

The Dust

In Oklahoma, the ploughs cut through the red earth. The rain fell and the corn grew. By the end of May, the sun was strong on the growing corn. The corn grew green and straight. The sun beat down and the earth became dry and pale. In June, the sun was stronger, and the air was thin.

Everywhere, there was dust. Every moving thing raised a cloud of dust. The dust stayed in the air for a long time.

Half-way through June, big thunder clouds moved up from Texas and the Gulf of Mexico. Men looked up into the sky, hoping for rain, but it did not fall. A wind drove the rain clouds to the north. The wind blew harder and the dust rose up from the fields. The wind blew strongly and steadily and the dust was blown away. Then the wind blew on the growing corn.

Day came and a red sun came up, but it gave no light. Men and women had to tie handkerchiefs over their faces when they went out. The night was black, because the dust hid the stars. Houses were shut against the dust, but it still got in and settled on the chairs and tables.

Then the wind passed on and left the land quiet. In the morning, the dust covered the corn, fences, roofs and trees. The people came out of their houses and smelt the hot air. Men stood by their fences and looked at their dying corn. The men were silent and the women came out and stood beside them. They looked at their men's faces. The children stood near and watched too.

After a time, the men's faces became hard and angry. Then the women knew that it was all right. The men would not give up the fight this time. The women went into the houses to work and the children began to play again.

The men sat outside and watched the dust-covered land. They sat still, planning the future, getting ready to fight back.

A large red truck slowly came to a stop on the main highway⁷, near a narrow dirt⁷ road. A young man jumped down and looked up at the driver.

‘Thanks for the lift⁷,’ he said. ‘So long¹.’ He turned away and walked on to the dirt road.

‘Good luck,’ called the driver. Then the motor roared and the red truck moved away, raising a cloud of dust.

The young man walking along the dirt road was about thirty years old. His eyes were very dark brown. His lips were firmly closed. His hands were hard, working hands with broad fingers and short thick nails.

The man’s shoes were cheap and new. His suit, new too, was of hard grey cloth. He was a tall man and the jacket was too big and the trousers too short. He looked down at his yellow shoes, then bent down and untied the laces. He took off his shoes, then his jacket. He put them under his arm and moved on up the road.

There was a thin wire fence on either side of the road. On the other side of the fence, the corn lay beaten down by heat and wind. The sun was high and the man sweated and walked more slowly. In front of him was a dusty tree which gave a little shade. The young man stood in the shade for a moment and then walked out quickly into the yellow sunlight.

The hot smell of dust filled the air. Then the cornfield ended and there was a field of dark green cotton plants. The bolls of cotton⁵ were forming and the dark green leaves were thinly covered with dust. The plants fought against the sun to live. The dirt road stretched out ahead. Dry dust filled the man’s eyes and dried them. The road dropped down a little hill and then climbed up again. The man walked on.

Hours later, the sun was losing its heat, but the air was still hot and dry. On the right-hand side of the road, a wire fence ran across the cotton field. The young man walked more quickly. He knew that fence. His father had put up the fence many years before, round the Joads' forty-acre farm.

Tom Joad went on to the top of the next hill. And then he stopped. He looked down at the Joad place¹, his old home. One corner of the small unpainted house had been crushed in. The fences had gone and the cotton grew in the yard and up against the house. The wooden barn⁵ lay on its side and dusty cotton grew close against it.

Tom stared for a long time.

No one's living there, he thought. Something's happened, that's sure.

He moved down the hill and looked into the tool-shed, next to the house. There were no tools there. Tom saw an old oilcan, covered with dirt and oil. A pair of torn overalls⁷ were hanging from a nail.

Tom moved away to the well. He dropped a piece of earth down the well and listened.

'No water there,' he said aloud. 'Maybe they're all dead. But someone would've² told me.'

The front door of the wooden house hung open. There was no furniture in the kitchen, no pots and pans. Tom Joad looked into the bedroom – no bed, no chairs, nothing. In one corner lay a woman's shoe. Tom picked it up and looked at it.

'This was Ma's,' he said. 'It's worn out⁷. Ma liked that shoe. They've moved out. Must have taken everything.'

A thin grey cat came out of the barn. It came silently up to the young man and sat down.

'Why hasn't that cat gone to some neighbours?' Tom asked himself. 'Maybe there aren't any neighbours. Maybe everyone's gone.'



A tall thin man was walking through the cotton.

Tom stared across the fields. A tall thin man was walking through the cotton, raising a high cloud of dust. Tom stared at the man's long pale face. Grey stiff hair stood up straight from the high forehead. The man wore overalls and a blue shirt. His canvas shoes were grey with dust.

'Why⁴, it's the Reverend⁷ Casy! Hey, Casy, how are you?' Tom called out.

'Now aren't you young Tom Joad – old Tom's boy?' Casy called back.

'That's me. Where's my folks¹?'

'Why, where've you been, Tom? They've moved away to the Rances' place, next farm along. Folks there moved out some weeks ago. When the tractors came. Your folks were going to stay here. Your Grampa stood out here with a rifle. But that rifle couldn't stop a tractor. So they moved on. But how is it you don't know?'

The young man looked down and moved his bare feet in the dust.

'I haven't been home for four years. Didn't you hear? I got³ sent³ to jail. I killed a man. He got out a knife and I hit him over the head with a shovel. I got seven years⁶, but they've let me out on parole⁶. My folks haven't written for two years. What are they planning to do?'

'I heard they're thinking of going west. Your Pa's going to buy a car. Folks say life is easy out west. You can pick oranges right off the trees.'

Tom looked at the broken house.

'Night after night in jail, I lay on my bunk and thought how it would be when I got home,' he said slowly. 'I knew it wouldn't be the same, but I didn't think it would be like this. Well, I'll go on to the Rances' place in the morning. You coming, Casy? Ma always liked you. Maybe you can come with us, out west. Ma'll like to take a preacher⁷ along.'

'I'm not a preacher now,' Casy said, 'but, yeah¹ I, I'm coming

with you. And when you folks start out on the road, I'll be with you.'

'We'll get some sleep now,' Tom said. 'We'll start for the Rances' place tomorrow, early.'

'I ain't² sleeping,' said Casy. 'I've got too much to think about. Now I'm not a preacher, I do a lot of thinking.'

He stretched out on his back and looked up at the stars. Tom Joad yawned, covered himself with his jacket and got ready for sleep.

Slowly the life of the night began as small animals crept out of their holes. Mice ran over the hard earth, rabbits moved to anything green and growing. Hunting birds flew silently overhead. The two men slept.

2

The Tractors and the Land

All over Oklahoma the tractors came and the people had to go. The owners of the land came first. They felt the dry earth with their fingers. The tenant farmers⁵ watched unhappily from their doorways. Then the owner men drove their cars into the yards and spoke out of their car windows. In the open doors, the women looked out and behind them stood the children. The women and children watched their men talking to the owner men.

Some of the owner men were kind and some of them were hard and afraid. They all said the same thing.

'The Bank⁵ owns the land. This land's poor. You know that. And the land's getting poorer. The dust flies away. And cotton robs the soil, takes the life out of it.'