

How could she be lonely?



On long winter nights when the wind howling through the lime trees keeps me awake, I often think of Margaret and the nights she spent alone. It was her wish to stay by herself and no amount of persuasion by her niece could ease her out of the fell-side farmhouse which had been home since her childhood. Margaret had always been a sociable person. Active in the community and her chapel she made and kept friendships, many from childhood days. But as the years progressed the friends became fewer and those who were left became too infirm to make the journey uphill along the rough little lane.

It was almost dark on a winter afternoon when I first walked up the lane towards the farm cottage guided by a solitary light from one window. *I don't like to shut the world out too soon, she told me when, after knocking for a while, then letting myself in, I offered to draw the curtains. Janet my niece, will do that when she comes to help me to bed. I couldn't manage without Janet. I'll have to give in and leave here soon, before I wear her out!*

We sat and talked and Margaret told me of hard but happy days on the few acres of farm which were now sold to neighbours. I learned of her sadness, barely discernible behind the beautiful wrinkly smile - the tragic loss of her young son - the early death of her husband, the arduous days of squeezing a living from the land.

I always prayed the Lord would take me home from this place, she said wistfully. But he'll have to make it soon.

The light had gone completely now and a strengthening wind brushed bare branches eerily across the bare window.

They are long nights, she said, and I responded with the obvious question. *Don't you get lonely here all by yourself?*

Why, bless you no! she laughed. *I may be alone but I'm never lonely. When I lie down in that bed after Janet's gone, you'd never believe all the hustle and bustle that goes on here.*

I immediately thought I heard the scurry of mice - or worse, but need not have worried. She went on.

It's my prayer-time! Sometimes all night! It's me and the Lord to start with, and then we invite the whole world in! I go round the world praying about all the things and people I've heard about on the news, I pray for the chapel and the minister, the church and the vicar and all the people, then all my friends - here and in heaven. And its like they're all here with me! How could I feel lonely!

I realised that Margaret had created out of her aloneness a place which was a cross between a shrine and an audience-chamber. Indeed, how could she be lonely?