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A Farthing Will Do

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Extract

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Chapter One

'Christmas is coming, the goose is getting fat,
Please put a penny in the old man's hat.
If you haven't got a penny, a ha'penny will do,
If you haven't got a ha'penny, a farthing will do.
If you haven't got a farthing – God . . . Bless . . . You!'

The voices rang out like bells in the crisp night air and Ruth Purslow felt her throat tighten as she saw Sammy's bright head gleaming amongst those of the other children gathered around the farmhouse door. It was three years since that first Christmas he had spent with her at Bridge End in 1941 – three years of a war that it had sometimes seemed would never end. Now it looked at last as though the Allies were winning. The D-Day invasion, back in June, had turned the tide and the enemy were being slowly beaten back.

'Let's hope this will be the last Christmas of the war,' her sister Jane Warren murmured in her ear. 'We've all had enough, even out here in the country. God only knows what they must be feeling like in towns and cities like Portsmouth and Southampton – not to mention London.'

'It'll end soon,' Ruth said. 'It's got to. And then the men'll come home and we can go back to normal.' But her voice trembled a little.

Jane glanced at her in the moonlight. 'And the rest of the kiddies'll go back home,' she said quietly. 'That's what you're thinking, isn't it? *Sammy*'ll go home.'

Ruth hesitated, then admitted, 'Well, I've got so fond of him.

He's been like my own little boy these past three years. And he loves being in the country – he even talks like us now! I just don't know how he'll take to going back to a little street in Pompey. And there's that brother of his, too. He'll be coming out of the Army and goodness knows how they'll get on together.'

'Hasn't his dad said anything?' Jane asked. 'I thought you and he were – well, quite friendly. Hasn't he talked it over with you at all?'

Ruth felt herself blush. 'No, not really. Well, he hasn't been able to get out here much lately, what with all the work on the ships. He goes to sea a lot, you know. And it seems a bit early days to be – well, making any plans.' She felt her cheeks redden deeper and was glad of the darkness. Even so, she knew her sister was looking at her curiously. 'Your Lizzie will be glad when Alec can come home,' she added hastily. 'They'll be able to start their married life properly then. They haven't had much of it so far.'

'He's got to be let out of POW camp first,' Jane said grimly. 'And God knows when that'll be. Poor Lizzie's at her wits' end over it. And it seems so unfair – he wasn't even in the Armed Forces. It doesn't seem right that merchant seamen should be taken prisoner. Nor that their ships should be sunk.'

Ruth, whose own husband had been a merchant seaman, sighed. 'You know what they say – all's fair in love and war. And I suppose preventing supplies getting to us is just another way of fighting.'

The children were singing a different carol now. There were eighteen or twenty of them – largely village children, for most of the evacuees had gone home now that the bombing seemed to have stopped, but there were a few who, like Sammy Hodges, had stayed on for one reason or another. Sammy's mother had died early in the war, leaving his father Dan unable to care for the boy properly, and since he still worked long hours in the shipyard Ruth had been only too happy to keep the boy with her.

'God rest ye merry, gentlemen,' the carol-singers warbled, *'let nothing you dismay.'*

The carol-singing was a feature of village life. It had been dropped in the second Christmas of the war, when everything had seemed so dark and dismal and the blitzing of the cities had

begun, but started again in 1941 when Ruth and Jane and Lizzie had made up their minds to give Sammy Hodges a Christmas to remember. Almost everyone in the village had joined in, bringing back life to the dark lanes and the huddled cottages, and every Christmas Eve since then there had been a grand tour of the village, ending at the Knights' farm where they would be plied with mulled ale, cider and mince pies.

Even there, things had changed. Arthur and Emily Knight had aged during the past few years and the farm had been taken over by their son Ian. At first, it had seemed that he would be allowed to stay at home, but as the war progressed he was called up and went into the Army while three Land Girls were brought in to work the farm under the direction of his wife, Heather, and Arthur. Eli, the stockman who had been on the farm since he was a boy, had hobbled out of retirement and together they'd kept the land worked and the animals tended.

'Heather'll be glad to see her man back,' Jane commented as they trooped into the big kitchen. 'She'll be able to hand over the reins and settle down to raising the family. Three kiddies are a lot to look after as well as running a farm.'

'I'm not sure she'll find it all that easy, just the same.' Having lived alone for so many years since her own husband had died, Ruth understood what it was like to have your independence. 'It seems to me she enjoys being a farmer. She might not want to go back to the kitchen – especially with her mother-in-law already there!'

Jane laughed. 'They won't have any trouble. Emily Knight'll be only too pleased to sit back. It's the natural way of things, isn't it – the younger generation taking over while the older ones take it easy. They'll all slot into place all right when Ian comes home, you'll see.'

Sammy came over and took Ruth's hand. 'Did you like the singing, Auntie Ruth? We've been practising for ages.'

'You don't have to tell me that! Even Silver knows most of the words,' Ruth said, smiling at the thought of her big grey parrot squawking them out in his creaky voice. 'He'll still be singing "See Amidst the Winter Snow" in the middle of July.' She gazed affectionately at the boy. He had changed so much since he had

first come to her, a thin and frightened little waif, so dirty that she hadn't even known his hair was fair until after she'd bathed him. Now he had grown and filled out so that, while still on the small side for eleven, he was a sturdy little chap, his rosy face shining with confidence. The thought of losing him brought a pain to her heart.

Heather Knight arrived with a tray of steaming glasses. 'Mulled cider,' she offered. Her brow beneath the mane of rich brown hair was smooth despite the cares of war, her hazel eyes lively and her wide mouth smiling. 'Our own – we had such a good crop of apples. There's hot milk with honey in it for the children.'

'Just what we need on a cold night,' Ruth said, taking a glass. 'Have you had any word from Ian?'

Heather nodded. 'He'll be in Italy for a bit longer yet, but they're not putting up much of a fight now. I don't think their heart was ever really in it, you know. It was Mussolini, in cahoots with Hitler, who pushed them in.'

'Just think,' Jane said, looking into her glass, 'it could be all over by this time next year and we'll be able to have a proper peacetime Christmas again. Things do seem to be getting more hopeful, don't they?'

'What's a peacetime Christmas like?' Sammy asked, and they all turned to look at him, startled. Ruth opened her mouth to say that surely he remembered Christmases before the war – he'd been five years old when it started – but then she recalled what his home life had been like and smiled at him.

'Not so very different from the ones we have now, really,' she said. 'But all the men will be home – Ben and Terry, and Alec, and young Mr Knight – and they won't have to go away again. And we won't have to think about bombs and air raids and the blackout. And there'll be all sorts of nice things to eat, things we haven't seen for years – bananas and coconuts, and ice cream – all sorts of things.'

There was a short pause. She glanced at the other women, knowing they were thinking the same as her. Then Sammy spoke the words that were in all their minds.

'And I'll have to go back to Portsmouth,' he said. 'I'll have to

go back, because there won't be any need for me to be evacuated any more.'

When everyone had gone, trooping out into the cold night with laughter and a few snatches of song still on their lips as they wished each other a Merry Christmas, Heather Knight and her mother-in-law started to clear the big kitchen. There wasn't too much to do – Ruth and Jane and some of the others had already washed up the cups and glasses, and the plates were stacked in a neat pile to be rinsed. Once they were all put away, Emily went into the larder and brought out the big turkey, already stuffed and in its enamel roasting pan.

'This can go in the oven now. If it cooks slow overnight we can just fire up the stove in the morning and have dinner ready for twelve. Then everyone'll have the chance for a sit-down in front of the fire till it's time to see to the animals again.'

Heather nodded. The three Land Girls and Eli would all be joining them for Christmas dinner, and there would be Eli's widowed sister Clara who lived with him in the farm cottage, and Heather's own three children, Roger, Pat and Teddy. That would make eleven faces around the table. A nice number for Christmas dinner; though however many there were, she knew that the most important face of all – her husband Ian's – would be missing, just as he had been missing for the past three Christmases. But surely, if the war ended soon, as everyone seemed to think it would, he would be home for next Christmas. And then we'll be a proper family at last, she thought. For the first time, really, since he's never even seen little Teddy yet.

Ian had spent most of the war in Africa and Italy. Letters came infrequently, often months out of date, and in them he referred to letters Heather had written so long ago she had forgotten them. He asked constantly what was happening on the farm, whether the cows were giving a good yield, had there been many heifer calves born, how had the lambing gone, and he complained that she wasn't telling him the things he wanted to know. But Heather knew she had reported all these things faithfully, along with family news, and could only assume that some of her letters had got lost. And she was just too tired, after working on the farm all

day, to write it all over again – it would all be out of date by that time anyway.

I can't wait to get home, he wrote. *The farm must be going to rack and ruin with just you and Eli and a few town girls to look after it. What do they know about animals and crops? I know you're doing your best, Heather, and you've got Dad to tell you what to do, but it needs a man around the place. Never mind – the minute this war's over, I'll be home and we'll soon get the place back on its feet.*

Heather raised her eyebrows a little as she remembered this. Born and brought up on a farm herself, she considered that she was making a good job of looking after this one. Mr Knight – 'Dad' to her – was old now and had arthritis, so couldn't do much more than advise. To begin with, feeling rather as if she were trying to steer an avalanche, she had turned to him almost all the time, but after the first few months her confidence had begun to grow. The sight of tiny points of green shimmering over the fields as shoots of new wheat she had sown herself pricked through the earth had been a real thrill, and the arrival of her first lambs almost as amazing as the births of her own babies. From then on, she had taken more and more control, and Arthur Knight had come out into the fields more to congratulate than to advise.

The Land Girls had been a tremendous help too. They lodged in one of the farm cottages and old Aggie Clutter had been glad to move in and look after them. She gave them breakfast and supper and the girls had their midday dinner with the family in the farmhouse kitchen.

'It'll seem strange when they go home,' Heather said to Emily now as the oven door was closed on the turkey. 'They're part of the farm. You wouldn't think they were the same girls as those townies who came here, scared stiff of the cows and cooing over the lambs as if they were cuddly toys!'

'You wouldn't,' her mother-in-law agreed with a chuckle. She went to the sink and pumped up some water to rinse her hands. 'But they've turned out real well. I must say, when I saw them I thought they'd be more trouble than they were worth – especially young Stevie with her gold ringlets and all. More like a film star than a farmhand, she was.'

'She can't help her looks,' Heather said, as if Stevie had been

ugly rather than pretty. 'And it was handy that Pam and Jean already knew each other in Southampton. I did think Stevie might take longer to settle in but when it turned out she knew the Budd family and some of the other evacuees – well, it seemed to make it easier. I suppose it must help if you're in a strange place, to see a few familiar faces about.' She sighed. 'I'll be sorry to see Stevie go back to Portsmouth, I really will.'

Stevie and Heather had hit it off right from the start. The other two were nice enough girls, and they all worked well together but, to Heather, Stevie had become more like a sister.

'That won't happen for a while yet,' Emily said, wiping her hands on the roller towel behind the door. 'I know everyone's talking as if the war'll be over soon, but you never know what dirty trick that Hitler might have up his sleeve.'

Heather nodded. There'd been a lot of talk lately about 'secret weapons' and bombs even bigger than the ones that had already been used by both sides. You couldn't take anything for granted.

When Ian comes home, we'll work the farm together, she thought as she began to set the big kitchen table for breakfast. The older kiddies are more or less off my hands now and Teddy'll be at school in a couple of years – I'll be able to show him all the changes there've been and we can plan what we're going to do next. All these hardships will be past then, and we can look forward to a happy future. It'll be different – I don't suppose he realises how much things have changed here, especially for women – but it'll be good. And the main thing is, we'll be able to share it all.

It had been so long since she had been able to share anything with her husband.

Jane, Lizzie and Ruth walked back down the lane together. Jane's husband, George, had slipped back early to make a final check on the animals and Sammy was walking ahead, putting his feet down very quietly in the hope of seeing a badger. The three women linked arms and sauntered along in the moonlight, talking softly.

'Another Christmas,' Ruth said, with a little sigh. 'It doesn't seem possible that a war can drag on so long. D'you realise, this is the *sixth* since the war started? Six Christmases of war! A lot of

the kiddies don't know anything else. They've grown up with bombs and air-raid warnings and their daddies away fighting, and they don't even know that life can be different.'

'And some of them will never see their daddies again,' Lizzie said in a sombre voice. 'Some men never even got the chance to *be* daddies.' Her voice cracked a little.

Ruth took her arm quickly. 'Lizzie, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to upset you. Me and my big mouth! I should've known better than to remind you of Alec, especially after having such a nice evening.'

'You didn't remind me. There's not a minute goes by when I don't think about him. I just live for the day he comes home again. Thank goodness I've got my nursing to keep me occupied.' Lizzie drew in a deep breath and turned to her mother. 'Is there anything else to do for dinner tomorrow, Mum? Don't forget we've got company.'

Jane laughed. 'I'm not likely to forget, with you reminding me every five minutes! But just in case you think I can't count, there'll be eight of us – you, me and your father, Ruth and Sammy here, and Dan Hodges if he manages to get over from Portsmouth, and the two Americans. Not a crowd, but enough to make a bit of noise and give young Sammy a party.' She hesitated, then added, 'It may be our last chance to do that.'

There was a small silence. Lizzie glanced at her aunt but before Ruth could speak there was a cry of excitement, quickly hushed, from Sammy and they all stopped. He tiptoed back to them and even in the moonlight Ruth could see that his face was glowing with delight. 'I saw one, Auntie Ruth! I saw a badger! He came out of the hedge and ran across the lane – I saw the stripes on his face. I knew there was one here!'

'There's a sett in the woods,' Lizzie told him. 'You went to see it with Ben last time he was home, didn't you?'

'Yes, and Ben showed me the track he makes coming over the bank and across the lane. It's his own path. But I didn't know what time he'd come. He doesn't come out until very late, Ben said.'

'In that case,' Ruth said, taking his hand, 'it must be very late

now and time for us all to be in bed. Come on, Sammy. You know who's coming tomorrow, don't you?'

He glanced up at her and for a moment she thought he was going to tell her scornfully that he didn't believe in Father Christmas any more. But then his smile broke out and he gripped her hand tightly and said, 'Dad! Dad's coming tomorrow, for Christmas dinner. And I've got a present for him.'

'Which still needs to be wrapped up,' Ruth said, walking on briskly. 'Come on. You won't see the badger again tonight – he's probably three fields away by now, scared out of his wits by all the noise we're making. Let's get home and make sure everything's ready for tomorrow. It's Christmas again and we're going to give your dad the best Christmas he's ever had!'

The best Christmas he's ever had? Lizzie thought, as she and her mother turned away up the farm track. Well, I don't begrudge Dan Hodges his Christmas, even if he is an odd sort of a bloke. But I wish I could be saying the same about my Alec. I wish I could be giving *him* the best Christmas he's ever had.

As it was, she knew that he probably wouldn't be having any sort of Christmas at all, hundreds of miles away in a German prisoner-of-war camp.