

“Unlit Decembers”

Katherine Hale

Illustrated by

John Francis White

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A Story of Three Women and the Prairies



“UNLIT DECEMBERS”

By KATHERINE HALE

ILLUSTRATED BY J. F. WHITE

It was when the glow of Christmas time drew near that Selina felt the numbed uncanniness of her situation most keenly—Selina, whom a fanciful mother had named moon-fashion, because she looked “so white and kind of peaked-like.”

At thirty-five she was still white and peaked-like, despite an open air ranch life, with what the clergy call “the man of your choice,” in that persistent prairie wind—blowing health-wise and from the most approved quarter of sunny Alberta.

Selina and her husband came from Ontario. They came at the beginning of the war. Strode, his unchristian name Abel, was physically unfit for service, likewise Selina, so they bought a corner of the Grayson ranch and started a tiny truck farm, which for some time seemed to be a right profitable enterprise. It was only as this Ranch, almost deserted while its owner fought in France, awoke, on his return, into new strength and larger proportions, that the truck farm faded, that the Strodes’ plans seemed to wither, that the great Tyrant, the overwhelming prairie, began to menace them, not only in their dreams but as an actual undercurrent of their lives.

Reams have been written about the ocean and its effect upon the destinies of individuals and peoples, but little has been said of the prairie—greater, vaster, more magnetic in its earth currents, more maddening in its allure.

Selina Strode had heard its voice long ago, when a wonderful, unthought-of occurrence happened, and she was taken by a benevolent uncle on a Press excursion to Banff. She was working at the time as a stenographer in this uncle's newspaper office in a small Ontario town. She was twenty-five years old and nothing had ever seemed to happen to her in all her life. That quick whirl through the West, the first sight of mountains, the incomparable brown hugeness of Banff was the awakening of her mind. But on the return trip somewhere between Calgary and Edmonton, when a break-down occurred after most people were asleep in their berths, and, the screen-shielded window open, Selina lay alone with the prairie for two brief hours of a mid-summer night, then the miracle, which usually descends once in every human life, transpired and the soul of white, "peaked" Selina woke up and listened.

Perhaps it was not a very high or mighty happening. She remembered afterwards, indeed, that it was punctuated by many snores from a fat man overhead. But it was her baptismal glimpse of immensity. At first the ceasing of grating wheels and the delight of swaying creakily into the darkness brought only a sense of unusual quiet. Gradually there awoke a long, low murmur of insect life, penetrating the stuffy sleeper. Then the wretched rumble of the fat man's snore. Silence again. Then, as the mid-summer chorus grew upon her consciousness, she raised herself on her elbow and peering into the darkness, suddenly beheld the moon rise out of a cloud and send a spear of light out over a limitless sea of grass. And yet not grass. Not the July green Ontario carpet that she knew. Not that, but something—a great undulating, naked but hairy line of the very body of the Earth itself, the Earth all alive and full of hidden possibilities murmuring in its sleep. The murmur seemed to her rhythmic—almost like the sound of a great unconscious cat. And occasionally, across the murmur, a sigh—a long sigh, like a wind—but no wind she had ever heard before—and in the sigh which heaved that great living grassy line there was a call—an invitation, as though Immensity had deigned to unveil itself for one moment to a weak little mortal and say, "Come and forget yourself—be lost, my child."

And, just when the mystery of the thing was pressing into her very being, lanterns were twinkled along the side of the sleeper, there were hoarse shouts and orders, and the great Express slowly gathering energy unto itself, shot away Eastward.

But Selina never forgot those hours, and when, five years later, after another arid interval of typing, Abel Strode informed her in a burst of confidence that he thought he'd go West and settle somewhere near Edmonton, her sudden flush and palpitant interest were so unexpectedly alluring to him that he thoughtlessly proposed to her on the spot, and she exultantly accepted—recalling that long sighing grassy length of the wonderful side of the Earth, and all the half-remembered, half forgotten dreams of a mid-summer night. While Abel thought “It’s awfully lonesome to go out there with a bunch of fellows and their stories. Me for a place of my own, and a family.”

That was five years ago. A place was obtained for rent through Phil Grayson’s manager. Returned men did not trouble them. But there was no family.

Selina enjoyed watching their shack grow up, and novelty satisfied her for the first years. Then over the plains the rim of a purple foothill beckoned her perpetually.

The prairie, sometimes compared with the ocean, is animated by different ends. The ocean is masculine and the prairie is feminine. It makes so many promises, throws so many flowers, fulfills richly and has demoniac ways. The first windstorm nearly paralyzed the Strodes. It seemed to them the epitome of everything cattishly violent.

“It wouldn’t have mattered so much about the cow shed,” moaned Selina, “but to take my one little cherry tree and uproot it as if it were a geranium,—that’s what I call unkind.”

As time went on, the isolation of the great snow-wrapped plains filled them, not so much with wonder, as with ennui, and with an insane desire for the things that were now impossible. They felt a sudden interest in music, the theatre, the visits of friends—all sorts of things that, quite at their hand in kind populous Ontario had been unconsidered, for neither of them were of the social order of beings. They were both indeed of that material so universal, yet so seldom depicted, whose desires are as weak as thin grasses, easily swayed by a prairie wind.

Yet the little truck farm had yielded a living. Then the Graysons returned from abroad, and it was as Christmas drew near, the work that kept them busy all summer completed, life withdrawn to the interior of a commonplace clapboard house, faint winds baying far over the rim of the prairie, blue-

white snow drifting down, the long stretch of winter desolation upon them, that Selina felt the numbed uncanniness of the situation most keenly.

They were facing an uncertain future. Already in the late fall the markets that had eagerly seized their produce during the lean years of the war were discussing with enthusiasm the prospects of the Grayson Ranch.

“Yes, Sir,” said Robson of Midway’s General Store, “Phil will make things jump next season! Guess what he’s been doing since he was demobbed! That kid has been hobnobbing with engineers, visiting show ranches everywhere, and he’s got what he calls a new staff coming on in March. Big doings then. You’ll have to fight for your little market, Mr. Strode.”

And Selina had an encounter. She had driven into the store with the butter which, usually quite passable, was “off color” in Mr. Robson’s opinion. And while they were agreeing on this point there was the rapid entrance of Mrs. Grayson, dexterously managing her small car, perfectly dressed in exactly the kind of superior coon-skin coat that ought to, and does, fit prairie life, a tinge of sunburn and a look of youth about her, and that irritating, perfectly-poised composure and strict economy of word that is the hallmark of the prosperous.

Then the jocular Robson said to the newcomer as the women exchanged greeting:

“I guess Mrs. Grayson can give this lady a line on the butter question. She’s in trouble, and you’re an expert on these things.”

Selina, instantly on the defensive, met a smile from her neighbor and the admission that she found butter-making rather fun. “I’m not an expert though,” she added, “I’m just experimenting.”

“Mighty good experiments so far,” said the urbane tradesman.

“Oh well—I try everything,” then, to Selina; “I’m sure you love your farm! Aren’t you coming to see us some day? We’ve a lot of things from France to show you.”

She turned to her purchasing, stowed the things in her motor and was quickly out of sight. “There’s a woman!” said Mr. Robson with a sigh of respect. “When her Country calls her she volunteers. That same has driven an ambulance over Flanders Fields, in the midst of dangers. And when I asked her—I couldn’t help it, Mrs. Strode, the idea took hold of me so—when I asked her if she had seen ‘the Crosses row on row,’ she says to me, ‘if you mention a poppy, I’ll die,’ just like as though she was trying to make

a joke. But I don't keep this Post Office for nothing. Why, that woman gets dozens of letters from France about every week, and she was in the papers all right, the things she done when times were the very hardest. Her picture was in an English paper, Mrs. Strode, and the Edmonton 'Times' copied it—but you seen that—I remember I showed it to you. Well, now, guess what she's been doing since she went up to those mountains in Switzerland, all along of a story she heard about a new butter process! Instead of a rest she went up there and she worked some more! She says we've got to get back to the ranch business—just as if it was all in her own hands, the working of that big place. Queer, ain't it, with Phil so prosperous?"

Selina thought it over at home that night, with the wind yapping outside, and the snow coming drifting in the crevices of the house.

Over the edge of the fields was the great low-roofed Ranch House, gas lit, furnace heated, hung with soft Persian rugs that covered the walls as well as the floors with designs more suggestive and enchanting than any pictures. A grand piano stood where the fire light fell upon it in a great living-room lined with books. More books and papers came to them by every mail, for these people had conquered the prairie years ago. Out of the West they had beckoned the East and it had obeyed. But they, the Strodes, they had only been beckoned, had followed a call that they did not understand, had struggled with an invitation too strong for them. Five years had passed in which passion had died, ambition was failing and life meant a getting along somehow.

At home, this week before Christmas, the little Ontario town would be all aglow, holly wreaths would hang in the shop windows, and the friendly people of the place would be choosing Christmas cards and gifts. That strange almost forgotten spirit, Expectation, would be in the air.

Expectation! That was the keynote to this Christmas time, this far off glow, this brightness that was composed of remembered things more than of the present. Selina recalled her commonplace youth, yet even into it the magic of some unforeseen event used to spread its wings in those early winter days. Back to her consciousness came two lines that she had read long ago:

“How brightly gleams in Life's unlit Decembers,
What love remembers!”

“Unlit!” that was the secret of her life and Abel's. To have probed the why of it would lead a long, long train of thought back to that mid-summer

of years ago. They had desired to escape monotony, yet had neglected even to light a friendly lamp.

“I told you about Mrs. Grayson, at the store. She asked me when we were going to see them.”

“Why don’t they come to see us?” returned Abel, “they’ve got cars enough, and they don’t mind running them over the snow ruts either.”

“Of course they did come, before they went overseas,” she reminded him. “We’ve never gone there, except that one time they asked us to tea. I mean we never called.”

“Called!”—It had a strange sound, harking back to pre-prairie days.

“Don’t know that I care to,” said Abel.

“Why not?” she insisted.

“Oh, I don’t know. Their kind make me tired. They know it all, they’ve done it all, they’ve got it all, too. Easy enough to buy land here when they did and get things going on a grand scale, when you’ve made your start—”

But he never finished his sentence, because the honk of a motor horn sounded just outside the window, and the door was loudly, peremptorily rapped.

“Say,” shouted Phil Grayson, as he burst into the sitting-room, “can you drive a car, Strode? Can you drive like the devil through the snow?”

“I can’t drive any way—never had a car.”

“Good heavens!” he was interrupted, “then I’ll have to go after the doctor, wherever he is, and there isn’t a man to leave on the place in case of emergency. I’ll have to take you with me, and send you back with medicines if the doctor isn’t there—and I’ll press on and find him. There’s an awful storm coming up.” Turning to Selina, “Could you go to the house with me and help my wife? Mrs. Davids, the cook, you know, she’s fallen on the ice and broken her leg and—she’s in mortal agony. I had sent Davids to the City yesterday. My wife’s alone,” he repeated, “can you folks come right away?”

They hurried into wraps, they piled into the waiting roadster, and in five minutes Selina was deposited at the Ranch House and the men were away.

It was a strangely brilliant place to her lamp-accustomed eyes, a big echoing empty house as she ran from one room to another following her instructions: “right through to the back.”

Off the kitchen was a large, half bedroom, half sitting-room, and on the bed a woman who swayed to and fro in pain and fear.

It seemed to Selina, who did not take in the entire situation at first glance, that the rancher's wife was living up to her reputation of sheer efficiency coupled with her (Selina's) own conception of tyranny, for she spoke to the woman in a series of short orders, very much like those that a superior officer might have used towards a negligent and helpless private. "Don't move . . . when you stir it's harder . . . yes, I know . . . It's bad but it might be worse. See, here's Mrs. Strode." To Selina, "I thought you'd come. Can you keep the fires on and the water boiling? There's wood in the kitchen and in the living-room." To her patient again: "Don't cry Kate . . . Yes, I know. But he'll soon be here. Oh, you mustn't move . . . No, no, it's just the leg . . . keep still."

And on and on she spoke in a peremptory round of admonition, into which no strain of tenderness was allowed to enter. She was full of resource, this Mrs. Grayson. "She knows lots of things to do," thought Selina, as through the hours she fetched and carried with a despatch that was the result of orders given in few words. Selina worked, but Alice Grayson sat immovable, holding her patient in a certain position so that the broken leg should not be disturbed. But the patient's cries continued.

The December night wore on. It was wind-circled, snow plumed, tempestuous. The house, blazing with lights, seemed like a solitary futile torch rearing its little flame in a vast wilderness.



From the doorway, Alice Grayson called Selina sharply: "Come at once, will you? I need you."

"It seemed so queer to hear her cry," Alice Grayson would exclaim, "she's such a jolly soul. Always laughing. And she never thinks of the future. I made all her arrangements to go to the hospital next month. She said it would be 'like a holiday.' She is of the kind that don't know what pain means. Well, we've got to manage somehow, you and I, if our men are snow-bound all night."

And Selina, trembling with fright, tried not to show it in her acquiescence. The whole thing was so unreal. She, who had never been present at birth or death, might presently be called upon to meet both these austere friends. She suddenly awakened to a feeling of intense excitement. The house was visited by insistent voices, the rising tempest without, and the cries of the woman within. She was alone with another woman to meet the greatest of emergencies. And yet there came a sudden flooding warmth, a lightness of heart, an emotion that she had thought forever lost—a return of the great gift, Expectation. As she moved to and fro, heating water in the

nearby kitchen and throwing fuel on the great open fireplace of the living-room, she was intensely aware also of the quiet young figure who sat so motionless holding the tortured woman in just the right position for her ease.

A clock somewhere struck eleven. The telephone, silent all evening, rang suddenly. Selina rushed to it and heard Grayson's voice at the other end. "Our car is snow-bound. We got the doctor. We're on our way, driving. Tell my wife to look in the medicine supplies and get a powder marked '24.' It will give her relief. This is by the doctor's orders. We ought to be there in an hour."

A godsend!" they sighed, as the magic of the powder took effect and the woman became relaxed and drowsy. "I think I'm frozen," Alice Grayson added.

They huddled in shawls and rugs, afraid to leave the room for the greater warmth of the fireplace. Once Mrs. Grayson rose to fill hot water bottles and, embracing these, they felt a slow warmth return. Selina looked towards the half-conscious woman.

"It's hard to realize how many women go through this, as a matter of course. It would kill me."

"And to break one's leg suddenly is rather a complication," replied Alice.

"Yes, but Mrs. Grayson, such pain, even if you're as strong as she is, seems so horribly cruel, in a way so unnecessary. You must have felt that, with all you saw of misery in France."

"You forget the danger!"

"No, I'm thinking of it."

"Are you?" This, rather wonderingly. "I didn't suppose you knew what it meant."

"I don't understand."

"No, that's it. You don't understand. You can't, at all, if you've never touched it, or never even wanted to. Lots of people are like that I know."

"Like what, Mrs. Grayson?"

"Why—strangers in a way—people who go with the rest, but don't really belong to these terrible things of life—don't care to belong. . . I mean because it is dangerous to care. It gets you into trouble. That's what I kept seeing and feeling over there, and queerest of all, how everybody, even the

strangers to life and death and pain and shock were willing, after the first plunge, to endure everything because they began to realize how fine a thing danger is. It wakes you up. It lights you . . . see, she's stirring . . . Perhaps we ought not to talk."

"I'm a rather old stranger in this life," said Selina, "I'm thirty-five, older than you, a good deal."

"Oh, my dear, I was quite old at twenty. That's when I got my first glimpse of danger. They actually told me I had incipient tuberculosis and that I mustn't sing for my living—didn't know how long or how soon it might take me to die, as a matter of fact. And here I am, nearly thirty, and having a beautiful time. After the first queer feeling you wouldn't be without that queer sense of uncertainty for anything. You have to hurry so with your life to get things done before a something that may happen, and you live on tiptoe, and you're reckless. And when you're reckless, every splendid thing happens. I've had, and done, more in my life, so far, a good deal more than a healthy person ever could. You see it's all a hazard—a sort of wonder—and if you've never met wonder, I'm sorry for you."

"I did once," said Selina. She thought of the prairie at midnight. But when her companion looked inquiries, she shook her head.

"I suppose you mean a wonder like this," motioning towards the stirring patient. "If you ever touch that, then I do envy you. That is the best danger, the brightest one, from which I am barred. Fancy losing that . . . Do you know what the soldiers liked better than anything on earth? It was songs, stories, odd recollections of children. In the hospitals at the recreation places, everywhere it was the same thing. If a man was married then the first question was, 'Have you got any children back home?' And you knew he wasn't exactly pining to hear about your children, but to talk about his own. And if he wasn't married and he wanted to draw you out, it was the same thing. 'I suppose you've got a family hidden away somewhere?' I never felt so poverty stricken in my life. I used to laugh and say 'No, but I've got a husband, and a ranch, and a hundred chickens,' and so on. They tried to be interested, of course, but they weren't really. Even fighting was tame compared to the dangers of a family."

"That's a queer way of thinking of it," said Selina.

The clock struck twelve. There was a sound of doors opening, and with the coming of the men a wild hungry breath of the snow-filled prairie entered the warm house.

The doctor came into the room.

Selina went into the living-room. The two men were standing within the area of the blazing fire, stretching out their numb hands but too cold to venture near enough to thaw out at once. On the high wooden mantel holly wreaths were laid, and above it Andrea del Sarto's Madonna looked down, bearing the south in her gaze.

Grayson asked questions eagerly, already he seemed to have thrown off the inertia of the endless bitter drive. But the cold enveloped Strode. Looking from one to the other the word lying in the back of her mind, recalled this evening, rang over again like a dull chime—the word “unlit.”

From the doorway Alice Grayson called Selina sharply: “Come at once will you? I need you.”

Christmas morning always brings toys. If we are two or twenty, seven or seventy, to the richest or the poorest of us it brings a toy. But if your mother breaks her leg and you arrive unexpectedly, if the prairie beckons a tempest and the two remain inseparable, oblivious of the Day of the Child, what then of a gift to greet the newly born?

The clock struck eight. A truly Western breakfast party assembled in the great living-room. There were the Graysons and besides them, Davids, the father, who had blown in the night before, more by the good graces of his horse than his own cunning, and who was serving the meal like the good army cook he is. There was the English Lieutenant, whom he had been sent to meet, the doctor still storm-stayed, the Strodes, and half a dozen dogs rescued almost frozen from the kennels. There was a glory of firelight, a great steaming of coffee and sizzling of bacon and eggs. There was joking and jollity, and the barking of dogs, and the laughter of folks who had had good sleep after long strain.

“Davids, your son is to receive gifts this Christmas morn,” announced Grayson. “I hereby present one cow, in lieu of the proverbial spoon—Holstein—and we'll see that she's a good one.”

“Oh, now Mr. Grayson!” protested Davids.

“Yes, Davids, and I shall set him up with a rooster and two hens,” added the lady of the ranch.

A wail in the distance was considered appreciative by the company.

“I made him a rattle,” said the young soldier, producing a strange effect of clothes-pins and bells, much jeered at by the doctor.

“Mine is at home,” added Selina.

“I’d like to know what it is,” volunteered her husband. “We don’t seem to have toys of any kind at our place.”

“It’s something you’ve never seen,” she said laughing, and hesitated as she found the whole breakfast table listening. “You see I only had a real birthday party once in my life. It was when I was ten, and my mother was alive then. She loved beautiful things, and she found somewhere the sweetest little candle-holders for my cake. They are of silver filigree. I have kept them, and some of the pink candles. They seem to me more lovely now than they did even then. I have never taken them out of the box where they have lain for years, and they are in a trunk with some other things that I thought too precious for a prairie shack. That’s where I made a mistake. Anyway, Davids, I shall bring a pink candle in a real silver filigree holder to your baby.”

This appealed to Davids even more than the Holstein and the chickens or the rattle.

“It’s a funny thing,” he said, “how presents will come along at Christmas time, whether you’re in the way of cities or just about buried in the snow and far away from other folks, like we all are out here! Certainly, that kid’s done well this morning, and the missus and I are obliged to you—and for all the trouble you took for us. You certainly have been the real thing—all of you.”

“What’s Christmas but a birthday?” sang the hostess gaily.

A little later, the two women stood at the window, looking out on dazzling fields, across which sun rays ran like brilliant, laughing waves.

“I love the prairie—from here,” said Selina, looking less peaked-like than ever before in her life. “And I feel somehow as if I were having a birthday too.”

“Let’s both have one,” said Alice Grayson, “let us join forces and go on together a little way. This place is so big, it means that people should come together, so that they can look it square in the face and not be afraid. Suppose that you two move into this huge house for a while, and help us. Together you and I can plan many things to work out in the spring, and you will go back to your own farm with new vim. The prairie is no place for separate aims. It has wide arms, and sometimes it seems to me to be calling aloud to a multitude of associates. It needs a thousand thousand friendly hearth fires to light it up.”

“This shall be a birthday,” echoed Selina.

Expectation again flooded her, she heard the eternal call of a wonderful, wide, unpeopled world, but this time, as again she listened, in her thoughts she also lit pink candles one by one.



TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

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[The end of “*Unlit Decembers*” by Amelia Beers Warnock Garvin (as Katherine Hale)]