

# THE WINTER BABY

Sheila Newberry was born in Suffolk and spent a lot of time there both before and during the war. She wrote her first 'book' before she was ten - all sixty pages of it - in purple ink. Her family has certainly been her inspiration and she has been published most of her adult life. She spent forty years living in Kent with her husband John on a smallholding, and has nine children and twenty-two lively grandchildren. They retired back to Suffolk where Sheila still lives today.

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*To John, my late husband, who took our large family on  
many adventures while I, more of a dreamer, just closed  
my eyes at the cry of 'Jump, Mum! Dad will catch you!'  
And of course he always did.*

*For my father, John Langley, who served with The Buffs  
in the Middle East, including Egypt.*

*Also remembering my wonderful Irish grandfather, Ernest  
Meehan, larger than life, who played his banjo at family  
gatherings and always included 'I'll Take You Home  
Again, Kathleen' and 'Danny Boy'.*



## Preface

One afternoon around fifty years ago, my husband John and I visited an old brickworks near Westerham, in Kent. We were house-hunting and the deserted property was reached through a little wood with a stream running by. We came across a large sunken area surrounded by brick walls, a well with a rusting bucket and a pile of bricks in the corner. Beyond was a big barn, with windows almost obscured by cobwebs. On a rise to the right, in the middle of a grassy plot, was the house we had come to view. Its bricks were patterned in soft shades from yellow to blue. Whoever had owned the property at the turn of the twentieth century had built an imposing residence. Inside, however, was a shambles, and although there were stairs leading up to where the bedrooms would have been, they ended in space for there was no upper floor. Yet someone *had* lived there, for there were broken chairs, a dusty, sturdy table and a fireplace, albeit not connected to a chimney.

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We looked at one another – we had small children; this was not the place for us. They would no doubt love the wood that went with the property, but I knew I would be nervous there on my own with the little ones while John was at work in London all week. So we walked away, and before long we had found a new home – a smallholding in the Weald of Kent – and our *Knee Deep in Plums* days began . . . Yet that abandoned house and the forlorn pile of bricks in the yard has been with me ever since. It deserves a story, I feel.

# Prologue

1903

The girl had been wandering for some days on the North Downs, stumbling along what she believed to be the old Pilgrims' Way. She'd lost track of time in her confused state, but she knew it was coming up to Christmas. Snow was falling thick and fast and she had no feeling in her feet, which were encased in boots with worn soles and cracked leather uppers. The dark, threatening sky above contrasted with the thick layers of snow-on-snow on which she staggered step by step; the cruel wind whacked her back and she cried out in agony. She clutched her shawl around her shoulders, dislodging the bundle fastened with odd pieces of string. She groaned as she bent slowly to retrieve it.

'I must carry it; I can't leave it behind, it's all I have . . .'  
she muttered. These lucid moments were fleeting.

She'd kept to the track, seeking shelter the first night after she fled in an abandoned shepherd's hut. The door hung off its hinges and the bitter wind invaded the cracks



in the wooden wall slats. Others had been there before her; she'd sorted among the debris they had left behind and found an empty brown beer bottle with the stopper lying nearby. Water, she thought, suddenly aware of how thirsty she was. I might be able to fill the bottle from a well on a small farm on the way – but where am I going? Home, she told herself. She sank down on a heap of old straw against a wall, closing her eyes, but she couldn't escape the awful smell that assailed her nostrils. She could guess what the rusty bucket in the corner contained.

She endured another sleepless night in a crude shelter in a field. There was a red-streaked sky in the morning: shepherd's warning – she must keep moving. Now, at dusk, alone in a white world of snow, she was retching, although her stomach was empty. She became aware of the muffled sound of bells. Am I dreaming? she wondered. Where am I? What am I doing here? Is it Christmas? Am I nearly home? The pain washed over her again, and near to collapse, she groaned, 'If I lie down in the snow, I won't be here tomorrow.' In her distress, she thought she heard a voice urging her to carry on. Who is it? she wondered, and who am I?

In a brief respite from the flurries of snow, she noticed that there was a hamlet below the ridge. She had previously avoided descending to these small villages along the way, but now she plucked up the courage to follow the lights beaming from a row of cottages. The bells had become





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clearer, though they were not as sonorous as church bells, and through a window she glimpsed a circle of people around a table, each with a handbell, ringing in turn.

A woman came into the room with a tray full of glasses, steam rising from a bowl of punch. The bells were put down as she placed the tray on the table and began to ladle the punch into the glasses. A man went to add a fresh log to the fire that already roared up the chimney, then crossed to the window to close the curtains, but a small gap remained so that a chink of light was visible from outside. The girl moved away from the window. She leaned against the rough stone wall next to the front door and glimpsed a lovely wreath of holly fastened there. She pricked her finger as she touched it hesitantly, but her hands were so cold she didn't feel anything. There was singing coming from the house now.

'It came upon the midnight clear, That glorious song of old . . .' They must be practising the bell-ringing and carols for Christmas, she thought.

Suddenly she heard organ music and felt drawn to find out where it was emanating from. Whoever was playing stopped abruptly. She saw a chapel further along the cobbled street; finding the oak door unlocked, she ventured inside, but no further than the porch, where she found a settle. This would be her bed for the night. She would be safe here, she was sure. There were notices on the walls but the light was too dim to discern them.





She rested her head on her bundle and shivered. *Charity is cold* – the words were jumbled in her head. She had no coat, just the shawl, and she tucked her numbed hands underneath it. She was too weary to attempt to remove her boots from her sore, blistered feet. They were smeared with clay after her slithering descent from the rough grass on the edge of the snow to the terrain below.

The inner door opened and a figure emerged from the chapel: a tall, well-built woman carrying a lantern. She looked down at the girl huddling on the settle, taking in the pale face and the shabby clothes, recognising fear in the blue eyes looking up at her.

‘There is nothing to be afraid of,’ she said gently. ‘You are welcome to rest here. I would offer you a bed for the night, but we have six sons still at home. I’ll come back soon with food for you. I am the minister’s wife.’ The girl’s eyes flickered and she nodded.

Later, the minister’s wife supported her with an arm around her narrow shoulders while the girl sipped hot soup from a tin mug. She broke pieces of soft new bread into a dish and added a chunk of cheese. ‘Eat what you can, it will give you strength,’ she said.

The empty crockery was packed into a bag, and from a reticule the woman produced a warm red and green plaid cape. ‘Let me help you put this on, my dear. It will be too large, no doubt, but wrap it around you and it will be as good as a blanket. I haven’t worn it in ages but I brought







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it here from Scotland when I married – I am glad for you to have it. In the pocket you'll find a lucky piece of white heather; I put it there twenty years ago.'

When the minister's wife returned the next morning with porridge and a bottle of tea, she found that the girl had gone. Her footprints had already been obliterated by a fresh fall of snow. She didn't even tell me her name or where she was going, the woman recalled. In fact, she didn't speak at all; she appeared to be suffering from shock. I can only pray she reaches her journey's end safely . . .



# **PART ONE**



## **1903–1907**

Oh! I will take you back, Kathleen,  
To where your heart will feel no pain,  
And when the fields are fresh and green  
I'll take you to your home again, Kathleen.

*'I'll Take You Home Again, Kathleen,'  
Thomas P. Westendorf, 1875*



## ONE



Soon after dawn, the girl left the Pilgrims' Way and the Downs, but she lost her bearings again and it was late afternoon before she emerged at a junction of five roads. She rubbed ice from a sign that told her she was at Hawley's Corner. She'd heard that name but she couldn't quite remember why or when. There was a hill ahead. She hesitated, too exhausted for a climb and suffering from hunger pangs, as she had not eaten anything since last night. Earlier, she had dipped her bottle in a trough after she saw an old shepherd deliver water to his small flock of sheep, but the bottle still smelled strongly of beer and she only managed a mouthful before she spat it out.

She followed one of a warren of unmade roads where she could just make out through the swirling snow a lone farmhouse and outbuildings surrounded by fields cloaked in dazzling white. Home, she thought, she was almost home . . .

She was unaware that someone was following her along the lane until she turned her head after discerning muffled



footsteps. Coming towards her was a big fellow with a cap pulled down over his ears and a muffler round his neck. He carried a large spade, which made her panic. She tried to run towards the house but her legs gave way and she collapsed in a heap on the snow. She hadn't quite made it, despite all her efforts, and she was so weary that she didn't struggle to get up or even cry out. She had reached her journey's end.

Through a mist of pain and fear she looked up at the man bending over her. He pulled his cap off and stuffed it in his pocket, thinking it might alarm her. His curly hair was ruffled and his smiling face made her wonder: am I in heaven? Is this an angel?

He put down the spade and asked gently, 'Will you allow me to help you?' When she didn't answer, he lifted her up into his arms, and with long strides reached the farmhouse gate, calling out, 'Mother, can you come? We have a visitor . . .'

The door opened and light spilled out across the drive. It illuminated the name over the lintel: Home Farm.

The man lowered his burden gently, supporting the girl until her feet reached the ground, where his mother was ready to guide her into the warm house. He went back to retrieve the spade, which his mother had asked him to bring in from the barn in case the snow built up round the house during the night. There were already icicle spears hanging from the gables and window frames.





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The girl was supported by the woman into a large room just off the hall. There was a low black-beamed ceiling, whitewashed walls patterned by shadows from flickering candles in polished brass candlesticks, and bare floorboards with colourful rag rugs. In the centre of the room was a long table with benches on either side, and at both ends an oak carving chair with a cushioned seat. On the table was an embroidered cloth runner, with a yellow bowl in the centre brimming with rosy-cheeked apples. She had an overwhelming feeling that she had been in this room before – was it a long time ago?

A Border collie had made himself comfortable on the long black horsehair sofa drawn up to the cheerful log fire, but was told firmly, ‘Down, Bob!’ His mistress helped the girl to swing her legs up and to stretch out on the sofa with a couple of plump cushions behind her back. ‘Let me help you out of your cape. I’ll shake off the snow and hang it up to dry. You were fortunate to be wearing it in this weather, eh? I am Jessie Mason – Danny, who carried you here, is my younger son.’

As she said this, another large man appeared in the doorway. He had a mop of thick dark hair and a shaggy beard. The girl on the sofa gave a strangled cry at the sight of him. She covered her eyes with her hand, an involuntary gesture, as if expecting a blow.

‘Can I help, Mother?’ he asked. He had a deep voice and a slow way of speaking.





‘You can, Sam. Fill my small washing tub with water, make sure it’s not too hot, and find a flannel piece and a bar of soap. The young lady will need to soak her feet, I think, and I will help her wash herself. Could you bring me the nightgown I’ve been airing by the kitchen range, please? Also, a big towel from the cupboard,’ she instructed him. ‘Danny will be back in a minute – you should both stay in the kitchen while I attend to our unexpected visitor, and give the stew on the hob a good stir. We’ll need a cup of strong tea before supper, I think.’

‘Here’s Danny now,’ Sam said. He closed the door, but the girl could still hear muted conversation in the hall as Danny divested himself of his outer garments and boots, then the young men went to fetch the tub and the other things their mother had asked for.

‘Don’t worry about my boys; they are gentle giants, I always say, and will do anything for anyone,’ Jessie said proudly. She sat down on the end of the sofa and began to gently ease off the girl’s boots. ‘You can’t hurt this old piece of furniture; it’s easy enough to wipe down. Now, my dear, will you tell me your name? That’s all I need to know; you needn’t tell me the story behind your distress till you feel ready.’

‘Kit . . . Kathleen,’ the girl said faintly. Her eyes closed.

Now that the girl’s head was uncovered, Jessie saw long, tangled black hair in need of a wash, like the rest of her, and she put two and two together – black hair and blue





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eyes, a soft lilting accent. 'You are from Ireland, I believe?' she asked. 'A long way from home.'

'Home . . .' the girl murmured. She gave a deep sigh.

'I believe you are,' Jessie said softly. 'Your poor feet – I need to put salve on them, then bind them up. Oh, here comes the tub. I hope they remembered newspaper to stand it on. Sam, look in my box on the dresser and bring the ointment and a roll of bandage – oh, and scissors. Then take these boots to the kitchen. They need a good clean, as you can see.'

Danny, unlike his older brother, was clean-shaven, with copper-coloured hair, the same shade as his mother's neatly coiled bun. She appeared small beside her large sons, but was actually a few inches over five feet tall, with a face creased with laughter lines.

'I hope I didn't frighten you?' Danny asked the girl. She didn't respond. Her eyes were open now: they were blue, he saw, mirroring his own. He surprised himself with the thought that fate had brought her here.

'Kathleen,' his mother said.

'I was lost,' Kathleen whispered unexpectedly, turning her face away from his gaze. She sounded so desolate, he thought as he left the room.

Jessie turned away while Kathleen undressed, and rolled the soiled clothes into a sheet of newspaper. 'I will wash these for you tomorrow.' She hesitated. 'I have some garments that belonged to my daughter . . .' She swallowed





hard, and then said, 'I lost my Mary four years ago, when she was only thirteen. I still miss her, but you have to carry on, don't you?'

She turned back to tuck the big towel round Kathleen and gave a gasp, quickly suppressed, when she saw what had been disguised by the girl's long full skirt. There were bruises on her arms too, as if someone had brutally restrained her, and raised red weals on her back. Jessie, shocked, dipped the flannel in the water and tenderly washed her visitor like she would a young child. After all, she thought, she's not much older, it seems.

After Kathleen had soaked her feet in the tub, Jessie bandaged them up, then Danny carried her in his strong arms into the kitchen, where his brother was laying the table for supper and pots bubbled on the range. Kathleen's face rested against his jersey. He saw her wrinkle her nose. 'You can smell the hosses, I reckon. I'd just bedded them down for the night when I came upon you struggling along in the snow.'

She found her voice: 'Horses.' She sounded reproving.

Danny caught his mother's warning glance, and interpreted it: don't ask questions.

'Here's the strong tea you ordered, Mother,' Sam put in. 'Drink up while I dish up the stew. I added the dumplings to the gravy, by the way.'

'You'll make someone a good husband one day, Sam.' She sipped her tea gratefully.





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‘Not till I’ve built my house first,’ he replied enigmatically. Kathleen gulped when a bowl was placed before her.

‘Take it away, Sam, and add it to Danny’s plate,’ Jessie said. ‘He’s been working hard all day.’

‘And I haven’t, I suppose?’

‘Well, you could hardly dig clay today or build walls, could you? You’ve been full of grand plans ever since your uncle left you the old brickworks. Danny put *his* half-share into livestock,’ Jessie reminded him.

Danny interrupted. ‘He has his dreams and I have mine, that’s all I have to say. But Mother, we’ve frightened our visitor, she’s weeping.’ He pushed back his chair. ‘I’ll make her some bread and milk, shall I? She might manage that.’

Tears coursed down Kathleen’s pale cheeks, but she didn’t sob. Jessie went to reassure her. ‘Put our plates in the warming oven, Sam,’ she said. ‘Danny, yes, bread and milk – now why didn’t I think of that? And Sam, you help me get Kathleen upstairs. She can sleep in my room so I can keep an eye on her. The spare bed’s made up. Danny, you can bring the bowl up when it’s ready. And she’ll need the stone hot-water bottle . . .’

‘Hold tight as we go up the stairs,’ Sam said gruffly to Kathleen.

She turned her face, avoiding contact with his beard.

‘I’m sorry.’ He smiled ruefully. ‘A beard gives me some protection as I work outside in all weathers. Here we are. Mother, open the door. I’ll put her on the bed, then you can see to things.’





Kathleen couldn't speak. Was she dreaming – would she wake up and find herself still struggling through the snow?

Jessie sat down next to her on the bed. 'I would like to give your hair a good brush if you can sit up. You'll need to anyway when your sop arrives . . .'

'Sop?' Kathleen asked, her voice just a whisper.

'Bread and milk, my dear. It was often the only thing I could eat when I was expecting my babies. You'll feel better once you get that down you.'

'You know?' the girl faltered, as Jessie gently dealt with the tangles in her hair.

'I do indeed, but I also saw that you had been beaten. Was it . . .' she paused, 'the man concerned?'

There was no response.

'Have you anyone to go to in times of trouble?'

The words spilled forth this time. 'No. I thought the Pilgrims' Way would absolve me.' She couldn't tell Jessie any more, it was all too painful and raw. She had managed to blot out the most recent and terrifying events, but she feared what might happen if they resurfaced.

'My dear, I'm sure you are absolved already.' Instinctively Jessie knew that was the right thing to say. She imagined the girl was a Catholic.

Danny delivered the bowl of bread and milk, and the hot-water bottle swathed in a small hand towel. 'I hope you will sleep well tonight,' he said, smiling encouragingly at Kathleen as Jessie propped her up in bed with a pillow.





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He turned to his mother at the bedroom door and said quietly, 'Doc Wiseman is coming to check the foal over tomorrow morning – would you like him to see her?'

'Danny, he's a *horse* doctor!'

'Maybe now, but he was once a doctor in a hospital, in the country where he was born, before he came here as a refugee. He won't charge you for advice.'

'I don't know how long she will be with us. Perhaps, though, this is her journey's end. Only she can decide that. It would be good to have another woman in the house.'

When Jessie turned back to the bed, she saw that the bowl was empty and the girl was asleep, the spoon still in her hand. She tucked the bedclothes round her and sighed. Her daughter had slept in that bed during her final illness, and now she had another young girl to look after.

Downstairs, Danny told Sam, 'I'll take the dog out as usual.'

'It's still snowing, don't go too far,' Sam said. He grinned at his brother. 'Though I don't suppose the weather will cool your ardour. Marion, no doubt, is waiting for you to knock on her door, eh?'

'Don't marry me off just yet,' Danny retorted. 'But at least I'm not in love with bricks, like you!' He dodged the cushion Sam aimed at him.

After Danny had gone out of the front door with the collie following to heel, spade in hand in case he stumbled into a snowdrift, Sam stoked the fire and gathered up the



newspaper that had been under the tub. An item on the inside pages caught his attention:

**MISSING GIRL**

*Police were called to an altercation at a large house in Croydon. Neighbours reported seeing a young woman they knew as Kitty, a servant in the house, running off down the street, with a man in pursuit. The man, who was rumoured to be her employer's long-time companion, returned alone more than an hour later. He told police he was only trying to help her, but she had eluded him. Later, a woman's body was removed from the house. Her identity and cause of death have not yet been established.*

The date on the newspaper was five days ago. The newsagent kindly supplied them with unsold papers, which were useful for many purposes.

Sam would never know why he acted then as he did, tearing out the damp page, screwing it up and putting it on the fire. He watched as it blazed up, then dwindled into ash.