

# ALONE IN THE HOUSE

THE wind lashed the grey waves into such fury that the cluster of houses under the hill was barely out of their reach: white froth curled over the side of the road towards the windows that were just lighting up, and sank back in a clatter of dragging shingle, springing again, sinking again, endlessly.

Shrinking as far from the sea as she could, a woman made her way from the group of warm lights to where her empty house stood alone on the rise. The smoke from twenty chimneys whirled over her and fled upwards to join the racing scud. Only her windows were unlit, and her fire dead. It was a cold and unwelcoming house, but Elsie Crabbe was glad to reach its shelter, and fasten the strong door behind her.

She was the only woman in the little fishing village who would be alone to-night; the others all had their men with them. The boats had come in that afternoon, when the gale began, and the last one in told her the same story as the first. Tom could not get back to-night. He was too far down the coast.

The fishing had not been good lately; the spell of fine weather had lasted too long, and the water was so clear that often the men could see the fish swimming under the boats. Out on the South Bank they had no luck at all, and Tom, always anxious to do a little better than the others, had left the fleet and, gone down to Boat Harbour. He had been gone half the day when the storm blew up, but the others knew he would be safe, for the grounds were only 10 minutes' run from the Harbour heads and Tom was too good a seaman to take risks with a stormy sea. No easterly that blew could harm him there, but it could keep him bottled up till the storm was over.

"Even if the wind drops," old Harry told her, "the seas are too bad now. He'll have to stay there."

And his wife joined in. "Better come and stay the night with us, Elsie. You'll be lonely up there in this storm."

But Elsie would not. She was newly married and unused to being left alone in the house; but she did not want to spend a night away from the house that she and Tom had made. She would feel nearer to him alone in their own home; and in some way she could not understand she felt that the bond between them would be broken if she went anywhere else.

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WITH the door securely fastened against the swiftly darkening night, she set about her evening duties. Soon a fire was blazing, and she prepared to settle down, in the armchair with her tea on a tray. It wasn't as good a meal as she would have made if Tom had been home, but she took as long as possible to eat it, drawing it out to make the evening shorter. Then she washed the dishes and put them, as she always did, ready for morning. Usually, no matter how quickly she tried to do the work, it was impossible to finish it in less than an hour. To-night, as she looked at the clock she

realised that it was little more than half that time since she had sat down to supper. She looked around the kitchen to see if there was anything more she could do, but the house was so spick and span that even her busy hands could do no more. She took her knitting from the drawer and settled herself again in her chair by the fire.

The wind was stronger now, whistling in every crack, and shaking the loose board in the woodshed wall so that it banged on the side of the house. The sea was roaring with a deep, continual boom instead of the sharp, disconnected cracks of calmer nights. She shuddered to hear it, thankful that Tom was not out there at its mercy, but sorry for him cooped up in a stuffy cabin where he might have to stay for

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they were dead, though no one had said so; and she had felt a kind of pride that she had knitted the socks they wore when they were drowned. She shivered at the thought now. Knitting socks for men to be drowned in.

The needles glimmered in the firelight as the second sock took shape, and the regular, monotonous movement had begun to make her feel drowsy, when a new, slight sound outside woke her abruptly. She listened intently, but nothing could be heard above the howling of the storm. It must have been



Slowly the door swung back

days. She did wish he could be here with her. They loved to sit in warmth and comfort in the little patch of light from the lamp while the storms raged outside; and she had grown so used to his presence in these few short weeks. She was a little bit nervous, not afraid exactly, but anxious for the storm to abate, so that she could hear something other than the noises it made. She would have to ask Tom to fix that board when he came home.

She piled more wood on the fire to make the room lighter, and moved the kettle over the flames so that it would sing. Occasionally she glanced at the clock, and the evening dragged on. It was useless to go to bed; she knew she would not sleep with all this noise.

Her knitting grew and grew. It was a good opportunity to get it done. One sock was finished and laid aside. She was quick with her knitting, and before she left school she had been knitting socks for her father and brothers. She thought of them now. She remembered the night of the storm when she had stayed in the kitchen with her mother and some neighbours, and how she had dozed all night, waking in the morning to see her mother sitting crying in the big chair. When she was told they would not come back, she had known

that loose board again. . . . She glanced round the kitchen to reassure herself, but the capering shadows on the walls were frightening rather than consoling; a cat would be company these nights; Mrs. Hill had plenty of kittens down on the farm; perhaps it would be possible to get one to-morrow. Still, she should not need company; she would have to spend many nights alone. There was nothing to be afraid of. Tom was safe, and she was safe, but all the same she wished the incessant crying of the wind would stop, just for a moment, so that she could hear if there was anything out there. She sat still for a few seconds, then took the candle and looked boldly into the dark corner by the dresser. Nothing there. Of course not. She laughed at herself and sat down again, turning her chair so that her back was protected by the wall and she had a better view of the whole room. As if in answer to her wish the gale had lessened a very little. Suddenly the comparative quiet of the lull was broken. There was a rustle outside and four sharp taps on the door.

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HER knitting fell softly to the floor as she rose to her feet, hesitating. If she answered she would have to open that strong door to whatever danger