

# IN GLORY GONE

MARY WEEKES

THE old house still stood, but not as the woman remembered it —its frame staunch; its clap-board sides white-washed; its window-panes crystals catching every ray of golden light.

Now its walls were grey, the grey of wood wasted by salt winds and rains, and corroding sleet, and the searing suns of Atlantic summers. Its wooden sills sagged. At the nervous grip of the woman's fingers, the loose window-panes rattled away from the shrivelled putty and fell jittering to the ground. The old house was a carcass settling into the earth. Old things must give way.

Yes, the house had had its day. What was there to mourn? So the woman mused as she stood for a little, her back stiff and straight, looking at the weather-bleached walls. She, too, was old, who once had been young and strong and proud. Only weak things courted pity.

Hardy men had the old house bred, sheltered, under its long, low, sloping roof. It had given men to the land, to the sea, to the dominion of their country; pirates, too, after the Elizabethan fashion; and women of beauty whose names graced the prows of clipper ships put out to sea, ships built by men of its ilk to command the arteries of commerce between the new land and the old. Then, it had been a house of robust life. What matter that it stood alone!

Strange that she should be the one to see the old house fall from its long, long glory; she, who used to swing so light heartedly, her pigtailed flying, upon the garden gate, trying to picture some of the bold, strange, even wild people that had come out of the old house. She used to imagine the gentler folk, too—the women; women whose beauty had been legendary in all the wide country. Beauty was women's dowry then. Well and "hearty" had the old house served its day.

Up from the road to the very doorway of the old house stood tall Lombardy poplars lining the straight driveway and rounding away to the crumbling barns; stript of leaves, almost, their long, narrow bodies bent, they creaked, and groaned, in the steady November wind. A threnody of ghosts, the song,—ghosts of rebellious men attending the death of the old house.

Still the woman remained quiet, her body taut against the decaying walls. In a vision, she remembered, used to appear the dark swarthy face of one of her forbears, and a great pride she used to take in him; he was a smuggler; his beard was black;

and he used to wear a leather jacket buttoned to his neck; yes, and hip boots. He had a skilful, quick way of jerking open the secret panels in the dark closet upstairs and shoving packages behind the oaken walls; and all the while his vessel of contraband goods swung easily on the full-tide. Never, did she think then, would the old house fail to shelter this gallant buccaneer. There would be other wide-eyed, pigtailed girls swinging on the garden gate, or leaning across the white picket-fence, to keep the legends of the old house fresh. Sad, the sentiment of youth! The old house had completed the purpose of its raising. Let its timbers fall to mould. In time all things returned to mould.

The woman was not disturbed when her foot touched a rotten sill. Ah, a sill! She looked down, and shifted away from the warped wall. At her movement, a bit of the sill, with a clump of dry earth, fell into the damp cellar. The unconscious pressure of her foot had crumbled a bit of the dead sill into dust. Yes, brown dust like chocolate, and rich. Rich!

Always at this time of the year, the old house used to be banked snug with eel-grass hauled from round the bend. It looked solid and comfortable, banked so. High and dry. Now its base was bare as only a deserted house is bare. Two of the lower clap-boards had fallen away. They were lying underfoot, cracked, shrunken, falling to dust.

A bitter chill was in the wind, which came sighing; and the mourning of the poplars continued, loud. The woman, her rich fur coat as nothing against the raw air, moved coldly through the crooked grass, which bound weeds fast to the once smooth-gravelled path; like the old house, life had gone out of her veins. Warmth? There was no longer quick, warm life in her body to hold against the world.

Yes, banked firm against winter, the old house had seemed anchored fast; but here were the rotting sills. Strength and skill of hard-muscled men had gone into the hewing of these sills. Once she'd seen men haul a great timber to replace a rotten one. With logging chain and doubletree, the old blacks—stout horses, too—hauled it to the side of the house jacked up to receive it. Her father, tall, sinewy, like all his breed, had commanded the putting in of that sill; it was on the other side of the house. The carpenter, a dour man of Scottish extraction, who wore knee boots, had cursed round, solid oaths at Sammy, the hired colored boy, for "geeing" the blacks too far. From the barrel-stave hammock, she had watched with relish the putting in of the new sill. This sill would be gone now, too, probably, with the first sills. The framework of the old house was hewn and

put together by a ships' carpenter. The house was built to last. Now it was perishing. The carpenter must have known as he hacked, and hewed, and sweated, that all things perish.

From the tall Lombardy that stood away from the kitchen-ell of the old house, a bough came cracking to the path. The woman steadied herself against the swaying tree; it was decrepit, too. Half-way up, a long, cracked limb creaked in the windy gusts. The tree was dry-rotting too.

"The earth shall perish"; so must all things perish; the old house must perish. A sea captain had built it. He was the first of her people in this part of Nova Scotia—"Acadie" it was called then. Exiled from Grand-Pré, he fought the captain of the English vessel that was bearing him from his home, put the crew in irons, and sailed the vessel into the harbour that lay below. No truer prophecy was ever made than "The evil that men do lives after them"—as Longfellow's *Exile of the Acadians* attested.

On the deep, narrow harbour below, the fitful wind curled the green racing water into white-caps, which tumbled and broke in high white foam on the rocky shore. It was sunlight, pure sunlight, sparkling and dancing in a broad path across the harbour from the rising sun to this once green-leafed poplar tree, that the woman saw. Back from the dim, distant years came the eyes of her youth.

Then, clipper ships brought rich and heavy cargoes. Porticos enclosed with glass windows had been a style in their day. Would the porticos, too, be eaten by the canker of age and neglect? There were two facing down upon the harbour, as did the houses of sea-faring men. The first portico was built by the first master of the old house; the second, with an addition, and an extra dormer window, was added by his son; fortunes had advanced. Glass doors, the porticos had had. In one door were colored panes of glass—colored to avoid the tax. They were imported.

The woman's steps had the rhythm of a march. Yes, the porticos still clung, in a crazy sort of way, to the old house; but the Colonial glass doors, paned to the bottom, hung loose. With greedy fingers, the woman slipped two of the panes—one violet, the other, amber—from their shrunken frames and wrapped them in her silk scarf. So much would she have of the glory of the old house.

Absently, she pushed the loose-hanging doors to and fro, though the cold cut into her blood—childhood memories stabbing at her; a crowded, muddled mass of things that were; her mouth was dry, and her throat was caught with pain. Once, two conch

shells had held these wonderful doors open; fast open against sudden squalls that sprang ripping out of the harbour and came riding down the hills; shells whose booming caverns held the rages of the sea; shells that had come from far-off China, in a sailing ship, which later struck a reef and sank off the coast of Sable Island. It was her grandfather's ship. He went down with it. She felt startled when her laugh rang out, bitter as the wind.

Pride had gone out of the old house forever. "Pride goeth before a fall." Even the doorsteps had disappeared. They would be about, perhaps, rotting, too, in the tall rank grass. She ought to find them and put them back where they belonged; without them, the old house was bereft of dignity. She moved about slowly, feeling through stinging weeds with her foot, but it struck only the rounded edge of a flower-bed.

Its touch faint against her foot lured her mind back to the flowers and the shrubs. In July, hollyhocks used to show brilliantly against the white, clap-boarded walls, just there between the porticos. On the kitchen side of the house grew the blue and the yellow flags, and, before they came out, when the banking was taken away, the snow-drops used to push through. The woman stooped and bent back the grass from the sagging walls. She found a root of ribbon-grass, and a scrubby bit of Old Man. She dug out a root of each, and put them in her handbag.

A squirrel came chattering angrily out of the falling chimney. The hand-hewn oaken floors would be rotting too; rotting where rain and snow dripped through from round the tottering chimneys. And a green mould would be clinging to everything, green sea-mould. The green-and-white scenic wall-paper in the big room, what about it? Would dampness and mildew have loosened it from the walls? For a hundred years, no, more, had this classic paper decorated the walls of the big room. It had come in a sailing-ship from France, a ship of her people; but now—Ah! There was no permanence to glory.

Nothing was permanent! The black marble mantle-pieces—four straight, smooth slabs of flawless marble that had come from Spain? They had been stolen, someone said. They had projected over the deep-stomached fireplaces and, when these fireplaces were faced with bricks, they still held dominance over the stylish Franklin stoves. Now tramps took refuge in this house, which had sheltered generations of her people!

Within the once strong walls of the old house, she had borne fine sons. With her own hands, had she laid out for burial the

bodies of three. The sea had taken the other two; the sea that lay moaning below, beating out its grief upon the lonely shore.

It was growing dark. Full rich memories of the old house had kept her loitering, loitering in cold that was a shroud wrapping her round. Too late to go inside; anyway there were no steps to let her up into the old silent house.

She stood away; and from the shadow of unkempt bushes she looked at the once grand house that had been a patriarch to her people. Once the old house had been warmth, light, home—her home. Now, it stood frayed, beaten, reduced to a skeleton—almost.

Yes, a carcass, the old house was! A carcass! Everything blighted! How could it be otherwise? No one had any interest in it now. It stood alone, deserted. There were no men in the family now to care for it. It would be better gone.

The old house ought to go out in glory, instead of rotting like a carcass into the earth! Pride, and love, and life, had abandoned it; ignominy, that it should rot into oblivion! The woman moved away from the crumbling house.

Presently, she turned in the quick-gathering gloom and went back. The lamenting wind was in her ears, and the heightening wail of the cadaverous poplars. Suddenly, the song was no longer a threnody; it was a *Te Deum*. From her silken scarf she took the blue and the amber panes and dashed them against the rotting sill. So had she seen her mother smash a bottle of wine on the white-painted prow of the *Eliza-Jane*. Upon the shattered glass she cast the roots of ribbon-grass, the stalks of Old Man.

Her now firm fingers touched the side of the decrepit house. Ah! It's dust, like the dust of noble women and great men, ought to be cast to the lenient winds! Cast to the green, racing sea-lanes that bore away to foreign seas, and flung to the far white sails that dipped and bellied free on the out-bound tide: out into the deep, borne on a tender wind, ought the spirit of the old house to ride, boldly and in glory, like the ships of its people, with men at the helm. Yes, men! Men that it had sired! A tongue of flame licked up and out, stabbing its side, and caressing its eaves.

A handful of rotten sill, dry earth, and warm ashes, the old woman scattered to the choral-singing winds, out over the harbour to the open seas. Erect, firm, she moved into the darkening shadows.

The old house had gone in glory.