

Holiday 2005

*Shimmer*

# THE WINTER TREE

## A Seasonal Tragedy

by Kate Harrad

**The village of Muddlenose** was extremely tiny and extremely isolated, and was situated not quite in the heart of England but perhaps somewhere around its stomach, or small intestine. Few people ever found it or even looked for it. Indeed, any signs pointing the way to Muddlenose tended to blow down in the wind or be unexpectedly burnt to a crisp one night, such was the Muddlenosians' desire for privacy. And the villagers got on well enough by themselves, mostly: marrying each other and giving birth to small Muddlenosians, each emerging from the womb with the village's characteristic expression of suspicious self-sufficiency.

"We don't need anyone else," Mrs. Mallowfudge would often say to her gentleman visitor, Audacious Skinwillow. And he would reply, "And they don't need us." Or sometimes, "And we don't *want* anyone either." Then they would nod firmly at each other before indulging in self-sufficient, Muddlenosian lovemaking. For the village was not opposed to fornication between the unmarried, or indeed adultery (for it was never clear if there was or had ever been a Mr. Mallowfudge). In fact, the village was rarely opposed to anything, provided it was done by a Muddlenosian.

One year, however, in spite of their precautions, a stranger did find Muddlenose. He stumbled in one day in high summer, blinking as if he had just emerged from darkness, and somehow he stayed.

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The woman from whom he rented a room, Miss Audrey Chasepaper (a lady of indeterminate age, weight and moral fiber), could not pronounce his name. So he came to be called Mr. Glittergrime. Once he had arranged terms with Miss Chasepaper, Mr. Glittergrime was rarely heard to speak. He stayed in his room, or went walking in the extensive woods to the east of the village, and seemed content. The villagers began to ignore his tall, spare figure as it hurried about the market square or disappeared among the trees, and before long Muddlenose had more or less accepted him.

Until winter came.

Autumn was long that year and winter came suddenly, breaking in on the brown and gold landscape almost overnight, like a guest who hopes to distract from his lateness with the violence of his entry. In other words, one morning there was a chill in the air; the next day there was a shimmering of frost; and on the third day, the village woke up to find itself deep in snow.

But not the snow they expected. For the snowfall was not, as they had previously found it to be, white. It was black. Black snowflakes fell and covered the square, plastered the thatches of houses, and shrouded the old oak tree by the village church. On the roads and paths, tremendous black snowdrifts made passage difficult. The snow was thick and deep and beautiful, but the villagers of Muddlenose did not notice that. They simply stared in astonishment at the midnight blackness all around them, for they had no idea what to think.

"What's going on?" said Mrs. Mallowfudge to Audacious Skinwillow. He shrugged. Neither of them liked to admit ignorance about anything at any time, but this was outside their experience. Both were lying in bed, looking out of the window at the seasonal and strange weather.

"Could it be a mirage?" she asked.

"I think those only happen in deserts."

"Oh."

"Perhaps," Audacious Skinwillow said, "we all ate too many of those delicious and interesting mushrooms over the autumn."

"I ate none," she told him, "and yet I still see the black snowfall as clearly as I see you."

"Perhaps we are dreaming?" said Audacious Skinwillow.

Mrs. Mallowfudge reached over and pinched his left testicle rather sharply.

"Aah! Very well then, we are awake."

"We are certainly awake. And if we are neither dreaming nor hallucinating, there can only be one possibility left."

"And that would be?" he said.

"It is a sign."

"A sign?" he repeated, nursing his bruised appendage.

"A sign, and perhaps even a curse. This is a warning to us."

"What should we do?"

"Wait," said Mrs. Mallowfudge, darkly. "And see."

**Over the next two** weeks, the black snow continued to fall, and the village became darker and darker until you could barely see it once night had come. There were a number of accidents: barked shins, heads knocked against walls, and several sprained ankles. The villagers began to stay in at night. When they did venture out, they went to the village pub, the Muddlenose Arms, where they reported all the odd and curious incidents they had experienced. Mr. Barleygrow had lost his walking stick and found it several hours later, upside down in his garden. Louise Wandlesticks had seen a robin in the woods that refused to sing for her. Old Mrs. Pettigram had suddenly taken an implacable dislike to bacon, formerly her favorite of all foods. The villagers muttered, and drank, and then muttered louder.

After some more drinking, the muttering became open discussion, and the theme of the discussion was: "What has changed since last year?" For, as Audacious Skinwillow pointed out, and all agreed, the snow had been the right and proper color of white last winter, and nothing untoward had occurred at all. Indeed, as Mrs. Mallowfudge asserted, and all further agreed, nothing strange had happened in Muddlenose for the whole time she had lived there, and that was a good fifty years. Old Mrs. Pettigram was enlisted to confirm that the thirty years before that had also been entirely uneventful.

In short, the village was in an uproar, and the question asked over and over again with increasing force and meaning, was "What is



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different?" Finally, somebody — and they could never remember which of them it was but it could have been any one of the assembled throng — somebody said, "We have a stranger here now."

"Yes."

"Mr. Glittergrime."

"A new arrival."

"Never speaks."

"Goes for long walks."

"Never smiles."

"And when he does it seems somehow menacing."

"I never hear any sound from his room," offered Miss Chasepaper. "Quiet as a mouse. Or as the grave."

"Or as the grave," someone repeated.

There was a moment of silence.

And then out of the blue and with a note of alarm that at once infected the rest of the pub, old Mrs. Pettigram said, "What if Christmas doesn't come this year?"

Suddenly everyone knew, knew for certain, that she was right. If snow could be black, then it was possible that Christmas would not come.

Muddlenose loved Christmas. Everyone gave everyone else a present, the old oak tree was hung with candles, and every house was decorated with red berries and green ivy. The preparations for Christmas were due to start tomorrow. But what would be the point if Christmas was not going to come?

A chill fell upon the villagers. "What if Christmas doesn't come?" they repeated softly.

Mrs. Mallowfudge stood up with the light of prophecy in her eyes.

"Christmas will *not* come," she pronounced, as if she had heard it from the lips of Santa himself. "Christmas will *not* come this year, unless we find a cure for our curse." She paused, taking in the sight of the villagers with their eyes open as wide as mince pies. "We must heal ourselves, somehow."

Mr. Barleygrow looked thoughtful. "I have some ointment at home," he offered. "It is supposed to be for rheumatism, but..."

"What we need is a priest," Miss Chasepaper said, more firmly. "We'll get the vicar to do an exorcism. Like in the Bible. Drive out the demon."

There was a pause while the villagers contemplated the idea of the elderly and vague Reverend Finkbottle conducting an exorcism to drive out a demon. There was a communal twitch at the corner of their mouths.

"Perhaps," said Mrs. Pettigram timidly, "we could dye the snow white again? I have some bleach and a mop..."

Mrs. Mallowfudge sighed and climbed on to a chair. "Listen," she called. They all listened. "I know what we have to do, to be safe. Trust me." She paused. "We have to offer a sacrifice."

There was silence, and a certain amount of shuffling. The villagers' faces were blank. But Audacious stood up next to Mrs. Mallowfudge,

and he nodded vehemently. "We have an intruder," he said. "We have an interloper."

The villagers' faces were still blank, but beginning to be tinged with acceptance. Mr. Glittergrime had done wrong to none of them, but he was undoubtedly a stranger, and if something had gone wrong with winter, it was perfectly logical to assume that he was, in some way, to blame.

One of the more enquiring Muddlenosians, ventured to ask the awkward but perhaps necessary question: "How did he do it?"

And that crystallized something in the people's minds, because they had not been sure till then whether he was a passive agent, unknowing, or an active agent, evil. Except for Mrs. Mallowfudge and Audacious Skinwillow, who had known at once, or even before, that Mr. Glittergrime was, in essence, and ultimately, *bad*. This knowledge was not based on events but on instinct: the unerring recognition of dark and light, which was conveniently typified by the black snow falling instead of white, and which could only be interpreted as a direct and unsubtle symbol whose meaning was, of course, corruption.

"He cursed us," said the two village leaders together, both knowing it was true.

"He may be a demon," Audacious said, "or a servant of demons. Note how he cannot speak human language, and that he cringes when we approach. He walks in the woods at midnight."

"To commune," said Mrs. Mallowfudge.

"And his diabolical conjurings have borne terrible fruit, as you can see all around you in the form of this black, black snow."

The villagers nodded, although they could not, in fact, actually see the snow because it was nighttime. Yet they accepted it as a rhetorical device, and dutifully pictured their dark village, and shuddered. Muddlenose had the very whiff of demon about it they believed.

With sudden fervor, Mr. Barleygrow said, "I found his familiar! Last night, walking in the woods, I saw a figure built of snow, black snow, looming out of the darkness. It had the stench of evil about it."

There was a collective gasp.

"We face a crisis," said Mrs. Mallowfudge, with all the authority at her command—and after thirty or so years as the unofficial but

universally-accepted village leader, that was a lot of authority. "We must deal with it swiftly, and strongly."

"So we must make a sacrifice to the spirit of Christmas?" said Miss Chasepaper, trying the idea out for size.

"And then Christmas will come, and the black snow will melt," said Mr. Barleygrow hopefully.

"And then all will be back to normal."

"And we will be freed from this horrible weather."

"Yes," said Mrs. Mallowfudge. "We will sacrifice the demon."  
Everyone cheered.

**Mr. Glittergrime, needless to say,** had not been in the pub. He was in his room, reading. He had been confused by the black snowfall, but this was his first winter in England, so he presumed that black snow was peculiar to the country, like smog. Nevertheless, he had come to enjoy the sensation of striding through crisp, dark snowdrifts and feeling black snowflakes falling on his head. He had even built a black snowman in the woods. He was contented.

He was therefore extremely confused to find an angry mob standing outside his window, throwing black snowballs against the glass and shouting. When he went downstairs and opened the front door, raising an enquiring eyebrow, he became further confused to find himself being dragged from the warm hallway out to the freezing road and from thence to the big oak tree by the church. The tree was a stark and cheerless object now, flinging its empty branches to the sky, almost crushed with the weight of the jet snow that covered it.

The villagers tied Mr. Glittergrime to the tree. Then some of them went to their homes and fetched great bundles of ivy and candles to put in the branches, brightly colored cloths to decorate the trunk, and they poured mead around the base of the tree so that it sank into the roots. They tore branches from the tree so that they would have light to see by, and flames lit up the churchyard. They adorned the Winter Tree for Christmas with Mr. Glittergrime as the centerpiece, wrapped in red and green fabrics and bound with ivy. He did not resist. He asked, once, "What on Earth is going on?" But he asked it in Czech, his only language, and since the villagers did not understand him, they



pretended not to hear him.

Finally, the tree was ready, and they stood around it in solemn admiration for a few moments, ignoring the cold that crept into their arms and legs and noses.

“Christmas,” said Audacious, flinging up his arms, “do not desert us!”

“Accept our tribute!” Mrs. Mallowfudge said to the sky. “Not just the demon who would take you from us, but our Tree, which has stood here for as many years as any of us can remember, and will stand no longer. Take it! Accept it!”

And she took a flaming branch and set fire to the Winter Tree.

The oak was too green to burn well, but the smoky, unsatisfying fire burned Mr. Glittergrime nonetheless. All of the adults of Muddlenose stood and watched in the dark. The passion they had worked up earlier in the warm, lit pub slowly melted away until all that was left was the darkness and the flames and the choking smoke. Still, they stood there till the end, as if warming their hands at a bonfire—but nobody’s hands were warm.

When the fire finally burned out, Mr. Glittergrime was dead—most likely from the smoke, although no one could stand to look at his blackened body for long enough to tell.

And then morning came.

Mrs. Mallowfudge and Audacious Skinwillow tried to whip Muddlenose into a sensation of triumph and accomplishment, but they met with little success. When Reverend Finkbottle emerged from the vicarage, Mrs. Pettigram quickly engaged him in conversation and led him away so that he would not see their shame: for the villagers knew now that it was shame they felt.

The children came out of their houses and started to run around, but their parents shushed them and sent them back inside. The Muddlenosians grimly cut down their victim and laid him in the snow, where his naked body was so charred that it became camouflaged by the snow. The villagers shut his eyes and crossed his hands.

And then they dispersed to their homes, or to the woods, and were quiet. The pub was deserted. Nobody went near the remains of the Winter Tree, and nobody put up any decorations. Except for Mrs.

Mallowfudge, who defiantly strung a row of brightly colored paper lanterns across her front garden, and found them trampled only an hour later.

Two mornings after the Winter Tree Sacrifice, Mrs. Mallowfudge and Audacious Skinwillow left the village. They did it silently, without goodbyes. They packed suitcases, stole a horse and cart, and disappeared. In fact, they only went as far as the next village, Hayfeather, which was slightly larger, but the effect was to remove them as thoroughly as if they had died. Occasional rumors floated back—that one of them had murdered the other, that both had suffocated themselves in the snow, that they had opened a hat shop together—but even though Muddlenose liked its gossip, they did not pursue the rumors. The couple had gone, and no one mourned them.

But the villagers mourned Mr. Glittergrime, whose real name they never knew. On the day that Mrs. Mallowfudge and Audacious Skinwillow left, Muddlenose held a funeral for him under the name they had given him, and his gravestone said the same.

The day after that was Christmas Eve, and then, finally, they put up Christmas decorations and roasted their turkeys and mulled their wine, and Christmas came as usual. (For, as Mrs. Pettigram remarked to Mr. Barleygrow in a shamefaced whisper, how could it not come, when they created it themselves? The fact had not previously occurred to them.)

**The next year,** the snow was white, and Muddlenose never did find out why they had had the year of black snow.

In the years that followed, on every Christmas Eve, the entire village would gather by the churchyard, by the stump of the Winter Tree, and they would bring a feast: plum puddings, apple tarts, roast chickens, mince pies, jugs of cider and mead. They would decorate one of the trees in the churchyard with ivy and berries, and they would eat and drink in the cold, with a fire to keep themselves warm. When they had finished eating, they would scrape some of the ashes from the fire and sprinkle them over one of the graves in the churchyard so that it looked as if the snow had turned black.

Then at midnight, someone would take the last jug of mead, which

was always kept back for this purpose, and they would pour it, slowly and silently, on to the black grave. They would contemplate for a few moments the wet and snowy gravestone and the Winter Tree Sacrifice. They would remember Mr. Glittergrime, whose name they never knew, and would never forget.

