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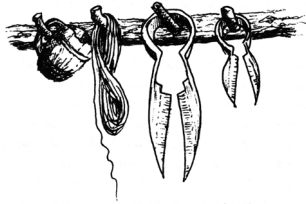
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*When icicles hang by the wall,
And Dick the shepherd blows his nail,
And Tom bears logs into the hall,
And milk comes frozen home in pail,
When blood is nipp'd, and ways be foul,
Then nightly sings the staring owl,
Tu-whit;
Tu-who, a merry note,
While greasy Joan doth keel the pot.*

*When all aloud the wind doth blow,
And coughing drowns the parson's saw,
And birds sit brooding in the snow,
And Marian's nose looks red and raw,
When roasted crabs hiss in the bowl,
Then nightly sings the staring owl,
Tu-whit;
Tu-who, a merry note,
While greasy Joan doth keel the pot.*

Love's Labour's Lost, William Shakespeare

March



*Yet winter seems half weary of its toil
And round the ploughman on the elting soil
Will thread a minutes sunshine wild and warm
Thro raggd places of the swimming storm
And oft the shepherd in his path will spye
The little daisey in the wet grass lye*

MARION ROLLED OVER on to her back to ease the ache in her hip. She moved slowly so as not to wake the others, but Peter, her husband, did not stir and his slow groaning breathing did not alter. She stretched out her feet, which touched the back of eight-year-old Peterkin, curled up at the end of the bed, deeply asleep. She put out her right hand, feeling for the cradle, and her fingers touched Alice's tiny hand, soft and cold as a little frog. She pushed it under the sheepskin cover.

It was intensely dark, but a mother's sleep is never deep when her infants are near. The raw night air, that penetrated the bedding, and a hot uneasiness in her stomach both combined to prevent Marion sleeping deeply. A sudden whimper from Alice awoke her. She stretched out an arm, felt the edge of the cradle and slid her hand over the cover to feel that Alice's face was not covered. She had not forgotten the horror, some years ago,

of seeing the cat heaving itself up in the cradle, stretching out tense limbs and then jumping down, leaving the already cold corpse of the baby which had earlier made it such a warm bed. But Alice's face was clear, her nose a button of ice. She slept on.

It was still pitch-dark in the cottage. There was no pale line of dawn or moonlight above the door. Marion pulled the cover, damp with her breathing, up to her face. Her nose was as cold as Alice's. Into the silence dropped a tiny clink of bark falling from a burnt log, indicating that the fire was not out. Peterkin, still curled up at her feet, breathed more heavily. Peter, a lump rolled in blanket at her side, moved slightly, altered the tone of his breathing for a moment, then subsided into silence again. There was a faint rustle of straw and a thump from the goat, the other side of the partition. Silence again, and perhaps Marion dozed until another whimper from Alice, almost a wail, woke her. But Alice quietened at the touch of her mother's hand. A dream, perhaps a nightmare, had frightened her, and Marion lay wondering what forms fear and horror might take in the mind of a two-year-old child.

The unease in Marion's stomach continued and she wondered whether she should attempt to relieve herself. The thought of rising into the chilly air, of going out into the icy dark was very unpleasant. They had always been against adults defecating in the cottage. Perhaps she should wait for the dawn, but no bird in the forest had tried his voice and the cock on the other side of the partition had not even croaked, so dawn could not be imminent. Drowsy but undecided she lay still.

Suddenly Alice gave a yelping cry, a choking cough, and a loud wail. Marion slid out her hand again and encountered warm slimy vomit, which seemed everywhere round the child's face. Instantly alert to the danger of a baby choking to death, she sat up, pulled away the feather quilt, which seemed sodden, and picked up the wailing child. The cheesy smell of the vomit was increasing her own queasiness. She felt Peter heave and turn over.

'Alice has been sick,' she muttered.

He grunted and lay still. Alice continued to cry as much as before. After a while Marion sat on the edge of the bed holding Alice on her lap and wiping at her with a handful of straw from the floor. Peter heaved again.

'Put her back in the cradle, she'll soon go off to sleep,' he said.

'The quilt and the straw are probably covered in sick – the quilt certainly is. She'd freeze.'

Peter could not sleep with the wailing child, so he sat up. He pulled their blanket over Marion's shoulders.

'She'll quieten down soon,' she told him, trying to reassure herself.

'Get back into bed with her,' Peter said. 'You're getting too cold yourself.' Marion continued sitting and nursing the smelly bundle. 'Come,' Peter urged, 'roll her up in the blanket and keep her on your side of the bed. She'll go to sleep again. You can clean the cradle in the morning.'

In their fourteen years of marriage they had had many babies, who had often been sick in the night. He was used to it.

Alice's cries became more intense, as though they were being squeezed out of her twisting body, and then there was more choking and Marion felt the warm wet of another flood of vomit down her front.

The blanket dragged on her shoulders as Peter heaved himself up and edged past her on the bed. 'Want a light?' was all he said, and then she heard his feet in the straw and his fumbling under the shelf for the bellows. Tibtab, who usually slept on the shelf, was wakened, and fled with a tiny mew. Peter began to explore with puffs from the bellows some places on the logs which might be brought to incandescent red.

The vomit seemed everywhere. Marion, wiping in the dark with little bits of straw, tried to hush Alice's cries. She wondered how the little body on her lap could have contained so much.