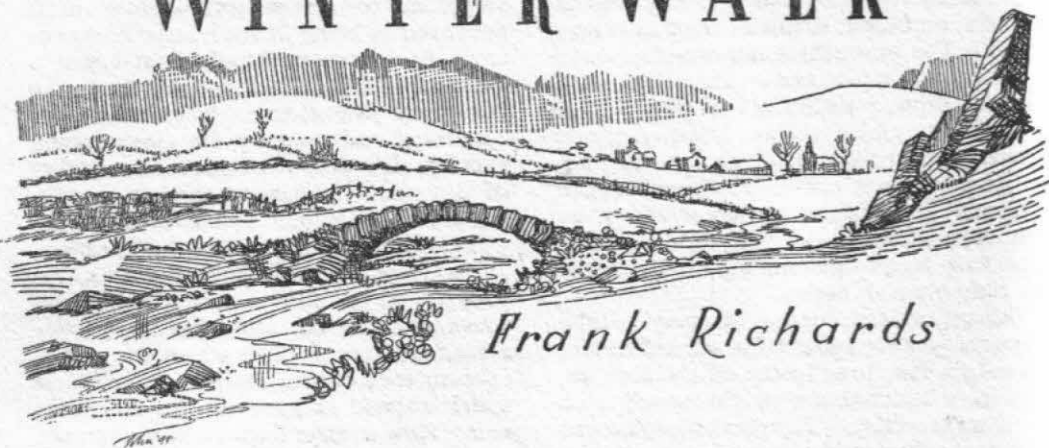


WINTER WALK



Frank Richards

BINX breathed in jerks.

Runce panted.

Tom Grundy glanced round at them.

"Tired?" he asked sympathetically, but with a faint touch of sarcasm.

Grundy could afford to be both sympathetic and sarcastic. Grundy's long, sinewy legs were tireless, even on a rugged Yorkshire moor. They carried Grundy's twelve stone of solid bone and muscle with perfect ease, mile after mile. Steep paths, frozen ruts, falling snow-flakes, in the midst of what seemed to his comrades a bleak, wild, uninhabited waste, did not trouble Tom Grundy. The bitter wind that made Binx and Runce cringe, seemed to exhilarate him. Grundy, after a good twelve miles, seemed as fresh as when he had started.

It was not so with Binx and Runce.

In matters of Art, Binx could talk Grundy's head off. In the literary line, Runce could make rings round him. But when it came to physical endurance, Grundy had the pair of them hopelessly beaten.

Now they were almost tottering.

Even on a summer hike, Grundy had been wont to walk them off their legs. But this winter walk was the limit.

Grimslade Moor seemed to them endless, dreary, dismal, desolate. To Tom Grundy, everything in Yorkshire was top-hole. And no doubt that wild moor had a certain wild beauty of its own. But it was lost on Binx and Runce.

The December dusk was falling. So was the snow. December gloom, December snow, December cold, were all very well, under a sound roof, by a cheery fireside. Out on the bleak moor it was quite different.

Binx, tall and slim, drooped like a lily. Runce, plump and stocky, dragged one weary foot after another, as if every step was a last effort. Grundy, stepping out briskly from force of habit, had to keep on slowing down for his lagging comrades.

"How far is it now back to Grimslade?" asked Binx. He hated to ask the question. He just hated to be tired out while Grundy was fresh as a daisy. But he was driven to ask it at last. The moor seemed endless. He took off his pince-nez, wiped them clear, and stared round, in a faint hope of seeing the lights of the hamlet on the horizon. But nothing met his eyes, or his pince-nez, but the endless, endless moor, rugged and snowy.

"Hardly three miles," said Grundy, encouragingly.

"Three miles!" repeated Binx, faintly. Runce suppressed a groan. Grundy might as well have said three hundred.

"Barely that," said Grundy, "Step out, and we'll be home under the hour." He glanced round at Runce, "What are you stopping for?" he asked.

Runce did not reply. A tree grew by the wayside. Runce stopped, and leaned on it. For more than an hour, Runce had been yearning for something to lean on. Now he had found something, and he leaned.

Binx stopped also. His legs, like Grundy's, were long. Unlike Grundy's, they felt like folding up under him. He joined Runce, leaning on the tree.

Grundy came to a halt, and surveyed them. Grundy was so packed with beefy strength, that he did not quite understand fatigue. He seemed puzzled.

"What are you stopping for?" he asked, again.

"The view from here," said Binx, "is superb. A wild natural beauty. Don't you think so, Runce?"

"Oh!" gasped Runce, "Yes! Quite! Superb!"

They were not going to admit that they couldn't walk another yard. They repented then that they had come up to Yorkshire to stay with old Grundy. In distant London they had remembered him affectionately as "old Grundy." Now their feelings were distinctly hostile. They realised that they ought to have remembered Grundy's manners and customs on a hike, and ought never to have trusted themselves with him on a wild, illimitable moor. They might have foreseen that he would walk them on, and on, and on, and on, till their weary legs dropped off. Now they had to rest—with a faint hope that Grundy wouldn't discern how frightfully fagged they were.

But those weary legs seemed to be now in the very act of dropping off! Binx and Runce leaned on the tree only in time to save them!

"I suppose you're a bit tired," remarked Grundy, thoughtfully, "You're not used to our moors. Pity we started on such a long walk—only, you see, it's a short walk

to me."

Binx and Runce made no reply to that. They only eyed Grundy with inimical weariness.

"A few minutes rest won't hurt you," went on Grundy, "I don't mind waiting."

Binx and Runce breathed hard.

Tom Grundy could be considerate, when he thought of it. But it made them wince. To be compassionated by the beefy, obtuse Grundy, was the last straw.

No fellow likes to admit that he is tired out, when another fellow is obviously as fresh as paint. Binx and Runce were crumpling up, but they just hated to crumple up under Grundy's eyes.

Instinctively, they made an effort to straighten up, and to lean on the tree with a casual air, as if they had really only paused there to admire the snowy landscape. They were so immensely superior to Grundy, intellectually, that it irked them sorely to admit inferiority in so simple and humdrum a matter as walking on a Yorkshire moor.

At that moment, Binx would have traded all his extensive knowledge of Art, and Runce would have swopped all his literary gifts, for an outfit of muscle and sinew superior to Grundy's. They would have enjoyed pushing on, and walking Grundy off his powerful legs. They would have loved to pause and offer him a helping hand over the rough places. They would have revelled in telling him to take a rest, and they would wait for him.

But that was only an idle dream. Actually, they leaned weakly on the tree, and eyed Grundy as if he were an enemy, instead of a hearty friend who was sorry for them because they were fagged out.

"Five minutes, what?" said Grundy, briskly.

Binx and Runce doubted whether they could get going again in five minutes. But they did not say so. They preserved a bitter silence, keeping up as straight as they could, with the assistance of the tree.

There was room on the tree for Grundy to lean also, had he been so disposed. But Grundy seemed to have no desire to lean on anything. He shoved his hands into his pockets, and strolled about, kicking the snow idly, to fill up time while

his comrades rested. He had, it seemed, plenty of energy left for idle strolling, before he resumed the tramp, while Pomfret Binx and Reggie Runce were wondering whether they would be able to drag themselves back to Grimslade alive. It is sad to relate that as they watched him, they almost hated Grundy.

Prompt after five minutes, Grundy came back to them.

"Well, what about it?" he asked, breezily.

Binx and Runce did not stir.

Nothing would have induced either of them to admit, in words, that they were too utterly weary to put one foot before another. But they were not going to shift from that supporting tree yet awhile. The snow might fall, the December dusk might thicken, unheeded. They weren't going to move.

"We shall be late for supper at this rate," said Grundy.

Supper was a mere trifle to Binx and Runce, in comparison with keeping still and leaning on that tree.

"No hurry," said Binx, breaking a bitter silence, "After all, this is a walk, not a foot-race. Why not take it easy?"

"I don't see racing about," remarked Runce.

"Well, a fellow gets hungry," remarked Grundy. Grundy's appetite was in proportion to his size and strength, and he had been thinking about supper for some time.

Binx and Runce exchanged a glance. The same bright idea occurred to both of them at once.

"Well, you cut on," said Binx.

"We'd rather stroll a bit," said Runce.

"We know the way all right—couldn't miss this cart-track," said Binx, "No need for you to hang about, old fellow, if you want your supper."

"Well, dash it all, I can't leave you here,"



"Well, what about it?" he asked, breezily.

protested Grundy. But evidently he was tempted. He did want his supper.

"My dear chap, we're all right," drawled Binx, "We just don't want to hurry. In fact, I'd rather smoke a cigarette before we move on."

"Better leave it till you get in. Smoking knocks out your wind for walking," said Grundy, shaking his head. "Look here, I'll wait another five minutes."

That offer was received absolutely without gratitude by Grundy's comrades. Just then, all they wanted to see of Grundy was his back. They longed almost passionately for him to go. Once he was gone, they could lean on that tree as long as they liked, and then crawl like snails along the cart-track unwitnessed by that immense, tireless Yorkshireman. They could almost have punched Grundy for offering to wait another five minutes.

Binx rather ostentatiously took out his cigarette-case. He offered it to Runce.

"Smoke, old chap?"

"Thanks," said Runce. He selected a cigarette.

"Well, if you're going to stick about here smoking—!" said Grundy.

"We are," said Binx, briefly.

"Cut on," said Runce, "We'll overtake you later."

Grundy stared at him. He could not see Binx or Runce overtaking him, if he went on. But he was just longing to let his long legs go full swing, instead of accommodating his pace to theirs, and his thoughts dwelt lovingly on a hot substantial supper when he got in.

"Well, if you don't mind—!" he hesitated.

"Why should we?" said Binx.

"Well, you can't miss this track," said Grundy. It's right on to Grimslade. If you really don't mind—!"

It seemed to Binx and Runce almost too good to be true, when Grundy's broad back was turned, and his long legs swinging, and he was growing smaller and smaller in the dusky distance. They ceased to make efforts to keep upright, and leaned heavily on the tree, half-smoked cigarettes dropping on the moor. Supper did not matter—falling wintry dusk did not matter—nothing mattered,

except resting their weary legs as long as they liked, and then crawling as slowly as they liked on the homeward way. They leaned almost luxuriously on that tree, and they were still leaning on it when Grundy sat down to supper at his home in Grimslade.

II

"Oh, what luck!" breathed Runce.

"Fortune smiles!" said Binx.

They brightened up.

They had been hardly conscious of time while they leaned on that tree. They were conscious only of the luxury of rest, and the comfort of getting rid of Grundy. The prospect of crawling three weary miles was still before them: but they were in no hurry to tackle those miles. They were past caring what time they got in—it looked as if they mightn't be in by midnight at this rate, but they did not care. The sound of wheels on the rugged track came to them as a happy surprise. Grimslade Moor had impressed itself on their minds as an uninhabited waste, where they had given up the idea of ever seeing a human being, just as if they had been in the heart of the Sahara. The sound of wheels apprised them that there were, after all, inhabitants about—it was not quite Sahara.

They detached themselves from the tree which was their only visible means of support, and stared along the cart-track in the gloom. Really, as it was a cart-track, they might have expected to see a cart on it sooner or later. Now they saw one. A lantern on the cart gleamed through the December gloom. It was coming from the direction of Grimslade—the direction in which they wanted to go. Manna falling from the sky could not have been so welcome. The grind of heavy wheels on rugged ruts was music to their ears—the music of the spheres had simply nothing on it. It meant a lift!

"It's a cart," said Runce, peering through the gloom.

"Can't expect a Rolls," said Binx. "If we can get the man to give us a lift—"

"Don't say 'if'. We must."

"He's coming from Grimslade

direction," said Binx. "He will have to turn back if he gives us a lift to Grundy's place."

"We'll make him turn back."

"Bribery and corruption will do it," said Binx, "we'll offer him a quid."

They left the tree, and stepped out into the track. The vehicle rumbled on towards them. As it came nearer, they discerned an ancient man, with his coat buttoned up to the ears, chewing a straw as he drove. The cart was empty.

They waved their hands, and shouted: "Hi!"

"Stop!"

The cart rumbled to a halt. They approached it, and looked up at the man with the straw in his mouth, who looked down at them.

"Will you give us a lift?" asked Binx, in his politest manner, "we're rather late."

"Aye!"

The cart seemed, like many natives of Yorkshire, a man of few words.

"You've come from Grimslade?" asked Runce.

"Aye."

"If you'll turn back, and take us there, we'll willingly pay for your trouble," said Binx. "What about a pound?"

"Aye."

"Thanks," said Binx.

Binx and Runce would have made it five pounds if necessary. Indeed, money seemed absolutely nothing, in comparison with dragging their aching legs over three rough miles. The tree against which they had leaned had been a windfall. But the prospect of sitting down was paradise. They had been tempted to sit down in the snow instead of leaning on the tree. Sitting down in a cart was a vision of delight. Binx, in London, had a car: Runce, in London, often rode in other people's cars. But no car had ever afforded them such heartfelt pleasure as that moorland cart, as they clambered into it, and sank down on a pile of sacks. The cart turned round in the track, and jogged away for Grimslade.

Snow sprinkled them as they sat. The winter darkness thickened. They were hungry—very hungry. But these were trifles. They were sitting down, and getting

on their homeward way without using their legs. The cart rumbled and bumped on the rugged track: the driver sat and drove without uttering a word: the passengers were considerably shaken: but they did not care. They stretched their legs and luxuriated in repose.

Lights glimmered, at last, through the gloom. Binx rubbed his pince-nez clear and blinked at the lights.

"We're getting in," he said.

"Good," said Runce.

Binx had a thoughtful expression on his intellectual face, as the cart rumbled on to the little moorland hamlet of Grimslade. He was rested now—he was feeling much fresher: he was himself again. His legs felt as if he could depend upon them once more without peril of collapse. With his body refreshed by repose, his brain worked.

At the street's end he touched the taciturn driver's arm.

"Stop here, please," he said.

"Aye."

The cart halted. Runce sat up and took notice.

"Why not keep on to Grundy's place?" he asked.

Binx smiled.

"I have my reasons," he answered "Get out here."

"It's some hundreds of yards on—"

"I know! But we've had a rest. Get down here."

"Oh, all right," said Runce. He realised that Grundy would grin, if he saw them arriving in a cart.

They descended. Two ten-shilling notes were passed up to the driver, who touched his hat, and drove away. Binx had been very glad to see him on the moor. He was almost equally glad to lose sight of him now. Binx had his reasons.

"Well, come on," said Runce, "My legs don't feel as if they were dropping off, now. But I shall be glad to get in. I suppose that idiot Grundy will chortle when he hears that we had to have a lift home."

"Why tell him?" said Binx, calmly.

"Oh!" said Runce.

"It was a spot of luck getting that lift," said Binx. "But silence is golden. I'm

not looking forward to hearing Grundy chortle."

"No!" said Runce.

"In certain circumstances facts may well be eliminated. Grundy's a good chap—"

"One of the best," agreed Runce.

"But rather an ass—"

"An awful ass—!" agreed Runce.

"We eliminate the lift," said Binx. "No need to mention it, that I can see. Why be superfluous?"

"Exactly," said Runce.

Binx laughed. Runce laughed. Then they walked quite briskly up the street to Grundy's dwelling, where they found Tom Grundy standing in the doorway, having finished his supper, looking out for them.

III

"Oh! Here you are!" said Grundy.

"Here we are!" assented Binx and Runce.

Grundy looked at them in the lighted hall. Binx and Runce looked very cheerful. That long lean on the tree on the moor had taken off the edge of their fatigue. The rest and repose in the rumbling cart had revived them. They were almost brisk. And they carefully looked brisker than they felt. That ass, Grundy, was not to know that they had had a lift home from the spot where he had left them on the moor. They were not going to breathe a word about that. Grundy could suppose that they had not been after all, so dog-tired as he had fancied—that his Yorkshire legs had not, after all, walked them off their metropolitan legs—that they had simply preferred to smoke a cigarette, and take things easily: that they were, in fact, very far from being the pair of Tired Tims or Weary Willies he had heedlessly concluded them to be. Grundy, indeed, could suppose what he liked—there was no deception in letting a fellow suppose what he liked. Only they weren't going to mention that lift!

So it was a little disconcerting when Grundy went on:

"You got a lift back?"

Binx breathed hard. Runce compressed his lips.

That was Grundy all over! Because they

hadn't crawled in looking as if they found life a weary burden, he supposed that they had had a lift! True, they had had one! That did not make it less annoying of Grundy.

Up to that moment, neither Binx nor Runce had intended to depart from the strait and narrow path of veracity. They had simply intended to leave Grundy to his own suppositions, and leave it at that. When two fellows walked in on their own feet, he ought naturally to have supposed that they had walked, not that they had been carried in a vehicle. But Grundy's suppositions having taken the wrong turn, as it were, Binx felt driven to hedge. He simply was not going to mention that lift in the moorland cart. He was not going to have Grundy grinning all over his rugged face at fellows who conked out in a walk which he had taken in his stride.

Binx gave a light, careless laugh.

"What put that idea into your head?" he asked.

Runce started a little, as Binx said that. But he caught on immediately—automatically, as it were. He laughed too.

"We're not exactly kids, Grundy, to be carried about," he remarked.

"Oh!" said Grundy, "I thought—"

"Quite a pleasant walk," said Binx. "You're a bit like a bull at a gate, old fellow, on a tramp. Full steam ahead all the time. Why rush?"

"Exactly," said Runce, "The scenery's worth looking at, you know."

"On a walk," said Binx, in his rather didactic manner, "one loiters!"

We rather loitered," said Runce.

"Well, I shouldn't care much for loitering, in the snow, with the dark coming on," said Grundy, "I thought you two were dead beat when I left you, and—"

Binx gave his pleasant light laugh again.

"Hardly that," he said.

"Hardly," said Runce.

"Did you expect us to come crawling in on our hands and knees, if we finished the walk?" asked Binx, humorously.

"Well, yes, I did rather," admitted Grundy, "and so I—"

"Sorry to disappoint you, old fellow," said Binx, smiling. "Sorry too that we're

rather late for supper—but the fact is, we rather strolled round a bit.”

Pomfret Binx was a veracious fellow. But the poet has remarked what a tangled web we weave when first we practice to deceive. That idea of a lift had to be got out of Grundy's thick head somehow. Unconsciously, almost, Binx drifted into unveracity. Having taken the plunge, he expanded.

“I suppose we added a mile or so, strolling round. But the air on these moors is so delightful. We enjoyed it.”

“Thoroughly,” said Runce.

“And you ain't fagged out now?” asked Grundy, evidently puzzled.

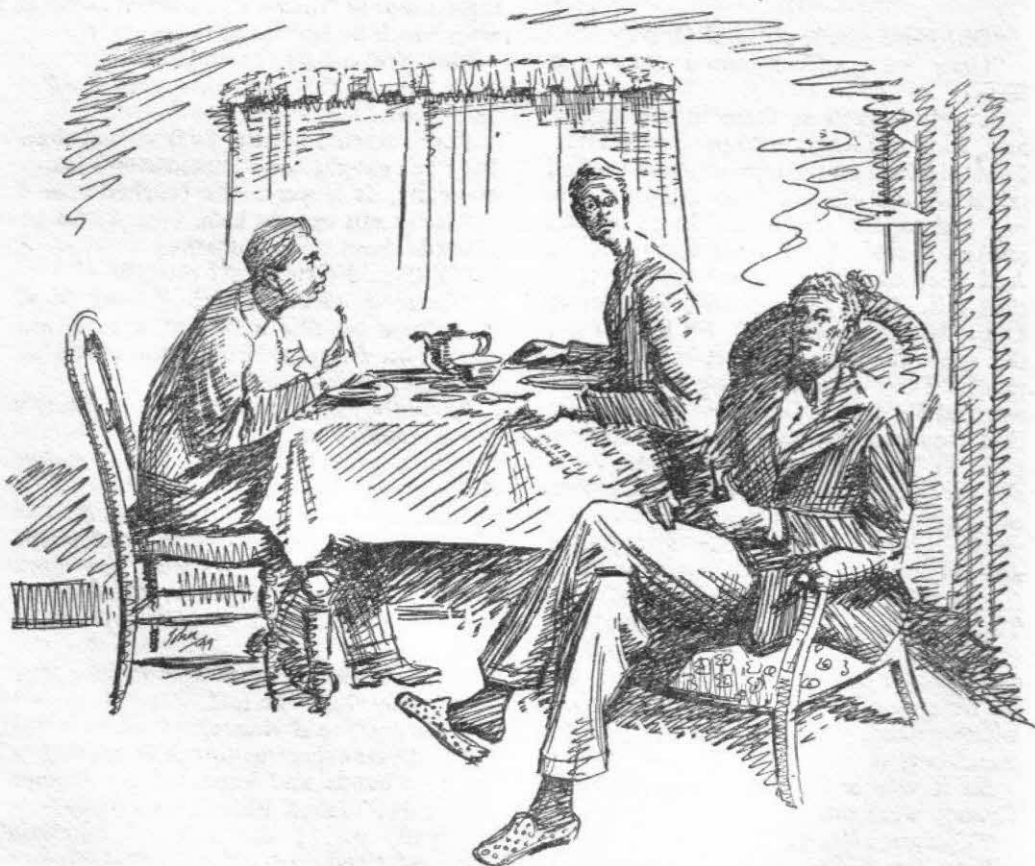
“Not at all,” drawled Binx.

“Not the least little bit in the world,” smiled Runce.

“A very enjoyable walk,” said Binx.

“Most enjoyable,” said Runce.

Grundy only looked at them in that puzzled way. They had floored Grundy. Evidently, on seeing them come in, he had taken it for granted that they had had a lift home. Otherwise he would have expected them to arrive in a crumpled state, weary and worn, dragging weary feet. Grundy, now, had to admit that fellows from London could walk, and that it was not essential to be born in Yorkshire to be able to cover twelve or fifteen miles on a rugged moor. It was sheer pleasure to Grundy's comrades to floor



“Didn't you see anything of a cart on the moor?” he asked.

Grundy.

"Well, come in and have some supper," said Grundy, "I suppose you're ready for supper."

"Quite!" agreed Binx and Runce.

They sat down with good appetites to supper, exchanging a smile, and a wink, when Grundy's broad back was turned for a moment. Grundy smoked a pipe while his friends ate. He still seemed puzzled. The supper was good: but Binx and Runce really enjoyed Grundy's puzzlement as much as they enjoyed the supper.

But there was more to come.

IV

Tom Grundy smoked in thoughtful silence for a while. Binx and Runce ate with good appetites.

Grundy spoke at last.

"Didn't you see anything of a cart on the moor?" he asked.

"A cart?" repeated Binx. He paused. But he realised that he was for it now. That lift had been eliminated. It had to stay eliminated. "Did you see anything of a cart, Runce?"

Runce, too, paused for a moment. But he, like Binx, realised that he was for it. They could hardly admit a cart. Runce shook his head.

"Not many carts about on the moor at nightfall, I should think," he remarked.

"A cart driven by an old johnny chewing

a straw," said Grundy.

"Eh?"

"What?"

"It's queer," said Grundy, "Old Smithers is generally reliable."

"Who's old Smithers?" asked Binx, a little faintly.

"The carter."

"The carter?" repeated Runce, also a little faintly.

"It's queer," said Grundy. He rose, and knocked out his pipe, "I shall certainly speak to him about this. I'll step round while you fellows are finishing your supper. Of course, it doesn't matter much, as you seem to have walked it without any trouble, strolling round, too. But I certainly thought you looked dead beat when I left you, or I wouldn't have sent him . . ."

"Sent him?"

"Yes. I told him to look out for two chaps on that cart-track, and pick them up, and give them a lift here," explained Grundy. "He said he would, but he's let me down, as from what you tell me, you never even saw a cart at all, let alone got a lift back. Not that it matters, as it turns out—still, I shall certainly have a word with him about it."

Grundy walked out.

He left Binx and Runce staring at one another, across the table, in dead silence. They had not finished their supper. But they were not eating. Grundy seemed to have taken their appetites away!