

Laura Ingalls Wilder, *The Long Winter*

Born in 1867, Laura Ingalls Wilder wrote the “Little House” series based on her childhood on the western prairie. When she was a child, her family established a homestead in a newly opened area of the former Indian Territory, near present-day Independence, Kansas. This became the setting for her most famous novel, *Little House on the Prairie*. When she was twelve, the family moved to DeSmet, South Dakota. The following winter, 1880-81, was one of the worst winters in the Dakotas. This became the basis for the story excerpted here, *The Long Winter*.

In 1882, two months before her sixteenth birthday, Laura took a position teaching in a one-room school to help her economically struggling family. She taught school for three years before marrying, at age eighteen. During the Great Depression, to help support her family, Laura began writing the “Little House” series of novels for young readers. The first of these books, historical fiction drawn from her own life, was *Little House in the Big Woods*, published in 1932. She wrote seven more books during her lifetime and became one of the most beloved writers of the twentieth century.


The Long Winter, published in 1940, is the most historically accurate of her novels. It tells of a year of frequent blizzards, from the fall of 1880 through the spring of 1881. Some of the details are fictionalized, but she conveys a true picture of the Hard Winter of 1880-81 on the northern plains. It was not one continual blizzard, but a seemingly endless series of blizzards, punctuated by sunny days. This excerpt offers just an introduction to the book, which a class might read (or have read to it) in its entirety. While Ma and Pa seem unrealistically cheery about the hardships the long winter brings, the story offers opportunities for discussion: What picture of the northern plains does this story create? How would you and your family deal with such relentless blizzards? How did daily life in the 1880s differ from life today? What kind of work were young girls expected to do around the house, and how does that compare to your lives today?

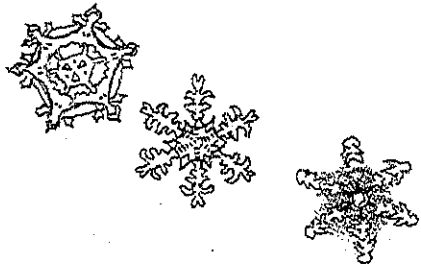


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THE LONG WINTER

BY LAURA INGALLS WILDER
ILLUSTRATED BY GARTH WILLIAMS

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12. ALONE

ON SATURDAY the sun was shining and the wind was blowing softly from the south. Pa was hauling hay from the homestead, for the cow and the horses must eat a great deal of hay to keep themselves warm in cold weather.

In the sunshine from the western windows Mary rocked gently, and Laura's steel knitting needles flashed. Laura was knitting lace, of fine white thread, to trim a petticoat. She sat close to the window and watched the street, for she was expecting Mary Power and Minnie Johnson. They were coming to spend the afternoon, bringing their crocheting.

Mary was talking about the college that perhaps someday she could go to.

"I am keeping up with you in your lessons, Laura,"

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she said. "I do wish, if I do go to college, that you could go, too."

"I suppose I'll be teaching school," Laura said, "so I couldn't go anyway. And I guess you care more about it than I do."

"Oh, I do care about it!" Mary softly exclaimed. "I want it more than *anything*. There's so much to learn, I always wanted to go studying on and on. And to think that I can, if we can save the money, even now that I'm blind. Isn't it wonderful?"

"Yes, it is," Laura agreed soberly. She did hope that



So after supper Pa called for his fiddle and Laura brought it to him. But when he had tuned the strings and rosined the bow he played a strange melody. The fiddle moaned a deep, rushing undertone and wild notes flickered high above it, rising until they thinned away in nothingness, only to come wailing back, the same notes but not quite the same, as if they had been changed while out of hearing.

Queer shivers tingled up Laura's backbone and prickled over her scalp, and still the wild, changing melody came from the fiddle till she couldn't bear it and cried, "What is it, Pa? Oh, what is that tune?"

"Listen." Pa stopped playing and held his bow still, above the strings. "The tune is outdoors. I was only following it."

They all listened to the winds playing that tune until Ma said, "We will likely hear enough of that without your playing it, Charles."

"We'll have something different, then," Pa agreed. "What'll it be?"

"Something to warm us up," Laura asked, and the fiddle, gay and bright, began to warm them up. Pa played and sang, "Little Annie Rooney is My Sweetheart!" and "The Old Gray Mare, She Ain't what She Used to Be," till even Ma's toes were keeping time to it. He played the Highland Fling, and Irish jigs, and out on the clickety-

clattering floor Laura and Carrie danced till their breath was gone.

When Pa laid the fiddle in the box he meant that now was bedtime.

It was hard to leave the warm room and go upstairs. Laura knew that in the cold up there every nail-point that came through the roof was fuzzy with frost. The downstairs windows were thickly covered with it, but somehow those frosty nails made her feel much colder.

She wrapped the two hot flatirons in their flannels and led the way. Mary and Carrie followed. Upstairs the air was so cold that it shriveled the insides of their noses, while they unbuttoned and dropped their shoes and shivered out of their dresses.

"God will hear us if we say our prayers under the covers," Mary chattered, and she crawled between the cold blankets. There had not been time for the hot irons to warm the beds. In the still cold under the frosty-nailed roof, Laura could feel the quivering of the bedsteads that Mary and Carrie were shaking in. The deep roar and the shrill wild cries of the winds were all around that little space of stillness.

"What in the world are you doing, Laura?" Mary called. "Hurry and come help warm the bed!"

Laura could not answer without unclenching her teeth to rattle. She stood at the window in her nightdress

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and stocking-feet. She had scraped away the frost from a place on the glass and she was trying to look through it. She cupped her hands beside her eyes to shield them from the glimmer of lamplight that came up from the stairway. But still she could see nothing. In the roaring night outside, there was not one speck of light.

At last she crawled in beside Mary and curled up tightly, pressing her feet against the warm flatiron.

"I was trying to see a light," she explained. "There must be a light in some house."

"Didn't you?" Mary asked.

"No," Laura said. She had not been able even to see the light from the window downstairs where she knew the lamp was shining.

Carrie was quiet in her bed by the stovepipe that came up from the hot stove below. It helped to warm her and she had a hot flatiron too. She was fast asleep when Ma came up to tuck Grace in beside her.

"Are you warm enough, girls?" Ma whispered, bending over the bed and snuggling the covers more closely around them.

"We're getting warm, Ma," Laura answered.

"Then goodnight and sweet dreams."

But even after Laura was warm she lay awake listening to the wind's wild tune and thinking of each little house, in town, alone in the whirling snow with not even

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a light from the next house shining through. And the little town was alone on the wide prairie. Town and prairie were lost in the wild storm which was neither earth nor sky, nothing but fierce winds and a blank whiteness.

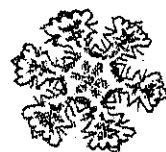
For the storm was white. In the night, long after the sun had gone and the last daylight could not possibly be there, the blizzard was whirling white.

A lamp could shine out through the blackest darkness and a shout could be heard a long way, but no light and no cry could reach through a storm that had wild voices and an unnatural light of its own.

The blankets were warm and Laura was no longer cold but she shivered.



13. WE'LL WEATHER THE BLAST



MIXED WITH those wild voices, Laura heard the clatter of stove lids and Pa's singing, "Oh, I am as happy as a big sunflower that nods and bends in the breezes, Oh!"

"Caroline!" Pa called up the stairs, "the fires will be going good by the time you get down here. I'm going to the stable."

Laura heard Ma stirring. "Lie still, girls," she said. "No need for you to get up till the house is warmer."

It was terribly cold outside the bedcovers. But the roaring and shrilling of the storm would not let Laura sleep again. The frosted nails in the roof above her were like white teeth. She lay under them only a few minutes before she followed Ma downstairs.

The fire was burning brightly in the cookstove, and in the front room the heater's side was red-hot, but still

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the rooms were cold and so dark that it did not seem to be daytime.

Laura broke the ice on the water in the water pail. She filled the washbasin and set it on the stove. Then she and Ma waited, shivering, for the water to warm so that they could wash their faces. Laura had begun to like living in town but this was the same old wintertime.

When Pa came in, his whiskers were blown full of snow and his nose and ears were cherry-red.

"Jerusalem crickets! This is a humdinger!" he exclaimed. "Good thing the stable is tight. I had to dig my way into it. Snow was packed as high as the door. Lucky I put your clothesline where I did, Caroline. I had to come back to the lean-to to get the shovel, but there was the clothesline to hang onto. Hot pancakes and fried pork look good to me! I'm hungry as a wolf."

The water was warm in the washbasin for him, and while he washed and combed his hair at the bench by the door, Laura set the chairs to the table and Ma poured the fragrant tea.

The hot cakes were good, with crisped slices of fat pork and the brown-and-amber grease from the pan, and dried-apple sauce and sugar syrup besides. There was no butter, for Ellen was nearly dry, and Ma divided last night's milk between Grace's cup and Carrie's.

"Let's be thankful for the little milk we have," she

said, "because there'll be less before there's more."

They were chilly at the table so, after breakfast, they all gathered around the heater. In silence they listened to the winds and the sound of snow driven against the walls and the windows. Ma roused herself with a little shake.

"Come, Laura. Let's get the work done. Then we can sit by the fire with an easy conscience."

In that well-built house it was strange that the fire did not warm the kitchen. While Ma put the beans to par-boil and Laura washed the dishes, they wondered how cold it was now in the claim shanty. Ma put more coal on the fire and took the broom and Laura shivered at the foot of the stairs. She must go up to make the beds, but the cold came down the stairs and went through her woolen dress and petticoats and red flannels as if she were standing there in her bare skin.

"We'll leave the beds open to air, Laura," said Ma. "They're upstairs out of sight and you can do them when the house warms up."

She finished-sweeping and the kitchen work was done. They went back to the front room and sitting down they put their cold feet on the footrest of the heater to warm.

Pa went into the kitchen and came back in his big coat and muffler, his cap in his hand.

"I'm going across the street to Fuller's to hear the news," he said.

"Must you, Charles?" Ma asked him.

"Somebody may be lost," he answered. Putting on his cap he went to the door, but paused to say, "Don't worry about me! I know how many steps it takes to cross the street, and if I don't strike a building then, I'll go no farther away till I do find one." He shut the door behind him.

Laura stood at the window. She had cleared a peephole through the frost but she saw only blank whiteness. She could not see Pa at the door nor tell when he left it. She went slowly back to the heater. Mary sat silently rocking Grace. Laura and Carrie just sat.

"Now, girls!" Ma said. "A storm outdoors is no reason for gloom in the house."

"What good is it to be in town?" Laura said. "We're just as much by ourselves as if there wasn't any town."

"I hope you don't expect to depend on anybody else, Laura." Ma was shocked. "A body can't do that."

"But if we weren't in town Pa wouldn't have to go out in this blizzard to find out if somebody else is lost."

"Be that as it may be," Ma said firmly, "it is time for our Sunday school lessons. We will each say the verse we learned this week and then we'll see how many of the old lessons we remember."

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First Grace, then Carrie, then Laura and Mary, and Ma repeated their verses.

"Now Mary," Ma said, "you tell us a verse, then Laura will do the same, and then Carrie. See which one can keep on longest."

"Oh, Mary will beat," Carrie said, discouraged before she began.

"Come on! I'll help you," Laura urged.

"Two against one isn't fair," Mary objected.

"It is too fair!" Laura contradicted. "Isn't it, Ma? When Mary's been learning Bible verses so much longer than Carrie has."

"Yes," Ma decided. "I think it is fair enough but Laura must only prompt Carrie."

So they began, went on and on until Carrie could remember no more even when Laura prompted her. Then Mary and Laura went on, against each other, until at last Laura had to give up.

She hated to admit that she was beaten, but she had to. "You beat me, Mary. I can't remember another one."

"Mary beat! Mary beat!" Grace cried, clapping her hands and Ma said, smiling, to Mary, "That's my bright girl."

They all looked at Mary who was looking at nothing with her large, beautiful blue eyes that had no sight in them. She smiled with joy when Ma praised her and then her face changed as the light does when a blizzard

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comes. For a minute she looked as she used to look when she could see, and she and Laura were quarreling. She never would give up to Laura because she was the older and the boss.

Then her whole face blushed pink and in a low voice she said, "I didn't beat you, Laura. We're even. I can't remember another verse, either."

Laura was ashamed. She had tried so hard to beat Mary at a game, but no matter how hard she tried she could never be as good as Mary was. Mary was truly good. Then for the first time Laura wanted to be a schoolteacher so that she could make the money to send Mary to college. She thought, "Mary is going to college, no matter how hard I have to work to send her."

At that moment the clock struck eleven times.

"My goodness, the dinner!" Ma exclaimed. She hurried into the kitchen to stir up the fire and season the bean soup. "Better put more coal in the heater, Laura," she called. "Seems like the house hasn't warmed up like it should have."

It was noon when Pa came in. He came in quietly and went to the heater where he took off his coat and cap, "Hang these up for me, will you, Laura? I'm pretty cold."

"I'm sorry, Charles," Ma said from the kitchen. "I can't seem to get the house warm."

"No wonder," Pa answered. "It's forty degrees below

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zero and this wind is driving the cold in. This is the worst storm yet, but luckily everyone is accounted for. Nobody's lost from town."

After dinner Pa played hymn tunes on his fiddle, and all the afternoon they sang. They sang:

"There's a land that is fairer than day,
And by faith we can see it afar. . . ."

And:



"Jesus is a rock in a weary land,
A weary land, a weary land,
Jesus is a rock in a weary land,
A shelter in the time of storm."

They sang Ma's favorite, "There is a Happy Land, Far, Far Away." And just before Pa laid the fiddle in its box because the time had come when he must get to the stable and take care of the stock, he played a gallant, challenging tune that brought them all to their feet, and they all sang lustily,

"Then let the hurricane roar!
It will the sooner be o'er.
We'll weather the blast
And land at last
On Canaan's happy shore!"



The hurricane was roaring, the icy snow as hard as buckshot and fine as sand was whirling, swirling, beating upon the house.



14. ONE BRIGHT DAY



THAT BLIZZARD lasted only two days. Tuesday morning Laura woke up suddenly. She lay with her eyes wide open, listening to hear again what had awakened her. There was no sound at all. Then she knew. The stillness had startled her awake. There was no noise of winds, no swish! swish! of icy snow scouring the walls and roof and window.

The sun was glowing bright through the frost on the window at the top of the stairs, and downstairs Ma's smile was like sunshine.

"The blizzard's over," she said. "It was only a two days' blizzard."

"You never can tell what a blizzard will do," Pa agreed.

"It may be that your hard winter won't prove to be so hard after all," Ma said happily. "Now the sun is shin-

ONE BRIGHT DAY

ing, they should have the trains running again in no time, and, Laura, I'm sure there will be school today. Better get yourself ready for it while I get breakfast."

Laura went upstairs to tell Carrie and to put on her school dress. In the warm kitchen again she scrubbed her face and neck well with soap and pinned up her braids. Pa breezed in gaily from doing the chores.

"Old Sol's bright and shining this morning!" he told them. "Looks like his face was well washed in snow."

Hashed brown potatoes were on the table and Ma's wild ground-cherry preserves shone golden in a glass bowl. Ma stacked a platter with toast browned in the oven, and then took from the oven a small dish of butter.

"I had to warm the butter," she said. "It was frozen as hard as a rock. I could not cut it. I hope Mr. Boast brings us some more soon. This is what the cobbler threw at his wife."

Grace and Carrie were puzzled, while all the others laughed. It showed how happy Ma was that she would make jokes.

"That was his awl," Mary said. And Laura exclaimed, "Oh, no! It was the last. That was all he had."

"Girls, girls," Ma said gently because they were laughing too much at the table. Then Laura said, "But I thought we were out of butter when we didn't have any yesterday."

ONE BRIGHT DAY

"Pancakes were good with salt pork," said Ma. "I saved the butter for toast." There was just enough butter for a scraping on every slice.

Breakfast was so merry in the warmth and stillness and light that the clock was striking half past eight before they finished, and Ma said, "Run along, girls. This one time I'll do your housework."

The whole outdoors was dazzling, sparkling brightly in bright sunshine. All the length of Main Street was a high drift of snow, a ridge taller than Laura. She and Carrie had to climb to its top and get carefully down its



other side. The snow was packed so hard that their shoes made no marks on it and their heels could dig no dents to keep them from slipping.

In the schoolyard was another glittering drift almost as high as the schoolhouse. Cap Garland and Ben and Arthur and the little Wilmarth boys were skating down it on their shoes, as Laura used to slide on Silver Lake, and Mary Power and Minnie were standing out in the cold sunshine by the door watching the fun the boys were having.

"Hello, Laura!" Mary Power said gladly, and she tucked her mittened hand under Laura's arm and squeezed it. They were pleased to see each other again. It seemed a long time since Friday, and even since the Saturday afternoon that they had meant to spend together. But there was no time to talk, for Teacher came to the door and girls and boys must go in to their lessons.

At recess Mary Power and Laura and Minnie stood at the window and watched the boys sliding down the snowdrift. Laura wished she could go outdoors to play too.

"I wish we weren't too big now," she said. "I don't think it's any fun being a young lady."

"Well, we can't help growing up," Mary Power said.

"What would you do if you were caught in a blizzard, Mary?" Minnie Johnson was asking.

"I guess I would just keep on walking. You wouldn't freeze if you kept on walking," Mary answered.

"But you'd tire yourself out. You'd get so tired you'd die," said Minnie.

"Well, what would you do?" Mary Power asked her.

"I'd dig into a snowbank and let the snow cover me up. I don't think you'd freeze to death in a snowbank. Would you, Laura?"

"I don't know," Laura said.

"Well, what would you do, Laura, if you got caught in a blizzard?" Minnie insisted.

"I wouldn't get caught," Laura answered. She did not like to think about it. She would rather talk with Mary Power about other things. But Miss Garland rang the bell and the boys came trooping in, red with the cold and grinning.

That whole day long everyone was as cheerful as the sunshine. At noon Laura and Mary Power and Carrie, with the Beardsley girls, raced in the shouting crowd over the big snowdrifts home to dinner. On top of the high drift that was Main Street, some went north and some went south and Laura and Carrie slid down its east side to their own front door.

Pa was already in his place at the table, Mary was lifting Grace onto the pile of books in her chair, and Ma was setting a dish of steaming baked potatoes before Pa.

"I do wish we had some butter for them," she said.

"Salt brings out the flavor," Pa was saying, when a loud knocking sounded on the kitchen door. Carrie ran to open it and, big and furry as a bear in his buffalo coat, Mr. Boast came in.

"Come in, Boast! Come in, come in!" Pa kept saying. They were so glad to see him. "Come in and put your feet under the table. You're just in time!"

"Where is Mrs. Boast?" Mary inquired.

"Yes, indeed! Didn't she come with you?" Ma said eagerly.

Mr. Boast was getting out of his wraps. "Well, no. You see, Ellie thought she must do the washing while the sun shone. I told her we'll have more good days but she said then she'd come to town on one of *them*. She sent you some butter. It's from our last churning. My cows are going dry. The weather we've been having, I couldn't take care of them."

Mr. Boast sat up to the table and they all began on the good baked potatoes, with butter, after all.

"Glad to know you came through the storm all right," Pa said.

"Yes, we were lucky. I was watering the stock at the well when the cloud came up. I hurried them in, had them all snug in the stable and got halfway to the house before the storm struck," Mr. Boast told them.

The baked potatoes and hot biscuits with butter were delicious, and to finish the dinner there were more biscuits with some of Ma's rich tomato preserves.

"There's no more salt pork in town," Pa said. "Getting all our supplies from the East, this way, we run a little short when the trains don't get through."

"What do you hear about the train?" Mr. Boast asked him.

"They've put extra gangs to work on the Tracy cut, Woodworth says," Pa replied. "And they're bringing out snowplows. We can look for a train before the end of the week."

"Ellie's counting on my getting some tea and sugar and flour," said Mr. Boast. "The storekeepers raising prices any?"

"Not that I know of," Pa reassured him. "Nothing's running short but meat."

Dinner was eaten and Mr. Boast said he must be getting along to reach home before night. He promised to bring Mrs. Boast in to see them all one day soon. Then he and Pa went up Main Street to Harthorn's grocery and Laura and Carrie, hand in hand, went joyously climbing up the drifts and sliding down them, back to school.

All that happy afternoon they were full of the clear, cold air and as bright as the sunshine. They knew their

ONE BRIGHT DAY

lessons perfectly, they enjoyed reciting them. Every face in school was smiling, and Cap Garland's flashing grin included them all.

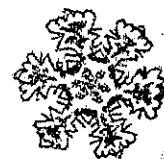
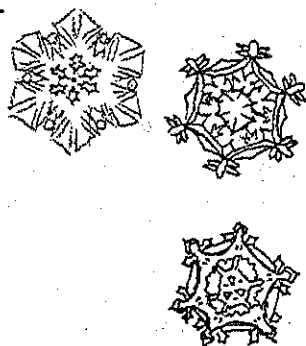
It was good to see the town alive again and to know that again all the weekdays would be school days.

But in the night Laura dreamed that Pa was playing the wild storm-tune on his fiddle and when she screamed to him to stop, the tune was a blinding blizzard swirling around her and it had frozen her to solid ice.

Then she was staring at the dark, but for a long time that nightmare held her stiff and cold. It was not Pa's fiddle she heard, but the stormwind itself and the swish! swish! of icy snow on the walls and the roof. At last she was able to move. So cold that the dream still seemed half real, she snuggled close to Mary and pulled the quilts over their heads.

"What is it?" Mary murmured in her sleep.

"A blizzard," Laura answered.



15. NO TRAINS

IT WAS not worth while to get up in the morning. The daylight was dim, the windows were white and so were the nails in the roof. Another blizzard was roaring, screaming, and swishing around the house. There would be no school.

Laura lay sluggish and half awake. She would rather sleep than wake up to such a day. But Ma called, "Good morning, girls! Time to get up!"

Quickly, because of the cold, Laura put on her dress and her shoes and went downstairs.

"Why, what is the trouble, Laura?" Ma asked, looking up from the stove.

Laura almost wailed, "Oh Ma! How can I ever teach school and help send Mary to college? How can I ever amount to anything when I can get only one day of school at a time?"

NO TRAINS

"Now Laura," Ma said kindly. "You must not be so easily discouraged. A few blizzards more or less can make no great difference. We will hurry and get the work done, then you can study. There is enough figuring in your arithmetic to keep you busy for a good many days, and you can do as much of it as you want to. Nothing keeps you from learning."

Laura asked, "Why is the table here in the kitchen?" The table left hardly room to move about.

"Pa didn't build the fire in the heater this morning," Ma answered.

They heard Pa stamping in the lean-to and Laura opened the door for him. He looked sober. The little milk in the pail was frozen solid.

"This is the worst yet, I do believe," Pa said while he held his stiff hands over the stove. "I didn't start a fire in the heater, Caroline. Our coal is running low, and this storm will likely block the trains for some time."

"I thought as much when I saw you hadn't built the fire," Ma answered. "So I moved the table in here. We'll keep the middle door shut and the cookstove warms this room nicely."

"I'll go over to Fuller's right after breakfast," said Pa. He ate quickly and while he was putting on his wraps again Ma went upstairs. She brought down her

NO TRAINS

little red Morocco pocketbook, with the shining, smooth mother-of-pearl sides and the steel clasps, in which she kept Mary's college money.

Pa slowly put out his hand and took it. Then he cleared his throat and said, "Mary, it may be the town's running short of supplies. If the lumberyard and the stores are putting up prices too high..."

He did not go on and Mary said, "Ma has my college money put away. You could spend that."

"If I do have to, Mary, you can depend on me paying it back," Pa promised.

After he had gone, Laura brought Mary's rocking chair from the cold front room and set it to warm before the open oven. As soon as Mary sat in it Grace climbed into her lap.

"I'll be warm, too," Grace said.

"You're a big girl now and too heavy," Ma objected, but Mary said quickly, "Oh no, Grace! I like to hold you, even if you are a big three-year-old girl."

The room was so crowded that Laura could hardly wash the dishes without bumping into some sharp edge. While Ma was making the beds in the upstairs cold, Laura polished the stove and cleaned the lamp chimney. Then she unscrewed the brass chimney holder and filled the lamp carefully with kerosene. The last clear drop

poured out from the spout of the kerosene can.

"Oh! we didn't tell Pa to get kerosene!" Laura exclaimed before she thought.

"Don't we have kerosene?" Carrie gasped, turning around quickly from the cupboard where she was putting away the dishes. Her eyes were frightened.

"My goodness, yes, I've filled the lamp brimful," Laura answered. "Now I'll sweep the floor and you dust."

All the work was done when Ma came downstairs. "The wind is fairly rocking the house up there," she told them, shivering by the stove. "How nicely you have done everything, Laura and Carrie," she smiled.

Pa had not come back, but surely he could not be lost, in town.

Laura brought her books and slate to the table, close to Mary in her rocking chair. The light was poor but Ma did not light a lamp. Laura read the arithmetic problems one by one to Mary, and did them on the slate while Mary solved them in her head. They worked each problem backward to make sure that they had the correct answer. Slowly they worked lesson after lesson and as Ma had said, there were many more to come.

At last they heard Pa coming through the front room. His overcoat and cap were frozen white with snow and he carried a snowy package. He thawed by the stove and

when he could speak, he said, "I didn't use your college money, Mary.

"There's no coal at the lumberyard," he went on. "People burned so much in this cold weather and Ely didn't have much on hand. He's selling lumber to burn now, but we can't afford to burn lumber at fifty dollars a thousand."

"People are foolish to pay it," Ma said gently. "Trains are bound to get through before long."

"There is no more kerosene in town," Pa said. "And no meat. The stores are sold out of pretty nearly everything. I got two pounds of tea, Caroline, before they ran out of that. So we'll have our bit of tea till the trains come through."

"There's nothing like a good cup of tea in cold weather," said Ma. "And the lamp is full. That's enough kerosene to last quite awhile if we go to bed early to save coal. I am so glad you thought to get the tea. We would miss that!"

Slowly Pa grew warm and without saying anything more he sat down by the window to read the *Chicago Inter-Ocean* that had come in the last mail.

"By the way," he said, looking up, "school is closed until coal comes."

"We can study by ourselves," Laura said stoutly. She and Mary murmured to each other over the arithmetic

problems, Carrie studied the speller, while Ma worked at her mending and Pa silently read the paper. The blizzard grew worse. It was by far the most violent blizzard that they had ever heard.

The room grew colder. There was no heat from the front room to help the cookstove. The cold had crept into the front room and was sneaking in under the door. Beneath the lean-to door it was crawling in too. Ma brought the braided rugs from the front room and laid them, folded, tightly against the bottoms of the doors.

At noon Pa went to the stable. The stock did not need feeding at noon, but he went to see that the horses and the cow and the big calf were still safely sheltered.

He went out again in midafternoon. "Animals need a lot of feed to keep them warm in such cold," he explained to Ma. "The blizzard is worse than it was, and I had a hard tussle this morning to get hay into the stable in these winds. I couldn't do it if the haystack wasn't right at the door. Another good thing, the snowdrifts are gone. They've been scoured away, down to the bare ground."

The storm howled even louder when he went out into it, and a blast of cold came through the lean-to though Ma had pushed the folded rug against the inner door as soon as Pa shut it.

Mary was braiding a new rug. She had cut worn-out



woolen clothes in strips, and Ma had put each color in a separate box. Mary kept the boxes in order and remembered where each color was. She was braiding the rag-strips together in a long braid that coiled down in a pile beside her chair. When she came to the end of a strip, she chose the color she wanted and sewed it on. Now and then she felt of the growing pile.

"I do believe I have nearly enough done," she said. "I'll be ready for you to sew the rug tomorrow, Laura."

"I wanted to finish this lace first," Laura objected. "And these storms keep making it so dark I can hardly see to count the stitches."

"The dark doesn't bother me," Mary answered cheerfully. "I can see with my fingers."

Laura was ashamed of being impatient. "I'll sew your rug whenever you're ready," she said willingly.

Pa was gone a long time. Ma set the supper back to keep warm. She did not light the lamp, and they all sat thinking that the clothesline would guide Pa through the blinding blizzard.

"Come, come, girls!" Ma said, rousing herself. "Mary, you start a song. We'll sing away the time until Pa comes." So they sang together in the dark until Pa came.

There was lamplight at supper, but Ma told Laura to leave the dishes unwashed. They must all go to bed quickly, to save the kerosene and the coal.

Only Pa and Ma got up next morning at chore time. "You girls stay in bed and keep warm as long as you like," Ma said, and Laura did not get up until nine o'clock. The cold was pressing on the house and seeping in, rising higher and higher, and the ceaseless noise and the dusk seemed to hold time still.

Laura and Mary and Carrie studied their lessons. Laura sewed the rag braid into a round rug and laid it heavy over Mary's lap so that Mary could see it with her fingers. The rug made this day different from the day before, but Laura felt that it was the same day over again when they sang again in the dark until Pa came and ate the same supper of potatoes and bread with dried-apple sauce and tea and left the dishes unwashed and went to bed at once to save kerosene and coal.

Another day was the same. The blizzard winds did not stop roaring and shrieking, the swishing snow did not stop swishing, the noise and the dark and the cold would never end.

Suddenly they ended. The blizzard winds stopped. It was late in the third afternoon. Laura blew and scraped at the frost on a windowpane till through the peephole she could see snow scudding down Main Street low to the ground before a straight wind. A reddish light shone on the blowing snow from the setting sun. The sky was clear and cold. Then the rosy light faded, the snow was blowing gray-white, and the steady wind blew harder. Pa came in from doing the chores.

"Tomorrow I must haul some hay," he said. "But now I'm going across to Fuller's to find out if anybody but us is alive in this blame town. Here for three whole days

NO TRAINS

we haven't been able to see a light, nor smoke, nor any sign of a living soul. What's the good of a town if a fellow can't get any good of it?"

"Supper's almost ready, Charles," Ma said.

"I'll be back in a jiffy!" Pa told her.

He came back in a few minutes asking, "Supper ready?" Ma was dishing it up and Laura setting the chairs to the table.

"Everything's all right in town," Pa said, "and word from the depot is that they'll start work tomorrow morning on that big cut this side of Tracy."

"How long will it take to get a train through?" Ma asked.

"Can't tell," Pa replied. "That one clear day we had, they cleaned it out, ready to come through next day. But they shoveled the snow up, both sides of the cut, and now it's packed full, clear to the top of the banks. Something like thirty feet deep of snow, frozen solid, they've got to dig out now."

"That won't take very long in pleasant weather," Ma said. "Surely we're bound to have that. We've already had more, and worse, storms than we had all last winter."



16. FAIR WEATHER



MORNING WAS bright and clear but there was no school. There would be no more school until the train came bringing coal.

Outdoors the sun was shining but frost was still on the window and the kitchen seemed stale and dull. Carrie gazed out through the peephole in the frost while she wiped the breakfast dishes, and drearily Laura sloshed the cooling water in the dishpan.

"I want to go somewhere!" Carrie said fretfully. "I'm tired of staying in this old kitchen!"

"We were thankful enough for this warm kitchen yesterday," Mary gently reminded her. "And now we may be thankful the blizzard's over."

"You wouldn't go to school, anyway," Laura said crossly. She was ashamed as soon as she heard the words,