meditatively at the fire.

'When you say that no one questioned the actions of his superiors, do you mean that they were automatically considered right or that verbal protestations were never made, or what?' I asked her.

'We recognized injustice, dear,' answered Miss Clare equably, 'as clearly as you do. But we bore more in silence, for we had so much more to lose by rebellion. Jobs were hard to come by, in those days, and no work meant no food. It was as simple as that.

'A sharp retort might mean instant dismissal, and perhaps no reference, which might mean months, or even years, without a suitable post. No wonder that my poor mother's favourite maxim was "Civility costs nothing." She knew, only too well, that civility meant more than that to people like us. It was a vital necessity to a wage-earner when we were young.'

'Was she ever bitter?'

'I don't think so. She was a happy, even-tempered woman, and believed that if we did our best in that station of life to which we had been called, then we should do well. After all, we all knew our place then. It made for security. And here, in Fairacre, the gentry on the whole were kindly and generous to those they employed. You might call it a benevolent despotism, my dear – and, you know, there are far worse forms of government than that!'

Miss Clare's eyes twinkled as she resumed her work and the room was filled again with the measured clicking of her knitting needles.

Tuesday was a beast of a day; foggy and cold, with the elm trees dripping into the playground. Two workmen arrived from Caxley to see to the school skylight over my desk: it must be the tenth time, at least, that it has received attention since I came here just over six years ago. Usually, it is Mr Rogers, from the forge, who has the job of clambering over the roof, but the managers decided to try the Caxley firm this time, hoping, I imagine, that it might be better done by them. The village, of course, is up in arms at this invasion of foreigners, and Mr Rogers wears a martyred expression when he stands at the door of his smithy. I am confident that he will soon be in a position to smile again, as the skylight has defied all comers for seventy-odd years – so the school log-books say – and I doubt whether any workmen, even if hailing from the great Caxley itself, will vanquish it.

One man, in Mrs Pringle's hearing, said loudly that 'it was a proper bodged-up job,' so that, of course, will inflame passions further. Mrs Pringle, who was scrubbing out the school dustbins at the time, drew in her breath for so long, with such violence, that I thought she would burst; but only her corsets creaked under the strain.

Tea, at Miss Clare's, was the bright spot of the day. We had a lardy cake which was wonderfully hot and indigestible, and conversation which was soothing, until I was putting on my coat when Miss Clare shattered me by asking if I had yet met a very nice man, a retired schoolmaster, who had come to live in Miss Parr's old house.

I am beginning to feel very, very sorry for this unfortunate man, and have half a mind to ring him up anonymously, advising his early removal from Fairacre if he wishes to have an undisturbed retirement.

The last day of the holidays has arrived, and, as usual, half the jobs I intended doing have been left undone. No marmalade made, no paint washed down, only the most urgent mending done, and school starts tomorrow.

It all looks unbelievably clean over there. I staggered back with the fish tank and Roman hyacinths, all of which have sheltered under my school-house roof for the past fortnight. Miss Gray – Mrs Annett, I mean – will have a smaller class this term, only sixteen on roll, while mine will be twenty-three strong.

The stoves are miracles of jetty brilliance. Mrs Pringle must have used pounds of blacklead and enough energy to move a mountain to have produced such lustre. Woe betide any careless tipper-on of coke for the next few days!

Term has begun. Everyone is back with the exception of Eileen Burton, who has, according to the note brought by a neighbouring child, 'a sore throat and a hard, tight chest.' Can only hope these afflictions are not infectious.

The workmen have found it necessary to remove the whole frame of the skylight, so that, having had a clear two weeks to do the job undisturbed, they now tell me that we must endure a flapping and smelly tarpaulin over the hole in the roof, while a new window-frame is made in Caxley. Straight speaking, though giving me some relief, dints their armour not at all as blame attaches, as usual, to other members of the firm 'higher-up and back in Caxley, Miss', so that I can see a very uncomfortable few days ahead.

The children appeared to have forgotten the very elements of

education. Five-times table eluded them altogether, and my request to write 'January' on their own, met with tearful mystification. Having walked round the class and seen such efforts as 'Jamwy,' 'Ganeree' and 'Jennery' I wrote it on the blackboard with dreadful threats of no-play-for-a-week for those who did not master its intricacies immediately.

The vicar called, just before we went home, in his habitual winter garb of cloak, biretta and leopard-skin gloves. Surely they can't stand another winter? I only wish I had such a serene outlook as Mr Partridge's. He greeted us all as though he loved every hair of our heads, as truly I believe he does. I see that he has 'Jesu, Lover of my Soul' on the hymn list this week, but haven't the heart to tell him that I think it painfully lugubrious and quite unsuitable for the children to learn.

I invited him over to the school-house to tea and ushered him into the dining-room, where the clothes-horse stood round the fire bearing various intimate articles of apparel and a row of dingy polishing rags which added the final touch of squalor. Not that he, dear man, would have worried, even had he noticed the things – but that clothes-horse was whisked neatly into the kitchen in record time!

I have just returned from a day out with Amy. She rang me up last night to say that there was a wonderful film on, which I must see. It would *broaden* me. It was about Real life. I said that I'd looked through the *Caxley Chronicle* this week, but I thought that both cinemas were showing Westerns.

'Caxley?' screamed Amy down the wire. Did I think of nothing but Caxley and Fairacre? When she thought of what promise I had shown as a girl, it quite upset her to see how I'd gone off! No, the film she had in mind was to be shown in a London suburb – the cinema specialized in revivals, and this was a quite wonderful chance to see this unique masterpiece. She would pick me up at 10.30, give me lunch, and bring me back to the wilds again.

I mentally pulled my forelock and said that that would be lovely.

Amy's car is magnificent and has a fluid fly-wheel, which as a gear-crashing learner, filled me with horrid envy. We soared up the hills, passing everything in sight, while Amy told me that life,

even for a happily married woman, was not always rosy. James, although utterly devoted of course, was at a dangerous age. Not that he was inattentive; only last week he gave her these gloves – she raised a gargantuan fur-clad paw; and the week before that these ear-rings – I bent forward to admire a cluster of turquoises – and this brooch was his Christmas present, and was fantastically expensive – but she found she was beginning to suspect the *reason* for so many costly presents, especially when he had been away from home, on business, so frequently lately.

I said: 'Why don't you ask him if there is anyone else?' Amy said that was so like me – it wasn't surprising that I stayed single when I was so – well, so *unwomanly* and *unsubtle*. No, she could handle this thing quite skilfully, she thought, and in any case it was her duty to stick by dear James through thick and thin. Unworthy thoughts crossed my mind as to whether she'd stick so nobly if James suddenly became penniless.

We arrived in the West End; Amy had no difficulty in finding a car park with an obsequious attendant who directed our footsteps to the hotel where Amy had booked a table. I was much impressed by the opulence of this establishment and said so. Amy shrugged nonchalantly: 'Not a bad little dump,' then, scanning the menu, 'James brings me here when he wants to be quick. The food is *just* eatable.'

We ordered ham and tongue, with salad, which Amy insisted on having mixed at our table, supervising the rubbing of the bowl with garlic (which I detest, but could see I must endure), the exact number of drops of oil, etc., and expressing horror that the whole was not being turned with wooden implements.

I would much rather have had my salad fresh and been allowed to ask for Heinz mayonnaise, in constant use at home, but realized that Amy was enjoying every minute of this worldly-woman-taking-out-country-mouse act, and would not have spoiled it for her for worlds.

Over lunch, Amy continued to tell me about James's generosity, and disclosed the monthly allowance which he gives her. This, she said, she just manages on. As the sum exceeds easily my own modest monthly cheque as a headmistress, I felt inclined to remind her of our early days together, teaching in a large junior school not many miles from this very hotel, when we thrived

cheerfully on a salary of just over thirteen pounds a month, and visited the theatre, the cinema, went skating and dancing, dressed attractively and, best of all, were as merry as grigs all the time. As Amy's guest, however, I was bound to keep these memories to myself. As I watched her picking over her salad discontentedly I remembered vividly a meal we had had together in those far-off days. It must have been towards the end of the month for I know we spent a long and hilarious time working out from the menu which would fill us up more for eightpence – baked beans and two sausages, or spaghetti on toast.

The cinema was rather hard to find, in an obscure cul-de-sac, and the film which Amy had particularly come to see had just begun. It was so old, that it seemed to be raining all the time, and even the bedroom scenes – which were far too frequent for my peace of mind – were seen through a downpour. The women's hair styles were unbelievable, and quite succeeded in distracting my grasshopper mind from the plot; either puffed-out at the sides, like the chorus in *The Mikado*, or cut in a thick fringe just across the eyebrows, giving the most brutish aspect to the ladies of the cast. Waist lines were low and busts incredibly high evidently when this film first saw the light.

The supporting film was of later vintage, but, if anything, heavier going. Played by Irish actors, in Irish countryside in Irish weather, and spoken in such a clotted hotchpotch of Irish idiom as to be barely intelligible, it dealt with the flight of a young man from the cruel English. Bogs, mist, mountains, girls with shawls over their heads and bare feet splashing through puddles, open coffins surrounded with candles and keening, wrinkled old women, all flickered before us for an hour and a half – and then the poor dear was shot in the end!

We emerged into the grey London twilight with our eyes swollen. Drawn together by our emotional afternoon we had tea in a much more relaxed mood than lunch, and drove back in a pleasantly nostalgic atmosphere of ancient memories shared.

It was good of Amy to take me out. A day away from Fairacre in the middle of January is a real tonic. But I was sorry to see her so unhappy. I hope that I am not so wrong-headed as to blame Amy's recent affluence for her present malaise. As anyone of sense knows, money is a blessing and I dearly wish I had more – a

lot more. I should have flowers in the classroom, and my house, all the year round, buy a hundred or so books, which have been on my list for years, and spend every school holiday travelling abroad – just for a start. I think the truth of the matter is that Amy feels useless, and has too little to do.

She used to be a first-class teacher and was able to draw wonderful pictures on the blackboard, that were the envy of us all, I remember.

School has now started with a vengeance, and I have heard all Mrs Annett's infants' class read – that is, those that can. She has done wonders since she came a year ago. The marriage seems ideal and Mr Annett has lost his nervous, drawn look and put on quite a stone in weight. He brings her over from their school-house at Beech Green each morning, and then returns to his duties there as headmaster. I was glad that the managers persuaded her to continue teaching. She intended to resign last September, but we had no applicants for the post, and as the Annetts had had a good deal of expense in refurnishing she decided to work for a little longer. The children adore her and her methods are more modern than Miss Clare's were. She has a nice practical grasp of infant-work problems too, as an incident this morning proved. I was sending off for more wooden beads for number work. 'Make them send square ones,' she said. I looked surprised. 'They don't roll away,' she added. Now, that's what I call intelligent! Square they shall be!

Joseph Coggs appeared yesterday morning with a brown-paper carrier bag. Inside was a tortoise, very muddy, and as cold and heavy as a stone. It was impossible to tell if it were dead or only hibernating.

'My mum told me to throw an old saucepan on the rubbish heap at the bottom of our place,' he told me, 'and this 'ere was buried under some old muck there.' He was very excited about his find and we have put the pathetic reptile in a box of leaves and earth out in the lobby – but I doubt if it will ever wake again. The children, I was amused to hear, were hushing each other as they undressed.

'Shut up hollering, you,' said Eric in a bellow that nearly raised our tarpaulin, 'that poor snail of Joe's don't get no rest!'

The weather is bitterly cold, with a cruel east wind, which flaps our accursed tarpaulin villainously. (The frame 'has been a bit held-up like, miss. Funny, really.') Scotland has had heavy snow, and I expect that Fairacre will too before long.

The vicar called in just before the children went home to check up numbers for our trip to the Caxley pantomime on Saturday. Two buses have been hired as mothers and friends will come too, as well as the school managers who generously pay the school-children's expenses. It is the highlight of dark January.

Mr Annett called to collect his wife – she won't be coming with us to the pantomime – and the vicar remarked to me on their happiness, adding that, to his mind, a marriage contracted in maturer years often turned out best, and had I met that very pleasant fellow – a retired schoolmaster, he believed – who had come to live at Miss Parr's?

An almost irresistible urge to push the dear vicar headlong over the low school wall, against which he was leaning, was controlled with difficulty, and I was surprised to hear myself replying politely that I had not had that pleasure yet. Truly, civilization is a wonderful thing.

I met Mr Bennett as I walked down to the Post Office the other evening. He is the owner of Tyler's Row, four thatched cottages at the end of our village. The Coggs live in one, the Waites next door to them, an old couple – very sweet and as deaf as posts – in the next, and a tight-lipped, taciturn woman, called Mrs Fowler lives in the last.

Mr Bennett had been to collect the rent from his property.

Each tenant pays three shillings a week and parts with it with the greatest reluctance.

'I gets to hate coming for it,' admitted poor Mr Bennett. He is beginning to look his seventy years now, but his figure is as upright and trim as it was when he was a proud soldier in the Royal Horse Artillery, and his waxed moustache ends still stand at a jaunty angle. He has his Old Age Pension and lives with a sister at Beech Green, who is ailing and as poor as he is.

'Every door's the same,' went on the old soldier. ' "Can't you set our roof to rights? Can't you put us a new sink in? Come and look at the damp in our back scullery. 'Tis shameful." And what

can I do with twelve bob a week coming in? That's if I'm lucky. Arthur Coggs owes me for three months now. He's got four times the money coming in that I have, but he's always got some sad story to spin.'

The old man took out a pipe and rammed the tobacco in with a trembling finger.

'I shall have to give this up, I s'pose, the way things are. I went to get an estimate from the thatcher over at Springbourne about Tyler's Row roofs. Guess how much?'

I said I imagined it would cost about a hundred pounds to put it in repair.

'A hundred?' Mr Bennett laughed sardonically. '*Two* hundred and fifty, my dear. There's nothing for it, it seems, but to sell 'em for about a hundred and fifty while I can. Mrs Fowler would probably buy 'em. She's making a tidy packet at the moment. Pays me three bob, my dear, and has a lodger in that back bedroom who pays her three pound!'

'But can she?' I asked, 'Didn't you have a clause about subletting?'

'No. I didn't. When Mrs Fowler first come begging, all pitiful as a widder-woman, to have my cottage, I was that sorry for her I let her have the key that day. Now the boot's on the other foot. She earns six pounds a week up the engineering works in Caxley, gets three off her lodger, and greets me with a face like a vinegar bottle. "Proper hovel," she called my cottage, just now, "I sees you don't give me notice though, my dear," I says to her, "and, what's more, that's a real smart TV set you got on the dresser there." Ah! She didn't like that!'

The old man chuckled at the thought of his flash of wit, and blew out an impudent dart of smoke from under the twirling moustaches.

'I've just met Mrs Partridge,' he added. 'She asked me if I'd like to give something towards the Church Roof Fund. I give her a shilling, and then I couldn't help saying: "If I was you, Ma'am, I'd call along Tyler's Row for donations. There's something in the nature of forty or fifty pounds going in there each week. You should get a mite from that quarter." '

He leant forward and spoke in a conspiratorial whisper.

'And you know what she said to me? "Mr Bennett, I'm afraid

their hearts don't match their pay packets!" Ah, she sees it all – she and the vicar! Times is topsy-turvy. There's new poor and new rich today, but one and all has got to face responsibility, as I see it. You can't take out of the kitty and not put in, can you, Miss?'

The bus to Beech Green and Caxley drew up with a horrible squeaking of brakes. The driver, a local boy, from whom no secrets are hid, shouted cheerfully to Mr Bennett above the din.

'Been to collect them rents again? Some people has it easy, my eye!'

The old soldier cast me a quizzical glance, compounded of despair and amusement, mounted the steep step, and vanished among the country passengers.

I have been inflicted with a sudden and maddening crop of chilblains and can scarcely hobble around the house. No shoes are big enough to hold my poor, swollen, tormented toes and I am shuffling about in a pair of disreputable slippers which had been put aside for the next jumble sale, but were gratefully resurrected. A very demoralizing state of affairs, and can only put it down to the unwelcome appearance of snow.

The pantomime was an enormous success. Both buses were full, and Cathy Waites, looking very spruce in her new Grammar School uniform, sat by me and told me all about the joys of hockey. 'I'm right-half,' she told me, eyes sparkling, 'and you have to have plenty of wind, because if you're right-half you have to mark the opposing left-wing, and she's usually the fastest runner on the field.' There was a great deal more to the same effect, and in answer to my query about her prowess in more academic subjects, she said: 'Oh, all right,' rather vaguely, and went on to tell me of the intricacies of bullying-off.

Jimmy, her little brother, who sat by his mother opposite, was eating a large apple as he entered the bus, and in the six miles to Caxley consumed, with the greatest relish, a banana, a slab of pink and white nougat, a liquorice pipe, a bar of chocolate cream, and a few assorted toffees. This performance was only typical of many of his companions.

Joseph Coggs sat by me when we settled in the Corn Exchange. The pantomime was 'Dick Whittington,' and he was overawed

by the cat, whose costume and make-up were remarkably realistic.

'How does he breeve?' he asked, in a penetrating whisper.

I whispered back. 'Through the holes in the mask.'

'But he don't have no nose,' objected Joseph.

'Yes he does. It's under the mask.'

'Well, if it's under the mask, how does he breeve?'

We were back where we started, and I tried a different approach.

'Do you think he's holding his breath all this time, Joseph?'

'Yes, he must be.'

'Then how can he talk to Dick?'

Still not persuaded of the cat's 'breeving,' or half-believing it to be a real cat all the time, Joseph subsided. He loved every minute of the show – which was an extraordinarily good amateur performance – and nearly rolled out of his seat with excitement, when I pointed out Linda Moffat to him on the stage. She was a dazzling fairy queen, in a creation of her clever mother's making, and her dancing was a pleasure to watch. I was glad that Mrs Moffat, with her friend Mrs Finch-Edwards, had been able to come with us this afternoon to witness Linda's success.

Several of the cast were known personally to the Fairacre children and storms of clapping greeted the appearance of anyone remotely known.

'Look,' said Eric, on my other side, clutching me painfully, 'there's the girl what drives the oil-van Tuesdays.' And he nearly burst his palms with rapturous greeting.

When we emerged, dazzled with glory, into the winter twilight, the snow was falling fast. Queen Victoria on her lofty pedestal wore a white mantle and a snow-topped crown. The lane to Fairacre was unbelievably lovely, the banks smooth as linen sheets, the overhanging beech trees already bearing a weight of snow along their elephant-grey branches, while the prickly hawthorn hedges clutched white handfuls in their skinny fingers.

St Patrick's clock chimed half-past five when we stepped out at Fairacre, after our lovely afternoon. Our footsteps were muffled, but our voices rang out as clear as the bells above, in the cold air.

Mrs Pringle asked me as we got off the bus if I had ever tried Typhoon tea? I successfully curbed an insane desire to ask her if it

brewed storms in tea-cups? I enjoyed this *bon mot* all through my own tea-time.

A most peculiar thing happened today. A very loud knocking came at the door of my classroom, while we were chanting the pence table to 100, in a delightful sing-song that would make an ultra-modern inspector's hair curl – and when I opened it, a strange young man tried to push in. I manoeuvred him back into the lobby, shut the classroom door behind me, and asked what he wanted. He was respectably dressed, but unshaven. He said could he come in as he liked children? Thinking he was an eccentric tramp on his way from the Caxley workhouse to the next, I told him that he'd better be getting along, and shooed him kindly into the playground.

An hour later Mrs Annett came in from P.T. lesson, somewhat perturbed, because the wretched creature had hung over the school wall throughout the lesson making inane remarks. At this, I went out to send him off less kindly. By now, he had entered my garden and was drawing patterns on the snowy lawn with a stick.

When I asked him what he was supposed to be doing, he flummoxed me by whipping out a red, penny note-book and saying he'd come to read the gas meter. As we have no gas in this area, this was so patently silly that I made up my mind at once to get the police to cope with the fellow.

As I opened my front door he tried to come in with me, whining: 'I'm so hungry – so hungry,' and grinning vacantly at the same time. By now I was positive I had a madman on my hands, and very devoutly wished that I had not seen a gripping film about Jack the Ripper in Caxley recently, the horrider parts of which returned to me with unpleasant clarity.

'Go to the back porch,' I ordered him, in a stern school-marmish voice, 'and I will give you some food.' Luckily he went, and I sped inside, locked front and back doors, and rang Caxley police station in record time.

A reassuring country voice answered me, and I began to feel much better as I described the man, until the voice said, in a leisurely manner: 'That'd be the chap that ran off from Abbotsleigh yesterday' – our local mental home.

'Heavens—!' I began, squeaking breathlessly.

'He wouldn't hurt a fly, miss,' went on the unhurried burr, 'he'll be scared stiff of you. Just keep him there if you can and we'll send a car out – it'll be with you in a quarter of an hour.'

I didn't know that I cared to be told that the man would be scared stiff of me, but I cared even less for the suggestion that I cherished him under my roof. Nor did I like the thought of the forty children, of tender years, for whom I was responsible, not to mention Mrs Annett, whose husband I should never dare to face, if aught befell her. All this I babbled over the telephone, adding: 'I'm just going to give him a drink and some bread and cheese, in the back porch, so please try and get here while he's still eating.'

'Car's gone out already. Never you fear, miss. Treat him like one of your kids,' said my calm friend, and rang off. I handed a pint of cider, half a loaf, and a craggy piece of hard cheese through the kitchen window, and with subtle cunning of which I was inordinately proud, supplied him with a small, very blunt tea-knife which should slow up his progress considerably. I couldn't make up my mind whether to dash back to the school and warn Mrs Annett, or whether to hang on in the house until the police car came. In the end I stayed in the kitchen, watching the meal vanish all too swiftly and edging my mind away from that pursuing film.

After the longest ten minutes of my life, the car drew up. Two enormous, cheerful policemen came to the back porch, and asked the man to come for a ride with them.

He went, without a backward glance, still clutching the plate and mug. Once inside the car he finished his cider, and I emerged from the front door and collected his utensils, wishing him a heartfelt good-bye into the bargain.

The policeman said: 'Thank you, miss, thank you!' and drove off, still beaming.

When I caught sight of myself in the mirror in the lobby I was not surprised. The most scared schoolmistress in the United Kingdom crawled thankfully back to her noisy class, and never breathed a word of reproach to the dear souls.

I really believe that my chilblains have finally gone, and wish I

knew what had cured them – if anything particular, apart from Time-the-great-healer, I mean.

The various suggestions for their rout have ranged from (1) calcium tablets (Mr Annett); (2) painting with iodine (Mrs Annett) which I tried, but found tickly to do and so drying that the poor toes started to crack as well as itch; (3) treating with the liquid obtained from putting salt in a hollow dug in a turnip (Mr Willet, the caretaker); and (4) thrashing with a sprig of holly until the chilblains bleed freely (Mrs Pringle). Needless to say I did *not* attempt the last sadistic assault on my suffering extremities.

I am very worried about Joseph Coggs. His mother was taken to hospital last week with some internal trouble connected with the recent baby. Mrs Pringle, who usually describes any ills of the flesh in the most revolting detail, has seen fit on this occasion to observe an austere reserve about Mrs Coggs' symptoms, taking up the attitude that there are some things that the great army of married women must keep from their less fortunate spinster sisters. The twins, who usually adorn the front desk in Mrs Annett's room, and a toddler brother, have been sent to Mrs Coggs' sister in Caxley; but as she has no room for Joe he is living a hand-to-mouth existence with his father (who is completely useless) and with Mrs Waites, the next-door neighbour, 'Keeping an eye on him.'

It all sounds most unsatisfactory to me. The child is not clean, has not had his clothes changed since his mother's departure, and looks frightened. Mr Willet told me more this morning when he came to fill the two buckets for the school's daily drinking-water from my kitchen pump.

'I don't say nothing about Arthur Coggs' drunkenness,' announced Mr Willet, with heavy self-righteousness. 'Nor don't I say nothing about his hitting of his wife now and again – that's his affair. Nor don't I say nothing about an occasional lift round the ear for his kids – seeing as kids must be brought up respectful – but I *do* say this. That's not right to leave that child alone in that thatched cottage with the candle on, while he spends the evening at the "Beetle and Wedge." Why, my wife and I we hears him roaring along home nigh on eleven most nights.'

'But the candle would have burnt out by then,' I said, horror-struck. 'Joe would be alone in the dark.'

'Well, I don't know as that's not a deal safer,' said Mr Willet, stolidly. 'Better be frightened than frizzled. But don't you upset yourself – Joe's probably asleep by then.'

'I thought Mrs Waites was looking after him.'

'Mrs Waites,' said Mr Willet, with a return to his pontifical manner, 'is well-meaning, but flighty. Never room for more than one thought at a time in her head. Maybe she takes a peep at him, once in a while; maybe she don't.'

Discreet questioning of Joseph, later in the morning, revealed that the state of his home affairs was even worse than suspected. The candle *does* go out, Joseph is too terrified to get out of bed, so wets it, and Arthur Coggs on his return from the pub shows his fatherly disapproval by giving the child what Joe calls 'a good hiding with his belt.' (On seeing my appalled face, Joe added, reassuringly, that 'he didn't use the buckle end.') Joseph's stolid acceptance of this state of things was rather more than I could bear, and I went to Mrs Waites' house during the dinner hour to see what could be done.

She was sensible and helpful, offering to let Joe share her little Jimmy's bed downstairs. This sounded ideal, and I promised to see Arthur Coggs about the scheme after tea. He – great bully that he is – was all smiles and servility, and confessed himself deeply grateful to Mrs Waites, as well he might be.

Luckily, Mrs Waites, who is a confirmed novelette-reader, has just read in this week's number, she told me, a story about a friendless child who later becomes heir to a dukedom and landed estate (no taxes mentioned), and suitably rewards a kindly woman who befriended him in his early years. This has sweetened her approach to young Joe considerably, and though I can't see a dukedom looming up for him, he will doubtless never forget his own neighbour's present kindness. Flighty Mrs Waites may be, but thoroughly sweet-natured, and I can quite see how she has fluttered so many male hearts.

I seem to be more than usually financially embarrassed, and when I had paid the laundry man this morning, found I was left with exactly two shillings and sevenpence. Mrs Pringle brought me my

weekly dozen eggs this afternoon, and I had to tip out my threepenny bits which I save in a Coronation mug, and make up the balance.

That's the worst of being paid for December and January just before Christmas! I shall have to take my Post Office Savings Book into Caxley on Saturday morning and withdraw enough to keep me going until the end of the month. It would be more than my reputation's worth to withdraw it here in the village. Mr Lamb, our postmaster, and brother to Mrs Willet, would fear I was either betting or keeping two homes. Meanwhile I must just embezzle the dinner money.

We have had pouring rain all day and – miraculously – the new skylight seems weatherproof.

I gave my class an arithmetic test. Linda Moffat did exceptionally well, and should go on to Caxley High School in two years' time if she keeps on at this rate. She grows prettier daily, and will doubtless become a heart-breaker.

All goes well with Joseph, thank heaven, and the child is cleaner than I've ever seen him. He and Jimmy are great friends and I can see that Mrs Annett is going to have to squash those two young gentlemen before long.

Joe's tortoise seems to have turned round in his box. At my suggestion that perhaps somebody lifted him round, there were hot denials, and I apologized hastily. He certainly looks less dead.

Jim Bryant, our postman, brought our cheques today. He was never more welcome. I gave Mrs Pringle and Mrs Annett theirs, but could not find Mr Willet. However, he had a noisy coughing attack in the lobby this afternoon, which reminded me of his rightful dues.

'There now,' he said, when I gave the cheque to him, 'this is a real surprise!'

Bless him, if anyone ever earned his humble wage it's Mr Willet! He copes with coke, water, dead leaves, dustbins, snow, intruding animals varying from Mr Roberts' cows to black beetles – not to mention the buckets from our primitive lavatories – with unfailing cheerfulness. May he endure for ever!