

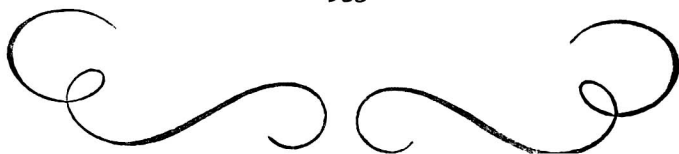


AS
THE EARTH TURNS

GLADYS HASTY CARROLL

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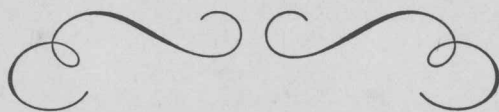
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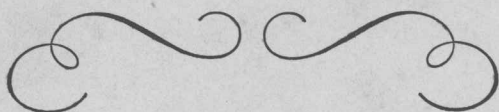
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WINTER





WINTER



I

OUTSIDE the house it was storming, a busy downfall of flakes that the wind blew lightly across acres of old snow left from December. Drifts piled up over the steps and over the sawdust banking that covered the sills. Fence posts were hidden, and the rails; only a few apple trees in the back field and the pine in the corner at the end of the lane struck black lines on the whitening air, while other pines and scattered hardwood trees surrounded the farm at a little distance, a smutted circle darker than the heavy, late afternoon sky.

Inside, all the rooms but one were cold and closed, the comforters in stiff heaps on the beds, the windows of the parlor and sitting-room thick with spiralled frost. The women and children sat in the kitchen. Here night came earlier than to the rest of the house for the barn shut out the sunset light from the ell, but it was not yet lamp time, and the girl at the dark end of the cookstove peeled and sliced her apples with swift, firm strokes to finish them before it should be. The little woman in the rocker by the north window

held her sewing high and twitched at it, her sunken mouth pinched with concentration. The children, one fat with red braids and big new front teeth, the other, younger, a sober small boy in overalls, sat on their heels before the couch cutting figures from a mail order catalogue and assembling them into families.

"Shutting down awful early to-night," the woman said. "Time they was getting home, ain't it? Lois May hadn't ought to be out in this night air, her throat the way it is, after that cold."

"They'll be right along," the girl answered.

She rose to put wood on the fire. Flames, shooting up brightly toward her face, showed it round and serene with gray eyes and light hair pinned in smooth braids about her head. Her arm, crooked to shake the lid into place, was bare to the elbow and stout, her hands quick and sure. She went toward the sinkroom for a saucepan. The apples were ready for stewing.

"That's pretty, ma," she said. "I don't see how you ever do it so fine."

"Well, I've always been called a very good hand at tucking," the woman said. "I know when Lois May was born folks up to Kezar Falls thought she had the prettiest things of any young one round. I'm different from some. I take a little pride."

She stroked the strip of white rayon smooth across her lap, regarding it with anxiety, her eyelids swollen, her heavy, pale red hair sliding low on her neck.

"What's all that commotion down the road?" the girl asked.

She stopped by a window and peered out, holding the basin of apples balanced against her hip. Through the snow which whirled between the house and the road

and the damp flakes clinging to the glass, it was not easy to tell what passed by at this time of day. Still, anything that stirred, except the snow, was a wonder and had not escaped her as she glanced out.

The children came running and squeezed in between her knees and the low window ledge.

"Is it a shanty, Jen? Is it a Frenchman's shanty being hauled?"

Sometimes the choppers moved their houses from woodlot to woodlot two or three times throughout a winter, often with women nursing babies by the windows as they rode along. At these wanderings the farmers and their families looked on with curiosity and high contempt.

"There, I can't see," the mother said, standing too, "enough to know!"

"It's not a shanty, Bun," Jen told the little girl, "but it's probably Frenchmen's folks on the move. It looks like a load of furniture. It's pretty big for that one horse in this going, ma. He'll never get far to-night."

"Well, that's the Frenchman of it all right," the woman said grimly. "That's as well as they can plan. . . . Yes, now I can make out some chairs tied on the back without a mite of covering. I guess this wet will start the rounds in them!"

"I guess so," Jen agreed.

The caravan had passed. She went on into the sink-room and came back, glad she was not travelling. She had never slept in any but this house in her life, nor been more than a few miles away from it. Deftly she transferred the apples, poured water from the teakettle over them, and set them on to cook. There was nothing better than warm applesauce for supper, and these

bellflowers held their flavor the best of any she had ever used. She set the table with big black and white plates, yellow bone-handled knives and forks, new aluminum teaspoons, and a red glass sugar bowl and pitcher. She brought in a frypan with ham already placed in it and, while it was heating, lit a tall lamp with a clear base that the white wick and grayish oil showed through.

"I'll bet the old horse will balk," Bun was saying with narrowed, prophetic eyes and much satisfaction. "I'll bet he'll balk and the man will be lost and they won't know where to go. So he'll holler to his wife and young ones that's under the blanket and they'll get down under the cart to sleep and the snow'll drift over them tight and they'll freeze to death right in the road."

She sat on the couch, rocking and swinging her feet. The room was warm and light and smelled of supper and she had enough paper dolls to last out any storm that ever blew. She even had some colored ones; and in the sitting-room cupboard there was a bag with seven pieces of candy in it, heart-shaped wafers with printing on. She hoped the storm would last and last. She did not mind even if the snow should cover the windows, for Jen could light the lamps, and there was oil enough, for her father had brought home a great can full only yesterday from market. Ed might have to dig a tunnel to the well, and she and John could play in it. Her face shone with anticipation.

Jen chopped vigorously in the sinkroom. Her father liked his warmed-up potatoes cut very fine.

"They won't, will they?" John asked behind her.

"They won't have to stay outdoors all night, will they, them Frenchmen?"

"Land, no," Jen said, looking at him quickly. "They're probably just going up to Cherry Swamp. There's a mill set up to saw in there, Ed said yesterday. They're maybe there by now."

John turned his back on her, rubbing his forehead against the cupboard door very hard.

"You s'pose they got beds?" he wanted to know. "Beds to sleep in, up there to Cherry Swamp?"

"Land," said Jen again, "yes. And hot beach rocks to put in them, like enough, just like we have. And stoves to cook suppers on. Why, they'll be snug as a bug in a rug in no time."

She chopped again and then lifted her head to listen.

"I believe I hear old Bob. . . . Yes, that's them. You put on your jacket, John, and I'll light the lantern and you can take it out to father. I guess it's dark enough in the tie-up to-night. . . . Bun, you go with John and carry the milk pails down."

Cora Shaw had taken a hand lamp and gone upstairs to put away the white rayon, and for a minute Jen was alone in the kitchen. She took quiet steps between the stove and table, cellarway and sinkroom, wasting none of them, a stocky figure in a dark wool dress and bright pink apron. Many things she reached for without looking at them, so accustomed was she. Now and then her glance slid about the room, not aware and yet not unaware of the year-old tulip paper on the walls, the faded border around the new calendar, the black stove with a fat baby engraved on the oven door, the steeple clock on the shelf over the

table, the sagging couch with its flowered pillows, the worn, reddish chairs, the tall woodbox, the geraniums in the windows, the smoky fragrance of the fried ham, the yellow shine of the lamplight on the dishes. There was still more here which she could not even see, much more describe, but which she was not unaware of, much that was a part of the room and also a part of her. She had been mistress of this house since her ninth year, and she was nineteen now. The coming of a stepmother six years ago had changed nothing. This was Jen's kitchen. She brought a pitcher of milk from the cellar, briskly stirring in the risen cream with a big spoon, and set it on the table.

"Jen! Jen, can you open the door?"

She let in a slim, dark girl in a red crocheted cap and short brown corduroy coat, with a plaid shawl worn over all and pinned under her chin, and her arms full of books and boxes.

"Well!" Jen exclaimed. "I guess you're loaded, Lois May, scuppers all in under!"

"I've got the darlinest hat," the girl said in a husky, excited voice. "It's that brown straw of Margaret's but we steamed and shaped it over to-day, and Mil had a yellow feather she gave me to put on it. They said it was lucky for me feathers had come in again, for they've got quite a few were their Aunt Grace's. And Margaret gave me some silk to make a scarf. That's yellow, too. Look!"

She threw the shawl and coat and cap on the couch and rummaged through the boxes to produce a narrow length of yellow crepe and twist it around her neck. She was taller than Jen, but younger, not over sixteen,

with small, well-made features and a long bob that had been waved with an iron. Her eyes were deep blue, narrow and slightly slanting, her skin smooth and dusky, and she had brought a smell of perfume into the room.

"Now you're fine, I must say," Jen declared admiringly. "Ma! Ma, come along down before you freeze and see what the girls give Lois May! It looks as if it would pay to send her visiting every day."

She went back to her supper and while the other two fingered and nodded and talked, she set on biscuit to steam and tasted the applesauce to be sure it was sweet enough. Lois May had also four yards of lace, three fancy handkerchiefs, a string of amber glass beads, and a new tablet of scratch paper in her boxes. She displayed these with an air of triumph.

"Well, now, I'm sure Mil and Margaret went to a good deal of pains," said Mrs. Shaw. She added, "If your own folks was all as interested to see you get ahead as George's wife, and Margaret, too, even if she ain't even married to Ed yet, you'd be in business school by spring all right. Folks has to work together and kind of figure when money's as scarce as 'tis here."

Sometimes the Shaws were Lois May's kin, and sometimes not. It rested with her and Mrs. Shaw to decide to fit the occasion whether the fact that her name had once been Webster carried any significance. With Bun, Mrs. Shaw's other daughter by her first husband, the point was never disputed. She was Bun.

"That's right, ma," Jen said now, cheerfully. "What is it they sing in school, Lois May? A long pull and a strong pull? You'll be educated yet!"

"If I could only get hold of a decent spring coat anywhere," sighed Lois May, "I'd have clothes enough to do."

"Yes, but you've got to have money for that tuition fee," her mother said. "And your board's got to be paid some way. I don't know. Sometimes I can't see any hope at all, but I'm bound you'll go, that's all. I'm just that set. Seems as though I'll get down sick, though, studying over it."

"There, now, don't do that," Jen said. "For goodness' sake. That's no way."

"I'll have to have some new stockings, of course," suggested Lois May. She sat down on the couch and ran her finger delicately up two long, mended runs in her cheap, pale silk stockings. "These are as good as I've got."

"There, that's another thing!" her mother exclaimed, bending over to look. "I ought to have caught them sooner."

Jen set the steamed bread on the table, the ham and potatoes and applesauce, and began to pour the tea. John came panting up the shedstairs.

"They're coming, Jen," he told her in his grave, five-year-old voice. "They're just right behind."

"That's good," Jen said. "Everything's ready."

She looked up and smiled at Mark Shaw, her father, a big stooped man with light hair graying at the ends and a broad, brown face; at Ed, her brother, tall and lean, in a blue frock coat and overalls over his heavy winter clothes; at Bun helping Ed to carry a basket of wood, her full, plain face twisted with the effort, and her red pigtails bobbing into her mouth.

"I can carry as much wood as Ed can, Lois May. Jen, look! I did, didn't I, Ed? I'm getting stronger and stronger. I guess I'll be awful strong when I grow up."

"Yes," Jen said. "I don't doubt we'll have to put you in the circus. . . . You just leave the milk there, father. I'll tend to it right after supper. Everything's ready now."

The two men hung sheepskin-lined coats and visored caps behind the stove, and laid wet mittens on the shelf to dry. They sat down, one in a chair, the other on the end of the couch, and pulled off their felt boots, grunting faintly as they did so. John scrambled under the stove and brought out slippers, Mark Shaw's of green carpeting, well worn and run down at the heels, Ed's of leather, new and shiny, a Christmas present from the sister of his brother's wife, the girl he would marry in the spring. They stood up, spreading their arms to take in the heat of the supper fire, and after a minute went together to the sink, washed, and took their places at the table without speaking.

The others were already there. Jen waited on them, tied John's napkin, filled Ed's cup again when he had gulped down, hot and clear, the tea she had poured for him, pushed the biscuit toward her father. The men ate heartily and bent their minds upon their plates. Mrs. Shaw took a bit of meat, a taste of applesauce. "My tea," she said, "is all that keeps me going. I don't know when I ever had a mite of appetite for anything." Lois May sat upright, her hands held daintily, aware of how she used her fork and spoon.

The fire in the stove licked birch sticks, and a coal snapped out on the rug, making the cat jump. The children twisted in their chairs to see, and laughed. "Come, finish your suppers," Jen said. "Drink your milk, John." He drank fast, gurgling, and emerged from the glass with a white rim on his upper lip, his eyes triumphant. The heads of the Shaws made shadows on the wall.

Mark, his knife and fork now crossed upon a cleared plate, looked around at the family from deep, colorless eyes. He had known winter nights when only he and Minnie Foote sat at this table, Minnie Foote, his first wife, young then, thin and gay and red-cheeked, quick at figures and wrote a pretty hand. They drew up more chairs as the children grew. George, the first boy, fat and always hungry; George had been a great one for baked beans and brown bread from a baby. Then Ralph and Lize, the twins, thin and far looking like their mother; and Ed here, and Jen; and then Olly. After Olly, Minnie Foote had never used her chair much, and finally not at all. The frost was going out of the ground when the men dug the grave down in the pasture, Mark Shaw remembered.

Then George was married and went up the road to live. And Ralph went off and joined the army, strange enough to think of, and Lize to work in the city; it was a wonder what they wanted of that life out there. Ed worked on the neighboring Searles place as long as Caleb lived, and the old man had made it cheap to him to buy it; it was as good a farm as any around; Ed had done well. His father's slow thought dwelt with pride on this third son. Jen, there, she kept the

house going, and for a year or two they two had been alone, except for Olly, the boy who was all Foote, with a head for books and nothing else; she was a good girl, light on her feet and handy at her work.

Then he brought Cora Webster here from Kezar Falls, the year fire went through Burke woods and took two houses at the edge of it. That was a bad fire and nothing but a week's rain could have put it out. Cora was never much contented; she had a nervous way with her, and all the drugs she wanted him to get never had much effect. But she had brought two children with her, girls, to help fill up the kitchen that was growing empty; and she bore John. Olly, too, had gone away now, to a college down east, but Cora Webster had borne John, a stout, steady boy already. Mark Shaw's deep eyes stayed longest of all on John.

"Can't you eat anything more?" Jen asked. "Any of you?"

She looked at Ed. He shook his head.

"See your new neighbors go up by to-night, ma?" he wanted to know, tilting on the back legs of his chair.

"We see a load of Frenchmen's stuff," sniffed Mrs. Shaw, "if that's what you mean."

Ed made no reply but crooked the corner of his mouth, staring at the ceiling. He had a hard, ruddy, handsome face.

"Did you meet them, Lois May?" Mrs. Shaw pursued.

"We didn't meet anybody," Lois May answered. "Not coming home." She added, "Margaret's afraid this storm'll make it so she can't keep school to-mor-

row. She says they've missed enough time this winter as it is."

"Gee, I hope it will," Bun cried. She wriggled joyfully, for she had paper dolls and seven pieces of candy.

"It's been a terrible winter," sighed Mrs. Shaw. "I know that. How did you find Mil?"

"All right, I guess," Lois May said. "The baby's cute." She wrinkled her nose. "If *only* she would keep her kids clean!"

"I guess you'd have your hands full, Lois May, if you had four to tend to and a house to keep," Jen said. "Did you see George, father?"

"We didn't go in," her father answered. His voice was heavy and he used it with care. "We just stopped in the road there when we come out of the woods and Lois May come right along. George was lugging water to the barn. He swung his hand."

"It makes it bad for George in winter," Jen said. "The way he has to go outside to get to the barn, so. It would be worth everything to him to have a shed between."

She began clearing the table as she sat there, reaching for the plates and stacking them before her.

"No, that wasn't any Frenchmen's stuff you saw, ma," Ed took up his topic where it had been left. He still looked secretly amused. "That was Polack stuff."

"Polack!"

They all turned toward him sharply, except Mark Shaw who only listened, warm, filled, comfortable, finished with one day many hours before the next would begin. He liked his supper table.