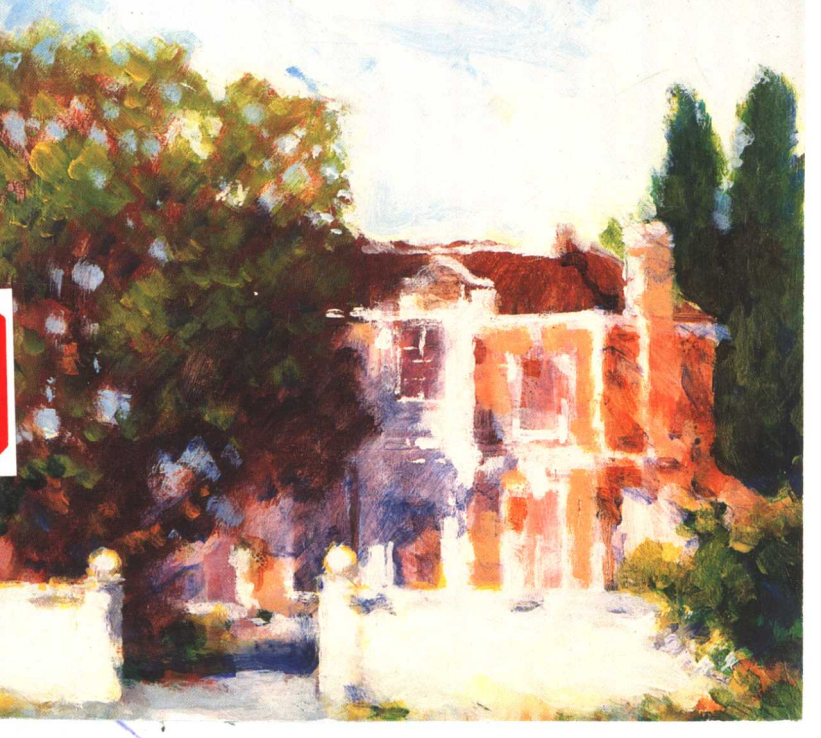
ELIZABETH TETTMAR

THE YEARS BETWEEN



The Years Between

Elizabeth Tettmar

Mandarin

A Mandarin Paperback
THE YEARS BETWEEN

First published in Great Britain 1994
by William Heinemann Ltd
and Mandarin Paperbacks
imprints of Reed Consumer Books Limited
Michelin House, 81 Fulham Road, London SW3 6RB
and Auckland, Melbourne, Singapore and Toronto

Reissued 1995
Reprinted 1995

A CIP catalogue record for this title
is available from the British Library
ISBN 0 7493 1527 X

Printed and bound in Great Britain
by Cox & Wyman Ltd, Reading, Berkshire

PROLOGUE

He was one of twenty boys between the ages of nine and eleven assembled on Thorpe Station, Norwich, one misty day in August 1895, all with their heads cropped like convicts and all labelled like parcels. They waited with the patience born of the discipline and repression of the orphanage.

Daniel, the youngest, just nine years old, was proud of his label. He felt it gave him an identity he was otherwise lacking. His name was the only thing that distinguished him from the other boys. He squinted at it, reading it upside down: Daniel Harker, the first time he had seen his name written out in full.

He waited like the rest, in his rough cloth knickerbocker suit and navy-blue cap with his toes pointed outwards and his hands in line with the seams of his trousers as he had been taught in assembly when the Master of the orphanage read out the collect for the day. His eyes, as blue-black as sloes and rolling from side to side like marbles took in all the strange sights that surrounded him, and finally came to rest on a group of men and women gathered outside the

waiting-room. With one of those he might well be staying as a holiday guest for the next two weeks. He looked them over carefully.

The thin ones didn't get a second glance. The plump, well-fed ones looked more promising, though it didn't always follow. The Matron of the orphanage was enormous but the helpings she dished out at meal times were what the other boys called ''alf-'elpings'.

'You got yourn 'alf-'elping, Will?'

'Looks more'n a quarter-'elping, this time.'

'Mine looks as if somefink bin dropped on me plate.'

This in undertones in case the Master overheard, which would mean a clip on the ear and supperless to bed.

He also wanted someone with a smiling face, for smiles were strictly rationed at the orphanage. But what was the good of wishing – it wasn't up to him. Their billets had already been allocated way back in the winter by the ladies on the committee of the charitable institution that financed the summer holidays.

And now their names were being called out in alphabetical order. Brown, Carruthers, Deeping, Evans and both Greens had been ticked off the lists and led away by temporary foster parents looking as apprehensive as their charges.

Dan didn't expect much from this holiday. Living at the orphanage since he was five had indoctrinated in him the belief that those who had nothing must expect nothing. Before going to the orphanage, his home had been a workhouse but the memory of those years was hazy. Once, on a tram going along the Mile End Road a grim edifice had been pointed out to him as the place where he had been born. One look at it was enough to convince him that, contrary to the well-known proverb, he had been lucky enough to jump out of the fire back into the frying-pan.

He must, he had been told, consider himself fortunate that he had been selected for a holiday. Not every boy had that good fortune. Under the age of nine they were considered too young to appreciate such a benefit and over the age of eleven too unruly to be trusted.

Some boys returned from their allotted two weeks at seaside or country with tales of wonderful hospitality, plentiful food and warm-hearted goodness. Others of being worked to the bone and treated like lepers. Dan, assessing his luck so far, was quite prepared to finish up in the grasp of some slave-driving miser.

'Daniel Harker!'

'Yes . . . s-sir . . .'

'Pay attention, boy, that's the second time I've called your name. Mr Fraser, this is your charge. He's small for his age but quite wiry. He knows the rules. Any trouble and he's to be sent straight back to us.'

'I doan't think we're going to give each other any trouble, do 'ee, bor,' said a genial, twinkling-eyed giant, pinching his ear. And that was the beginning of the two most wonderful weeks of Dan's life so far.

He was hoisted up into the cab of a baker's delivery van, a green cab with gilt lettering on the side which he spelled out to himself as Albert Fraser, Thornmere Bakery. His mind filled with thoughts of freshly-baked bread, Chelsea buns and apple turnovers, and his mouth filled with saliva. Mr Fraser heaved himself into the driver's seat and took up the reins.

'We've a fair ole ride ahead of us, bor, so I shan't take offence do you fall asleep. I ain't one for making conversation myself – I'd rather save me breath to cool me porridge . . .'

The horse clip-clopped his way through the traffic and

blurred images began to cross Dan's line of vision: streets of houses and shops; trams and buses; leafy suburbs; and when they petered out, wide fields golden with corn. Once in the open countryside the horse slowed down.

'He know his way be now without any help from me,' said Mr Fraser, slackening his hold on the reins. He beamed down on his small passenger. 'Feeling drowsy, eh? Want to have that little snooze now?'

'No fear.' Daniel, now that he had sized up the situation and realised it was very much in his favour didn't intend to waste a moment of it in sleep but, lulled by the steady motion of the van, his head soon began to nod.

He came back to consciousness slowly, awakened by the sudden cessation of movement and then felt himself being lifted down from the cab. He was put into the arms of someone who was warm and soft and cushioning and he opened his eyes and looked straight into a face of welcome. The tempting smell of freshly-baked bread tickled his nostrils and all around him in the garden of the bakery, roses bloomed profusely. Thereafter, the smell of new bread or the scent of sun-warmed roses recalled for him his first visit to Thornmere. That and Mrs Fraser's friendly greeting given in her soft Norfolk accent would, in days to come, be remembered with heart-aching nostalgia. But now, still half asleep and overcome with bashfulness, he listened to the exchange of words between the baker and his wife in a language that was still strange to him.

'You be having your work cut out trying to fatten up this scrawny little ole barrow pig, mawther.'

'Shan't be for the want of trying, Bert.'

'Your arms be empty far too long . . . Thass what you do be wanting, i'n't it. Remember, m'dear, it's not for ever . . . He has to go back in two weeks' time.'

'Two weeks is better than no time at all, Bert.'

Daniel found himself sitting at a table between his host and hostess in a kitchen as big as a dormitory with before him a bowl of soup thick enough to be eaten with a knife and fork. He thought he had landed in paradise.

On the last full day of that memorable holiday he went blackberrying with Mrs Fraser. She knew a lane where the berries grew at their best – plump and juicy and ripe for picking – and this lane led them past Thornmere Hall, the home of the local squire. Daniel came to a halt at the sight of a pair of massive wrought-iron gates and, peering through them, he saw at the end of a long avenue a very large and impressive house.

His bashfulness since living at the bakery had developed into a mild and amusing brashness. ''Oo lives in that whackin' great place, then?' he asked.

'Sir Roger and Lady Massingham.'

'Cor! Any relation to royalty . . .?'

Mrs Fraser laughed, as she did at everything he said. 'No, they ain't related to royalty, but they be very important folks in these parts. Come you on now or I'll be late with Mr Fraser's supper.'

She tried to take his hand but he held fast, staring eagerly through the iron bars at the house beyond his reach. He had long since decided that the meek didn't inherit anything – not even the earth. If you wanted to get anywhere you couldn't afford to be meek, you had to be tough and grab what you wanted when you got the chance. And his chance would come. He made that promise to himself. When he grew up he would be rich and he would also be the master of a house every bit as grand as Thornmere Hall.

ONE | 1922

The roof of the parish church at Thornmere had recently been re-thatched. The war had postponed this most urgent of jobs but now, in 1922, the shining newness of the reeds contrasted sharply with the weather-stained walls of the ancient flint church. Time would put that right, said those old enough to remember the last time the thatch had been renewed – in 1887 to celebrate Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee.

The church, which held about three hundred people, was full for Sir Roger Massingham's funeral service and the vicar, newly-appointed, very young and very nervous, was praying earnestly in the vestry. This was his first burial service. Dear God, he prayed, give me strength to do that which is right in your sight. And then, as a sort of desperate *post scriptum*, Please don't let me make a fool of myself . . . Don't let me be too verbose.

In the nave the congregation waited in silent reverence for the arrival of the funeral cortège: some with a genuine feeling of loss, others concerned about the changes that were bound to occur as a result of this death. And some,

like Helena Roseberry and her mother, from a sense of duty. Sir Roger had been a friend and a neighbour.

Grief can't touch me anymore, thought Helena, hearing stifled sobs from a pew behind. She liked to think she was immune. I don't have to shed tears or express regrets and do and say all the things required of me, her thoughts ran on. I shall, of course, for the sake of good manners, but they won't mean anything. I've been through it all: the longing, the waiting, the grinding sorrow; I'm free of all that. And knowing all the time that she wasn't. She was good at pretending, even to herself.

She recalled the last time she had been to a service in this church. The mood had been quite different then. Sad, yes, but underlying the sadness a deep sense of relief that there would be no more killing, no more dying.

That was the 11 November 1919 and she and her mother, newcomers to the village, had attended the first Armistice Day service to commemorate that first anniversary of the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month. Both Sir Roger and Lady Massingham had been alive then and present at the service: Sir Roger in uniform, wearing the campaign medals of the Boer War, Lady Massingham shrouded in black, still in mourning for her daughter and younger son who had died, both victims of the war in 1918. Helena had never liked Lady Massingham but she had admired her on that occasion, standing proud, her thin lined face showing no trace of emotion, only the trembling of her veil betraying her inner suffering.

Death, death, nothing but death. Helena looked at the memorial plaque on the church wall above the pew in which she sat. Inscribed thereon were the names of all the men from the village who had given their lives for their country. It was headed with that of Sir Roger's younger son, Henry

Massingham, and continued down with names that were duplicated sometimes twice and once three times. Dear God, she thought, is it possible? Brothers, cousins, fathers, sons . . . all from the same small village. How many more times will blood be spilt before the people cry, Enough, enough! No more war.

There was a rustle of skirts, a shifting of feet, as the congregation rose. The funeral cortège was approaching. Helena helped her mother to her feet. The coffin passed them bearing three wreaths: one from the Lord Lieutenant of the county; another from the heir in Africa; and the third from tenants of the Massingham estate. The vicar solemnly began to intone the familiar words of the burial service.

Helena quite liked the Reverend Francis Thomas. He had an easy and pleasant manner and an attractive Welsh lilt to his voice which was now disguised as he assumed the dirge-like tones in keeping with his office. Her mother, however, thought him an upstart.

'Nothing is the same now,' she complained. 'The war has changed everything – even the clergy. One cannot place them anymore.'

'. . . I am the resurrection and the life, saith the Lord: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: and whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die . . .'

Helena closed her mind to the familiar passages. No such words were said over her brother's body. There was nothing left of David to mourn. Her father had been buried at sea. And Rupert . . . but she must not think of Rupert, that way heart-break lay.

Several pews behind her a girl in her early twenties was sobbing quietly into her handkerchief. The tall young

man beside her stood uneasily. 'Ruby, do give over,' he whispered. 'Crying always makes your eyes puff up so, and you must look your best for later.'

What Reuben meant by later was the reception at the Hall. After the service she'd have to leave as soon as possible to prepare the drinks and refreshments. The thought of what refreshments to serve had plagued Ruby for the past three days. She had not been present at Lady Massingham's funeral four months ago, for she had been at home then nursing her ailing mother. Sir Roger, for lack of staff, had booked a suite at a Norwich hotel for that occasion. This was different. She had no Sir Roger to advise her, or anyone except Reuben to turn to, though Mrs Crossley, the land agent's wife, was doing all she could to help. If the Honourable Mrs Roseberry had been more approachable she would have gone to her, knowing she was an old friend of Lady Massingham. But Mrs Roseberry wasn't someone who encouraged requests for help.

Ruby had coped on her own for the past few years, running the Hall with the help of a daily woman, not that there was much to do looking after Sir Roger and Lady Massingham. They only occupied one wing of the house and the rest of the place was shrouded in dust covers. But for one brief weekend, she remembered, the Hall had blazed with light as it had in the good old days, before the war had turned everything topsy-turvy. That was in January 1919 on the occasion of the Massinghams' Victory Ball.

Mrs Webster, the Massinghams' old cook, had come out of retirement to help with the preparations and the daily woman had produced daughters and nieces to do the fetching and carrying. Untrained country girls as they were, they had got through the evening without breaking any of the glass or porcelain or scratching the silver.

The war had left Sir Roger impoverished, but for those three short days the hospitality was on a scale as lavish as anything in pre-war times. Lady Massingham had looked magnificent in a black velvet gown and the Massingham diamonds. Over the years skirts had narrowed, split, shortened and dipped and in 1919 were worn a few inches above the ankle, but Lady Massingham was never dictated to by fashion and kept faithful to the styles of her prime: on her they never looked outlandish. It's all to do with presence, thought Ruby, not quite knowing what presence meant. It was a word Mrs Webster was fond of using. 'Her ladyship has such a presence . . . She can carry off anything.'

'. . . O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory? The sting of death is sin; and the strength of sin is the law . . .'

Reuben Stoneham, beside Ruby, standing stiffly to attention, wondered what the future held for him. He was nineteen when the war started and was one of the first of the village lads to enlist. This was as much out of expediency as patriotism. When the Massingham horses were requisitioned by the army there was nothing else for it but to follow them to the Front. He enlisted in a cavalry regiment and though in time he got used, though never hardened, to the death of his comrades, he could never get over the sight of a wounded or dying horse thrashing about in the mud of Flanders. It was with some relief, therefore, that he suddenly found himself transferred to a newly-formed Tank Corps. But what after the war, he thought? Would Sir Roger take him back to work in the stables?

Sir Roger did, but not as a coachman. There were no longer horses at Thornmere Hall. Sir Roger could not

now afford to hunt but he did require a chaffeur for the Daimler he had bought for her ladyship in 1913. Reuben, who had learned to drive on an army lorry, slipped easily into his new duties but now, he wondered, what would become of the old Daimler – and more to the point, his furnished quarters in the converted coach-house? Would the new squire keep him on? Reuben doubted it and doubted whether he could accept the job if it were offered to him. There was no love lost between him and the heir to the Massingham estate. He had seen the way Joseph Massingham had treated the horses – much the same way as he treated women if village gossip was to be believed. His fists clenched when he remembered the way Lottie Foster, a one-time maid at the Hall, had suffered at the hands of the new owner of the Massingham estate. Work for that man! He'd rather starve.

The stranger sitting at the back of the church, unnoticed in his dark corner, hardly heard a word of the burial service. Not because of the acoustics, which were good, but because he never wasted his time listening to something that held no interest for him. He had at the age of nine decided that there was no life but the present one and, that being so, it was up to him to make the most of it. And he had done that with such success that now, at the age of thirty-seven, he was a wealthy man and could if he wished buy up any or all of those sitting around him. It was a thought that gave him a great deal of satisfaction.

He had not come to pay his last respects to the deceased as he did not know the man, though he had seen him once from a distance many years ago. He had come to see if he could benefit by Sir Roger's death in any way and to revisit the village where he had known, for two short weeks, true happiness for the first and only time in his life.

He had been born, so he understood, in a workhouse and though he couldn't remember any part of that grim Victorian edifice he had visited it on one occasion since. Not out of sentiment – he had no time for sentiment – but to compare it with the orphanage which had been his home for as long as he could remember and he had come away with the opinion that there wasn't much to choose between the two institutions that had been responsible for his welfare for fourteen years.

Still, he was grateful to the orphanage for one thing – it had introduced him to Norfolk. He had come to Thornmere as the guest of the village baker and his wife, Mr and Mrs Fraser – the boulanger and his wife.

'D'you know what boulanger means, bor? Thass French for baker. 'Tis the only French word I know and the only French word I need to know. I can go anywhere in the world and say I be a baker or a boulanger and the people will know my calling. Now you, you're an orphan. What is French for orphan? You don't know and nor do I. We must look it oop.'

Daniel thought that orphan in any other language would sound just as grim.

Mr Fraser was a rare one for reading. His idea of a day's outing was to go to Norwich and browse round the second-hand book shops. He was up at four to make his bread and to bed at nine with a candle in one hand and a book in the other. It was he who introduced Daniel to the world of books.

I owe everything to him, I owe everything to the Frasers, Daniel mused. Mrs Fraser's warm humour and Mr Fraser's dedication to learning had laid the foundation for his own success. The one regret he had was that he had not adopted their generosity of spirit. His years at the orphanage had precluded that.

Lost in the past, he was unaware that the funeral cortège was now returning down the aisle. The congregation had risen. He got to his feet and looked among the chief mourners for the young woman who had taken his eye when he first entered the church. He had spotted her in the first pew, her profile turned his way as she spoke to the elderly lady at her side. He was immediately touched by her beauty as, when staying with the Frasers all those years ago, he had been similarly struck by the sight of a field of ripened corn. He now knew it was an appreciation of nature at its best, as he could now appreciate the pleasing arrangement of the girl's features: the straight nose; the curved eyebrow; the subtle contrast between the pallor of her complexion and the brightness of her hair; and the extraordinary greenness of her eyes which, when she turned to look over her shoulder, returned his admiring stare with a look of marked detachment.

The whole lot of them, he thought, the whole bloody gentry had that same way of looking down their noses at lesser mortals. His resentment boiled. Lesser mortals! He was as good as any of them. The only difference between him and that lot was that they didn't have orphans – they had bastards instead.

What, he thought as, last to leave the church he followed the procession out into the sunshine, what would happen if, by the slightest chance, Thornmere Hall should come on the open market? He'd bid for it of course. That was what he was here for, on the odd chance, knowing all the time that the odds were against him.

He had kept in touch with Mrs Fraser. When Mr Fraser died she sold the bakery and moved to a cottage in the village street and from there from time to time she sent him undistilled news of Thornmere. It was she who