

The Arid Month

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THE dust moved slowly across the fields, rising and falling, low on the ground, like an exhausted wanderer near death on a desert. The open hearth of the sun baked and cracked the flat grey land, shrank the yellowed corn stalks and withered the exposed roots with its hot blast.

Splitting the field, the scar of a road stretched dry and endless until it disappeared far away in the distance in the converging lines of stick and barbed wire fences. A dusty path struck off at right angles from the road and wove into a farm yard, where a weathered house, square and white, sat surrounded by the scattered shacks of chicken coops and implement sheds, unpainted and grey-white, listing to one side with cracked seams and rotting roofs. A barn, far back from the road, with pin-stripes of light showing through the rust colored boards, stood stark and alone, its metal roof glaring back at the intense stare of the sun. A long rain pipe hung down from the roof at one corner of the barn; the slight crook at the bottom, from which months before had gushed a portion of the heavy rains into the yawning mouth of the galvanized steel water tank, now gave only an imperceptible cough as the dust sifted aimlessly inside the parched throat of the vessel.

Scattered around the yard were a few trees, whose limbs listlessly supported the sleeping chickens perched in their branches. The birds drooped their ruffled and dirty wings in an effort to catch the faint breath of air that stirred the crisp leaves of the trees. An old unused buck-board, with a broken wheel pitched forward on the left shoulder of its hub, and a gang plow stood nearby, erect and firmly planted in the dry earth, with its steel blades glistening and throwing white hot sparks of reflected sunlight.

Behind the barn, the hulking, slowly heaving forms of the hogs in their sheds, seeking a refuge from the scorching heat and light, made little sound except for the deep-throated grunts that commented on the heat and their discomfort and impatience with each other.

In a field far to the right of the barn could be seen the tiny figures of men working the baler; feeding the hay into one end and stacking the bales in huge square blocks in the middle of the field. The low speed "tuk-tuk-tuk" of the tractor was the only sound that disturbed the oppressive silence of the dry air.

Stretching from horizon to horizon, diminishing the small cluster of farm buildings in the vast expanse of space, the wide sky blazed with fiery incandescence and the earth beneath panted with stifled breath. All life lay choked and fatigued with the burning fever that accompanies the long arid month of August in Kansas.