



## **At The Back Door**

Winter still struggled against the arrival of spring. Snowdrops stood tall in the hedge bottoms. There were still chips of ice in the cracks in the path along which I approached the little cottage at the edge of the village. A thin wisp of wood smoke rose straight from the red-brick chimney. But of course Millie was at home. She was almost too lame to walk at all and now she had been laid low with bronchitis. That's the message I had received and the reason for my call. I stopped at the front door and gently rapped on one of the little glass windows. After a while I knocked again, louder this time in spite of the loose glass, and waited, giving Millie plenty of time to come. I just hoped she was not in bed. That would mean a return visit later. I tried the door. It was locked. About to attack the handle more vigorously I saw Millie's neighbour crossing the road and dropped my hand quickly. She was holding a box, or something, covered with a white cloth. She approached steadily, holding me with her stern look. I remembered the cold blue eyes from a previous encounter. Her long pointed nose, like an enquiring probe seemed to ask 'who are you and what do you want?' The voice made me feel I had been apprehended, tried and found guilty of housebreaking, so I quickly explained.

'Come on,' she said in the same curt tone. I followed her to the back of the cottage, along a narrow path between un-pruned roses and a dustbin bereft of its lid.

'Hold this,' was her next command as she thrust the cloth-covered parcel into my hands. The warm dish was a surprise and noticing me fumbling, she added, 'And be careful. Don't upset it.' She bent down stiffly, to pull a key from under a flowerpot by the wall. She unlocked the door and pushed it open, calling in a voice as shrill as a magpie at dawn, 'Millie !'

'It's a pie.' Millie's neighbour took the covered dish from me. She seemed a little embarrassed as she added, 'I've brought it for Millie's dinner. Now don't you go telling anybody though.' The faintest glimmer of a smile crossed her face as she continued, ' My old Dad always used to say. If you're going to do a kindness, always do it at the *back door*.'

She pushed the door ahead of me, put the pie down on the kitchen table and called. 'Millie !. It's May. You've got a visitor. Parson's here.' Then turning to me, 'You go on up. I'll put the kettle on. And remember - the pie's a secret - at the back door !'