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The Birds on the Trees

Written by Nina Bawden

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THE BIRDS ON THE TREES

Nina Bawden



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Prologue

'I hope we've done right,' Clara Tilney said. From her, this was an unusual remark – she seldom doubted her actions, nor expected her husband to share the responsibility when she did – but the occasion was exceptional. An hour earlier, ten o'clock on Christmas Eve, she had opened the back door to clear the steam from her kitchen and found the child outside. How long he had been there was anyone's guess: his little hands were cold as toads and his striped, knitted hat beaded with moisture, although the rain had stopped some time before, leaving a clear, seasonal, carolling night. Certainly he hadn't knocked – busy at the stove with mince pies and turkey stuffing, Mrs Tilney would have heard him – and all he would say, once coaxed inside and comforted, was that Mummy and Daddy had gone away for Christmas and left him behind, alone.

Although shocking, the situation was not entirely beyond belief. The family had moved into the house at the bottom of the Tilney's garden nine months ago and the boy had become an accepted visitor some time in the middle of the summer, infiltrating so unobtrusively that it was hard to say, exactly, when he had ceased to be a small, anonymous figure standing silently at the broken fence, and begun to appear regularly, weekend mornings when the Tilneys were sitting down to their enormous breakfast, to watch from the back door with huge, dark, famine eyes. Looking at those eyes, it was easy to believe him when he said Mummy had given him nothing to eat, but Clara Tilney was not one to choose the easy road. Nobody's fool, she took most of what she heard with a pinch of salt. But if the child was a persistent liar – for the complaint, or statement, was frequently repeated – he was not one of a kind she was accustomed to, being

neither bold not sly; having, on the contrary, a steady if wistful gaze and gentle manners, saying *if you please,* and *thank you so much,* with a solemn, old-fashioned air. Accepting, then, that he spoke the truth, Mrs Tilney looked for other signs of ill-treatment but found none. 'Not a mark on his little body,' she said to her husband, after she had seen him stripped one hot afternoon, playing with her own children under the garden hose. Though not disappointed (she wasn't a morbid woman), she could not help feeling a little at a loss. Blows she could comprehend and would have dealt with: Clara had been brought up in the slums and knew the proper channels. But what was wrong here was something not only harder to deal with, but to place. You couldn't call the child really neglected. Thin he might be, but some people are like that, all scrag and muscle, and he was always decently, if sometimes oddly, clothed. Mrs Tilney had seen him at the bus-stop with his mother, dressed neatly enough in the uniform of the local private school but wearing, on his head, a towering pink velvet toque with a tattered, trailing veil. His mother had smiled, but Mrs Tilney hadn't liked to speak.

Her inhibition was to some extent social. Not – in spite of the private school – a question of money, for the little boy's parents were visibly shabby. They had no television set, so the Tilney children reported, and no car; only an ancient, high-seated bicycle which the tall young mother rode, that had a carrier behind for the boy and a cradle in front for the baby. Nor was it old-fashioned snobbery. Mrs Tilney had no ear for accents and no interest, anyway, in ladies-and-gentlemen nonsense. It was power that impressed her; not Dukes, but Captains of Industry, Presidents of the United States. No – as far as class went, what divided her from the children's mother was simply a difference of *approach.* Except in moments of brutal necessity, it was not Clara's habit to come straight out with things, expecially if they were of a delicate nature. And the only time she had actually had an opportunity was once in the launderette; she was folding her sheets, warmly crinkled from the tumbler-drier, when the younger woman

came up with a bundle of wet washing and said, without any preamble, 'I meant to ask you before – I *do* hope he isn't a nuisance, running in and out all the time.' It was said breathlessly – all that bicycling, perhaps, and heaving the fat baby about – but with such a clear, confident ring that 'No, of course not, it's a pleasure,' was the only possible answer. No lead in for a comfortable discussion of childish habits, fads and fancies – *mine won't touch corn-flakes, or meat roll, or dripping toast* – which might have made it possible, after a reasonable length of time, to cautiously bring up the business of the breakfasts.

'Not that I grudge the child,' Mrs Tilney often said, either to her husband or aloud to herself, holding an imagined conversation with the mother. Perhaps that was, really, what held her back from going round to the house and coming out with it: the fear that she might be thought inhospitable. Clara's childhood had been hungry and miserable, her parents being both poor, and mean by nature, so that even the food they could afford to put on the table was jealously watched, mouthful by mouthful. (Marge *and* jam; Money no object, I suppose! When you grow up, my girl, you can put two spoons of sugar in your tea, but while you're under this roof, you'll toe the chalk line!) From this sour soil, Mrs Tilney had flowered remarkably, large-hearted and generous. 'Eat,' she said to her children. 'Eat. Have butter on that potato. Can't you really manage another piece of pie?' Using, always, thick cream and butter, best meat not scrag end, fresh vegetables, the biggest eggs, stone-ground flour. Mr Tilney earned good money working for a hire firm that ran a fleet of school buses, but even if he had not, she would have served up good bean stews, home-made soups. She often lay awake at night devising cheap, nourishing meals, so that if the worst should happen she could still feed her family with a flourish.

Having grown strong and sturdy, happy and casually greedy, they now had almost ceased to need her. The little boy was, therefore, both a replacement, and a challenge. Clara longed to put colour in that milk-pale

face, flesh on the bony limbs. She kept back the brownest, most speckled eggs, bought jars of expensive honey. 'That'll keep you going for a bit,' she said as the child tucked in. 'There's my pet, my lambkin-pie.' Her own children had grown out of such endearments, as they had grown out of caresses and lap-sitting: if she reached out to touch them, they jerked their heads like ponies.

In fact, though, the boy preferred Mr Tilney's lap to his wife's, perhaps because he sat still for longer. Mr Tilney was a quiet, lethargic man who suffered with his stomach. (Boiled fish and skim milk was what he needed, but never got.) His role in the household was negligible, but he never complained, only gazed, occasionally, at his lusty wife and children as if wondering how he had ever had the energy. This imported child was a better match for his temperament. He would sit on the tired man's lap, watching television, sucking his thumb. From time to time he would glance up at the underside of the scraggy, tortoise neck; sigh, and snuggle closer.

It was Mr Tilney who put him to bed on Christmas Eve while Clara went round to his parents' house – a big, run-down place in half an acre of neglected garden. By the time she got back to report that the house was dark and empty and that all she had been able to do was push a note through the door to say where the child was, he was already asleep, tucked up on the divan in the Tilney's bedroom and Mr Tilney was filling a stocking for him with small things from the tree.

It was hard to know what to do for the best. In the first flush of outrage, Mrs Tilney was all for going to the police, but her husband talked her out of it. They would come and ask questions which would only upset the poor little bugger without getting anyone any further: since he wouldn't – or couldn't – tell them what had happened, he was hardly likely to talk to a stranger. Best to wait twenty-four hours and let him enjoy his Christmas. 'The bird's big enough to go round an extra one, isn't it, mother?' Mr Tilney not-so-innocently asked. A convinced procrastinator, he was also tired.

Once in bed, though, he couldn't sleep. There was no sound from the divan. He found himself – foolishly, he knew – holding his breath to listen for the child's, but all he could hear was his wife breathing beside him with little, fussy, puffs and snorts like a steam-engine. After a while, he got out of bed and went over to the divan. Enough light came in from the street lamp outside to show the child, lying on his back as a young baby sometimes lies, both hands palm upwards on either side of his face, the fingers loosely curled. Mr Tilney stood, looking down, his feet cold on the cold linoleum. It was some seconds before he realised that the boy was awake and looking up at him, and it shocked him, momentarily; those large, dark eyes, wide open and fathomless. His own children only lay so still when fast asleep. He said nervously, 'All right, are you?' The child did not answer. Mr Tilney touched the palm of one hand, very gently, and the fingers curled over his like tentacles, and gripped tight. Mr Tilney felt a curious, uneasy emotion; as if he were being asked a question he didn't know how to answer. He said, 'It's all right, you know. I expect your Mum and Dad will turn up tomorrow.'

'Mummy and Daddy are dead,' the child said, softly but distinctly, so that Mr Tilney could not pretend he hadn't heard. Not that he wished to: after the first chill, the sad little statement opened doors in his mind that had been closed for a long time. All he said was, 'Oh, come on now,' but he sat down on the divan and gathered the boy into his arms, pressing the small head into the bony hollow of his neck and shoulder. After a brief resistance the child began to weep silently, and Mr Tilney rocked him, stroking the limp, silky hair, and felt his throat constrict with tenderness. Even when they were small, his own children had never needed him like this. He loved them dutifully, admired them, as he admired his wife, for their marvellous vitality, their unthinking good humour, but they were strangers to him; they rocketed about his house like foreign, billeted troops, shouting, banging doors, swilling milk, needing no more from anyone than food and disci-

pline, which his wife could easily supply. His own, gentler offers were unnecessary, and disregarded.

Mr Tilney was cold and in an awkward position that increased the pain of his ulcer, but the discomfort was suddenly sweet. 'Quiet,' he murmured, 'quiet, now. It's all right. Uncle's here. Uncle knows . . .'

After lunch on Christmas Day, while his wife and eldest girl washed up the mammoth meal, Mr Tilney took the other children and the little boy for a walk on the common. A white sun shone and the heather was furred with frost. His own children ran and hollered and stamped in puddles: their shouts cracked the thin air as their boots splintered the frail skim of ice. The boy walked with Mr Tilney, holding his hand. From time to time he ran to join the others but always returned, after a very brief foray, to the shelter of Mr Tilney's side, smiling up at him with a kind of shy flirtatiousness – it was indeed, Mr Tilney felt, almost as if there were a burgeoning love affair between them. Certainly he felt strongly drawn towards the child; the more so, perhaps, because he knew he must betray him. He had promised his wife that he would telephone the police this evening; although this was the sensible course, Mr Tilney found it hard to respond to that happy, cozening smile. The memory came to him of a tale heard at school: a young, imprisoned prince whose eyes were to be put out by the order of his uncle, the king. There had been a picture in the history book of the pretty, trusting boy, and the kindly jailer, weeping . . .

Mr Tilney's imagination, once the flood gates were opened, was a sentimental one. Once or twice, as he did his best to amuse the child and encourage the rare, high laugh, his own eyes filled.

But he was spared his Judas role. When they got back, the parents were already there, sitting by the fire Clara had banked up so high against her family's return that the heat struck like a furnace as Mr Tilney opened the door. In that instant their faces, turned towards him, seemed curiously alike – brother and sister was his first,

bemused thought – but on second look the similarity lay only in their expressions which were so shocked and bewildered as to be robbed of individuality, like the expressions of people caught in a road accident, and in their pallor, though when the woman saw the little boy, pressed close to Mr Tilney's side, the colour flooded her face. She said, 'Darling.'

The child made a grunting sound and fled down the passage to the kitchen.

The woman – girl, rather – half rose. Her husband said 'No,' rather sharply, and she sank back again, though her hands still gripped the arms of the chair. She looked up at Mr Tilney with eyes like her son's: enormous, dark and sad. He saw her throat move as she swallowed.

She said, 'I'm so terribly, terribly sorry.'

And so you should be, was on the tip of Mr Tilney's tongue. Unlike his wife, he was slow to anger, but now, faced with this wicked pair, outrage swelled within him. His hands had begun to shake; he pushed them deep into his trouser pockets and took a step into the room.

His wife said, flatly, 'Apparently he ran away, the naughty boy. After everyone was fast asleep.'

Her broad face was blank. She sat stiffly on a hard, high-backed chair.

The girl said, 'We went to my husband's sister for Christmas. It's not far, just a few streets, but she likes to see the children open their stockings on Christmas morning. I think he's frightened of his grandmother. She lives there. She's got Parkinson's, and shakes . . .'

The husband sighed, not loudly but definitely.

The girl said, 'Well, she will *kiss* him.' Her pleading eyes met Mr Tilney's. He felt only anger.

'Darling.' Her husband sighed again, perhaps reproachfully. He was looking at Mr Tilney, too. 'We're afraid it may not be so much my poor Mum, as the associated memory that's upset him. At least, it's all we can think of. We left him with my sister when the baby was born. Put him to bed and left him . . .'

'For Christ's sake, what could I *do*; I was in *labour*,'

the young woman said, shocking Mr Tilney who hated to hear a woman swear. She seemed to be trembling with anger.

Her husband was massaging the side of his face, dragging the flesh downwards. He said evenly, 'Look, we can't know, and of course it wasn't your fault, but it's an explanation. Whenever he's put to bed there, he's afraid the same thing will happen again. Mummy will tuck him up and when he wakes, Auntie will be there instead. No Mum, no Dad . . .'

'You *said* you'd go and see him every night!'

'It seemed to upset him. You agreed it was best . . .' He began to rub at his eyes with the heel of his hand as if he were very tired. 'Lord above, we've gone over and over . . . . I don't even believe it. *You* don't believe it. Do we have to go on;'

'You started it,' she said, like a child.

Mr Tilney looked at his wife. He assumed, from her tight-lipped look that she felt the same way as he did, but she said, suddenly and loudly, lifting her jaw, 'Poor souls, they've been half out of their minds with worry.'

The girl blushed, very deeply. 'It has been pretty awful,' the husband admitted, taking a crushed pack of cigarettes out of his pocket and extending it in Mr Tilney's direction. Mr Tilney shook his head. He was amazed. Not so much by the couple's behaviour (though that they should quarrel in front of strangers seemed extraordinary to him) but by his wife's attitude. She had given them sherry and was getting up now to fetch the bottle from the sideboard. 'All's well that ends well, look at it that way, dear,' she said, as she re-filled the girl's empty glass. Turning her head she shot Mr Tilney a challenging look. 'Offer the biscuits, father.'

Mr Tilney stared. Had she forgotten; She was behaving as if this were an isolated incident. As if all that had happened was that a little boy had run away from his Auntie's house and upset his poor parents. A naughty child. Not a neglected child, a starved child . . .

He said hoarsely, 'There have been other things.'

'All lies,' Mrs Tilney said, meeting his eyes. 'We've had it all out.'

'You should have told us,' the girl said. 'Really.'

'Well.' Mrs Tilney offered biscuits, sighed, sat down.

'Oh, I know. Frightfully *embarrassing*, I can see that!' The girl gave a little, kind, understanding laugh, though Mr Tilney guessed that she could not really see at all and found it, indeed, almost unbelievable that one neighbour should suspect another of keeping a young child hungry, and not say so. 'I mean,' the girl went on, wrinkling her forehead in a nervous effort to comprehend such bizarre behaviour, 'what would one *say*;' She laughed again – giggled. 'Oh dear! You must have thought us *monsters*!' She looked helpless: this was, presumably, what they *had* thought. She said. 'I really am so terribly sorry about it all.'

'Well, you can't say fairer than that,' the man said in a suddenly assumed cockney accent that sounded to Mr Tilney like mockery. Perhaps the man sensed this; he clapped his hands on his knees and stood up, reverting rather too loudly to his normal voice. 'Honestly, we can't thank you enough, you've been marvellously kind, but we better get on now, I think. Ring the police and tell them to call off the tracker dogs!' He put out his hand to his wife, smiling, and pulled her to her feet. They stood together, fingers clasped. She was taller than he was; a gangling girl in a darned jersey.

'I'll get him,' Mrs Tilney said.

When she had gone, the three left in the room stood still, almost at attention. The smile had gone from the man's face and Mr Tilney thought, *if he lays a finger on him . . .*

The child was there, in the doorway, pushed forward by Mrs Tilney, her bulk solid behind him. He walked across the small, hot room, straight to the place, on the floor in the window bay, where he had left the pile of presents from his stocking. He knelt and began to examine them.

The girl said, 'Hallo, there,' and he lifted his head, briefly, weaving it round in a blind way, like a mole.

His father cleared his throat. There were red patches, like burns, on his cheekbones. He was standing under the naked glare of the hanging central light. He said, 'Well, you gave us quite a fright, old man.'

The child had spread out his toys in a neat circle round him. He selected a puzzle and began to tip it carefully from side to side, holding it with both hands. The room was silent except for the tiny, sliding, rattling sound as he tried to persuade a plastic mouse into its hole.

The parents looked at each other. They seemed uncertain, almost afraid. Finally the father said, in a loud, cheerful voice, 'I suppose we'd better be going, Mrs Tilney.'

She preceded them. They shook hands with Mr Tilney, smiling elaborately, like actors. He wanted to stop them, to say, *this is terrible, what you are doing is terrible*, but he couldn't it. He didn't even know what he meant.

The child sat quite still, head bent sideways like a blind child listening. Then, when the front door opened, he staggered to his feet and ran after them, screaming: agonised cries of rage and loss that made Mr Tilney sit down and put his head in his hands.

'It isn't natural,' he said later.

Mrs Tilney folded coloured wrapping paper on her lap. 'I'd have knocked him into the middle of next week.'

'Or hugged him, 'Mr Tilney said. His wife's bark was worse than her bite. 'Either would have been . . .' He paused; there seemed no word for what he wanted to say. 'More natural,' he ended. 'Poor little chap.'

'It's the parents I'm sorry for,' Mrs Tilney said.

Mr Tilney mended the fence between the two gardens. Towards the end of the afternoon, the little boy came out of the house with his mother. They ran about, playing ball. He missed a catch. 'Fetch it, darling,' his mother called.

But he was watching Mr Tilney. Colour was draining from the day. His face was indistinct, a pale flower at

dusk, but what Mr Tilney could not see his guilt supplied: the wide, patient, dark, sad eyes, the hurt, rejected mouth. His mother laughed and struck her hands together. 'Come *on*, stir your aged stumps.' Mr Tilney banged in the last nail and got down from the fence.