Dust and Lemonade

Isabelle Lyon*

*Iowa State College

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Abstract

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THE window was closed against the still summer heat. The air was heavy with expectancy. The old man stood at the west parlor window holding the soft lace curtain to one side with a square hand. A light footstep behind him turned his head.

"Pa, why don't you take your hat off in the house?" His wife was a small woman. Despite her age, her hair was dark-brown with reddish highlights. It flowed back from her square face in natural waves, covering the tips of her generous "Irish ears," and pinned into a softly-twisted bun just above the nape of her small neck.

"Where's Suzie, Ma?" The old man pulled the curtain further and stepped aside.

"Out back. Playing with her dolls." She squinted at the sky. "How does it look in the south?"

"Not good." His blue eyes were almost hidden as worry lined his tanned forehead and knit his brows together. "Looks like it'll be here in the next fifteen minutes to a half-hour."

His wife picked up the corner of her apron and subcon-
sciously creased a fold in it with a fingernail. "This makes the third one this week."

"Everything is dying. Now that the water is rationed, we'll probably lose the garden...." 

"I know, Pa," she patted his arm sympathetically. "Things will be mighty slim this winter — but — well," she smiled up at him, "we'll manage. . . like we always have."

He covered the small white hand on his arm with his own, tanned and work-roughened.

"Did you get the lemonade fixed? She likes it so much."

"Yes, Pa. It's like a party to her, so it's ready and chilling in the ice box."

"Good!"

"Even so, we must be careful."

The old man thought a minute, then, "How so?"

"Children seem to know what we are thinking. They . . . well. . . they sense things."

"Oh, bosh!" he teased. "More Irish folderol?"

She shook her head. "Just you mark my words," she warned, crossing towards the dining room. "I'll get Suzie."

"She paused in the kitchen just long enough to untie her apron strings and drape the cotton print over the back of the chair by the door. She pushed open the screen door.

Suzie was playing house beside the garden, with the old Indian blanket as her living quarters. The reed doll buggy stood beside it, and Suzie was rocking her baby to sleep.

She looked up at the woman beside her, and quickly raised a finger to her lips.

"Sh! Granny, don't wake up the baby. I jus' got her t' sleep!"

Carefully, she patted the small pink blanket around the doll, then hopped to her feet and clasped Granny's hand with both of her chubby, sun-tanned fists.

Granny's eyes scanned the sky. The mid-afternoon sun was hidden behind a dull, red-orange haze as a brown ridge loomed larger and closer. It rolled and clawed away from the southwestern horizon.

Brown. Everything seemed to conform to that color. The big two-story frame house once stood proud and white, but now. . . it was stripped of paint. Even the bare boards had
taken on the brownness. Trees that ordinarily rustled their waxy greenness in a soft summer breeze stood listless in the still heat — their green leaves drooping with the brown coat of dust. Bushes squatted under their wearisome brown burden.

"Granny, why is the garden sick?"

Granny swallowed at the lump in her throat as she felt time suddenly weighing heavily upon her shoulders. The garden was a wilted brownness. Even the stunted flowers at the south end of the garden had no color of their own. And the odor was the same... same as everything else. Dusty!

"It needs a nice big drink of fresh cold water, Sweetheart. And so do you. You've been playing out here a long time, now."

"But, I don' wanna come in yet. I jus' got out. An' 'sides — I jus' got Baby to sleep."

"I know, Dear," she forced calmness into her voice, "but your Gran’dad wants to see you... so hurry... and gather up your things. I'll help you get the doll buggy up the steps."

That firm tone told Suzie better than words: she was going inside... now! Reluctantly, but speedily, she obeyed. She picked up the doll, blankets, pillow, the toy baby bottle and doll clothes, and put them lovingly within the reed doll buggy.

Granny was waiting at the porch steps. Worry wrinkled her forehead and stooped her shoulders as she watched the dry brown grass disintegrate into the dirt like little puffs of smoke under Suzie's scurrying feet.

"Hurry, Dear!"

"I am, Granny! I am!"

Granny smiled. How like a wee Leprechaun she was: happy, carefree — mischievous, at times — and busy. Always busy.

Little hands grasped for the handle of the doll buggy as Granny hustled up the steps onto the big back porch and swung wide the kitchen screen door. Concentration wrinkled Suzie's pug nose. She tilted the buggy on its back wheels and, finally, with an effort, buggy and child crossed the raised threshold. Granny stepped inside. The spring chattered down-scale as the door followed her, nipping at her heels.
She turned, set the hook into the metal circle, then shut the inside door firmly and turned the ever-present, twisted steel key. Voices floated in to her from the parlor.

"Hullo, Grampo!"

"Hullo, there, Sweetmeat! Come in to have some lemonade with your ole Gran'dad?"

"Lem'nade?! O goodie, goodie!" She clapped her hands and skipped around on the soft oriental rug.

Granny stepped into the pantry. The odor of fresh home-baked bread and fruit always lay in wait to tantalize anyone who should enter. She raised the top door of the ice box and lifted the fat, tinkling pitcher away from the steamy block of ice. The lid banged shut. Granny carried the lemonade to the drop-leaf kitchen table, where tall glasses sparkled on a white linen cloth.

She glanced through the window between crisp organdy panels.

"Merciful heaven!" she breathed.

Everything outside had taken on an eerie yellow-brown hue. The pitcher clunked on the table. Granny dashed out of the kitchen as though a Pooka was after her—or she had seen the "divvil," himself.

As she passed the dining room table, her fingers plucked up a high stack of soft clean rugs.

"Pa..."

He nodded silently over Suzie's brown curls. "Now Suzie... you stay right here." Getting up from the rocker, he gently eased the child into the big seat, promising, "I'll be right back—with some lemonade for us."

"Awright, Grampo."

With deliberate slowness, he took the stack of rags from Granny and then, when Suzie couldn't see him, he raced for the upstairs bedrooms.

Granny's small body seemed to fly from window to window. Gently, she pushed aside the lace curtains. Hurried fingers pressed rags firmly over the top of the center division, then down on the sill along the window frame.

An unnatural darkness crept in. Suddenly the wind hit, with a shriek and a moan, like a Banshee wailing. It hurled the heavy brown cloud at the sturdy house. The walls
seemed to take a deep breath and brace against the onslaught as sandy fingers beat the house and scraped against the windows through the screens. Vapor-like wisps curled up from under the window barriers. Tiny clouds seeped in around the front door.

Granny quietly returned to the living room. She stepped between the tall bay-windowed bookcase and ebony-glossed Victrola, and glanced towards the rocker where Suzie was playing with her doll—seemingly unconcerned with the activity around her. Crossing over to the oak-armed leather chair sitting on its casters in the opposite corner, Granny twisted the button on the wall that divided the parlor from the dining room. With a snap, the centered overhead light filtered a soft, cheery glow through its pink silk shade. As Granny stepped towards the oak-armed loveseat, the cool tinkle of chipped ice against the sides of tall glass tumblers made Suzie peer towards the dining room.

“Oh-h-h... lem'nade! A partee... a partee,” Suzie chanted.

Sliding from the rocker, she gently lifted her doll from the seat and carried it to the reed buggy.

“Now, Dollee, you be good,” she cooed, “an' take your nap. When you wake up, that nassey-ole-dust-storm will be ALL GONE... an' ever'thin' will be all right. Then we can play some more.”

Her grandmother and grandfather’s eyebrows raised. Their blue eyes met and held their mutual question for an instant, then smiles erased the worry lines.

Her grandfather held out the tinkling glass and winked, “Here you are, Sweetmeat...”

“Thankee, Grampo! — M-m-m-m, lem’nade!”

**Haiku**

*by George Hopkins*

Set between doing
And glorifying the done.
Summer menopause