

The Snow

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CHARITY began to lift her body, stopping at every inch to listen for a change in Faith's breathing. It seemed to her as though an hour passed before she was sitting up, and then there remained the task of swinging her legs over the side of the big tester bed and getting out of it without waking her sister. Now! Her feet were on the floor—the bed squeaked when her weight left it. She bit her lip. Faith grunted, dug her head into the pillow, and then the regular rise and fall of the tufted comforter resumed.

Stealthily Charity reached to the wall peg for her clothes, hoping she wasn't taking Faith's by mistake. For a minute annoyance welled up in her; if Faith hadn't been so eager to go to bed early with her she wouldn't have had to get undressed all the way. Now there was nothing to do but take her clothes and dress downstairs; Faith would surely wake if she tried to do it here. Maybe she ought to wake her and say goodbye—Pa'd surely never let her come back. She'd never see her sister again. Charity turned, then stopped—Faith would cry and wake the whole house if she knew. Charity swallowed, and crept out of the room.

How had she ever thought she'd get past Ma and Pa's door and down the stairs? Her bare feet on the cold floor sounded like hobnail boots. Every time a board creaked, her heart gave a funny flutter and stopped momentarily, then thudded against her flannel nightdress until the next creak. It pounded in her ears so loudly she feared that everyone would hear, and she pressed a rough slim hand on her chest to still it.

Finally she was in the hall. Teeth clicking, she hurriedly drew flannel knickers and petticoats and heavy woolen stockings beneath her gown, then tore it off and pulled on her best brown wool dress with trembling fingers. Funny to be wearing flannel underclothes for a wedding—but if she froze to death there'd be no wedding. What would Faith say, finding her sister had been married in flannel petticoats? Charity remembered how the two of them had sewed for days on Hope's dimity ones last year and giggled as they threaded them with white ribbon. Lucky Hope—and here Charity was, sneaking off in the middle of the night in flannels! If Pa wasn't so all-fired stubborn! He'd see, Pa would. He'd see how responsible and dependable Jed Sparks was. Jed—she'd been so full of getting out quietly that she'd hardly thought about him. A sudden warmth made her fingers go faster buttoning up the brown basque. She spread and smoothed its white collar and took her shiny auburn hair out of its bedtime braids, hoping she could get it fastened up decently without a mirror. Maybe the Justice's wife would give her a room to fix up a little when they got to Bentleyville. There—she was ready! But she couldn't leave her nightdress right here in

the front hall, Ma would have a fit. She wadded it up under her arm.

The vows Hope had taken ran through her head. This time it would be "I, Charity, take thee, Jedediah"—she hoped she wouldn't stumble over his full name. She'd better not, if she was going to be Mrs. Jedediah Sparks for the rest of her life! As she tiptoed to the back door, took her thick cape and shawl from the hook and bundled into them, she suddenly thought about Ma and Hope. She was going to be married. They were married. What was it like? You went to keep a man's house, and you had babies. You didn't get sent out of rooms when people talked, and you went to other women's houses when they had babies instead of being bundled to Aunt Chatty's when Ma had one. That was what it was to be married. But what was the other thing, the thing Ma had talked to Hope about the night before she was married? Charity remembered them coming out of Ma and Pa's room, Ma with her lips tight and Hope scared and big-eyed. Probably just a lecture about keeping house. Hope never did like doing chores. There couldn't be anything to be scared about—not with Jed, anyway. Jed was so big and kind and easy-going. . . .

The cold hit Charity hard as she pulled the door to behind her and stepped out into the chicken yard. Great shakes rattled her. What would Pa say if he knew she'd come out in such cold of her own free will? Nobody hated winter more than she did—nobody except Jed. Pa'd have a conniption when she wasn't there in the morning. Charity shuddered with more than cold, glad she wouldn't be there to face it. She hoped Faith wouldn't catch it for not waking up and stopping her.

Plodding through the snow, Charity appreciated it for once; the moon was hidden, but the white covering on the ground made it easier to see where she was going. The barn loomed huge and fearsome ahead. She'd get a lantern there. Laws, it was cold! She could hardly get breath against it. Pulling her shawl closer around her head, she mopped away the cold trickle down her cheeks with a corner of it. As she neared the barn she began to talk, very softly, hoping to keep the animals quiet without waking anyone in the house. The dogs came out to escort her the rest of the way, their tongues warm on her numbed fingers.

At the door of the barn, Charity turned toward the tall, narrow house built of brick made right on the land. Straight as Pa's back it stood blackly against the black sky, with its two chimneys pointing upward. Hope always said they looked like "Simon says 'thumbs up'!" in the game, but now to Charity they were her parents, upright and solid and forever pointing to heaven. So strict and narrow—for a moment Charity had felt an impulse to run back, but now her shoulders straightened. Pa said she couldn't marry Jed. He said Jed wasn't steady. Well, what if he had missed his own brother's barn raising? It was only because he forgot about it. Anybody could forget. And Ma wanted Charity to marry the preacher—that skinny

old thing! Must be at least forty, and he wore a beard and droned on for hours in a hideous nasal tenor—Charity whirled around. Must be the night. It was only Daisy, not the preacher's voice. What was she thinking of, to waste all this time? Jed would be out there freezing to death. Why hadn't she told him to meet her in the barn where it was warmer? Oh, yes, the animals wouldn't know him.

In the corner she groped for a lantern and flints. Her hands were shaking so that she struck and struck before getting a spark, and the cows began to stir. There! Holding the lantern high so as not to brush against any straw, Charity made her way to the back door of the barn. How strange it was to see the animals at night—Prince poked his nose out of his stall, and Charity hastily grabbed a handful of hay to keep him from neighing after her. As she fed it to him she kissed his big nose, wondering if he'd miss their early-morning rambles.

If only the door wouldn't squeak too much—praise be she was thin, and didn't have to roll it back very far. Gently she pushed it shut after her, poking the dogs' cold noses back. They whined, but they didn't bark. It had been so easy! Charity's heart began to beat more steadily. Every moment she'd been expecting Pa to come stomping out like bearded doom in a nightshirt, and heaven only knew what would have happened. Now all she had to do was walk about a hundred yards to the dead oak log, and there Jed would be.

Beyond the flickering lantern light the trees cast weird shadows, and Charity remembered all the old tales of bears and wolves. Silly! Jed was there, waiting. She'd better hurry, before he died of the cold! Feeling suddenly gay, she giggled between shivers. Didn't it prove how much they loved each other, that two people who hated winter as much as she and Jed would set out on a night like this to be married? Charity wasn't minding the cold now, though it pinched into her bones and set her shaking like a newborn calf. There was the beech tree—she began to run a little, holding her skirts tight with one hand to prevent their catching. Then she stopped short. In a minute she'd be there, and it wasn't seemly to be running. Jed must see the light by now; why wasn't he coming to meet her? Charity stood motionless to listen, but not a twig snapped. He must be playing games. Trying to put on a dignified expression, she stepped solemnly forward, her brown eyes dancing like the lantern flame. The great hollow log came into the light—and that was all. "Jed? Jed, come out, I'm here! Jed, it's too cold to play hide games!" and then simply "Jed!"

Oh, well, maybe she was early. He'd come in a minute. Charity brushed snow off the log and sat down, setting the lantern in front of her and stretching her hands out to it. The nightdress was still under her arm; she tossed it inside the log, remembering she'd left half her hairpins on the hall table. Ma would be furious! Not Faith—they never seemed to have enough to go around. Charity wondered if Faith would marry the preacher. She liked him pretty

well—poor Faith. But it wouldn't be so bad for her, she wouldn't be the butt of his preaching all the time. One reason Ma'd wanted Charity to marry him was to settle her head, but Faith's head was already as settled—and dull, to Charity's mind—as anyone could ask. Faith would be a good preacher's wife. Not she—how could she ever marry anyone but Jed? Jed with his ready bass laughter and easy ways—why didn't he come? It was starting to snow again, and the lantern burned lower and lower. There hadn't been much oil in it to start with. He'd be there in a moment, laughing—did she hear his horses on the road now? Charity sat up straight, suddenly in a panic. What would she say to him? What did you say to a man you were about to run off and marry with? What would he say? Oh, well, they always had found plenty to talk about. There was always the weather.

Charity gave a little cry. The lantern had gone out. It was so dark and cold—she could see nothing but the snowflakes that fell thicker and thicker in front of her nose. Shortly she reached inside the log for her nightdress and wrapped it over her shawl. She could snatch it off and hide it when she heard Jed coming. Her feet and hands felt numb. Jed wouldn't be able to tell her from the log, they were both covered with snow . . . she couldn't stay like this much longer. But she couldn't go back—what would Jed do when he came, if she wasn't there? The log was plenty big enough, she and her sisters all used to get in it together when they were little. What if something else was already inside it—a bear, or a snake? No, it surely would have waked up when she came.

Gingerly feeling ahead, Charity crawled inside the oak log. The inside was scaly and fungous; she choked down a sob, pulled the shawl over her face, and stuck her hands inside it. She felt a little bit warmer, but what if she didn't hear Jed when he came? Holding her body rigid, Charity listened with straining ears, but the only sound was that of the blood thudding against her temple. After a while she relaxed. If he didn't see her right away, Jed surely would call her name. The log was none too big; she felt terribly cramped. It must be getting quite late. The Justice would be angry if they woke him up in the middle of the night . . . well, there wouldn't be anything else to do. They couldn't stay out all night without getting married. Pa'd shoot both of them.

Closing her eyes, Charity prayed with all her might that Jed would hurry up. Then she opened them with a start, realizing she'd been about to drift off. That wouldn't do, she wouldn't hear him call her. She was beginning to feel cold again, clear through. Eloping wasn't as much fun as she'd thought—but there, that wasn't fair, it would be as soon as Jed came. She couldn't fall asleep—why hadn't they waited till spring? Funny, they hadn't even thought about it, much as they hated the cold . . . so sleepy . . . what if Jed thought she wouldn't come, on a night like this? Maybe he was home in bed, asleep, this minute. No, he wouldn't be asleep . . . not when she

