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Christmas at Thrush Green

Written by Miss Read
with Jenny Dereham

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Christmas at Thrush Green

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Miss Read

with Jenny Dereham



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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

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.

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



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

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.'

'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.'

'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,'

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.

Harold Shoosmith, a handsome man in his late sixties, was returning home after a morning spent in Lulling. The little market town was half a mile down a steep hill from Thrush Green, and what goes down must come up so

Harold was puffing a bit. His wife Isobel had suggested he should take the car since it was blowing such a gale but Harold was determined to stick to his resolution to walk to Lulling and back whenever possible.

This had been his New Year's resolution the previous January. He hadn't expected to keep going all year, but well-meant teasing from some of his friends had made him all the more determined. He had taken great pleasure in reporting that Dr Lovell had told him at his medical check-up during the summer that he had the blood pressure of an eighteen-year-old.

Today was rather different, he thought, stopping a moment on the green. The wind had been against him on the hill, and it had been hard work. He would take the car, of course, when he had a quantity of shopping to bring back, but today's visit had just been to collect his new spectacles.

As he set off for the last fifty yards across the green to his house, he saw the familiar hunched figure of Albert Piggott, the sexton of St Andrew's, coming out through the churchyard gate. I bet he's off to The Two Pheasants, Harold thought and then smiled as Albert predictably turned left to walk the few yards to the village pub. The day that Albert *didn't* go to the pub would indicate something was very wrong with the old man. In fact, looking at Albert now as the man disappeared inside, he seemed to be more bent than ever, and limping.

I wonder if the time has finally come for him to retire, Harold mused. Perhaps it's something to bring up at the PCC meeting on Wednesday.

The strong wind swirled dead leaves around the green, and Harold put out a hand to catch one as it flew past at head height – and laughed at himself when he missed. He righted the litter bin that had blown over, extracted a soggy plastic bag that had been caught underneath it and placed it inside.

As he approached the end of the green, Harold paused in front of the statue that stood there. It was some years now since he had been involved in erecting the memorial to Thrush Green's most famous son, and he felt very responsible for it. In fact, he noticed that there were some rather unseemly bird droppings down the side of the missionary's face, and he made a mental note to bring his step-ladder over with a bucket and sponge.

'Wretched pigeons,' he muttered.

Nathaniel Patten had been a Thrush Green boy, born when Queen Victoria was on the throne. As a young man, he had gone to Africa as a missionary and had set up a church, a mission hall, a school and the beginnings of a medical centre. Thrush Green still kept in close touch with the African village, and it was Harold who annually organized a fund-raising function of some kind, and ensured that the proceeds were sent to the current administrators of the little hospital.

When he had worked in Africa, he had lived near the small community and admired their hard work and constant cheerfulness. On his return on England and looking for somewhere to retire, he thought where better than the village where Nathaniel Patten had been born? He was delighted that a house on the green, next to the

school, had been for sale and quickly bought it. The house had been built at the turn of the nineteenth century for a retired colonel from the Indian Army, and Harold felt that the building would now feel at home with a retired businessman from Africa.

The garden had been a jungle when he arrived and he set to with billhook and shears and soon discovered there was immense satisfaction in clearing the rampant undergrowth. He found childish pleasure in the subsequent bonfires and, ever since, looked forward to the autumn chores of cutting down the garden plants and raking up the leaves in order to have a deliciously pungent burn. The evenings would be drawing in, and he would often pull back the sitting-room curtains to see the soft glow of the day's bonfire at the far end of the garden.

'Hello, darling!' he called now as he shut the front door behind him. 'What's for lunch? I'm starving!'

His wife, Isobel, came out of the kitchen to greet him, and helped him off with his overcoat. 'I thought you might have had something in Lulling when you were down there. You're a bit later than you said you'd be.'

'It's so windy it took much longer than usual to get up the hill,' Harold replied. 'It was almost a case of two steps forward and one step back! Are you saying there's no lunch?'

'Of course not!' replied Isobel. 'I'll rustle something up in a jiffy. You go and sit down and have ten minutes with the paper.'

Harold went into the sitting-room, and sank gratefully into his favourite chair. He was indeed a most fortunate

man to have found Isobel to be his wife so late in life. They had met when Isobel, recently widowed, had come to stay with an old college friend, Agnes Fogerty, who at the time was one of the teachers at Thrush Green School. When Harold learned that Isobel was planning to return to the Cotswolds where she had lived as a child, he offered to drive her round to look at the various houses for which the estate agents had sent particulars – most of them totally unsuitable, they both agreed. However, Isobel returned to Sussex without finding what she wanted.

After she had gone, Harold realized how much he missed her and the weeks went by very slowly until Isobel returned the following summer to start house-hunting again. Harold was determined not to let the grass grow under his feet a second time and without delay he asked Isobel to marry him. Although her friend Agnes Fogerty had retired, moving to Barton-on-Sea where she shared a house with the school's old head-mistress, Dorothy Watson, Isobel had made friends quickly with many of the Thrush Green residents.

Harold was brought out of his reverie by his wife calling, 'Lunch is ready!' He put his newspaper aside – the crossword would have to wait – and went eagerly to the kitchen.

Harold had been right about Albert Piggott. He was definitely feeling his age, and grunted loudly as he pulled himself up onto his regular bar stool.

'What's all that noise about, then?' asked Mr Jones, the

landlord of The Two Pheasants, reaching for the tankard that Albert particularly favoured.

'It's that dratted wind,' grumbled Albert. 'Gets right into me bones.'

'As does the rain, you're always tellin' us,' said Percy Hodge, the local farmer who was sitting further along the bar.

'And you don't much like it when it's very hot, neither,' added another regular, putting down his paper where he'd been studying the form for the afternoon's racing.

'In fact,' said Mr Jones, pushing the tankard brimming with dark ale across the counter towards Albert, 'you aren't happy unless you're grumbling about something.'

Albert Piggott was an arch-moaner, and was the regular butt of well-meant cracks from his drinking cronies.

'Is there anythin',' took up Percy Hodge, 'that would make you happy, and put a smile on that grumpy ol' face of yours?'

Albert didn't answer, but drank deeply from his tankard. Then he wiped a grubby sleeve across the froth that had lodged itself on his unattractive upper lip, and turned to face his companions.

'There's one easy answer to that! Retire! I've 'ad enough of diggin' and cuttin' and mowin'. And I've certainly 'ad quite enough of clearin' up after folks what dumps their litter in the churchyard. You should've seen it this mornin'! Plastic bags, paper, heaven knows what else. And I only cleared it right through last Friday.'

'I think you'll find that the wind had something to do with it,' said Mr Jones, looking out of the leaded windows

of the pub. 'I saw one of the bins had been knocked over, and there was litter flying all over the place. With the wind in this direction, it's bound to end up in the churchyard. Stands to reason.'

'Well, reason or not, I've 'ad enough,' mumbled Albert, and took another huge gulp of beer.

'Are you serious?' asked Percy Hodge. Percy was a respected member of the Thrush Green community. He was a churchwarden and a member of the Parochial Church Council. 'You moan so much, it's hard to tell when you actually mean it.'

'Well, this time I'm serious,' replied Albert. 'After all, I don't need to work at all cos Nelly is doing awright – good girl,' he added somewhat surprisingly. He didn't often praise his wife.

'When I passed the caff the other day,' said the third person drinking at the bar, 'it looked fit to burstin'. Must be doin' well.'

'Hey, less of the caff, Joe,' said Albert rather crossly. 'It's The Fuchsia Bush to you, and it's no caff. It's a tea-shop!'

'Sorry, I'm sure,' replied Joe, turning away so Albert shouldn't see his grin. It was very unusual to hear the old moaner being so supportive of his wife. 'Want 'alf a pint in there, then?'

Albert pushed the tankard across the counter. 'Thanks, Joe, don't mind if I do. Got young Cooke coming over this afternoon so I can take it easy while 'e does all the work.' Albert laughed, which was a mistake since it set off a spasm of coughing. He'd always had a troublesome

chest that, together with peptic ulcers, had put him into hospital more times than he cared to remember.

'You needs to watch your bronichals,' remarked Joe, leaning back to avoid any germs that might be heading in his direction.

'They'll be awright,' replied Albert when he'd caught his breath. 'They'll be just fine when I retires.'