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# When Winter Comes

By Richard Trump ●

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*The prize-winning story in the Chi  
Delta Phi-Inkhorn literary contest*

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IN THE middle Mississippi valley, where the land lies low in vast stretches along the river, summer finds a host of wild creatures thriving amid the rampant vegetation; but when winter comes, the leaves die, the birds go away, and it is a cold place. . . .

Early autumn was there, and the afternoon sun shone on a small log cabin, a fisherman's hut, perched on stilts in the midst of a little clearing. A middle-aged woman came out of the open doorway and stood on the top step of the rough stairs that provided entrance to the hut. As she gazed across the river at the village on the other shore, her eyes looked sad and worn. One would have guessed that her face always had that expression. It was a pathetic face, a weak one, broken by continuous defeat—a face that had changed. And the straggly hair, the soiled dress and run-over shoes on stockingless feet made a figure closely in harmony with the face.

Her gaze shifted to the beach down below the cabin where a bronzed man sat on a box, smoking and working with lines. Her expression did not change. A fly lit on her arm, and shaking it off decisively, she descended the steps and limped toward the man on the box.

Arthur Willet, her husband, glanced up at her and then went on tying hooks on the lead lines. He said nothing. And it was a moment before she herself spoke.

"Arthur."

He grunted.

"Arthur, don't you think you ought to be looking for a—a place for the winter—a job?"

He puffed on his pipe, drawing his rough cheeks into deep craters, sharpening the contour of his jaw-bones at each draw. He said nothing.

"The children—they should go to school."

HE WENT on with the lead he was fixing. Finishing the knot with a deft jerk, he laid the hook on a sun-dried plank at his feet. He drew sharply on the pipe, took it from his mouth, and blew the smoke out slowly. Then he looked up.

"Huh?"

"The children, Arthur—they should get started in school on time this year."

"What grade they in?"

"Charles is in the fifth—ought to be in the sixth. Not a fair chance, living over here."

"Didn't have any more myself."

"But Fanny—she's only ten."

He returned the pipe to his mouth and picked up another lead.

"And in the winter—it always gets so cold before we go across to the town. And then—and then we can't find a house. And you can't get a job—"

When she saw that he was not going to reply, she went slowly back toward the cabin. Halfway up the beach she stopped and turned. Her voice was shaky.

"I'm not in any condition to be over here in this god-forsaken place anyway!"

He removed his pipe again, but Mrs. Willet went on to the cabin. She hesitated by the steps and then called Charles, in a shrill voice. No answer, and she called again. Then her husband replied.

"No use o' yellin'. He's down to the wing-dam, runnin' lines."

She went up the steps, muttering; the men were always gone when she needed them—gone or busy with lines. Changing her mind, she called to Fanny, who appeared in the doorway of the cabin.

"Want you to pick up potatoes for me. Bring the basket."

WHEN Mrs. Willet had found the spade where her husband had last dug for worms, she followed a path through the tangles and cane, about fifty yards from the hut, to the garden—a plot with less of wild grape tangles but with more tall weeds. At the end of the garden she waited for Fanny. Presently the child, in a scant, dirty frock, sauntered toward the garden, with the basket in one hand and a stick in the other. She was holding the stick against the heavy stalks of the horse-weeds, clicking it against them as she passed.

Finding the row where potatoes had last been dug, Mrs. Willet uncovered the runty tubers while Fanny came behind and picked them up. They worked silently, and Fanny knew by the silence that her mother was angry. Having dug a few hills Mrs. Willet dropped the spade, seized the basket, and marched out of the garden, leaving Fanny standing there bewildered. The child stared after her mother until she was out of sight, then followed.

The mother stopped on the cabin steps and stood looking down the beach; her husband was still puffing on his pipe. Shyly the bare-footed girl came up the steps and stood beside her mother. They were silent. The woman continued to look down the beach, and occasionally the child would peer up at her face. Then, without shifting her gaze, the mother moved her lips.

"Fanny—" But she stopped, as if correcting herself, and went into the hut.

THE cardinal flowers withered along the edges of the swamp, and farther back from the river, late asters were fading on the hills. A tall vine-covered hackberry towered above the underbrush at the west edge of the clearing. In the evenings

Mrs. Willet watched how its shadow crept nearer the hut. She believed she could see how much nearer it was each evening when the five o'clock factory whistle blew in the town across the river. At the sound of the whistle she would come out of the doorway and stand on the top step, peering down at the shadow. A shadow creeping nearer.

One evening as she watched the shadow, her husband pulled onto the bar with the old flat-boat—"Dorie," he called it. She saw him hook the chain around a stake driven in the sand, and then wade out to the fish crate anchored a few yards from shore. Pulling it nearer to the boat, he opened the lid and tossed several small, shiny perch into the crate. She saw them disappear in the mouth of the crate—into the shadow.

She counted the fish as they were taken from the boat. Seven. She sighed. Seven—it was always something: first the water was too high and muddy; then the river went down and the minnows disappeared; and then the swamp dried up so that there were not even any craw-fish for bait; Arthur would take her precious flour for dough-bait; slime collected on the lines and covered the hooks; and later, when the minnows came back, there was something else—gars took the bait, or there were too many turtles. And if everything else was all right, then there was no market for fish. . . .

She saw her husband shut the crate and push it back into the current. He plodded up to the cabin, clopping along in his awkward rubber boots. As he came up the steps, the man and wife glanced into each other's faces but said nothing. He entered the cabin while she waited on the step outside. In a moment the whistle would blow. . . Yes, there it was—and there was the shadow. The very slowness of its motion made the approach seem so inevitable, so relentless. There was no stopping a shadow.

She went inside. Arthur was pulling off his boots. He threw them into a corner and stood in his stockinged feet looking out of an opening in the wall—the opening where the window should have been. Mrs. Willet was scraping some cornmeal out of a tin box on the table. She tipped the box on edge to get the last bit out.

"The last of the cornmeal, Arthur."

"Umm."

"Are you going to take the fish over tomorrow?"

"Only got about twenty pounds."

"But you'll go anyway, won't you? We'll have to have some flour."

He grunted again, still looking out the window space.

"We need so many things—don't you think you should look for a—job? The fishing's no good, and it will be cold so soon now."

"Should get better," he mumbled, without turning from the window. "Minnies 'r comin' back."

"You always say that, Arthur. And we stay so late. And then you want to trap for muskrats on the swamp. Even if you do earn a few dollars it isn't enough. And it gets so cold here. Look at those cracks in the wall. And the floor—you can see the ground through our floor, Arthur."

SHE stood holding the pan of cornmeal, waiting for her husband to speak. But he remained silent. She stared at his back for a moment and then went out. At the side of the cabin was a rough fire-box of rock, with a rusty steel grate. Removing the grate, she scraped out the accumulation of ashes with a stick and arranged some sun-bleached bits of drift-wood.

When she was about to light the fire, Charles came running around the cabin, Fanny squealing after him with a stick. Mrs. Willet stopped them.

"Here, you, no time for that! You two can go down to the beach and get some more drift-wood; won't have enough here."

Fanny dropped her stick, and the children stood looking at each other. Then they started off down the beach, Charles in the lead.

"No, Fanny," her mother called; "you stay here; I want you to go with me after water."

THE path led by the edge of the garden and beyond among the thickets. Although the tops of the trees were still lit with the late rays of the sun, the lower branches and the thickets were already darkened. Occasionally as they walked be-

tween clumps of elderberry and tangled grapes, they would be in a patch of sunlight. In one place, a long shaft of light stretched diagonally across the path, and the woman walked in it as far as she could, even getting into the weeds a little. Fanny noticed her mother's attempt to keep in the light.

"Isn't it funny," she said, coming closer to her mother's side—"isn't it funny—in the summer the sun is so hot, and you don't like it. But now you like it, don't you, mamma?"

The mother stepped back onto the path; she spoke softly.

"Yes, Fanny. In the summer we're baked. But when winter comes the sun is good." She was silent a moment and then continued. "See how brown the leaves are. Some day it will snow, and then we will go over to the town to live."

Soon they came to the spring. It was by a big maple, where water oozed out of the ground and trickled in a tiny stream toward the swamp. Charles had hollowed out a place so there would always be a pool. After dipping out a pailful, they started back to the cabin. Neither of them spoke until they reached the edge of the garden. The mother broke the silence.

"Yes, Fanny—some day it will snow, and then we will go over to the town to live."

**T**H**ERE** were days along the river when the sun was hidden by grey skies. Long lines of water fowl were beating their way southward, and big gulls flew back and forth, temporary residents during migration; some of them would stay throughout most of the winter, hunting endlessly above those cold waters. Mrs. Willet had watched them every time she looked down the beach . . . anxiously she would await her husband's return, but never would he say what she hoped. No, why should he care—he and Charles—they could go across to the town; but she and Fanny must remain in this bleak place, seeing nothing but bare trees and brown leaves blown by the wind and white birds flying above the cold river. And now Arthur had started trapping; there were two muskrat skins hanging on the wall to dry now. Smelly things—they would bring enough to buy a little food, but what about those cracks in the wall? And the stove—she had been unable to use it all sum-

mer because the pipe was rusted out. And they needed clothes and blankets. They needed so many things. . . .

She watched Arthur pull the boat up on the sand and plod toward the cabin. As he came in she searched his face for the answer to the question she thought so often but put into words so seldom. Today she must know.

"You've—you've looked for work today? And a house?" She looked directly at him. He started to turn and remove his boots, but she followed his movement, her eyes demanding a reply.

"No!" he said, and pulled off his boots. When he looked up his wife was still staring at him. "Amy, you don't seem to understand. Only a couple more weeks of good trapping. And I can earn more here than I could over there."

"Understand!" she challenged, her gaze steadfast. "How many years do I have to go through this to understand? Understand! You know it is always the same, Arthur. Already it is cold at night. Look at those holes in the wall. And you want to wait longer! I suppose you'll want to wait till the river freezes so we can go over on the ice. No, it is you—you and Charles—who don't understand." She hesitated as if awaiting a reply. But the reply did not come, and she added, "Fanny and I wait here in the cold. Yes, *we* understand."

He put on his shoes, and without lacing them, went out the door. When she looked out of the window opening, he was hacking on a short board with the hand-axe. Probably making another stretcher board for drying pelts, she thought. Understand! Yes, that was the trouble—if he could but understand, he would not be so unkind. . . .

THE nights grew long and cold. Mrs. Willet no longer watched an advancing shadow—she watched the grey horizon where the white birds came from, and the misty hills of the town across the river where the blue smoke rose in columns and greyed into the atmosphere. The dried leaves on the poplars rattled in the wind. Crows went cawing hoarsely over the hut. And the gulls beat restlessly over the choppy water. She tacked a box lid over the window space, leaving only enough opening to admit

a little light. She endured the fumes that came from the leaky stove-pipe in order to have the meager heat from the fire.

Then, one morning when she crawled out of her bunk, Mrs. Willet found that a little pile of snow had sifted through a crack in the corner of the hut. She lifted back the cloth she had hung over the remainder of the window opening and looked out. The ground was all white save where the brown stalks of the horse-weeds protruded grimly. Chickadees flitted nervously over the snow-capped twigs of the thickets.

With a set face Mrs. Willet went about her duties, first poking the fire into life.

Her husband stirred in his place on the floor. The children, on the other side of the floor, slept quietly—their blankets pulled over their heads. Willet yawned and rose to a sitting position. Pulling himself up, he put on his coat and went to the window. For several minutes he stood gazing through the opening. Mrs. Willet, her face resolute, went on with her work.

Willet turned from the window and pushed his blanket into a corner. As he turned their eyes met, but neither spoke. He returned to the window and took his pipe from his coat pocket. After knocking the bowl against the heel of his shoe, he filled it from a dirty-looking pouch. Hands in his pockets, shoulders hunched, he stood there puffing and looking out the window.

Then, taking the pipe from his mouth, but without turning, he asked in casual tones, "Anything you want from town? Guess I'll go over and look around this morning."

