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opening extract from

Giant Under the Snow

written by

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published by

Orion Children's Books

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ONE

THE HAND



A cold, wet day in December. The worst kind of day for the backlands. The clouds were so low they seemed to trail their mists in the tree-tops and already, at half past three, it was dark within the forest.

Jonquil Winters left the trees and started to cross the heath. Fools, even Bill Smith. Pelting pine cones like little kids. She was glad to leave them behind.

The rain had held off for a while, but now the first drops of a new shower pattered into the fern fronds. That would send them running for the bus. Too neat, was she? What was it that girl called her? Never mind! Never mind! The shoes, the 'inappropriate shoes' (she clenched her teeth at the thought of Miss Stevens' face as

she said it), were wet inside and out. The pointed toe of one of them was scratched. Right! She opened her coat. Let the rest of her get wet. New coat, best jeans, everything.

A copse, well clear of all the other trees, stood out on the open heath. She would walk there and back in her own time and nothing would stop her. She shook her long hair clear of her coat collar and held her face up to the rain.

The bus that had brought the school party to the backlands was hidden in the forest behind her. Its horn sounded. Time to return. Jonquil concentrated on the copse. It was neat and circular, like a little temple. She would walk round it, once, slowly, and they would have to wait until she had finished.

Bill Smith stooped over a fungus that made a skirt of fleshy frills on a dead tree.

'No wonder,' he said.

Arthur Minnett stood beside him, blond, thin and tidy.

'No wonder what?'

'No wonder fungus is poisonous.'

'Not all of it. Not mushrooms.'

Bill was a shade taller than his friend, dark, and he wore clothes that were more fashionable but looked as though, once bought, no further care was taken of them.

'You've missed the point again,' he said. 'It looks poisonous.'

'The point is,' said Arthur, 'does it kill you?'

The bus driver put his hand on the horn button again. Out on the heath its sound was thin and distant, like a foghorn at dusk when the beach has emptied. Jonquil Winters shivered. Across a sea of dead bracken the forest showed no sign of movement.

Miss Stevens was asking if anybody had seen the Winters girl. Nobody had. She turned to Mr Roberts. Her lips were pinched in.

'We should *not* have come here,' she said.

'Oh, I don't know,' said Mr Roberts, not wanting to argue. It was he who had organized the trip to the heathland where, many centuries ago, people had lived and left their mark – if you knew where to look. 'Even now, you know, there's something about it.'

Miss Stevens turned her back on him.

What now? Rain trickled from the floppy brim of Mr Roberts' hat and dripped from the end of his nose. He took off his glasses to wipe them. He could have been happy in spite of everything if it hadn't been for that woman. She had no feeling for the atmosphere of this lonely place. He sighed and turned to his group of pupils.

'Miss Stevens is worried about Jonquil Winters,' he said. 'Anyone any idea where she is?'

'Jonk Winters, sir?'

'That's what I said.'

'Better ask Bill Smith.'

'Why should I know?' Bill was angry. If he was keen

on Jonk Winters that was his business. Nothing to do with teachers.

Trouble enough, thought Mr Roberts, and let the matter drop.

Jonk looked around her. The copse was on a very low, flattish mound so regularly shaped it may have covered the ruins of a small building, a temple perhaps. But several ridges splayed out from it like the spokes of a wheel, or the rays of a sun shape. Jonk counted them. Four straight ones and one shorter and bent. Not a wheel, more like a gigantic hand with trees thrusting up between the fingers.

A hand? What if it closed on her! The thought made her jerk her head up. Her hair was wet now. It hung in dark strings to her shoulders and made a spiky fringe across her forehead. Her imagination was trying to frighten her but she would not be beaten. She would circle the copse.

She stepped from the mound to one of the ridges, but her foot was too near the edge, and the rain-sodden earth began to crumble. She tried to jump and the extra pressure pushed a miniature landslide away beneath her and she fell full length between the fingers of the green hand. It seemed to clutch at her and she almost cried out, but a moment later she crawled clear unhurt.

She stood up, facing the green hand, and stooped to brush her coat. As she did so she saw something shining where the black earth had crumbled.

The horn bleated again, nagging like Miss Stevens. It was a sudden spurt of anger more than anything else that made Jonk stride into the 'V' of the grassy ridges and stoop to pick up the glinting object. But as her hand reached for it she paused. The object was like a shiny yellow ribbon, twisted in upon itself. A clutch of worms wintering under the soil? No, it was metal. She pulled a fern leaf, doubled it to make it stiff, and poked the object clear. It was circular, about the size of her palm, and was composed of metal ribbons that twisted and writhed among themselves in an endless pattern. It looked like a brooch, perhaps an old one, perhaps gold. Certainly it was a discovery; she had been right to visit the temple of trees.

She picked it up, crumbling the earth from its crevices as she turned it in her hands. There was a distinct pattern to it, and in the middle of the interwoven gilded strips was a shape like a man standing upright with his legs together and his arms outstretched. His head was a loop of metal.

Now she would go back. The green hand had given her a gift. It no longer seemed unfriendly. Jonk smiled slightly as she bent to brush the brooch in the grass of one of the ridges. The grass was short and fine, and beneath it the earth was spongy. She pressed it and it gave. Another landslip and more treasure?

She was about to press again when the turf dimpled, as though it was going to split of its own accord and save her the trouble. But it did not crack. A ripple ran the

length of the ridge, and suddenly, with a soft sound almost like a sigh from underground, it humped itself in the middle. Jonk jerked back. The movement stopped. The ridge was absolutely still. The hump in the middle was very low and may have been there all the time. Stooping may have made her giddy and she had imagined it. But she was afraid. She was able to admit to herself that she was afraid. It was time to go.

She looked towards the trees that hid the bus, trying to penetrate the darkness under the branches. There was not a glimmer of light nor a sign of movement.

And then, directly between her and the trees, perhaps fifty paces away, something showed above the ferns and crumpled bracken. It must have had its forepaws raised on a mound, but even then it was big for a dog. A solid mane of black hair made its head huge. Its sharp, black muzzle was pointed straight at her.

Jonk felt a fluttering in her throat. Breathing was difficult. Then the horn wailed and the dog turned its head. Only a dog. If she walked towards it, showing no fear, it would do her no harm. But as its head swung towards her again its muzzle wrinkled and a yellow line of teeth showed. She heard it snarl as it vanished behind the ferns, and she panicked.

Her first step took her to a fallen branch which hooked her foot and made her stumble. She landed on all fours, then tried to run before she had properly regained her feet and she blundered, half falling, through the bracken, away from the dog and away from the bus home.

A rabbit track was directly in front of her. She ran along it, able to move faster with less noise. She turned into another, listening as she ran. She could hear nothing, but the dog might be silently at her heels. She looked over her shoulder and fell flat. She put her hands over her head and brought her feet up beneath her.

The attack did not come. Gasping, eyes wide, she took her arms from her head and listened. Nothing. She stood up and her eyes searched the heath. She could see no sign of the dog. She looked towards the copse. The trees were shaking. There was no wind, but the thin top branches lashed and the trunks jerked as though some enormous thing had curled round them and was beginning to uproot them.

And somewhere close to the copse the dog howled.

Her breath hissed in her throat as she ran in a wide circle that would take her to her friends. The dog's howl lay on the heath like the gathering darkness itself and when it stopped she heard yelps as the animal came after her again.

It cast about. She could see the black flag of its tail from time to time, but it did not seem able to find her trail. She began to get control of herself, forcing herself to move more stealthily, keeping behind cover when she could, but the dog was making her circle wider and wider and she was no longer going towards the main belt of trees but towards a tongue of the forest that stretched out into the heath. She might be safer inside it.

She was almost there when the dog picked up the path

she had used. Seconds later it saw her. She broke for the trees and was zigzagging among the trunks before it was clear of the ferns.

She stumbled, almost fell, regained her feet, and plunged on. But it was useless. Now she could hear its rush. Then suddenly, slightly to the left, and almost hidden in ivy, she saw a wall and behind it she glimpsed a roof.

It was almost magical the way she covered the ground. It was a straight run and she flew towards the wall while the dog was still weaving through the trees. She reached the wall and jumped, thrusting her hands high among the ivy leaves and kicking among them for a foothold. She got a firm grip first time, but her feet skidded on the brick. She heaved wildly, her feet found a branch, and then, quite slowly and rustling gently as it moved, the ivy came away from the wall and lowered her to the ground.

The dog, black mane bristling, jaws open and red, made its final ferocious run. She screamed as it leapt. Its jaws closed on her arm. She thrust her other hand into its mane and pulled the coarse hair with all her strength. It shook its head and the pain in her arm made her scream again.

She kicked at it and fell. She was a beast's prey. It began to back away among the trees, pulling her with it. She whimpered. Once she got her arm around a low branch, but the pain of the jaws was too great and she let go.

She screamed for the third time.

In the ivy a door opened. A small figure came through. A woman. Two or three paces and she stopped.

Then Jonk saw her and cried out. The woman stood still.

'Please!' Jonk shrieked. 'Please!'

A growl in the dog's throat vibrated in her arm. Jonk's mouth was open as though she would scream, but this time no sound came. There was dead silence in the forest.

Then it happened. A crack like a whip. The jaws opened and let Jonk's arm fall as the dog was sent hurtling sideways. It twisted, biting at something she could not see. Another crack and it leapt, biting air. Crack followed crack and the dog writhed and leapt. Then it was on the ground, squirming, no fight left in it, just fear.

In the gloom of the forest Jonk could not see what was attacking it. A sound of breathing alongside her and something brushed her arm. She started back. But it was the woman. She was slim, dressed in black. She stood over Jonk but did not look at her.

In the gloom her face was no more than a pale shape with shadows for eyes. But her hands, clenched together beneath her chin, sparkled faintly as she moved them in a series of strange little thrusts. With each thrust came the crack of the whip.

The dog backed further away, clumsily, bumping into tree-trunks. The glittering hands continued to jerk.

From a long way off, deep in the forest, came a faint whistle. Jonk turned her head. The dog was creeping away into the darkness of the trees, black disappearing into black. Then silence.

She looked up as the woman unclasped her hands and let them fall. The woman's head was tilted, listening. The whistle came again, more distant. The dog pushed through a patch of undergrowth and then there was silence again.

They remained where they were in the winter forest until Jonk, very slowly, surprised that she was not trembling, got to her feet. It was not until then that the woman turned towards her. As she put out her hands to take Jonk's, the rings that she wore glittered again. Under the hardness of the rings her hands were dry and feverishly warm. Without a word she led Jonk through the door in the wall and closed it behind them. No words were needed. Jonk was being led to safety.

They walked on a path of sand. The stillness of the garden was not the stillness of the forest beyond the wall. There was a calmness that went with the orderliness of the little hedges, neat and less than knee high, that patterned the smooth sand surrounding the house. The sky had cleared and the stars hung high overhead. In the house a fire flickered.

They went inside and the woman switched on a light in the hall. She was still holding Jonk's right hand as she turned towards her and Jonk could feel the pressure of her fingers nervously altering. She was small. Even her

high heels made her only slightly taller than Jonk. Her black hair was so short and smooth it fitted her head like a helmet. She had large blue eyes that moved swiftly over Jonk's face, and a small mouth on which a half-smile appeared, vanished, and appeared again. She wore a black dress and no jewellery apart from the rings.

'I could have told you the dog was loose,' she said. 'His master thinks he can pin me inside my own house by letting that brute run free.' She pulled a face, biting her lower lip as if she was afraid, but then she laughed. It was a wordly-wise laugh and flattering because the woman was treating Jonk as an equal, somebody who knew what she herself knew.

But the experience Jonk had just survived was being ignored. Jonk winced.

'My arm hurts,' she said.

The wrinkles of laughter vanished, the black eyebrows dipped into a frown, and under her make-up the woman's face flushed.

'Hurts?'

'Yes. Hurts.' Jonk was frowning now, angry at explaining the obvious.

'His dog . . .' the woman began, then paused as if puzzled.

'It ought to be shot!'

'Shot?'

Was the woman stupid? Her big eyes were round, simple, not understanding.

'Whose dog is it, anyway?' For an instant Jonk was in

command, prepared to bully an answer from a silly, flighty little woman, but then the face she was looking into changed. The frown went, the mouth straightened, and she did not answer Jonk's question.

'I am Elizabeth Goodenough.' The voice and the eyes were steady. 'Who are you?'

'Jonquil Winters.'

'Do you know me?'

'No.' But Jonk was not certain. There seemed something familiar about the face and the black helmet of hair, something she ought to recognize.

Without saying anything more Elizabeth Goodenough led her from the hall into the room where the fire danced. Jonk took her coat off and, under a reading lamp, her sleeve was pushed up and her arm examined. The skin was not broken but the bruises were already beginning to blacken. Elizabeth Goodenough began to massage the painful place. The room was warm but Jonk shivered. The woman waited for the trembling to cease, but it was uncontrollable. After a moment she said gently, 'Jonquil?'

'Yes?'

'What are you doing in the forest?'

Jonk found talking difficult. She had to clench her jaw after every few words to try to control the trembling but, bit by bit, she told about the school trip, and her anger with Miss Stevens which had caused her to walk away.

'Where are the others?' asked Elizabeth Goodenough.

'I was walking by myself.'

'On the heath?'

'Yes.'

'What did you see?'

Jonk pulled her arm away.

'I want to go home,' she said. She looked at her scratched and ruined shoes.

'Jonquil!'

It was a command to look up. The large eyes had each caught a prick of white light in the centre.

'What did you see!'

Jonk shook her wet hair clear of her collar.

'I saw a dog.' It was sweetly spoken and defiant. Miss Stevens had often been sent into a cold fury by that tone. Elizabeth Goodenough smiled.

'And what else?' she asked.

Jonk let anger make her voice loud. 'I stood on a green hand and saw trees move when there was no wind.'

'Ah!' The jewelled hands were clasped under the chin.

I have also seen, thought Jonk, a dog whipped when I could see no whip.

Rain rattled on the window. At the bus the two teachers would be organizing search parties.

Elizabeth Goodenough sat back, one hand on each arm of her chair, her feet together.

Who does she think she is, thought Jonk, a queen?

For a long time Elizabeth Goodenough stayed silent, looking at her. Jonk waited, aware that her wet coat was steaming in the heat of the fire, her mind a jumble of thoughts and fears. At length the woman spoke.

'You are a pretty girl,' she said. 'It is a shame your clothes have been spoilt. But it was your own fault. They were inappropriate.'

It could have been Miss Stevens speaking. Jonk tried to smile but the muscles of her face barely moved.

'When your friends come, you must go home and stay with them. That is where your safety lies. What you have seen today should be enough of a warning to you.'

'But what have I done? What is it all about? I don't understand anything!' Jonk was on her feet.

Elizabeth stood up, smiling.

'Some people are sensitive,' she said. 'Some imaginations fill up too quickly.'

The words had again become too much like a teacher's. Jonk cut herself off. Her hand in her coat pocket touched something bitterly cold. Very well, if the little woman was determined to keep her secrets Jonk would keep hers. She tightened her grip on the brooch and thrust it deeper into her pocket.

And then Elizabeth Goodenough's face softened. She opened her mouth to speak, but just at that moment, almost inaudible through the forest, the sound of the horn reached them and Jonk could think of nothing but getting home.