

OLGA MASTERS

THE SNAKE AND BAD TOM

Mother and the five children were around the table for midday dinner one Saturday in the spring of 1930.

Mother had passed out the plates of potato and pumpkin and corned beef except Father's, and the children anxious to start kept looking at the kitchen door.

"Now everyone behave when Father comes," Mother said, her dull blue eyes skimming over them all without resting on anyone, even Tom.

But the children's eyes, from 12 years old Fred to Rosie the baby swung towards Tom, next in age to Fred. Tom lifted a shoulder and rubbed it around his ear.

"Tom's doing it, Mother," said Letty.

Mother was about to tell Tom not to, because the habit irritated Father and Lord knows what it might lead to when the door opened and Father was there.

"There you are Lou," said Mother bustling to the old black stove and, taking his dinner from the top of the saucepan, she set it in his place.

Father hooked his old tweed cap on the back of his chair and fixed his eyes on Rosie, who was in her high chair with her head tipped back and her blue eyes glittering with the brilliance of her smile for him that showed every one of her pearly teeth.

"That cheeky one will get a hiding before the day is out," said Father sitting down.

Fred, Letty and Grace laughed because it was wise to laugh when Father joked, and the idea of Father's favourite, beautiful innocent four years old Rosie being belted with the leather strap was quite laughable. Mother sent a small smile Father's way thanking him for his good humour. Tom was opposite Father and Father fixed his brown eyes suddenly gone hard on him, because Tom, lifting a shoulder again and rubbing it around his ear, hadn't laughed. Tom had stolen a look at the strap hanging behind the kitchen door. It surprised him the way things were always being lost in and around the house but the

strap, long and broad and shining and curled a little at one end, never strayed from its nail except when it was flaying the air and marking the children's yellowish legs, nearly always Tom's, with pink and purple stripes.

Tom felt his legs prickle at the sight of it. The old clock on the dresser with a stain on its face, where Mother had poured separator oil into the works to get it going, showed one o'clock. Tom dropped his knife and fork and counted on his fingers under the table. Two, three, four and up to eight o'clock when everyone was sent to bed. Could he stay out of trouble that long? There was once ten Saturdays in a row when Tom got a hiding. As soon as Saturday dawned the topic was whether Tom would get a hiding before the day was out. Tom ashamed and fearful would lift his shoulder to his ear, and wish for time to race away as fast as old Henry the cattle dog fled for the safety of the corn paddock from Father's blucher boot.

Tom was wishing that now, counting carefully with both hands from one to eight. He was slow at school, in the same class with Letty, two years younger, so it took him a long time. Father saw Tom's lips moving, and not with pumpkin and potato behind them. Rancour rose inside Father, churning at his innards and making him stand his knife and fork upright beside his plate with a noise like bullets from a double-barrelled gun. The young whelp! The dingo! Neglecting food slaved for under the hot sun and orders barked out by old Jack Reilly on whose farm Father did labouring work because his own place couldn't keep the seven of them. Seven! My God, he should be free to go to Yulong races this afternoon with money in his pocket and an oyster-coloured felt hat, a white shirt and a red tie. He clenched his jaws on the tough meat and snapped his head back, eyes with the whites showing fixed on Tom.

"You!" he yelled, and everyone jumped. "You! Eat up! Eat up or I'll skin the hide off you! I'll belt you raw as a skinned wallaby! S-s-s-s---" When angry, Father made a hissing noise under his tongue that was more ominous than a volume of words. Knives and forks now clattered vigorously on the plates.

"Eat up everyone," said Mother hoping to pull Father's eyes away from Tom.

"Everyone is eating up, except Tom." Grace said, looking

at Father for approval.

Father held Tom's mesmerised eyes. "Up straight in your chair!"

Tom took up his knife and fork and glanced down at the wooden bench he shared with Fred and Grace. "It's not a chair," he said, "it's a stool."

Even to his own ears the words sounded not his own. They were his thoughts and they had rushed from him like air from a tightly blown balloon pricked with a pin. Perhaps he only thought he said them. He looked around the table and saw by the shocked faces that he had. Then he saw Father who was long and lean and sinewy, grow longer as he reared up over the table. Tom scarcely ever thought of more than one thing at once. Now he only thought how much Father reminded him of a brown snake.

Father dropped his knife and fork with a terrible clatter and seized Tom by his old cambric shirt. There was the noise of tearing.

"Oh, Lou!" Mother cried with a little moan, "don't, Lou!"

"Don't Lou!" said Father, mocking her. "Won't Lou! I'll kill him!" Father had risen from his chair and it fell backwards onto the floor.

"I'll pick up Father's chair," said Letty, looking at everyone and anticipating their envy because she thought of it first.

"I'll get the strap" said Grace, feeling she had gone one better.

Father let go Tom's shirt but held onto him with his eyes, his body hooped over the enamel milk jug and the tin plate of bread. Tom saw Father's red neck running down inside his unbuttoned grey flannel. He's like a red bellied snake, Tom thought, and the corner of his mouth twitched.

"Ooh-aah," cried Letty aghast, "Tom's grinning!" She was on one side of Father, having put the chair upright. Grace was on the other side, holding out the strap. The only sound was the busy ticking of the clock.

Rosie spoke first. "I love Tom!" she cried.

Eyes swung to Rosie, and breaths were let out in shocked gasps. The words had rushed from the small sweet red mouth the way Tom's words had. Rosie too seemed shocked at herself

and looked around the table, pressing the spoon to her mouth as if to hold back more.

Eyes flew to Father. What would happen now? But Father still held Tom by the eyes, one hand groping in the air for the strap.

"Here it is, Father," said Grace and Letty moved Father's chair to make it easier for him to make his way around the table.

"Finish up your dinner first Lou, while it's hot!" Mother urged.

Father began to lower himself slowly towards his chair.

He's going back into his hole, Tom thought, and his mouth twitched again.

Eyes were on Tom so no one could shriek a warning when Father lowered himself past his chair and hit the floor with a thud.

"Oh, Lou!" Mother cried out. "Lou, are you hurt?"

"Poor Father," cried Letty, anxious to shift any blame from herself, "It's all Tom's fault!"

Mother helped Father up, pressing him into his chair, deliberately cutting off his vision of Tom. If Mother's back could have spoken it would have said, Run, Tom. Run. Go for your life. If he hits you now he might kill you. Run, run. Please run.

"Finish up your dinner first, Lou," Mother said.

Father sat with the strap across his lap.

Suddenly Rosie cried out, "Don't hit Tom!"

Oh my goodness, said the breaths jerking from Mother, Grace, Letty and Fred. Father would hear this time!

Father did. His head snapped back as he reared up. He swung the strap around the table, like a stockwhip, flicking Rosie's cheek and missing Fred who was skillful at ducking. The strap wrapped itself with stinging force around Tom's neck. Without a sound Tom leaped from the stool, sailed across the corner of the table and out through the kitchen door, leaving it swinging behind him. Even before Rosie started to scream they heard the rustling of the corn as Tom fled through it.

"Ooh-aah," cried Letty and Grace scuttling back to their places on either side of the shrieking Rosie. Rosie had flung her head over the back of her chair. Her eyes were screwed tight

and tears ran down her face over the three-cornered white mark rapidly cutting into the pink of her cheek.

"Fred should go after Tom, shouldn't he Father?" Letty shouted above the noise.

"Father only meant to hit Tom, didn't you Father?" shouted Grace.

Father took up his knife and fork again. This uncaring gesture caused Rosie to shriek louder.

"Bread, Lou?" Mother called above the noise, pushing the plate towards Father.

Father cut savagely into his meat. Rosie leaned towards Grace for comfort but Grace, frightened at Father's profile, jerked away from her. The pitch of Rosie's scream increased. Mother got up and filled the teapot at the stove. "Your tea's coming, Lou," she shouted.

The cruelly unloved Rosie stretched both arms across the tray of her high chair. Father dropped his knife and fork, seized the strap and slapped it hard across her arms.

She bellowed now like a young calf and flung the wounded arms towards Fred. But Fred pulled himself away from her and made chewing motions without swallowing, keeping his eyes on his plate.

"Take her outside," said Mother to Letty and Grace.

Grace lifted a stiffened Rosie from her chair and bore her out, with Letty trotting alongside. Rosie's arms, now marked identically to her cheek, stretched piteously over Grace's shoulder towards Mother.

"Go after that animal," said Father to Fred. "And bring him back for me to belt the daylights out of him."

"Yes, Father," Fred said and left the table. He began to run before he reached the kitchen door.

Father's eyes bored into Mother's plate with so little of her food eaten. She began at once sawing into her meat.

"I baked a batch of Brownies this morning, Lou," she said. "I'll get you one while they're all away."

But Letty and Grace were in the doorway, Rosie in Grace's arms. Rosie's hair was damp with sweat, her face scarlet. Hiccupping she looked pathetically towards Father. Grace set her down on the floor.

“Rosie has something to tell Father,” Grace said.

“Go on Rosie,” Letty said, giving her a little push.

Rosie stuck half a hand in her mouth and stared at the floor.

After a moment she removed the hand and cried out, “I hate Tom!”

Father stopped chewing and snapped his head back staring ahead. Then without turning his face, he put one arm out in Rosie’s direction. She raced for him, climbing onto his knee and laying her head against his flannel she began to sob again.

“See! Father loves you Rosie,” Grace cried.

“Stop crying now Rosie!” said Letty.

Mother fixed her dull eyes on Grace and Letty. “You two finish your dinner,” she said.

“What about Fred’s dinner?” Letty asked sitting down.

“Pass it up and I’ll put it on the saucepan,” Mother said.

“We’ll put Tom’s in the pig bucket,” said Grace importantly.

“Tom might get bitten by a snake if he’s hiding in the corn,” said Letty.

Rosie lifted her face from Father’s chest. “Yes, a big black snake might bite bad Tom,” she said.

Mother reached for Fred’s dinner. She saw Father in a sideways glance. He stretched and snapped his head back at the sound of Tom’s name. His swallow moved his red throat running down inside his flannel and turning brown at his chest.

His jaws snapped shut and his hard brown eyes darted at Tom’s place.

He made a hissing noise under his tongue.

Mother had a vision of Tom flying through the green corn.

She blinked the dullness from her eyes. One corner of her mouth twitched.