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Thrush Green

Miss Read

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Extract

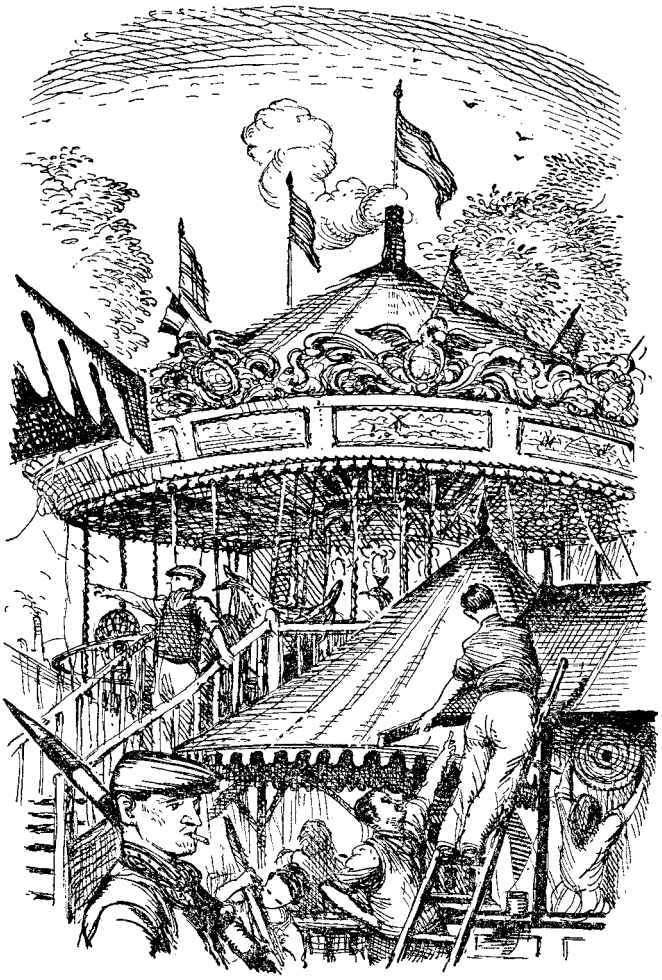
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PART ONE

Morning

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1. The Day Begins

As soon as he opened his eyes the child remembered, and his heart soared. This was the day he had waited for so long – the day of the fair.

He lay there for a minute, beneath his tumbled bedclothes, savouring the excitement. His mind's eye saw again, with the sharp clarity of a six-year-old, the battered galloping horses with flaring nostrils, the glittering brass posts, twisted like giant barley sugar sticks, the dizzy red and yellow swingboats and the snakes of black flex that coiled across the bruised grass of Thrush Green waiting to ensnare the feet of the bedazzled.

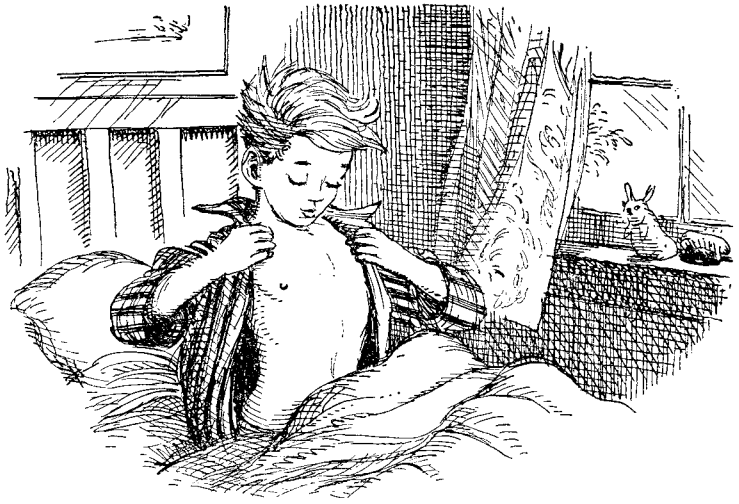
His nose tingled with the remembered scent of the hot oily smell which pulsed from the blaring roundabout and the acrid odour of his own hands, faintly green from clutching the brass post so tightly. In his head rang the music of the fair, the raucous shouting, the screams of silly girls in swingboats, the throbbing of the great engine which supplied the power and, over all, the head-hammering mammoth voice which roared old half-forgotten tunes from among the whirling horses of the roundabout.

At last, at last, Paul told himself, it was the first day of May! And at this point he sat up in bed, said 'White Rabbits!' aloud, to bring luck throughout the coming month, and looked eagerly out of the window into the dewy sunshine which was beginning to shimmer on Thrush Green.

And then, with a horrid shock, the child remembered something else. His heart stopped singing and dropped like a lark to the ground. Would he be able to go? Could he? Would he?

Frantically he clawed at the buttons of his pyjama jacket, tore it open, and surveyed his chest with agonized anxiety.

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'The rash has almost gone,' young Doctor Lovell had said to Aunt Ruth the night before. 'If his temperature stays down, I don't see why he shouldn't have an hour at the fair.'

Aunt Ruth had smiled at Paul who had bounced up and down on the mattress with excitement.

'But you've got to take it quietly, young man,' went on Doctor Lovell, 'otherwise, no fair!'

They had left the child in bed and gone downstairs to the cool hall. The front and back doors of the pleasant old house stood hospitably open and the low rays of the setting sun crept in through the back door with the fragrance of the wallflowers which lined the garden path.

'He'll be so pleased if he can go,' said the girl. 'They say that this will be the last time the fair comes here.'

'Oh, you've heard that too?' observed Doctor Lovell. 'Evidently the old lady who runs the thing – Mrs Whatsit –' He snapped his fingers and cocked his long dark head sideways in an effort to remember.

'Mrs Curdle,' prompted Ruth. 'The great Mrs Curdle. Why, I remember her when Joan and I used to come here to stay as children! She always looked about eighty – and as tough as they make them!'

'That's it – Mrs Curdle. They were saying at The Vine last night that she's decided to sell the business.'

'It seems impossible,' said the girl, as they paced slowly down the short flagged path to the gate. 'And what her family will do without her to bully them all I can't think.'

The doctor opened the gate and stood outside. Ruth rested her bare arms on top and they gazed across Thrush Green to the half-dozen or so caravans which clustered at the further corner near the church some hundred yards away. Most of them were gleaming modern beauties, flashing with chromium plating and fresh paint; but two of them were the traditional horse-drawn ones painted gaily with green and red, with yellow wheels and a bucket or two swinging from the axle, and in one of these, Ruth knew, lived the old matriarch who had ruled the fair for so many years.

In the still evening air blue smoke rose from the little tin chimney to the lime trees above. There was a faint whiff of frying onions, and a lurcher dog was sitting close to the caravan, his nose pointed expectantly upward. Nearby two skewbald ponies, tethered to the trees, cropped the new grass.

'Looks the perfect life,' sighed Ruth longingly. 'Just wandering from place to place. Nothing to remind you of things you want to forget –' Her voice trailed away and her companion looked at her quickly. She was uncomfortably pretty, gazing into the distance like that, he thought, and looked much better than she had when he had first met her six weeks before. Then she had been a pathetic little ghost, sitting listlessly in her sister's house, answering politely when addressed, with her heart and mind in some far-distant place.

Damn that fellow! thought young Doctor Lovell savagely, for the hundredth time. And I suppose she'd take him back again if he came crawling, blast his eyes! He fought down his useless anger and spoke equably. The calm evening gave him courage to speak more intimately than he had dared before.

'You will forget,' he assured her seriously. 'Look at the day ahead and never backward. You don't need a caravan for happiness, you know.'

The girl looked at him directly and gave a quick warm smile. The young man laughed with relief and raised a hand in farewell.

'I'll look in tomorrow morning,' he promised, and set off across Thrush Green to his own temporary home.

Thrush Green stood on high ground at the northerly end of Lulling, a small sleepy prosperous town, which had been famous in the days of the wool trade.

The town itself lay some half a mile distant, its gentle grey houses clustered, in a hollow, on each side of the twining silver river, like a flock of drowsy sheep. The streets curved and twisted as pleasantly as the river, but shaded by fine lime trees, now breaking into delicate leaf, instead of by willows, soon to shimmer summer through, above the trout-ringed reaches of the River Pleshy.

The High Street tilted abruptly to rise to Thrush Green. It was a short sharp hill, 'a real head-thumper of a hill!' in hot weather, as old Mr Piggott, sexton of St Andrew's, often said. In the grip of winter's ice the same hill was feared by riders, drivers, and those on foot. Years before, a wooden handrail, polished by generations of hands, had lined the high pavement, but the town council had decided that it served no useful purpose and detracted from the charm of the stone-walled cottages perched high on the bank above, and when the handrail had become shaky with age it had been dismantled, much to the annoyance of the Thrush Green residents.

The green itself was triangular, with the church of St Andrew standing at the southerly point. The main road from Lulling to its nearest neighbouring Cotswold town ran along one side of Thrush Green, and a less important lane threading its way to half a dozen or so sleepy little hamlets, skirted the other side. Across the base of the triangle at the northern end ran a fine avenue of horse-chestnut trees, linking the two roads, and behind them, facing towards St Andrew's across the green, stood five sturdy old houses, built of that pleasantly sunny Cotswold stone which reminds one of honeycombs, golden afternoons, and warm and mellow bliss.

It was in the middle house of the five that Ruth Bassett was staying this spring. She had known and loved the house all her life, for it had belonged to her grandparents, and she and her sister Joan had always spent as much time as possible at Thrush

Green, escaping from their parents' home at Ealing whenever they could.

It had been wonderful as children to exchange the small garden, the neat tree-lined streets, and the decorous walks in Ealing parks, for the heady freedom of Thrush Green and the big untidy garden that lay behind the old house. Sometimes they travelled with their parents, for their father visited his mother and father as often as his work would allow. But sometimes the two girls travelled alone from Paddington in the charge of the guard and it was these journeys that they loved best. Their spirits rose as the train rattled westward, leaving the factories and rows of houses behind. Whatever the season the country enchanted them. They would stand in the corridor of the lurching train in the springtime, watching the broad fields of buttercups whirling by, glittering like the Field of the Cloth of Gold in the May sunshine. In the summer they kept watch for the gay boats on the river, the sunshades, the punt poles flashing with drops in wet hands, and the trailing plumes of weeping willow ruffling the surface. During the autumn the glowing beech woods, gold, bronze and red, flared across the hills like a forest fire; and in the Christmas holidays the bare, quiet stillness of the sleeping countryside formed the prelude to the cheerful domestic bustle of Christmas which they knew would welcome them at their grandparents' home.

Their grandfather had died first. Ruth remembered him pottering about in the garden, a little doll of a man with fluffy white hair and a complexion as softly pink and white as a marshmallow. He had taken a great interest in Lulling's affairs, and the people of Thrush Green were reputed to set their watches and clocks by the old gentleman's punctual appearance at his gate each morning as he set off for his daily walk downhill to the town. He had been a fine cricketer in his day, and during his long retirement he had attended the modest matches at Thrush Green and those more important ones at Lulling's playing field, and those at the neighbouring towns.

One sunny June morning he had returned from his walk a little more breathless than usual after the stiff uphill climb. He had lowered himself into the sagging wicker chair in the shade of the lime tree and had surveyed the fresh beauty of the flaunting

oriental poppies and irises which he loved so well. From the house came the welcome smell of lunch being prepared. He had nodded off in the drowsy sunshine, and when they had come to tell him that lunch was ready, he lay there, beneath the lime tree murmurous with bees, in his last sleep.

In the following autumn his widow had died too, and the house had been left to Ruth's father. By this time Joan had become engaged to Edward Young, a Lulling architect in partnership with his father. The two families had been friends for many years and, as a boy, Edward had always been at Thrush Green to welcome the two girls on their visits. He had been a stolid child, even-tempered and quite impervious to the Bassett girls' quips. Ruth had secretly thought him rather dull, but she had had to admit that he had developed into a kindly, reliable man, devoted to Joan and their one little boy Paul, and possessing a remarkably dry sense of humour.

The house on Thrush Green was offered to the young couple by Joan's father, who was compelled to stay in Ealing to be near to his business.

'But the day I retire,' he had threatened his young tenants with a smile, 'you are turned out into the snow on Thrush Green, don't forget! And I move in!'

Meanwhile the house remained much as it was in the grandparents' day. Joan and Edward had changed the dark paint to light and had removed the lace curtains which had shrouded all the front windows in their grandmother's time, but little else had altered, and when Ruth came down to stay, she still felt the same uplift of spirits as she stepped inside the cool hall, and still half-expected to see the pink and white old gentleman and his bustling little wife approach to welcome her.

She always slept in the same bedroom, the one which she had shared as a child with Joan, and the view from its window across Thrush Green never ceased to enchant her. If she looked left she saw the wider road to Lulling, with a few comfortable houses standing well back in leafy gardens. The tallest one belonged to old Doctor Bailey, who had attended to Lulling's ills for almost fifty years, and who had known the Bassett girls since they were babies.

To the right, on the narrow dusty lane, lay the village school

behind a row of white palings. A stretch of mown grass lay between the palings and the road and on hot days the children left their stony playground and lay and rolled on the grass just outside. Only if their teacher were with them were they allowed to cross the dusty lane to play on the greater green, for Miss Watson was a timid woman and had no doubt at all that each and every pupil would be run over and either maimed or killed outright if she were not there to keep an eye on their movements.

Beside the school stood the little school house, and beside that a row of small cottages. In the last lived old Mr Piggott, the sexton of St Andrew's. As The Two Pheasants stood next door to his house he was handy not only for his work at the church on the green, but also for his only pleasure. He had been a source of fear to the Bassett girls when they were small. Always grumbling, he had threatened them with all kinds of dreadful punishment if he had caught them walking in St Andrew's churchyard or sheltering in the porch. Now, bent and rheumaticky and crosser than ever, Ruth and Joan found him a figure to be pitied rather than feared, but both agreed that he was an evil-tempered old man and they felt very sorry for his only daughter Molly who kept house for him.

'It's a good thing she's got a job in that pretty little pub in Lulling Woods,' Joan told her sister. 'At least it gets her away from her wretched old father for most of the time. I can't think how she puts up with him. She's so sweet and so terribly pretty – she's bound to get married soon, I suppose.'

And then she had stopped short and had cursed herself fiercely for mentioning marriage to Ruth just then. In the silence which fell upon the room that dusky April evening Joan had cast a swift look at her sister's drawn face and had hastily changed the subject to the plans which she and Edward were making for a few days' holiday. Ruth had offered to mind Paul while they were away, and secretly looked forward to having the peace and comfort of the old house with only the little boy for company. Joan and Edward couldn't have been kinder, she told herself, since the blow had fallen upon her. They had offered hospitality, rest, companionship, and the tranquillity of Thrush Green, all combining to act as balm to a hurt mind and heart; but yet she

craved, now that the worst was over, for a little solitude in which to make plans for a timid, sad return to life.

They had driven off on a sparkling April morning and within two days Paul had developed a high temperature and a rash on his chest. Old Doctor Bailey, who just lately had spent most of his time in bed, had sent his young assistant Doctor Lovell across to see the little boy, and Ruth, who had met him soon after her arrival earlier in the spring, had grown to like this quiet young man who had slipped so easily into the ways and the affections of the people of Lulling and Thrush Green. Even Mr Piggott had spoken a grudging word in his favour.

'Pity he don't stop,' he had said to Ruth, nodding across the green at the departing figure. 'The old 'un ain't too good these days. But there – he won't give up till his knifing arm drops off. Still keeps an eye on some of the old patients, ill though he be himself.'

A tapping at the bedroom window above had interrupted this conversation. Paul's woebegone face was pressed to the glass and Ruth had hurried back to the patient.

'All that's troubling him,' old Piggott had called after her, 'is whether he'll be fit to go to the fair!'

When Ruth awoke on the first day of May her first thought, as always, was of that nightmarish scene which had changed her life. The old accustomed horror engulfed her as her mind fought to turn itself away from such bitterness. But, to her surprise, the feeling was not so sharply cruel on this particular day. True, her mind shied from its remembrance like a terrified horse, but it did not plunge and toss, this way and that, in grief-maddened panic, in its efforts to shake off the devil that possessed it. It was as though a veil had been dropped between the dreadful picture and her mind's eye. She could see it all, down to the smallest detail, but the picture was dimmed, the impact was gentler, and her own feeling less agonized.

Could it really be true that time healed everything, Ruth wondered? For six weeks now she had woken daily to a sickening sense of loss and humiliation, and this was the first time that she had felt any lessening in the misery that engulfed her.

The clock of St Andrew's struck seven and she could hear movements from Paul's room across the landing. The first of

May! The day of Thrush Green fair. No wonder that he was awake early. If the rash had gone and his temperature remained normal she felt sure that he would be allowed to go to the fair. Doctor Lovell would be along as soon as possible, she knew, to put the little boy out of his suspense.

She sat up and reached for her slippers. The sun was already striking rainbows from the dewy grass and gilding the roofs of the caravans on Thrush Green. As Ruth thrust her feet into her slippers she was struck once again by a second marvel. The thought of seeing young Doctor Lovell again had sent the faintest flicker of warmth into her sad heart. She sat on the side of the bed and considered this phenomenon dispassionately. To have the searing pain lessened at all was remarkable enough for one morning, but to find a little warmth among the dead ashes of her day-to-day existence was even more extraordinary.

Wondering and bemused, shaken with a vague sense of gratitude for mercies received, she went to the bedroom door. And clutching this crumb of comfort to her she made her way across the sunlit landing to see Paul.

2. The Great Mrs Curdle

Mrs Curdle heard St Andrew's clock strike seven as she lifted the boiling kettle from her diminutive stove. She had been up and about for over an hour, moving slowly about her caravan, straightening the covers on the bunk, shaking the rag rug, and even giving the brass on her beloved stove an early rub with metal polish.

The stove was the delight of her heart and had been built especially by a friend of her late husband's to fit neatly into the end of her tiny home. The top was of gleaming steel which Mrs Curdle rubbed up daily with emery paper, hissing gently to herself like a groom to a horse, as her busy hand slid back and forth, back and forth across the satin of the surface.

A circular lid could be lifted off and the fire then sent up its released heat to Mrs Curdle's kettle, stew-pot, or frying-pan. When the food was cooked, or the teapot filled, it could be kept