The village in winter

In this exclusive extract from *The Magic Apple Tree*, Susan Hill's lyrical study of a year in the life of a Cotswolds hamlet, the author celebrates the magic of a snow-bound Britain

ILLUSTRATIONS BY **LUCY GROSSMITH**

Apart from a short, hard frost over Christmas, it had so far been a wet winter, mild and dank, 'a green winter', a winter of those fogs and mists that hang over all the ditches and dykes of the Fen. Barley is set on a hill and runs away in a horseshoe shape down two sides of it, 200 feet above the Fen and all the water runs down there, too, for the land just beneath your feet, wherever you stand, is a mesh of small streams, the veins of the village. So when it rains, Barley is soon dry again but the Fen is a bog, often flooded for weeks at a time.

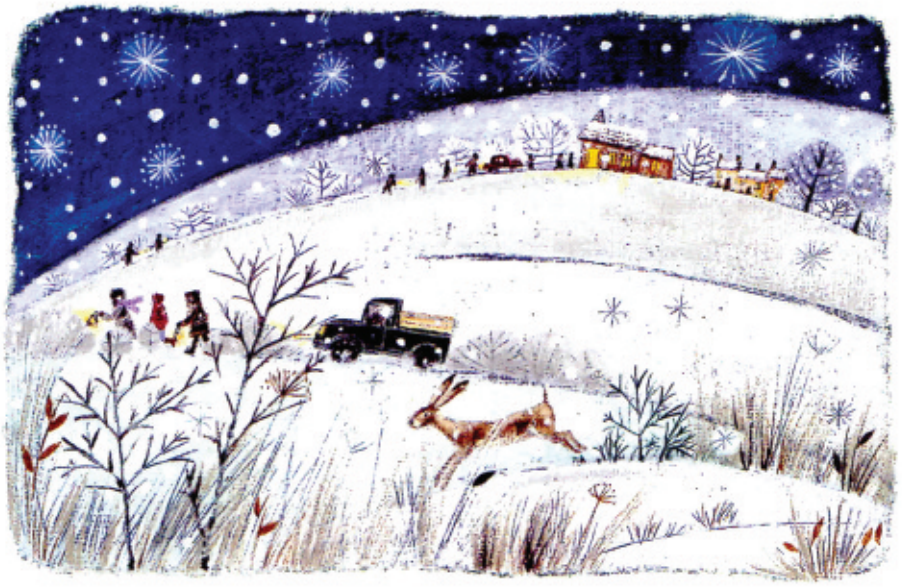
November, December, January. From Moon Cottage we looked down on those flat, water-filled fields, water that gleams the colour of gunmetal, with a grey sky above. It sounds drear and drear it can be, lowering to the spirits of the watcher, day after day. Yet it is also strangely beautiful, in the sombre way of those Dutch or Norwich landscape painters whose glories lie in the greyness of sky and wind-torn clouds, and in every subtle variation in the way the winter light is reflected down on to the wet fields and back again. The views from Moon Cottage, and from all of Barley in winter, are like those paintings, one third land, and two thirds sky.

For weeks, it was still dark after eight o'clock in the morning, and again by three, lamps were kept on all day. And so, because of the wet, low Fen and the mild days, followed sometimes by intensely cold nights, there were those mysterious mists, when the stumps of posts and hedges and the blackened upper branches of trees reared up out of the coiling whiteness, their trunks and the ground on which they stood remaining shrouded.

Even on these raw, wet days, I like to walk through the village, and down on to the Fen itself, for the pleasure of doing so, seeing what looks different, who is about, and to stretch my legs after a morning at my desk. But, when the mist hangs about down there, I am uneasy once I have passed the last house down the lane and am walking alone between the dripping hedgerows. There is no ▷

traffic, these lanes that lead down from Barley are all dead ends, and there seem to be no creatures, either, except for a donkey standing like a stone in a field full of mist and thistles; the farm animals are housed in their barns for the winter, the birds are silent and invisible, apart from the occasional crow flying low, a dark shadow over the sodden land.

On the Fen it is quiet and the air seems muffled, pressing in around me, the mist drifts into my hair and clings to my face, I feel stifled by it and I can see only a yard or two ahead. I turn my back and walk faster up the slope again, where the air is at once fresher. I see no one at all. I am anxious to be home. This is the most alienating and unsociable of all weathers in the country. No one goes outside unless they must, and then, like me, they walk fast, heads down, on their way to the letter box; there is nothing to be done on the sodden ground of the garden and the farmland is waterlogged, too. That is one of the great differences between life in the village and in the town, especially in winter which, after all, lasts for more than half the year, and it has driven away many who are not naturally withdrawn, cannot take the solitude and the emptiness of fields and lanes, the apparent monotony. In the town, bad weather is unpleasant, but it does not have such a drastic, tangible effect on everyday social life. People congregate at the shops, and walk dogs and prams, ride their bicycles down the streets, they brave rain and gales and early dark going to and from their places of work and the stations and car parks, libraries and markets, there is always someone to be seen from the windows. When we lived in the city and my daughter was a baby, I pushed her out whatever the weather and the suburban avenues were always full of people. We did not know many of them, but there



was usually someone to nod to and complain to about the weather. But country lanes in winter are different, they are lonely places. I do not mind that in the least, and besides, there is a hidden social life behind the doors and drawn curtains of villages all winter through; the appearance of emptiness and silence, lack of life, is deceptive.

For all that Barley lies in a comparatively mild inland county, there are bouts of severe weather and then, because we stand on a hill, and because we are, so to speak, a dead end, on the road to no other village or town, we are very easily cut off here, and very exposed to blizzard and bitter winds that drive the snow before them to block off the lanes.

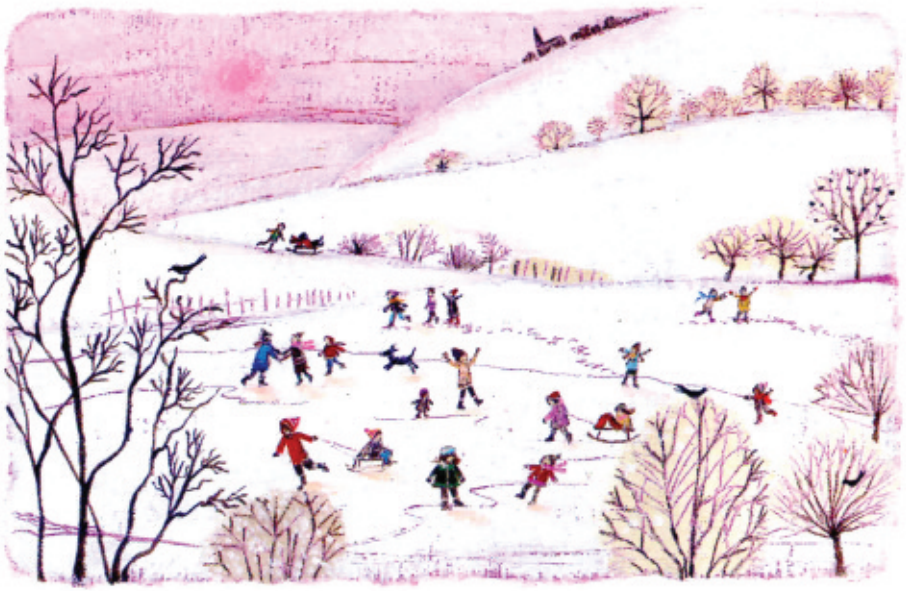
It was on the second Tuesday in January – WI night – that winter became a serious and dramatic matter, a cold, tiring, but exhilarating time, at least for the young, and a companionable time for all, when we were stranded, snowbound and sealed off in place and, it seemed, in time too, for the usual pattern of the day's coming and going was halted.

We had been in the town all day, and I had scarcely noticed the weather. But, by the time I put the car up the last, steep bit of hill, past Cuckoo Farm and Foxley Spinney, towards the village, the sky had gathered like a boil, and had an odd, sulphurous yellow gleam over iron grey. It was achingly cold, the wind coming north-east off the Fen made us cry. We ran down the steps and indoors, switched on the lamps and opened up the stove, made tea, shut out the weather, though we could still hear it; the wind made a thin, steely noise under doors and through all the cracks and crevices of the old house. But by six o'clock there had been one of those sudden changes. I opened the door to let in Hastings, the tabby cat, and sensed it at once. The wind had dropped and died, everything was still and dark as coal, no moonlight, not a star showed through the cloud cover, and it was just a degree warmer. I could smell the approaching snow. Everything waited.

Another hour later, setting off for the WI, I saw the first, fat flakes as they came softly down and settled at once as they touched the ground. I bent and touched them. They were oddly dry, grainy. They would last. I put on my coat and boots and took the lantern.

There are no street lamps in Barley and on a dark night you cannot see further than the end of your nose. But ahead, up the lane, I could see other lanterns and torches bobbing on, as the ladies made their way up to the hall. People coming in cars from outlying farms, or the next village, spoke uneasily of the bad weather forecast and the need to get away early; snow powdered hats and coat shoulders and was filling up the ruts in the track outside, softly, steadily.

The speaker for the evening, who had come 12 miles to tell us about her travels in Arabia (at the age of 70!), was in a direct line from those intrepid female adventurers of the 19th century who crossed mountain ranges by mule with only native scouts for company, and ventured into remote and dangerous areas of the desert in search of early pottery fragments. Her talk was later described as 'fascinating' but she gave it at top speed and omitted the showing of her slides altogether, so nervous was ▷



she about being marooned in Barley by the bad weather. By nine o'clock we had disbanded and the snow was inches deep and still falling like goose feathers. It was a convivial, even giggly walk down the dark lane, with elderly ladies clutching one another's arms, torches dropped and extinguished at once, buried in the snow, and a certain air of excitement, for all the complaining.

At five in the morning, I woke to a wonderful silence. I went to the window and pushed it open carefully. A little heap of snow fell inwards on to the ledge. A light wind was taking it now, and moulding and shaping it against the hedges and fences. Every thing was bone-white, under the riding moon. I wanted to go out and walk in the fields by myself, to watch for owls and foxes and smell the night smells. Dull common sense and tiredness prevailed. I returned to bed and have ever afterwards regretted it, for such times come rarely and the countryside under the first, heavy fall of snow at four in the morning is a changed and an enchanted place; the imagination would feed upon the memory of it for ever after.

Next morning, the snow had turned pink, and the sky was pink, too, the whole Fen and all the snow-covered fields between seemed to glow with it, as the sun rose. Then the light changed as it climbed higher, and on the near horizon we could see more snow clouds, banked one upon the other, menacing, moving nearer. I felt excited, babbled of sledges and skis, snowmen and snowballs. Intending to go up the stone steps as usual to collect mail and milk and newspaper from the box in the wall, I opened the front door and stepped out and up to my knees in snow. The steps were not to be seen, and the stone wall dividing us from the Buttercup field, below the apple tree, was concealed too, under the hummocks and billows of windblown snow. It was clear that there would have been no deliveries.

After half an hour or so of hard digging, scraping and shoving back, we carved a narrow path out to the lane, but no further. Moon Cottage was cut off from Geranium Cottage, belonging to our neighbour Mr Elder, and from Fen Cottage opposite, and School Lane was cut off from the rest of the village, and the village from the world. Across the snow, we saw other people with shovels and waved to them, stranded on our island. I wondered about old Miss Reevers, alone in the very last cottage, before the lane peters out into the fields, and how much food we had and how long it would be before my husband would get to work again.

Extremes of bad weather and being isolated by them do bring out the best in village communities and show up all the strengths of this way of life. There are about 500 souls in Barley, and more than half of them are over 60, quite a few well over 80. It is a companionable village, and fairly compact but, because of its situation, set on a hill, it is badly placed for vehicles to negotiate the lanes in snow and ice. It was only two and a half days before the ploughs got to us, fast followed by the delivery vans, and before we ourselves could, albeit hazardously, get out, but I have not enjoyed a time so well for years, or felt so at one with my neighbours, so useful and purposeful, touched by that spirit of Blitz and blizzard. This may seem a sentimental view. It is not. Of course, we were not suffering any extremes of deprivation, we had electricity and water and food, no one was taken seriously ill, we telephoned each other with offers and requests, we could walk about.

The young and strong trudged through the snow to share supplies and take messages, the housebound and elderly made hot drinks and received more visitors in those few days than often during weeks of normal life. Meals-on-wheels became meals-on-foot, the village school remained closed, but for once the pub was entirely full of locals only, and its car park was empty.

And oh, the joy for the children, to live within reach of so many sloping, snow-covered fields. All day they slid and tobogganed, ran and tumbled and pelted one another; standing at the window, I looked down on such scenes as Breughel created, and at the end of the afternoons the lanes were lined with coloured gnome-figures in woollen hats, the little ones half asleep, pulled on sledges or carried on shoulders, noses red as berries, hands raw as meat, voices hoarse with shouting. It was the most carefree, joyous of interludes, the world was as far off as the moon, and just as unreal, its doings could not touch us. I wanted it never to end.

But, waking at dawn on Saturday, I heard the slip and slide and bump of loosening snow, the patter of rain on the windows. The sky was the colour of a gull's back and the snow just a little darker, already smirched and soiled.

The thaw had begun.

Following the seasons through a year in a small rural community, *The Magic Apple Tree* by Susan Hill first appeared in 1982. An anniversary edition with wood-engraved illustrations is out now from Long Barn Books (£12.99). To order a copy at the special price of £10.99 including p&p, call 01624 677237 and quote Long Barn Offer (offer ends 29 February 2008). Susan Hill has written 36 books, including *Strange Meeting* and *The Woman in Black*.