Dust of Blakmer

Lyle Abbott*
Dust of Blakmer

Lyle Abbott

DOWN in the dry, barren bed of Grand River where he was working during a September afternoon, Graham Peters ceased shoveling. With the back of his pigskin glove he brushed fresh grains of sand from the knees of his overalls, and rubbed the grit deeper into the summer wrinkles on his brow.

Around him the leaves of the oaks had no thought of fall. Like the sumac they drooped listlessly in the sun, subdued and dusty.

Where the oaks ended, Pete’s corn began, its leaves brown and rustling—its golden ears smaller than the spring had promised, but safe. Something inside Pete smiled but his face was grim. The Peters cornfield during the summer had become the talk, not only of Blakmer, but the vicinity beyond.

For the season, his crop was good. Elsewhere the earth was a sunstruck scar.
Down the river Pete heard the rattle of wagon wheels and the rumble of tin bouncing against flapping sideboards.

Someone after water.

Pete peered over the edge of the bank. Two thin bays emerged from the oaks.

It was Wilkins. Fifty yards from where Pete stood, the spring bubbled with the only good water in the hills. Around it and for a few feet back the world was green. Below it a handmade earth and stone embankment held back the overflow and formed a deep pool. For more than a month the Wilkins and the Allens and the Carters had dipped from it the water that kept them alive.

Pete took Maud by the bit and pulled the sandboat to the top of the bank. He left her standing there blowing from the pull and walked over to where Jess was working.

“Howdy,” he said. “Let me dip. You stand and fill.”

Jess clenched the pail, fumbled the strap for a moment. Then silently he handed it to Pete and climbed on the wagon.

For twenty minutes they worked and said nothing.

In spite of everything, Pete hurt inside for Jess. The summer had dulled the fire of his small eyes, although they were more bloodshot than ever. His white whiskers failed to conceal the despair of his drawn face. His slim shoulders drooped like a wet barley sack lopped over a post to dry. Each time he lifted the bucket over the lip of the tank the effort became greater.

“Let’s rest a bit and I’ll give the bays a drink,” Pete said without asking.

The bays were thirsty. It took a sharp cuff from Pete to keep Toby’s nose out of the bucket while Bill drank deeply.

Back on the wagon, Jess sat heavily on the sideboard. Pete watched him scrape enough leaves from the bottom of his leather pouch for a chew.

What a queer day it had been when they built the mud dam around the spring—he and Jess and J. B. Allen and Mr. Carter. What a strange meeting when the four of them came stalking up the creek and found him by the spring.

“Two of us are out of water,” Jess had said. “Even the holes we dug in the river bed have dried up.”

Pete had brought his black herd from the east pasture for water. They were drinking from the small stream eagerly.
“The weather’s been hell,” Pete said.
Jess squinted. His voice was threatening. “We been down the river for two miles. It’s bone dry. Pumped my well dry last week. Ben’s gave out this morning. Appears yer spring’s about the only water in the country.”
Pete smiled.
“I reckon there’s enough here for all of us if it were fixed up right,” he offered.
So they had come the next day and Pete helped them fix a dam. The five of them worked in silence. Pete riprapped the mud barrier with rocks and brush and batted it with leaves from catalogues and almanacs.
That night they surveyed their work critically as a pool began to form behind the dam.
“These hills could do with a lot of dams like these,” Pete had ventured.
The four of them looked at each other quickly. They picked up their things and left, but they’d been back with wagons and barrels and tanks every day since, just as Jess was now.
The bays finished drinking. Pete resumed his dipping.
“How’s your work coming?” Pete broke the silence.
Jess pulled the float back onto the tank and tightened the rope around the barrels. He took the empty bucket from Pete.
“We’re all going to start cutting for fodder tomorrow,” he muttered, “before the few leaves we got left blow away.”
As he fixed the sideboard Pete saw Jess eyeing his winding rows on the hill.
“There’ll be damn little corn this year. I’ll be shippin’ stock ‘fore the winter’s gone,” Jess said.
He gathered the reins in his curled fingers.
“Maybe—well, maybe I’ll have a little extra that’d tide you over.” I’d be . . .’ Pete began.
Jess slapped Toby’s rump soundly with the lines.
The wagon jolted roughly across a buckbrush thicket and into the oaks. Water splashed from the tank onto the dusty path.

II

On the eve of October Pete headed their buggy across the barnlot and into the lane. He slapped the reluctant Maud across the rump with the end of her line and turned her away from the
road to Plainville. They went instead toward the white church three hills beyond. It was a new direction for the Peters family.

In the seat beside him, Lucille sat very straight and looked absently into the twilight brought early by a cloud bank that sent dark fingers jutting over the setting sun.

She was very silent and, Pete thought, as he watched her without looking, very pretty in the red and white gingham dress. He'd made her buy it at Hillery's that morning when they were in town selling her roosters . . . her first store dress in more than a year.

"It's your money," he had insisted. "Get the right kind, and you'll have it to wear to town when little Pete grows bigger."

As they rode along Pete closed his rough hand about the tightly clasped fingers in her lap. Birds worried nervously in a plum thicket as they passed by. The fields by the road seemed tired and quiet. The dust in the road was thick and rose from Maud's hoofs to meet them in the still air.

"It's a mighty pretty dress," Pete said.

Lucille looked behind his eyes.

"What can they want of us?" she said.

"Don't know. Don't know. Maybe they want me to run for sheriff."

"You mustn't joke, Pete." There was a frightened blueness in her eyes. "They're after your crop. They'll fix to get it, too. Somehow they'll fix your having it as not legal. They'll twist it around someway."

She looked down at the white and red pattern of her skirt.

With his forefinger Pete stopped the droplet that raced down along the side of her straight nose.

"It's not that," he said. "They don't invite us to those kind of meetings."

Maud's big round hoofs pounded their way hollowly along a level stretch. Through an opening in the buckbrush Pete could see Jess Wilkins' cornfield with the cutting and shocking almost done. The shocks looked spindly in the twilight.

Something's brewing, Pete thought. Something different about the way Jess rode his horse into their yard yesterday and came up to where Pete was digging the new cistern.

Pete had leaned on his shovel and looked up at Jess standing
at the edge of the hole. It seemed they’d just stood there looking for a while, Pete waiting for him to speak.

“I’m calling a meeting tomorrow night at the church,” Jess finally said. “There’ll be wimminfolk, too. Maybe you and Lucille can come.”

Pete was puzzled.

“I reckon maybe we can,” he said.

“It’ll be at 7:00,” Jess said. Then he walked back to his horse and trotted off down the road.

Maud quickened her pace at the sight of a team and wagon winding up the hill past where the road forked. The church sat at the hill top, quiet and bare.

“Well, we’ll soon know,” Pete said.

Lucille looked at him with eyes that were dry again.

“I’m frightened, Pete.”

“No time to get scared now,” Pete said. “You just be yourself. When they see you march in wearing that new getup you’ll have ‘em speechless.”

He spoke lightly but the lines about his mouth were tight.

Outside the church it was deserted. Only the horses stared as Pete drove the buggy up beside them. He hitched Maud to the fence and helped Lucille down. They walked toward the door with his arm through hers.

When Pete lifted the latch the talking suddenly hushed.

The darkening sky made the lamplight look thin. At the front of the room Jess Wilkins stood with one hand on a high table. The rest were seated.

As Lucille and Pete stood on the threshold the men shifted and fidgeted in the flat double seats and looked ahead. But several women looked around and those nearer the door nodded, vaguely. Pete found Lucille a place near the back of the room and sat down beside her. He looked at the room and remembered, in the past that came rushing back, the huge round oak stove back of Jess that had warmed the room on winter days when he trudged there to school, and sometimes on Sundays when he had been brought to church. Most of the room was the same, only more faded. The ceiling was blacker and the seats were changed since the days when he had squirmed on the hardness of the wide oak slabs.
The big slate stood in the same spot, and the table where Jess leaned looked as foreboding as ever. Across its rough edge Pete had been held and whaled by the hickory rod of Master Milton one spring morning for being late. Through the dingy window the stern Milton had watched him stop to return a young robin, toppled from its nest by the wind, to its home. In the process of shinnying up and down the tree he tore his shirt and snagged his new trousers.

Now, at the table Jess looked back at him and cleared his throat. Jess was as grizzled as always, in his same tattered work clothes.

"We've been talking, Peters," he began, "about a lot of things we've all been discussing of late. It's been a bad summer."

Pete felt the uneasiness of sidewise glances, but looked on at the white-whiskered man at the table.

"We know there's been something wrong on our farms," Jess continued, "the years have been hard. This year we got nothing. We figure there's a reason. It's no secret your crop'll be the only one in Blakmer outside a few spots on the flats."

Pete felt Lucille's hand clutch his leg.

"I reckon there ain't much that need be said here about us and our ways. Most of us have lived here all our lives, and here's where we'll die. When we know we're right we fight for it to the last ditch."

He looked around fiercely, then became more quiet.

"But we've got to have crops and we've got to have water. There are a lot of things we've talked over. There are a lot of things we don't understand. Maybe there'll be more time to understand them later. And if in time it appears our reasoning is wrong then we'll be admittin' that, too. But right now there's things more pressing. We can't stand another crop like this one. We can't go into a winter with no more water than we got."

Jess looked at Pete squarely.

"We're meetin' here tonight to form a pondbuilding crew," he said, "and we want to stop a few ditches before it's too late. There's some things we ain't learned about building dams to hold and to keep them from filling up . . ."

Molly Carter's baby interrupted with a muffled squall.

"You've got the only scraper around," Jess continued, "and we
thought maybe if you’d like to help, too . . .” He hesitated as if waiting for Pete to answer.

Like to help? The words burst inside Pete like popcorn. The sensation made his skin prickly. His throat choked. He wanted to laugh like a madman. He wanted to take Lucille and jump up and down in the aisle.

Like to help?

He got to his feet and gripped the seat in front of him. His heart pounded against his ribs as he tried to tell them how much he wanted to help. But the words stuck somewhere in the dryness of his throat, and he made strange gestures with his mouth and lips.

While he still groped for words his audience suddenly hushed and sat erect.

Outside there came a noise like the rustling of wind in the tall grass. A breeze swept through the open window and flickered the lamp. It made queer dancing shadows on the walls. Then a rumble like the roll of a million tin drums echoed across Grand River bottom and shook the church. It was followed by a moment of ghastly silence.

There was no mistake. Rain splashed down on the parched church roof.

Regrets

G. S. Thompson, Jr.

As ages pass,
and time forgets,
I now recall
but two regrets—

That you loved me
and did not know it.
And I loved you—
and did not know it.