

MARIANNE RATCLIFFE

Last Christmas

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Chapter 1

Reverend Arthur Mottram should have been home an hour ago, but tardiness was not to blame for the cancerous guilt pressing against his breastbone. Nor could he hold the weather accountable for the chills that ran through his body, even though a gusting north-easterly slithered between the gaps in his scarf to wrap icy fingers around his neck. So strong was his dread of what awaited him at the rectory, he was vastly relieved when Miss Cracknell tapped on her cottage window to gain his attention.

Knowing Miss Cracknell kept no servant, he let himself in. His elderly parishioner unwound herself from a cocoon of old coats and blankets to shovel a few coals into an empty grate.

‘Not on my account,’ he begged her, even though the air within her sparsely furnished parlour felt colder than the street outside. Miss Cracknell waved away his protests with hands only partly protected by fingerless gloves and hung an iron teapot above the meagre flames. Perched uneasily on the edge of a faded crewelwork chair, Arthur listened with half an ear to tales of aches and pains and biting winds until the whistling of the kettle roused him. His host presented him with lukewarm black tea in a porcelain cup with a gilded rim, its glaze, like that of the

matching saucer, webbed with cracks. It had been fine once; Miss Cracknell had been a woman of comfortable fortune, until ruined by a bank scandal.

She apologised for the lack of milk, but insisted it was a blessing. 'Black tea needs only a pinch, you see,' she said. 'You must thank Miss Susan for her kind gift. If not for your daughter, I could offer only boiled water.'

'I'll pass on your thanks.' Although that depended on whether Susan's love for him survived the revelations he must make today.

'I asked Miss Susan if you would be sending Christmas parcels this year.' The quaver in Miss Cracknell's voice betrayed a battle between hope and pride. 'She seemed certain you would, but of course I do not expect...' Her cup chattered against her saucer. Arthur knew he must respond, but he was still distracted by thoughts of his family and the irrevocable change that was about to upend their world.

'I used to welcome Christmas, but these days I feel like Jonah, all alone in my dark little chamber,' Miss Cracknell added. Despite his own concerns, Arthur could not ignore her obvious need.

'I shall make sure you have coal and Margaret will send a parcel from our larder,' he assured her.

Miss Cracknell pressed her hand to his in silent gratitude, her fingers as cold as fresh-thawed spring water. He warmed them between his palms before taking leave, thinking that, despite Miss Cracknell's words, he rather envied Jonah. Should a whale somehow appear in their quiet corner of Suffolk, he'd be perfectly willing to offer himself up as a snack. In the belly of the beast, he would be safe from awkward questions and shameful revelations.

He set a path towards home, snowflakes filling the air as the last of the daylight leached away. He passed a group of village boys pelting a snowman with snowballs, laughing and catcalling in the gloom. Arthur empathised with the unfortunate snowman, assaulted from all sides. He offered up a silent prayer. *Lord, grant me the means to help Miss Cracknell and spare my family from hardship.* He'd made many similar petitions over the last few months. A man of strong faith, Arthur had been certain the Lord would answer. After all, his predicament was not due to any actual vice. His troubles stemmed entirely from love for his family and his inability to refuse those in need. Why then, had the Lord failed to respond to his pleas?

Too soon, he reached the rectory gate. The curtains were drawn, but the orange glow of fire and lamplight seeped through the fibres, the smell of coal and woodsmoke drifting down from the chimney stacks. A burst of muted laughter came through the windows and the tinkling notes of a piano drew him forward. After a stamp of his feet on the doormat to knock away a smattering of snow, he removed his hat and entered.

'Papa!' His daughters flung themselves into his arms. Had guilt left any room in his breast, his heart would have swelled with joy. Dear Florence, her pretty face a delight to look upon. And Susan, shorter than her sister and less handsome, yet the warmth of her kisses was more than any man deserved.

'Papa, you're squeezing too hard,' protested Florence.

'Am I? Dear me.' He released her with reluctance.

'Are you weeping?' Susan asked with tender concern.

He dashed the salty droplets from his cheeks and blamed the stinging wind. He was ushered to his favourite chair. The roaring fire and mantelpiece wreathed in holly and laurel made him think of Miss Cracknell, bundled up against the chill. Was

that to be his future? And that of his family? Margaret, his wife, pressed a glass of steaming mulled wine into his hand. He looked upon the loving faces that surrounded him, and his resolution fled like a coward. I will tell them tomorrow. The Lord will not begrudge me one last evening of contentment.

‘What joy to spend a quiet night in with my family,’ he said, tension uncoiling as he put off the dreaded confession for another day.

‘You haven’t forgotten the parish council are coming to supper?’ said Margaret. He stared at her, aghast.

‘Not tonight, surely?’

‘You are getting quite forgetful, Papa,’ Susan remarked. ‘It was most unfortunate that Mr Gregson had to come all the way from the village to remind you of his bill. His poor bunions! I must take him a pot of salve.’

It had been a close shave. The local chandler, after months of empty promises, had presented himself at the rectory door to demand payment. Arthur had been forced to borrow six guineas from the poor box to pay the balance. Money he’d not yet replaced. He set down the mulled wine, swallowing suddenly impossible. Susan tugged his boots off and eased pre-warmed slippers onto his feet. Through a constricted throat, Arthur squeezed out a few strained words of gratitude.

‘We’ve raised two wonderful daughters, Arthur.’ His wife looked fondly at the girls as they departed to dress. ‘I shall almost be sorry to lose them to marriage, although I suppose the time will come soon enough.’

Watching Susan and Florence, arm in arm, Arthur reflected that the love of his daughters was like opiates to a laudanum-addicted man. Unable to bear the losing of it, he had denied them nothing. Yet now they would most likely be forced to

marry the first solvent man to make a proposal. He'd mortgaged their future for a present that, however delightful, was about to run out.

'Meg, dearest...' His hesitant attempt to confess was drowned out by a loud knock at the door.

'That cannot be our guests, so early?' Margaret exclaimed. Arthur massaged his temples, but that did nothing to stem the growing ache behind his eyes. Who came knocking, after dark, unless they were invited? Only debt collectors and other unsavoury types. A tap at the parlour door was followed by Harriet, their housekeeper.

'Please, sir. Some fellows 'ere with the 'arp for Miss Florence. Where are they to put it?'

Good Lord, the harp! He'd ordered it in the summer, thinking if it came to the worst, he could sell Margaret's railway shares to pay for it. But those shares were long gone, swallowed by other bills. He rose to his feet in agitation. The harp would set him back two hundred guineas.

'I must return it.'

'You cannot think of disappointing Florence,' Margaret protested. 'We promised her. Susan has her piano and we vowed never to favour one child over the other.'

Arthur pinched the bridge of his nose, recalling many delightful evenings listening to Susan's fingers flying over the keys. The piano was only half paid off, but he couldn't bear the notion of parting with it. And Margaret was right; it was wrong to deny Florence the same opportunities as her sister.

'Have them put it in my study,' he told Harriet. 'Florence won't think to go in there.'

He hurried to his room to change before Meg could ask the reason for his agitation. Where could he possibly find two

hundred guineas, on top of what he already owed? Another desperate prayer brought no response.

The family had only just reunited in the parlour when their first visitor arrived.

‘Greetings Mottrams!’

Miss McCloud was a stout lady of middle years, attired in navy blue tartan. Florence ducked beneath an attempted embrace, but Susan allowed herself to be hugged warmly. Miss McCloud was still considered a newcomer to the village, having arrived from Manchester two years ago, after her doctor prescribed country air for her lungs. Her many eccentricities included general civility, regardless of social status, a warmth that extended even down to the coal merchant’s donkey, who would invariably receive a carrot or lump of turnip from the voluminous carpet bag that Miss McCloud carried about her person. Where others had been wary of such odd behaviour, Susan had been delighted, and she and Miss McCloud were firm friends.

‘That’ll be Potts,’ Miss McCloud informed them as the doorbell rang again. ‘He was on my heels. It’s darker than a tomb outside but his breath is unmistakable, even from twenty yards.’

Mr Potts was shown in, his smile revealing more gums than teeth.

‘Miss Florence,’ he said with a bow. Florence gave a tight nod and removed herself to the far side of the room, her hand across her mouth. Susan had more backbone, greeting the farmer politely, although unable to avoid an instinctive tilt of her head every time he breathed in her direction.

‘Miss Susan, your pretty smile is a tonic this cold night. I tell Mrs Potts she should smile more, but she don’t listen.’

Mrs Potts, the third to bear that name, was heavy with child,

despite having given birth to a girl in the spring. Arthur feared it would be the death of her and pitied the next young woman who caught Potts' eye. His stomach roiled as he watched Potts, with exaggerated (and, in Arthur's opinion, completely unnecessary) gallantry, press Susan's hand to his seed-encrusted beard.

'How are things at the farm?' Susan asked, retrieving her hand and wiping it surreptitiously on her skirt.

'Excellent! I had three eggs from Josephine this morning. There's a hen for you. Mrs Potts should take a leaf from Josephine and get on with the business. I've told her I expect a boy. With the farm so productive, I need more hands.'

Arthur's ears pricked up. If Potts was doing well, he might be amenable to a loan.

'We are only waiting for Mr Vernon,' said Margaret. Arthur tugged at his starched collar, which chafed his neck. He and John Vernon had exchanged strong words yesterday. It had been most distressing. Would his banker let something slip?

'Vernon sends his regrets,' said Mr Potts. 'A prior engagement.'

Arthur wondered if his luck was finally on the turn. Vernon absenting himself and Potts suddenly revealed as a potential source of funds. Were his prayers being answered at last?

Dinner was lobster in cream sauce, followed by stuffed partridge and a saddle of lamb. Arthur pictured John Vernon wringing his hands at such excess. Whether or not Potts gave him a loan, he'd have to speak with Meg about the housekeeping.

'Lobster's quite the treat,' said Miss McCloud, 'although I find fresh shrimp just as good at half the cost.'

Arthur was perturbed to find her grey eyes fixed upon him, sharp as flints.

'Have you been talking to Vernon?' he asked.

The room went quiet, and Arthur realised he'd spoken

rather loud and fierce. The only sound was of Mr Potts' knife, screeching against his plate as he scraped up every last drop of sauce. It set Arthur's teeth on edge and he looked desperately to Susan, who could generally be relied on to cover an awkward moment, but she was seated downwind of Mr Potts and expending all her efforts in hiding her discomfort.

'I speak to everyone,' Miss McCloud said wryly. 'I thought it was well known. Although it's hard to get two words out of Mr Vernon. I don't hold it against him, mind you. A fine, sensible man. And discreet.'

'It's easy for bankers to be discreet,' said Margaret. 'Who wants to listen to talk of pounds, shillings and pence? Not I.'

'Perhaps you should,' said Miss McCloud. 'Ignorance is never bliss, whatever they say.'

'Will you take some port, Potts?' said Arthur. Miss McCloud made a sound of delight and extracted a bottle from her bag.

'I hoped you might indulge me in a little Port and Pontification. I've brought my own supply.'

Whenever Miss McCloud entertained, she insisted the men and women remain together after a meal, rather than separating as was customary. In general, Arthur had no objection, but he'd been hoping for a moment alone with Potts.

'Are you insinuating I cannot provide for my guests?' he said testily.

'I meant no offence.' Miss McCloud swiftly returned the bottle to the depths of her bag. 'I was only hoping to make amends for any presumption on my part, but I see I have put my foot in it.'

'We know it is only your generous nature, Hetty,' said Susan. 'Father can have no objection. I'm sure he and Mr Potts weren't planning to discuss anything unfit for our ears. It would be

terribly out of character.’

‘It’s not unseemly conversation that bothers me, it’s missing out on important information,’ said Miss McCloud. She broke into a wheezing cough. Arthur was no physician, but he’d ministered to enough consumptives to recognise the sound.

‘By important information, I hope you mean gossip,’ said Susan. ‘However, since I had two glasses of claret with dinner, I will content myself with Coffee and Conversation.’

‘Tea and Tittle-tattle for me,’ said Florence smugly.

‘Oh well done, Flo,’ said Susan with a laugh, and Arthur resigned himself to defeat. His business with Potts would have to wait. What would the gossips say about him, when the truth came out? *Feckless, weak, spendthrift.*

Miss McCloud recovered from her coughing fit and withdrew two wrapped parcels from her bag. ‘I hope Reverend Mottram has no objection to my bringing Christmas gifts for Susan and Florence?’ she asked stiffly.

Arthur regretted his sharp words. It was unlike him to be so irritable, and Miss McCloud was hardly to blame for his predicament.

‘It is very kind of you to think of them,’ he assured her. To make amends, he collected his crystal port decanter from the dresser and poured her a generous glass.

Florence’s gift was the latest issue of *All the Year Round*, along with a subscription. Susan’s was a weighty tome carrying the title *Modern Cookery for Private Families*. A dimple appeared between her eyebrows, the same look of sweet confusion that had appeared when Arthur first attempted to teach her Euclidian geometry.

‘Every young woman should know something of such matters,’ said Miss McCloud. ‘In case they must fend for themselves.’

It never does to be helpless.’

Arthur felt a sharp stabbing pain in his left arm.

‘I don’t understand,’ said Florence, her expression even more confused than her sister’s. ‘How can we be helpless, when we have Harriet, and cook, and the other servants?’

The room tilted and Arthur’s vision blurred. Chairs scraped back in alarm.

‘Papa?’

‘Arthur? Arthur!’ Margaret’s voice rose to almost a scream. Strong hands, accompanied by even stronger breath dragged him into the nearest armchair.

‘I’ll fetch brandy,’ said Florence, her voice distant.

‘He’s having a fit,’ said Mr Potts, right in his ear, his breath more potent than the strongest smelling salts. ‘Happened to one of my chickens. Had to put her down, though a prime layer.’

‘Not helpful, Potts,’ said Miss McCloud, loosening Arthur’s collar. ‘One of the ladies in my Tea Circle used to go the same way if they were concerned about something.’

‘I’m quite well,’ he protested, his vision clearing to reveal a vista of blue tartan.

‘He’s overworked,’ said Margaret. ‘I shall speak to the bishop. Perhaps it’s time he consider retiring?’

‘Absolutely not!’ Arthur flailed his arms like a drowning man to create much-needed space. ‘That would be the very worst thing to do.’

In desperate need of air, he heaved himself out of his chair, broke through the circle of concerned family and guests, and staggered towards the nearest window, drawing the plush velvet drape aside so he might press his forehead against the cold glass. A draught blew in between sash and casing and cooled his overheated skin. It was time to confess. Time to act. The

harp must be returned, along with the piano. The girls would be distressed, and that was not the only sacrifice they would have to make, but if changes were made now, they might yet weather the storm. He lifted his shoulders and turned to address them.

Florence burst into the room, a decanter of brandy in her hand. He recognised it as the one he kept in his study. Her eyes were shining. 'You bought it!' She flung her arms around his neck.

'It was supposed to be a surprise,' said Margaret, laughing as Florence turned to smother her with kisses.

'This is going to be the best Christmas ever!' Florence exclaimed.

If you enjoyed Last Christmas and are eager to know what happens to the Mottrams, all is revealed in my novel [The Secret of Matterdale Hall](#), which was released in November 2022.

Praise for The Secret of Matterdale Hall

"You will feel the darkness and danger lurking and your fear for Susan increase as your heart pounds." *Silver's Reviews*

"Absolutely edge of your seat, bone-chilling mystery, with a lovely sense of heart and soul for doing what's right." *LESBIreviewed*

"The story pays a direct ode to the classic Gothic narrative (young heroine, forced to seek a job at a mysterious mansion,

mysterious vibes therein...) while still adding some of its own flourishes by incorporating LGBTQ and disability rep into the mix. It was a novel experience to see a historical fiction with these inclusive elements. An entertaining read without a doubt.” *Rosh, Goodreads reviewer*

“If you love a good old gothic Victorian mystery then this will be right up your alley!” *Laura, Goodreads reviewer*

“While the story has its tense moments, there are just as many that are light-hearted and uplifting. I really enjoyed reading this book and hope to read more from this author.” *StoreyBook reviews*

“Such an accomplished piece of writing.” *Books by your Bedside*

“The lonely Yorkshire setting, with much of the story taking place in the winter, added to the atmosphere and it was difficult not to think of *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*, while I was also reminded of Stacey Halls’ *Mrs England*.” *Helen, Goodreads reviewer*

“Matterdale Hall is a dark and twisty story of exclusion, of fearing that which we don’t understand. But also the power and inner strength which can come from simple kindness, the like of which can blossom a friendship into a tender romance under even the most fraught conditions.” *QueerLit Loft*

“It would be a hard-hearted reader who fails to be charmed by it.” *The Quick and the Read*

“There are shades here of both *Jane Eyre* and of *Wuthering Heights*, along with a tongue-in-cheek reference to “Mr Bell’s *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*”, but both plot and style echo most closely the “sensation” novels of Mrs. Braddon. When Susan investigates the disappearance of her predecessor at the Hall she puts herself in mortal danger. This is an impressive and atmospheric debut, not just for the author but for her publisher.”
Historical Novel Society



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