LANTERN & KEY

THE LAST BLOOM AT WINTERMERE

An illustrated mystery in three acts



Find what changed.
Choose what happens next.

STELEX BOOKS

A short reading sample

Enter Wintermere

January 1931. A snowbound house. A missing rose. An offer that may be worth less than everyone thinks.

You have been invited to witness a sale. Read a section, then follow one of its linked choices. Links in this digital sample take you straight to each numbered section.

This preview includes two readings of the conservatory scene, both search paths, and the route to the potting room. It stops before the mystery is resolved. The complete book contains the full mystery, optional hints, image descriptions, and four different futures for the rose.

Begin the case
SECTION 01

SECTION 01 · ACT 1

A flower worth a furnace

In January 1931, Clara Wren asks you to serve as a neutral witness. It is a flattering title for someone expected to listen carefully and take no side before soup. Wintermere stands above the village beneath a dark ridge of firs, its windows bright in the snow. Tonight, the house's trouble has a name: a rose.

In the glasshouse, a mature ivory rose grows in an aged terracotta pot on the round stone table. An open bloom leans over two buds; an oval leafy sprig is pressed into the pot. Clara calls it the last mature original at Wintermere. Ruth Bell, the late head gardener, tended it for years. The first nursery record dates the rose to 1902. Since Ruth first raised it, village families have come to see it flower in winter. Now the glasshouse is closed: its boiler has failed beyond repair.

Silas Vale, a collector of unusual plants, has offered seventy-five guineas for the whole rose. The money would replace the boiler, and the plant would have a warm room in Vale's private orangery. Clara owns it; no one has signed. Etta Bell, the gardener and Ruth's daughter, waits by the door with her hands folded, as if they might otherwise begin pruning something.

Auction agent Hugh Finch has brought the offer and a leather folio. He says the sale can be completed tonight. He speaks pleasantly, like a man accustomed to a room agreeing with him.

SECTION 01 · CONTINUED

Clara has kept Wintermere open through two hard winters. She knows a public room can be beloved and expensive at once. The repairer has patched the boiler twice and will patch it no more. Etta wants the rose to stay within village reach; Vale says it would thrive in his orangery. Hugh lays the papers between them. Clara asks you to witness the choice: too many memories crowd this house, and too few rooms are neutral.

At eight, you leave the conservatory for soup. Ten minutes later, the rose is gone. Clara sets down her spoon. ‘Before anyone says thief, find out what happened.’

Compare the conservatory before and after supper
SECTION 02

SECTION 02 · ACT 1

What changed

You stood here before supper. Now you stand in the same place. Compare the two views: what is missing, and where do the marks lead? The large objects and the route across the floor matter; stray leaves and reflections do not.



BEFORE SUPPER · READ TEXT DESCRIPTION · SECTION 63

SECTION 02 · CONTINUED



AFTER SUPPER · READ TEXT DESCRIPTION · SECTION 64

Clara waits beside you with a lamp. ‘Where would you look first?’ Hugh offers to show his sale papers once the plant is found. Etta is somewhere beyond the kitchen passage. Snow ticks against the glass roof.

Search through the service arch
SECTION 57

Search beyond the garden doors
SECTION 58

SECTION 57 · ACT 1

A route you can see

The trolley has vanished with the pot, and paired marks begin where it stood. The garden doors are shut; the tracks lead toward the service arch. They tell you where to look, not who pushed the load.

Clara asks you to follow the marks.

Follow the tracks through the service arch
SECTION 04

SECTION 58 · ACT 1

Try the picture again

The garden doors are shut in both views. No track crosses their threshold. The marks begin beside the table and lead toward the service arch, where the empty trolley waited before supper. Look again at the route the room records.

Compare the paired tracks and the missing trolley
SECTION 57

Follow the visible marks and check the trolley route
SECTION 04

SECTION 04 · ACT 1

A trail with two edges

The tracks pass under the service arch and turn toward the kitchen passage. Two parallel wheel tracks cross the floor; at the turn, one skirts a brass umbrella stand. Whoever pushed the load took care not to strike it.

Mrs Pritchard, the cook, is arguing with a pie about its structural integrity. She heard the kitchen door open after the others left. No crash or raised voice, only the familiar squeak of the trolley's left wheel. She thought Etta was bringing kindling.

That points to the trolley more than its driver. Etta knows it, but so do the house staff. The damp soil suggests the pot was moved before its roots dried or its surface crusted. The marks lead to the potting room, warm with the iron stove.

The potting room is practical: shelves of twine, seed trays, and a kettle with a chipped blue handle. The trolley stands beside the bench, the terracotta pot on it. The rose has one open bloom and two buds. Etta ties a label to an empty cane.

SECTION 04 · CONTINUED

Near the arch, wet soil has pressed a rim into the grout. The trolley’s left wheel has a flat place that catches once each turn and makes its familiar complaint. The tracks show a heavy load taken through the service passage and steered clear of the umbrella stand.

Ask Etta to explain the move · Continue online
CONTINUE PAGE

IMAGE DESCRIPTIONS

Text equivalents for the conservatory comparison

IMAGE DESCRIPTION · SECTION 63

Before supper — image description

Before supper. The whole rose pot stands on the round central stone table. The empty wooden trolley is at the left, with its dark-green handle and four wheels. The service arch is on the left. A closed green folder sits on the right-hand writing desk. The garden doors at the rear are closed.

Return to What changed
RETURN TO SECTION 02

IMAGE DESCRIPTION · SECTION 64

After supper — image description

After supper. The central table is empty except for a damp ring. The whole pot and the empty trolley that stood to the left have both disappeared. Two parallel soil-and-wheel tracks lead from the table through the left service arch. The green folder is still on the right-hand desk. The garden doors at the rear remain closed.

Return to What changed
RETURN TO SECTION 02

CONTINUE THE MYSTERY

The sample ends here

The excerpt has reached the potting room. Follow the link below to continue with the complete Wintermere story, including every section, evidence trail, optional hint, and ending.

Continue reading The Last Bloom at Wintermere
OPEN THE COMPLETE BOOK PAGE
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