

Drought

By Edward M. Strauss

BENDING against the resistance of the buffeting, gray-laden air, John stumbled across the shifting soil of the yard. Blindly he threw his weight against the creaking barn door, which supported a drift of elliptical tumbleweed and gray Kansas topsoil; the pails that hung from each arm rang dismally against the cement floor as he quickly flung them down. He tore at the cotton dish towel that damply encircled his head; two round spots of gray-brown stained the dull cloth where the air had gone through to enter his mouth and nostrils. He sniffed the air cautiously, then filled his lungs slowly with its regenerating clearness.

Picking up the pails, he trudged slowly past the dust-covered harness and saddles to the uniform parallels of the stalls, which stood empty—all except one. The remainder of his stock that had withstood the first onslaught had been shipped to better grazing lands. Elsa turned her bleary-eyed head and looked at the strange figure; a dull, caked skin was stretched tautly over her gaunt frame, revealing each recess and protrusion of her ribs with alarming truthfulness;—Elsa had won that blue ribbon which now hung so satirically over the front of her stall—only last year, too. John forced her to the other side of the stall and edged up to the barren grain box. Sparingly he poured the precious gold-brown kernels into the box; a dry, leathery nose forcefully intervened, and the grain disappeared at an alarming rate.

STEPPING gingerly over the stale straw of her bedding, John paused before a web-enshrouded window that let in little shafts of light and looked out over his farm—the farm that he had moulded into a unit of modernization after returning from four years at the state agricultural school—the farm that his grandfather had cut from the wilderness. Across the flat expanse of fields and pasture land, a cone-like

air current lifted huge billows of gray silt high into the sultry summer air; with each movement, tiny streams of dust rose from the earth, twisting and dancing like fantastic figures of a horrible fairy tale, to disappear in the monotonous gray-green of the sky. A half-buried section of barbed wire fencing, like the entanglements of modern warfare, stretched drearily in front of the former barley field. On the other side, bent and twisted stalks of dry, yellow corn drooped in dismal quaverings with each movement of the air, their heads torn or buried by the dark-brown menace.

EVEN his forced "Damn the drought!" seemed to fall dully and without feeling in the heavy air. Out on the highway that ran ribbon-like in front of the house, an overloaded mattress-bulging Ford chugged feebly toward the dull yellow ball of disappearing light, its headlights poking gingerly into the curtain of dust. For the past two weeks these caravans of "busted" farmers had been moving steadily westward; the last newspaper—nearly three days ago—mentioned newly-opened lands along the Columbia. Why should they stay when rich, moist lands were to be had in a clean land of new opportunities? Why all this resistance to nature? What was there to hold him to this barren wasteland?

Readjusting the cloth over his nose and mouth, he picked up the empty pails and forced himself out into the swirling currents of the hard, sharpened particles, trudging clumsily toward the muslin-covered screening of the side door. Some of the dust had penetrated his mask, and ground harshly between his teeth with the abrasive grittiness of an old emery stone.

AS HE fastened the flapping dust curtain in place, and divested himself of sweat-caked denims, he noticed the faint rays of evening light falling in focused parallels on the convex daguerreotype that hung so importantly over the cherry-wood desk; it was the likeness of old Grandfather Larrabee—stern, fully-bearded, erect. It was he who had first broken the soil on the farm, the first in Hancock County. The light played steadily about his eyes—black, piercing eyes that spoke of suffering, hardships, and undying patience; their gaze seemed

to fall past John and center on the worn ledger that lay on the marble-topped stand. Slowly John picked up the book, and opened it to a ribbon-marked entry.

“July 27, 1871—There has been no rain now for seventy-two days, and the dirt has sifted, so that we can no longer find the stream-bed or the road. The mare and the colt died this morning, leaving a total of four chickens and the old sow. I think I will try to borrow some bacon from neighbor Bailey; a twelve-mile walk will not be so bad at night-time. It has been three weeks now since Mary passed on—at times the walls seem to close in on my loneliness. The first newspaper for nearly three months came last week; it had an advertisement for a new reaper machine—I hope I’ll be able to get one with the corn money next year—.”

JOHN closed the book with a bang; a filmy cloud of brown rose slowly toward the ceiling. He felt a deep twinge of pride surge upward along his backbone, and for the first time in weeks, his was a feeling of confidence, almost cheerfulness. Again he looked up at the rigid, homespun-clad figure; the old fellow had certainly been quite a man.

Outside, the half-hidden sun seemed to find a recess in the thick blanket of dust; streams of evening light poured over the entire farm, covering each building with unaccustomed splendor. Inside, John was intently hunched over the oil-clothed kitchen table, studying the price listings and colorful pictures of the latest seed catalogue. . . .

