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**THE SIEGE OF
TRENCHER'S
FARM**

**THE NOVEL
THAT INSPIRED**

**STRAW
DOGS**

GORDON WILLIAMS

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THE SIEGE OF TRENCHER'S FARM

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ONE

In the same year that Man first flew to the Moon and the last American soldier left Vietnam there were still corners of England where lived men and women who had never travelled more than fifteen miles from their own homes. They had spent all their lives on the same land that had supported their fathers and grandfathers and great-grandfathers and unknown generations before that.

The neighbouring parishes of Dando and Compton Wakley formed such a place. Here, in the same generation that produced men who looked back at Earth from the blackness of outer space, existed Englishmen to whom the two hundred mile journey to London was an almost legendary experience, something that might happen once in a lifetime, if at all.

Progress had brought only superficial change to the life of Dando. Farmhouses built three or four hundred years ago, when walls were made by trampling mud and straw, now bore television aerials on their chimneys. Horses had given way to tractors. The narrow roads of the parishes, the banks so high they were little better than tunnels with an open roof, now had metalled surfaces and at night the jinking lantern on the shaft of a wooden cart had been replaced by the low-angled searchlight sweep of motor-car headlamps. The children of the district no longer had to walk six or seven miles to school and from the primary school at Compton Wakley; instead they were collected in the morning by a single-decker bus paid for by the County Education Committee and brought back home in the evening.

Ancient inns to which farming men, generations of them, had walked three and four miles in the dark, after twelve hours toil in the fields, now sold mass-produced beer brought by lorries from the cities.

Yet these changes were akin to the crippled wing which a hen plover drags over grass when man or beast approaches her nest. They were a disguise behind which the old ways and the old ideas lived on as before.

The face of the short, squat man with the black hair on the tractor seat was identical to the face of the man who had worked the same ground a thousand years ago.

At dusk on an autumn evening when the sky was a deep blue canvas smeared by fingers of flame cast by a burning sun, when haunting mists crept down from the dark hills of the moor, it was possible to stand by a wooden gate and look over fields and hedges and woods and see a farmhouse light winking across a shadowy valley and to think... of the men who had lived here before, of rough-clad armies coming over the bare brows of those same hills, of the savage fair-haired men who came from the sea, of kings and nobles on panoplied horses...

Also at night, in the dim light thrown by a single, cobwebby electric bulb over the encrusted walls of a barn corner, it was possible to stand on a hard earth floor and drink cold, bitter cider drawn from mighty black barrels made by long-dead coopers who had talked among themselves of Napoleon

Bonaparte. The tongues of the men who drank the cider were as strange to the outside ear as the dialects of foreign jungles. The names of the men were names that were written in the Conqueror's Domesday Book, the same names that had lived on the same farms since Drake sailed from Plymouth to smash the might of Spain.

Some of these men, it is true, had gone away from Dando to fight in the last war, the modern war. They had fought in African deserts and Burmese jungles and Italian mud. Yet, unlike the city men they had come home determined to maintain the old ways, as though the modern civilisation they had seen was an alien land from which they had escaped. Some of these men who drank cider in the year of the moon rockets could not read or write: Some, if a stranger were present, could adopt the speech of the cities. Some could not.

And some who could, would not. For there was a dark side to this corner of England. Cut off from the rest of that side of the country by low hills and served by roads no wider than a single motor car, the farmers and villagers had over the years come to regard themselves more and more as being apart from other people. Geography was one reason for the isolation of the two parishes. Poverty was another. The land here was poor. The men, whether they owned the land or worked for someone else, had to spend long, dreary days in the fields. Few of them could afford to go away to seaside towns for holidays – and neither did outsiders come to Dando, for it was not a city man's idea of beautiful countryside. To the south and west lay the Moor. It, they said, had a climate all its own, a meeting-point for cold rain-winds from the Atlantic Ocean. On the edge of the Moor, standing as it were between Dando and the sun, was the great bulk of Torn Hill. Even in summer Torn seemed to cast a shadow over the two parishes, robbing them of warmth.

So the outside world tended to pass Dando by. And Dando people, either from pride or fear – for the two are divisible – preferred to stay within the boundaries of their own parishes, to be born there, raised there, wed there, and buried there. It was said that some of the older people, especially the women, could give a family connection between almost any two individuals in the area.

Dando marries its own, was a local saying. In neighbouring towns this was often accompanied by knowing looks and the shaking of heads. Dando, they said, had married its own for too many years. And no closed family could be without its dark secrets. The few outsiders who did buy land within the boundaries of the two parishes might spend a lifetime without hearing these secrets, for some things could not be told to strangers and a stranger could be any man whose father had not been born in the parish.

The outsider might hear hinted references to things he did not understand. He might ask, for instance, why a certain pasture behind the woods which stood above the village of Dando Monachorum was called Soldier's Field. He would be told that ancient history had it that a soldier was once murdered there. He would not be told that there was one old man still in the village who had been in the field the night the soldier's head was hacked from his body by a hedge-cutter's billhook. He

would not be told that there were men and women who could remember their fathers being out the night, when the soldier came from the barracks at Plymouth and met twelve-year-old Mary Tremain on the road from the ford at Fourways Cross... and how the men came from farmhouses and cottages and the Dando Inn when the soldier – a deserter, a man of some strength who had crossed the Moor on foot – was caught. Only the men who were there could tell what was in their minds as they slew the soldier, each man taking his turn with the billhook so that all would have taken part.

The men of Dando, as the area of the two parishes was usually known, had been apart for a thousand years and more and when the outside world threatened them and their land they knew by the strength of their own apartness. A family had to guard its own secrets...

TWO

That morning George Magruder pulled back the red velvet curtains of the upstairs bedroom window to see the English countryside under snow for the first time. A foot or more had fallen during the night and apart from the black lines of the hedges and a few isolated trees everything was white from the little garden wall in front of the house right to the top of Torn Hill, whose great breast shape stood starkly bright against the darker grey of the sky. It was a cold, bleak scene. Nothing moved out there. He broke an icicle off the roof overhang, kneeling on the wide window ledge to reach out, his pyjama-clad arm feeling the biting cold of the east wind.

He walked on bare feet across bare, polished boards to the bed where his wife, Louise, was still asleep. With his left hand he smoothed a few strands of long, dark hair from her face. As usual she slept with her mouth open, a habit he had failed to cure.

On impulse he laid the icicle gently between her lips and bent over to kiss her cheek. She came out of sleep slowly at first, until her teeth and lips closed on the cold sliver of ice.

“What’s that? Get it away!” she grimaced, her face contorted in apparently real horror.

“Look,” he said, holding it up before her eyes. “It’s only an icicle.”

“Is it meant to be funny or something?” She turned on to her back, her face away from him. “I was having such a lovely dream, too.”

“We’ve had snow during the night. England looks distinctly Siberian.”

She showed no enthusiasm when he told her to get up and see the snow. He went to the window.

“It’s different from all those Christmas cards,” he said. “I can’t see any holly. Where’s the red-cheeked coachman and the robin redbreast?”

“I hope the bloody road isn’t blocked,” she said, yawning. “This is the last day the butcher calls before the holiday.”

“We might be snowed in for days and days. Wouldn’t that be romantic?”

“Not if we have to eat tins of catfood.”

“You going to get Karen up? She’ll love it.”

“I suppose so. That’s about all you can say for it, children like it.”

He threw the icicle out of the window and went to the bathroom, which opened off the small square landing at the end of the upstairs corridor. Karen was never at her best in the mornings, he told himself. He began to hum. The wind had blown snow in drifts against the right-angled wall of the outstable and garage, two buildings which, with the house, formed three sides of a square. The fourth side was the beginning of a long, narrow lawn which ran between high banks to a point wedged at the meeting of their own track road and one of the Knapman fields.

As usual he shaved, although it was unlikely he would leave the house that day. It helped

freshen him up for the day's work at his desk in the downstairs study. Sometimes he made a joke of this to Louise, saying that shaving was his equivalent of the Englishman dressing for dinner in the heart of the jungle. Since they'd come to live in Trencher's Farm she had not been receiving these silly little jokes of his with her usual tolerance. Lately he'd been trying consciously to bring a little more astringency into what he liked to describe as 'the furniture of their connubial conversation'. The bicycle, he thought, had been a mistake.

George and Louise Magruder had been married for nine years. For most of that time they had lived near Philadelphia in the United States, where he was a senior member of the English Department at the University of Philadelphia. They had met at the home of the Wilshires, Maurice Wilshire having married Louise's sister, whom he'd met at Cambridge. This sabbatical year had seemed an excellent opportunity to combine two ambitions: her desire to take him to England to show him *her* country and his need to find a quiet place where he could write the final draft of his definitive study of Branksheer, the late eighteenth-century English diarist. Of course Branksheer was now part of the common transatlantic heritage and most of the useful papers were safe and secure in America, but it had seemed appropriate that the final version should be written in England. He had been hoping, perhaps childish, that some of the atmosphere might rub off on him. He felt he knew everything there was to know about Branksheer without understanding a single thing about the man.

They had advertised in *The Times* (of London) for a suitable house in the West Country and it was Louise who had plumped for Trencher's Farm. A farm in name only, the land having been sold off many years ago, the house was a long, white-walled building with a study, sitting-room, dining-room and kitchen on the ground floor, and four bedrooms, bathroom and lavatory upstairs.

The general effect was of a squat, immensely sturdy building designed to stand up to the worst winds and snow the Moor could hurl down on the two parishes. The clay and straw walls – a method of construction known as 'cob' – were two feet thick. In the main part of the house, which was said to date back four hundred years, the windows were little more than three feet square, as though the original builders begrudged every inch that didn't give the inhabitants massive protection. Giant smoke-blackened oak beams traversed the ceilings of the downstairs rooms. At the rear the kitchen and the upstairs bathroom formed an extension built on since the war, its walls of brick and its windows more in accordance with modern ideas. When they were inspecting the house George had pointed out several diagonal cracks on the matt white walls of the downstairs rooms, but the estate agent had laughed and said those cracks had probably been there since the days of Cromwell.

They had taken a six months lease in the first instance at what Louise said was a fairly steep rent of twelve guineas a week. He had converted this into dollars per month (as rent was calculated in America) and found it remarkably cheap. However, having been married so long to an Englishwoman he was well aware of the reputation Americans had for money consciousness and he took care, when speaking to English people, not to boast about the deal.

When he had shaved, his cheeks and chin tingling with Old Spice, he went back to the bedroom and dressed in his fawn Levis and red tartan shirt. For a man who was thirty-five and did nothing more strenuous than walk and swim he thought he was in pretty fair shape.

“It’s my morning walk that does it,” he said to Louise, who was still in bed. She seemed bored. “I know you think I’m silly, my routines and all, but it isn’t as silly as you think. If I didn’t have my morning routine I couldn’t keep in the swing of the work.”

“As the monk said to the abbess, you’re a creature of habit, George. Who are you keeping in good shape for?”

“Who?”

“What, then? D’you still think they’ll maybe ask you to run in the Olympics?”

It was better to leave Louise alone in this mood. For a long time he’d been sure the difference between their nationalities was of no significance, but in the three months they’d been living here at Trencher Farm she’d changed, somehow. Had she ever felt like a stranger in the States? He was sure she had, goddam well had not, but he certainly was beginning to feel like a stranger here in England, here in his own home.

When they’d first arrived, he’d gone walking, to establish some kind of orientation. The obvious way was to turn right at the junction of their track and the “real” road, which was, admittedly, unmetalled but so narrow that when cars met one had to back up to a field gate or to one of the shallow indentations cut into the high banking. Having turned right, the road went downhill for about two miles, the longest two miles he had ever walked in his life, until it wandered into the village of Dando Monachorum. The name, he thought, was ridiculously at odds with the look of the place, which was not one of those thatched villages they used for British ads in the *New Yorker*. The name was the only picturesque thing about it.

Louise had said she wanted to find a house ‘off the beaten track’, away from the ‘touristy’ part. By Heaven, she’d achieved her wish. Any tourists who came to Dando Monachorum had to be nuts. There were seven or eight shabby cottages with low roofs, some thatched and some corrugated. There was a red-brick Methodist chapel, an ill-favoured building which, for some reason, seemed to have been built in such a way that all sides of it were always on the wrong side for the sun. There was a grey-stone school no longer functioning as a school and used for bingo on Monday nights and for occasional village functions. And there was the pub, the Dando Inn.

Louise had said the locals would take some time getting used to them, but he had seen no reason for encouraging mutual suspicion and one night he’d walked down to the Inn hoping to strike up some kind of thing with these fearsome villagers. The bar was smaller than their sitting-room. It contained seven or eight men and youths who seemed to do little drinking but a lot of dart-playing. He’d felt like a complete stranger who had walked uninvited into someone’s family home. The men stared at him and then turned their eyes away when he stared back and said good evening.

At the bar, a small counter hardly longer than his desk, he asked for a small beer. The landlord seemed pleasant enough, although it did strike George Magruder that the man showed very little curiosity. After all, how many Americans did they get in a joint like this? While most of the men looked like farm-workers or automechanics, the landlord had a faint air of having come down in the world. He wore a shirt and tie and the jacket of a blue suit.

He tried casual conversation about the weather and the beer, but the landlord made only non-committal replies, the kind that leave no conversational bridges. If he'd been in a similar situation at home (unlikely, he thought) he might have asked the man to give everyone a drink on him, but Louise had warned him against such typically unwelcome American habits. She said these kind of country folk would only respect you if you were as close with money as they were themselves. What the landlord wasn't interested in respect, only in getting somebody to talk to, but the customers ignored him for their interminable darts and the landlord offered not one word that could be construed as conversation.

"What was it like, darling?" Louise asked when he got home.

"I was hardly overwhelmed by traditional English hospitality, if that's what you mean," he said. "Going by tonight we'll have to learn to make our own conversation."

Louise had been slightly worried all the time he'd been gone. She knew more about the kind of people who lived in a place like this than George could ever hope to. To them a Londoner was a foreigner – an American might as well be from outer space. Yet she'd often been surprised by George's American ability to crash into situations which she found delicate – and to come out on top. It was one of the things she had admired him for.

After that night George Magruder began to wonder constantly if a man *could* exist purely within the society of his own family. Much as he loved Louise they had been married for nine years and the time for mutual exploration by conversation (or anything else) was past. And there was a limit to the satisfaction one could obtain from the company of an eight-year-old girl.

It seemed likely that for at least six months Trencher's Farm would be his only world. Well, countless men had lived like this in the frontier days. A man and his wife alone in a brutal, unknown world, living on their own resources. A man who'd come to a virgin valley and carved out a piece of land and fought off Indians and survived drought and ploughed and reaped and lived through hunger and blizzards and... it was the kind of childish thought, Louise said, that prevented him from turning completely into a stuffy old academic with his nose buried in the late eighteenth century.

That same evening, after he'd left the bar, the men had talked about him. They, of course, knew who he was, the rich yank who'd rented Trencher's, some kind of professor. The ones who had been in the army didn't like Americans for they knew that Americans were loudmouths with fat bellies and a yellow streak down their backs a yard wide. This view had come to be accepted by those who hadn't been in the army.

Tom Hedden, a Dando farmer, had been throwing for double sixteen to win the game when

George Magruder left. Normally he could throw three darts into the treble bed ten times out of ten, but his concentration had been broken.

“They’ m yanks be takin’ over the whole world,” he said, pulling out his darts with an open petulance often found among simple, masculine men. “How does ’ee afford Trencher’s then, when they’ m say the rent be, Norman?”

“Twelve guinea a week, I hear. More’n some folk get for feedin’ whole family.”

“He seemed a nice enough bloke,” said Harry Ware, the landlord. The men made a joke of the landlord’s impartiality.

“Oh aye, ’ee’s a friend o’ yourn so long he’ m not short o’ a bob or two.”

Harry Ware had grown used to the sarcasm and the jeers and the insults which formed most of the conversation of his customers. They were people who liked nothing better than to put something ‘over’ on somebody else, friend or foe didn’t matter. Harry Ware had bought the Dando Inn *because* it was so small and so far out of the way of crowds. He and his wife had thought it would give them a nice easy living after several years in a busy place on a main road not far from Torquay. He had been a grocer in Sunderland, where he was born, before going into the licensed trade. Although he had lived in the West Country for more than twenty years he didn’t really understand the people. In this he showed greater intelligence than many allegedly cleverer men, for he knew he didn’t understand them. If you came from anywhere else in England, these thicknecked, round-faced West Countrymen were regarded almost as clowns; they had a reputation for being the most obsequious and servile and obedient soldiers in the nation. They would touch their forelocks or salute an officer and take the most ridiculous order without question when a Geordie or a Taff or a Scouse or a Jock would argue – or fight.

Yet beneath this stolid, almost bovine exterior, he knew there were dark twists in their minds. A Glasgow Jock was quick with his fists but these men were different, they could go for years without showing emotion and then... their blood was said to be very old, going back to ancient days. He was always very careful. These men were his regulars and he more or less lived off what they spent every night. On Saturdays and Sundays other farmers and villagers increased his takings, but without the men in the bar that night he could not make his week’s wages.

Tom Hedden had a small farm, only fifty-one acres which he worked alone with the help of his fifteen-year-old son, Bobby. Then there was Bertie Scutt, who lived off his wife’s ten family allowances and the unemployment pay he drew between intermittent spells of casual work. Chris Cawsey was about twenty-two, he worked as a mechanic at the Compton Wakley garage; Harry Ware thought there was something almost girlish about Chris Cawsey even though he owned a motor-bike and wore big leather belts with fancy buckles.

Phillip Riddaway was the biggest man present, a thick lump of a farm-worker with a big round red face and hands like a bunch of bananas. Phillip worked for Colonel Scott at the Manor Farm

Everybody knew he was thick in more ways than one. Sometimes Chris Cawsey and Norman Scutt Bertie's son – would tease him to a point where an ordinary man would have lost his temper, but Phillip never did. The more they laughed at him the more he seemed to like them.

Bert Voizey was a carpenter and, it was said, an expert poacher. An insignificant looking man, he had a reputation for being able to snare foxes with wire and whenever a local farmer was infested with rats he would be called in to clear them for a flat price of two pounds. He had some recipe of his own for poison.

Norman Scutt was Bertie's oldest son, although in the bar they spoke to each other like mates rather than father and son. Harry Ware didn't like Norman, who wore his hair in some new fancy style with long black sideboards. For one thing Norman fairly often got drunk (something the other men rarely did, it being a matter of pride not to show it), but apart from that, he had a record. His last sentence had been nine months for burglary and before that he'd been in court for various offences, some of violence and some purely larcenous.

When closing time came it was generally Norman Scutt who wanted to go on drinking and while, like any other landlord of an out-of-the-way pub, Harry Ware was willing to stretch the law by half an hour or so to keep the goodwill of his regulars, he always had a slight fear of Norman turning nasty.

"I don't get twelve in my wages, do I?" said Phillip Riddaway, who took his time about entering conversations.

"That's because you'm thick, Phil," said Norman. "Them yanks aint thick, they'm richer'n you nor I'll ever be. You see his wife, then? Cor, Phil, she'd give you a good time, you dirty big booger."

Phil grinned. Norman was always telling him about women. Phil had never done anything to a woman. Norman was always saying he'd have to try it before he reached forty or it would be too late. Phil liked hearing Norman talk about women. Norman had done it with lots of women.

"Aye, it's all right for them yanks, bein' rich like," said Tom Hedden. "Us got to scratch for the price of a pint'r two."

Harry Ware wondered if Norman, who had not been out of Exeter gaol for two months, might be thinking of doing a bit of burglary up at Trencher's. The others always said in Norman's favour that he'd never stolen from anybody in Dando, but a Yank wasn't local...

When he went downstairs it was George Magruder's routine to pick up the morning's post from behind the front door and then to rake out and fill the two fires. In the sitting-room there was an *Esse*, a glass-fronted slow burner which heated water for six radiators throughout the house. Every morning when he raked out the night's ash he told himself how lucky they'd been to find an English house with central heating.

Having made a parcel of the *Esse* ash, using *The Times Business Section* as a wrapper, he then went through the sitting-room and the dining-room to the kitchen, having to duck his head to avoid the

low oak beam above the dining-room door. In the kitchen he cleaned out the *Aga*, which the estate agents had called the Rolls-Royce of cookers. On its two hot plates, normally capped by massive stainless steel lids on hinges, Louise did all their cooking, and the slowburning fire also provided hot water for the kitchen and bathroom. Although he knew the *Aga* was of modern and scientific design he liked to think it was the kind of stove women cooked on when men were out ploughing virgin prairie or branding longhorn calves. It was the first time in his life he had seen anything seriously cooked by other means than electricity. It gave life a kind of barbecue flavour.

He went out of the kitchen door into the porch, carrying the *Aga* rakings in its ash-shovel; he pulled down both lots of ash to pull on his rubber boots. These had tractor type soles and had been left behind in the coal-shed by a previous tenant. He had bought special felt sole-linings but even with those he still thought there was something unhygienic about wearing another person's castoffs. If it had not been for certain ridicule by Louise – who tended to laugh at his awareness of germs – he would have burned them and bought himself a new pair. He felt this sort of detail might possibly help towards creating the right mental attitude for writing the Branksheer book. Squire and scholar and diarist as he was, Branksheer had lived in what could only be described as squalor. George Magruder just could not tune in on the wavelength of a man who was at home in Latin and Greek and corresponded with Europe's leading classicists, and at the same time took head-lice for granted and the pox as almost inevitable. He and Louise often argued whether it was sophisticated to desire clinical sterility. She took the view that the truly mature man would not have a complex about dirt.

He opened the porch door and walked through a foot of snow towards the corner of the house, passing the kitchen window. Between the corner of the garage and the house there was a heavy wooden partition into which was set a door. He slid back the bolt and backed through, both hands occupied with ash. He let the wooden door slam behind him. He walked along the end wall of the house to the corner, where the frozen surface of the snow now glinted in the bright December sun.

In front of the house there was a small paved forecourt in which a few rose-bushes and shrubs grew in beds cut out of the paving stones. These were protected by a low brick wall which ran the length of the house front. With six inches of snow on top of the wall, it looked like a slice of Christmas cake topped by sugar icing.

Previous tenants had dumped their ashes in untidy heaps across the road behind an old shed, but he had seen a more useful and tidier way of disposing of them. Every morning he brought the two loads out to the front of the house and put them in pot-holes in the track road. Already he had levelled up most of the larger holes in front of the house. The distance between the house and the real road was about four hundred yards. He had a curious little ambition – to see their track completely smoothed off by waste from the two fires. Occasionally he would try to work out how long it would take. The answer varied from three to five years. But it was a useful task to launch and he could only hope future tenants would carry on the good work.

That morning he could not see the pot-holes for snow and after some thought he dumped the contents of the parcel and the shovel roughly opposite the garage door. When the snow melted he could sweep the ash into the nearest hole. Only then did he think of looking at the scenery. As usual he was offended by the rickety old shed across the road. There was something slovenly about people who would spend a lot of money putting in new heating and electric wiring and modern bathroom fittings and then leave a tumbledown shack like that right smack in line with the house's front windows.

He was learning a lot about the English. For one thing they were not the cosy little islanders they were pictured in the States. Of course there *were* odd characters around who looked as though they came straight from a Peter Sellers film, but for every tweedy old gent like Colonel Scott there were others; old women who muttered as they moved silently about the dark gardens of the village cottages; the dark-haired, unsmiling man who walked the road secretively, as though making for some age-old pagan rite under an oak tree.

One of the impressions he had gathered was of an unsuspected brutality. When he looked at the cold slopes of Torn Hill he thought of the big, prison-like building which stood beyond it; Two Waters they called it, officially described as Two Waters Institution for the Criminally Insane, a grim stone fortress rising out of the bleak slopes of the moor. He could never believe that a people who had split the atom and produced Robert Graves could be primitive enough to put their mentally sick in a place like Two Waters. Quite apart from the fact that no building erected during the reign of Queen Victoria could possibly be suitable for the treatment of extreme forms of mental illness, it wasn't reassuring to think of murderers and perverts of all kinds only ten or so miles away. There wasn't even a wall round the place, only high barbed-wire fencing. And that had only been erected out of public indignation after an infamous escape.

The English, he often thought, could yield to no people in their ability to accept various manifestations of unconscious barbarity...

Louise Magruder (*née* Hartley) watched her husband from the upstairs bedroom window. An attractive woman of thirty-five, she was doing her hair in the currently fashionable Jane Austen curls, severe lines over the ears and a bun at the back. She thought she would wear the white blouse with the frilly front and leg-of-mutton sleeves. Perhaps she was a little too *mature* to be dressing up like a teenage girl but stuck here in the wilds of nowhere there was little else to provide amusement. It didn't help her general state of irritation to know she had been largely responsible for bringing them to live at Trencher's Farm.

"Karen, aren't you up yet?" she called into the wardrobe cupboard set into the wall of the bedroom. On the other side of the wall was Karen's wardrobe, both cut into the clay and straw wall. Voices carried clearly through the thin wood that separated the two cupboards.

"Coming, Mummy."

Knees slightly splayed, as though that would bring her hair nearer her twisted arms, she put a p

into the bun at the back of her neck. George had dumped his ash on the snow. She knew she was being unfair but there was something essentially silly about him. The shape of his head, for instance. He insisted on having his hair cut short although she told him his large, pointed ears should be made less obvious. In Philadelphia, where she had been the foreigner, she had never thought of him as anything but a normal husband; now that they'd been living in England for three months she could see things about him, *American* things.

It wasn't just that he made a great fuss about making ice when they had people in for drinks and it wasn't just that he couldn't make a simple telephone call without remarking on the *dreadful* British phone system. She was used to ice in her drinks and she wasn't the hysterical patriotic type who had to defend the indefensible – American telephones made English ones seem like something out of the Middle Ages, if that wasn't an anachronism or something. Anyway, she knew what she meant.

No, it was his mind she could now see as being different. In America she'd almost forgotten what Englishmen were like but since she'd come back she'd found herself continually comparing George with other men, Colonel Scott, for instance, and Gregory Allsopp the doctor. In some ways George was more mature than them – he could hold his liquor better for a start, not like Colonel Scott who, judging by the colour of his face, should have had enough practice. Yet there was something infantile about the seriousness with which he took things like drinking. He hated anything facetious and when he fell into the trap of taking their little jokey remarks seriously he tended to sulk when he realised they had not been serious.

Driving was another of his weak spots. He was a good driver and he saw no reason for saying otherwise. Gregory Allsopp was probably just as good but like most intelligent Englishmen she'd even known he continually made himself out to be a blundering buffoon who'd only escaped serious accidents by a lifetime of phenomenal luck. George didn't like that kind of affectation.

He took the *stupidest* things seriously. Like his weight. If he went over his hundred and fifty pounds by so much as one pound he would first complain about the undependability of British bathroom scales, then he'd cut down on potatoes and bread and *everything*. He didn't smoke – of course. Impeccable, that was it about Americans, they had a neurotic fixation on health and hygiene.

She thought of the one lover she'd had since their marriage. Patrick had bad breath and a severe case of body odour and was even given to farting in public. She giggled into the mirror. She could imagine the hilarious look on George's face if someone farted out loud at dinner. The more she thought about it the more she laughed to herself.

"I'm up, Mother," said Karen. Not for the first time since she'd come back to England, Louise Magruder had to remind herself that her daughter was not pretending to be an American. She was an American...

Louise was pouring cold milk on their breakfast cereal when Karen said the cat's saucer had not been touched during the night. The cat, a half-grown tom they'd acquired from the Knapmans, had not

come back from its evening run the night before and they'd left its saucer of tinned meat in the corner of the shed.

"I wouldn't worry, he probably got caught in the snow, he'll be holed up somewhere snug and warm. Sound, cats can take care of themselves," said Louise.

"Cats don't like snow," said Karen. "To a cat snow is a drag. Cats are very fastidious, Mother."

"I know, dear. That's why they always come home, they can't *stand* other people's houses." Like George, she thought.

Her husband came into the porch, where he carefully removed his rubber boots and put on leather moccasins before stepping onto the kitchen linoleum.

"It's a funny old country this," he said. "Karen, you've never seen real *English* snow. It's a bit peculiar, you know that? It's *warm*."

"Snow isn't warm, Daddy."

Louise remembered when Karen had insisted on calling him Pop. It had taken time to cure her of *that*.

"English snow is warm. Isn't that right, Mother?"

She didn't really know why she felt so irritated.

After breakfast they went outside to throw snowballs. Louise felt confused. Karen was far too dignified for a child of her age. She wouldn't run and yell like a normal child, at least like normal children Louise remembered from her childhood. On the other hand George's antics seemed forced and unnatural, as though he didn't really understand why people threw snowballs but was willing to imitate the actions. Rather like his jokes.

Louise determined to suppress this recent tendency to criticise her husband and daughter. She allowed Karen to hit her with a snowball and then ran, screaming, through the door by the garage. They were standing in the snow on the road when George let out a horrified yell. He stood still, his face transfixed in horror, looking down.

"What's wrong, dear?" Louise cried. "Did nasty snow go down your boots, you poor old thing?"

He didn't answer.

She thought he might be having a game, tricking her into coming near so that he could rub snow down her neck, but he wasn't that good an actor.

"I stood on *something*," he said.

"It's all that ash," she said, smiling.

"No, it was soft. I felt it."

She went across and poked the toe of her Wellington boot into the hard snow where he had been standing. There was something there. She scraped at the snow with her instep. Karen threw a snowball which splattered on George's tartan shirt. He didn't seem to notice.

Her toe uncovered something brown. She scraped some more. She uncovered a piece of tabby fur.

and then a leg.

“It’s the cat,” she said. “It’s dead.”

“Our cat? Is it our cat, Mother?”

“Yes, I’m afraid so. Lift it up, George, I wonder what killed it.”

“Lift it? I don’t want to touch it! *You* lift it.”

It didn’t seem important. She scraped away the rest of the snow round the cat’s body. It was lying fully stretched on its side. She bent down and picked it up, her finger and thumb holding the very tip of its tail. Its head swung round gently, the whiskers dusty with snow. Something hung from its neck. It was a piece of thin rope, the tail end of a noose which had been pulled tightly into its neck.

“It’s been strangled,” she said angrily.

“Maybe it got caught in a trap,” said George, who had backed away a step or two.

“They use wire for snares, not rope. Look, there’s a knot in the rope. Somebody did this deliberately.”

“Kids, probably,” said George.

“Oh, Daddy, I don’t want to look at it,” said Karen. Not tearfully, as Louise remembered herself when her dog, Billy, had been run over by a car when she was young.

“Yeah, get rid of it,” said George. He looked at his wrist-watch. “I’m going in to start work. Take it behind the old shed, we can bury it later.”

Louise carried the dead cat to the dump behind the shed. She dropped it on the snow-covered mound of papers and other rubbish which they burned once a week. She hoped they would be able to bury it or burn it before it began to smell.

When she came round the shed both Karen and George had gone inside. She thought of winter days when her father went out with nets and guns and ferrets and came home carrying dead rabbits with blood on their soft grey fur. She’d often stood beside the sink and watched him skin and gut the rabbits...

Once a week Niles had to be taken to the county hospital for his kidney injections. That day there were no other patients for the ambulance run and Senior Male Nurse Frank Pawson thought the trip might be cancelled because of the snow. However Doctor Tindall said the road had been cleared by a County Council snowplough and Niles must have his injection and check-up.

“Come on, Henry old chappie,” said Pawson to Niles. “Time for your weekly jaunt.”

“Can I look out of the window?” asked Niles. He always did ask, although he’d been going back and forward to the county hospital for years and was always allowed to look out of the window.

“Sure, Henry, you can look at all the lovely snow. Nature’s magic carpet.”

When Pawson had first transferred to Two Waters Niles was still a big name and he could remember the male nurses sweating every time they had to take him for a bath or to the clinic. The

weren't afraid of Niles, no grown man had ever had reason to fear Henry. They were terrified in case they made some mistake and he escaped again. People had been dismissed the last time Henry had escaped. After the public inquiry into the security system a fence had been put round the grounds even though no inmate was ever allowed beyond the high wall of the exercise garden at the rear. Niles had been put under twenty-four-hour surveillance, not allowed to sleep without a light on in his room, inspected every half hour to make sure the sleeping figure was not a dummy.

As if Henry would ever have had the brains to think of building a dummy. To look at him now you'd never believe this was *the* Henry Niles. He looked like a man of fifty – and he was only thirty-four. He didn't look capable of tying his own shoelaces. A helpless little man. Pawson instinctively took his elbow as he made to climb the steps into the rear of the ambulance.

“Strike a bloody light,” said the ambulance driver, who, like Pawson, was originally a Londoner. “I thought I'd get a buckshee day off with this snow. Couldn't he have missed his shot for one bleeding week?”

“Doctor's orders,” said Pawson. “How long d'you think it'll take on these roads?”

“Should make good time. Not much traffic about today.” The ambulance driver grinned. “In fact you could say only a madman would be out driving in conditions like this.”

Pawson didn't laugh.

Henry Niles sat on the bench, his body twisting round so that he could look through the top three inches of clear glass. It was the only view he'd had of the outside world in nine years. This was the best treat of his week. Only he knew what he thought about as he looked through the glass slit. For ten years he had hardly spoken more than a few sentences at any one time. At his two trials and at the public inquiry into the escape it had been stated by psychiatrists that he had the mental age of a child of eight.

The ambulance pulled away from the main gate of Two Waters Institution for the Criminally Insane and picked up speed on a hard layer of snow left by the ploughs. The driver thought he might do the journey to and from the county hospital in fast time. With only one patient to be treated he stood a good chance of being home by five o'clock.

In the back of the ambulance Pawson brought out a folded copy of the *Daily Mail* from his hip pocket. It was his ambition to complete the crossword. He took no notice of Henry Niles who watched the snowy wastes of the huge moor. Frank Pawson found he couldn't concentrate on the crossword clues. Today, he'd made up his mind, he would *definitely* ask Kate Grady to go out with him...

THREE

It had been the Reverend William Hood's idea to improve the community spirit of Dando Monachorum by organising a children's Christmas party on the Wednesday before Christmas Day, which fell on the Friday. The party was to take place between four-thirty and six-thirty in the school. Then, at seven-thirty, there was to be the first dance held in the village for some years.

"That will give them an hour to take the children home and get back," he said to his church warden, Bill Knapman, who was not enthusiastic.

"There's a lot of folk won't come out again," he said. "Who's going to look after the children so's they can go dancing?"

"They've all got somebody who can baby-sit for one night," said the Rev. Hood. "They manage well enough to come to bingo every Monday."

Bill Knapman changed the grounds of his attempt to dissuade the Rev. Hood.

"It's not as though there's a lot of young folks who want to dance," he said. "They all go to Compton Fitzpaine if they want that sort of thing."

"Precisely," said the Rev. Hood. "It's about time we did something for them here in Dando. If we don't make the effort we'll never get *anything* going around here. One would think you didn't want to improve the quality of the community."

"It's not that, Mr. Hood," said Knapman, who was eight years older than the minister. "The people about here aren't very community-minded. They don't like a lot of outsiders comin' in, either that's why they stopped the Saturday night dances in the first place, we were gettin' all they teenage and whatnot, drinkin' and makin' trouble."

He had been church warden under four vicars, all of them elderly men in semi-retirement, happy to conduct their two services on a Sunday and carry out a minimum of parish visiting. The Rev. Hood was only the curate but because the vicar, the Rev. Thomas, was ill he'd been in charge of the parish for two months. He had not been ordained long. Much as he supported the church, as a much-needed influence in these unsatisfactory times, Knapman had no great respect for the curate. He told himself that he was only trying to save the man from embarrassment. The dance would doubtless be a flop.

"We *want* some life about the village," said the Rev. Hood. "That's most of the trouble about these rural backwaters, the young people have nothing done for them so they drift away to the towns."

"Aye well, there's young people and young people, if you know what I mean. A lot of them like to travel round the villages and disrupt things, fights and the like. I could name a few of our own who're never happy unless they're making trouble."

"Oh, high spirits, yes! That's the whole point. You've got to give the younger generation a chance to get rid of their high spirits the right way. It's when nothing's provided for them they cause

mischief. If you don't mind me saying so, Mr. Knapman, I sometimes get the impression you're rather scornful of your fellow men."

"I wouldn't say that," said Bill Knapman. "It's just that there used to be fights and all sorts at the dances here, the Compton Wakley crowd wanted to fight the Fitzpaine crowd and Dando wanted to fight them both – they'd be back and forth from the Inn and drink more'n they could hold and... well, dances is often just an excuse."

"We can organise a pass-out system," said the curate, brightly determined to push his plan through. "And I'm sure we have enough able-bodied chaps in the parish to handle any trouble. Dando has to move with the times if it isn't going to shrivel up and die."

In the end Bill Knapman had to agree to the dance. It was true what the young curate had said, but he didn't have a very high impression of his neighbours, but he knew more about them than any minister, even the old ones. He'd been born and raised within four miles of Dando Monachorum, on a farm his family had owned since seventeen hundred and forty-three. He had gone away to the war and when he'd come back he understood a lot of things about Dando. He could have told the curate of another night when they'd had a dance in the village, the night they found Mary Tremaine on the Fourway road, the night his father and the other men had gone off quietly to the field above the wood. Although he was part of Dando, he had been away into the world, and he could see the parish as it really was. If he had not been born there and brought up to take it for granted that one day he would take over the farm, he doubted very much if he would have chosen to live in Dando.

In the army, when he told them where he came from, they'd make jokes about inbreeding and incest and such things and he could understand why the outside world would think that about the West Country. Even he tended to turn his back on what happened beyond the parish boundaries. They weren't clearly marked but you could *feel* it, you'd be driving along a narrow road and you *knew* when you'd passed out of Dando and Compton, and you wanted to go back. Back to what you knew. Nobody could deny they were a close lot.

When the first sheep had been found brutally stabbed and its throat cut he'd been one of the few who'd been in favour of reporting it to the police at Compton Wakley, the nearest station. Over the last few months six other sheep had been found slaughtered the same way, throat cut and the bell slashed and stabbed by some maniac.

He had told the police and no good had come of it, for none of the farmers had anything to tell the police except how they'd found sheep killed. He had not been popular for having brought the copper in, prying and asking questions. Everybody had their own theories about who was responsible; it was lucky for Norman Scutt that he'd been in Exeter gaol when the first three were killed, for with him being a criminal already he would have been the obvious man to suspect.

It was a nasty thing to have in the area, with everybody theorising and suspecting, thinking the worst of their neighbours and at the same time, illogically, feeling guilty at being possible suspects.

themselves.

That dinner-time, the day of the children's party and the dance, he went down to the Inn with his neighbour, Charlie Venner. It was only two days to Christmas and that made it all right to go to the Inn in the middle of the day. In the bar he saw the Scutts, young Cawsey, Phillip Riddaway and Tom Hedden, plus a few more. As usual Tom Hedden was complaining about something – the price Colonel Scott was asking for hay. Hedden's farm was too small to grow all the stuff he needed for his winter stock, it was too small any way you looked at it for a man with five children, but Hedden hung on year after year, out of obstinacy no doubt.

"If I give her up what'll I do then, eh?" he'd say. "I'd have to move to a town and work in a factory or summat, not me I don't. They'm tryin' to push us small men off the land, not I they'm don't."

Bill Knapman, whose two hundred and fifty acres gave him a higher place in the Dando scheme of things than Hedden (and a *much* higher place than the Scutts and their friends), understood why Tom Hedden stuck to his farm, although this didn't mean he had much sympathy for the man. A farmer who was continually on the scrounge for one thing or another was a nuisance. No sense, that was Hedden's trouble, he had four sons all at school and a girl – Janice, who'd been born afflicted with five children to feed from a place that wasn't big enough for a man and his wife.

And there was the money Hedden spent in the Inn. The part of Bill Knapman which had been in the war understood why a man with too heavy a load on his back took to drink. The other part of him put it down to stupidity; a man who couldn't take care of himself and his family properly should get out. A factory would be a good place for him.

"The professor been in lately then?" Charlie Venner asked loudly, knowing this would give them all a laugh.

"Who, the last of the big spenders?" said Harry Ware. "No, I've been struggling along without him for two halves of bitter, thank you very much."

George Magruder would have been surprised to hear what they said about him. He would have realised that their natural awe of a man who could afford Trencher's Farm – without, as far as they knew, doing any work at all – had made them shy of him. If he had offered them a drink they might not have immediately taken him into their innermost confidences, but they would to some extent have accepted him as a *generous* outsider.

Instead they had taken his shyness for contempt. It was one thing for Colonel Scott to treat them with real contempt, for he was superior – he owned the Manor Farm and he was a colonel and he was rich and for centuries they'd lived with the unquestioned superiority of squires. They'd have held Colonel Scott in contempt if he behaved in any other way.

But a yank was different. He was an intruder. Other people had intruded – like the doctor and the curate – but it was different with them.

At half-past two Harry Ware shouted “Time”. He put a dishtowel over the beer taps.

“What’s all the noise about?” Norman Scutt demanded, shoving his empty pint glass at Harry Ware. “It’s Christmas ain’t it, give us another bloody pint.”

“Sorry, Norman,” said Harry Ware, “I got a long night ahead of me with the dance, I need me a kip.”

“Give us another pint,” said Tom Hedden, who looked fairly well gone considering it was dinner time.

“No more, sorry,” said Harry Ware. “Just drink up please, lads, plenty of time tonight for all you can hold.”

Tom Hedden had been enjoying himself, the Christmas spirit, all his good mates, darts and talk, the feeling that things weren’t so bad – now they were being turfed out. He felt cheated.

“Oh, go on, Harry,” he said, his voice thick. “Just another pint like, aint Christmas every day or it?”

Harry Ware shook his head. He had already intended to let Bill Knapman and Charlie Venner stand behind for a few drinks, they were responsible, steady men and they spent well when they came in. Bill Knapman had known this, and he was irritated when Tom Hedden began pleading.

“Right now, your glasses *please*,” Harry called.

“Balls to your glasses please, give we another bloody pint,” said Norman Scutt.

“Come on, lads, we don’t want to make trouble for old Harry here, do we?” said Bill Knapman. It was one of his failings, he recognized, to act as though he had some kind of authority. Yet he couldn’t help thinking of the Scutts and that crowd as riff-raff, he’d been brought up that way and for all his experience in the army he couldn’t shake it off.

“There’s no trouble,” said Tom Hedden, almost pathetic in his desire for another drink. “All we want’s another pint, it aint a lot to ask for regulars like.”

Harry Ware shook his head, already washing up glasses. This annoyed Tom Hedden who reckoned he was entitled to a bit more respect. Nor did he like being talked to by Bill Knapman in that high and mighty voice. He banged his glass down on the bar. The glass cracked.

Harry Ware frowned angrily as he swept away the pieces.

“Sorry about the glass,” said Tom, leaning forward with his elbows on the bar. “All we want’s just one more, that’s all.”

“I told you *no*.”

“I aint niver comin’ here again, niver givin’ you another bloody penny, Harry Ware you –”

Tom Hedden’s anger could find no words. He stretched his hand towards Harry Ware, as though to grab him. Bill Knapman was beside him, waiting for something like this. In the army he’d been a military policeman. He was that kind of man.

“Come on, now, Tom, let’s not be silly,” he said, taking hold of Hedden’s sleeve. Tom Hedden

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