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Ellis Foote

A DAY FOR THE RAIN

OLD MA wasn't around as Tade tromped in and peered around the house, but there was a note on the table saying she'd gone to Relief Society meeting to help pray for rain, and there was mush on the stove for him when he got back from taking the water. He looked at the pot of cold mush and groaned, then turned and went out of the empty house and sat on the step. He rolled himself a cigarette and whacked a match across the tigt of his rear.

"Hell, *what* water?" he snorted.

A flock of crows cawed up from Dry Gulch. Tade turned his head in their direction and saw two men on horses riding up out of the gulch and heading his way. Squinting, he quickly recognized the men by their horses. "That one's the bishop's bay mare; the other's that old crowbait of Ors's," he mused. He flicked his cigarette away, and stood up.

The visitors tied their Mormon schooners to the fence and came up smiling pleasantly, Brother Obe in the lead. "Well, we're around Ward visitin," he said, shaking hands.

"The members a the bishopric are visitin all the homes this month," Orson explained. "Jist seein how conditions are."

Orson's face, after the pleasantries were over, became a mask of gloom. Tade reflected that he looked wearier than usual.

"Shade dry," Tade said.

Obe stood in front of the doorway, peering with one eye into the dark screen. "The Lord says where two or three shall meet, there shall his spirit be also. Mebbe we better go inside an let Sister Larsen pertake a the spirit, too."

"Glad to have you in, a course," Tade said, "only the old

woman ain't around. Went gallivantin off to Relief Society this mornin. Ain't back yet."

Big Obe opened the other eye a trifle. "By grab, that's so. Sisters meetin to pray for rain today. Well, it's exackly what the country needs." He turned and looked at the others significantly. "You want anything done right, you jist sic the Sisters onta it."

Then he started laughing. "Reminds me a the summer—what year was that, Brother Orson?—the Sisters prayin fer rain. Steam-in it up inside the meetin house till they couldn't even see out the winders. Bellyachin the Almighty till he bust a whole cloud right on top a us!" Obe guffawed and whacked his thigh. "Come late afternoon, us Brethern was all out rescuin our livestock an fixin the bridges, up to our asses in rainwater. An the Sisters still in there prayin fer more rain."

Obe wiped his eyes. "Sure hope their prayers is answered," he said apologetically.

"Well, mebbe we kin all jist set here on the step, in the shade a the bowery." He inspected the step cautiously for chicken tracks, then sat heavily, motioning the others down.

"The message we want to put across to you, Brother Tade, is to so live in this life that you may be found worthy of glory an exaltation in the nex world," Obe began. He pulled a Church leaflet from his pocket and handed it to Tade. "It says in the Doctor an Covenants 'Behold, I, the Lord, have looked on you, an seen many abominations in the Church. But blessed are they as are faithful an indore, whether in life er death, for they shall inherit eternal life. But woe unto them as are deceivers an hypocrites, for, thus saith the Lord, I will bring em to jedgment.'" He looked at Tade sternly for a moment, with one eye shut.

"How's yer crop doin?" he asked finally.

"Oh, it's all burn ta hell," Tade answered. "Won't raise a dāmn thing this year outsiden a little garden an a few loads a first cuttin hay."

"Too bad," Obe said. "Same way with me. Same way 'th all of us down here the end a the ditch."

He shook his big head. "Guess it's the same you fellers up on the bench, ain't it, Orson?"

Orson made no answer, except that a smile of "Yes, that's how it is," crossed his face, quickly followed by a look of strain.

He had been looking north toward the mountains when Obe asked him the question. He had been thinking, "I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, whence cometh my help and my salvation." But the hills were unmoved, unpitying, and heeded not; particularly, they wept not streams of water as in other years. They simply endured, remote, aloof, and were as brass; and the sky too was as brass. And the place known as Clay Basin—a clayey, or sandy, or rocky wilderness, depending where you were in it, glossed by fields and fences and houses and sheds—was beginning to show through again as it was in the beginning when God made it, sixty years ago or sixty-million years ago, or whenever it was, and not a fit place for man or beast. . . .

These thoughts were in Ors Larsen's mind, and more—a growing suspicion that God had not even made this part of the world at all; had just let it fall into being by itself—sun-washed, water-worn, wind-wiped and warped out of shape by a million strains from here to hell-and-gone. And seeing He was busy somewhere else anyway, maybe God had decided to let this part of the world stay just the way it was, on the chance it would hold and not let the world fall apart, until He was ready to build a new one altogether.

Tade swapped the Church leaflet for a jack-knife in his pocket, and reached for a stick to whittle. "I hear tell there's been a little water thievin goin on on the bench," he let fall craftily.

"That so?" Obe asked, looking up.

"Yep. Not to mention any names, but old Ben, the water master, was tellin me about it this mornin. Said it was one a the brethren." He inclined his head slightly toward his cousin Orson.

"Be damned!"

"Said they caught him red-handed. Said they seen yesterday where his ditch was wet out a turn. So they hid in the willers by

his headgate last night, thinkin he might try for more. Waited around in pitch dark, listnin to killdeers and hooten owls an mistakin night hawks for the culprit till they was all as nervous, I Jesus, as a old cow havin a two-headed calf. Well, to make the short of it, he finely showed up."

"Pitch dark, you say?" Obe asked.

"Couldn't see their hands before their faces, Ben said. But they knowed who the feller was. Stood up an hollered his name. Well, sir, Ben said, it like to scairt this here brother plumb shitless. He drop that shovel he was totin, an jumped five differnt directions right in the middle a them fellers, then skunned out while they was pickin theirselves up. They lit out after him, a-cussin worsen they was old Ors here preachin at a unbeliever's funerl, but they never could ketch im. Still, he said they knowed who it was."

Obe tittered. "You say they didn't ketch him, though, right outen out?"

"Well, no—no moren they called his name an he lit right smack-dab in the middle a them fellers, the biggest quorum a just one scairt an fightin-mad elder they ever come in contack with. Then he struck out through them willers, scratchin like a tomcat."

Obe was relieved. "I wouldn't think they caught him red-handed, in that case," he said. "What do you think about it, Brother Orson?"

Orson was slow and careful in answering. "I wouldn't say it wasn't one a the brethern, an I wouldn't say it was. Neither one or the two, till I hear the whole story. Could a been, but on the other hand—." He paused, then went on ruefully. "People always knockin somebody in the Church. Seems like the harder a man tries to do good, the harder they knock him."

Big Obe nodded his head; Tade ducked his.

"Way I figger it," Orson continued, "it was one a them Greeks up there on the bench. They're always stealin water. Bribe old Ben with Greek wine so he won't say nothin. Somebody else hol- lers loud enough, Ben'll finely drag em in an they git fined a hun-

derd bucks or so an let go. Sons a bitches already had a thousand dollars worth a water, though. Fine crops ever year.

"No, if old Ben and his cronies hadn't been tanked up on Greek wine they'd seed who it was, dark or no dark. I don't think it was anybody in the Church."

Obe took long and prudent counsel of his thoughts, then leaned forward and spat.

"Well, I kin see how a man might a done her, Brother Orson," he said. "Way I figger it, a man jist stands there an can't figger what to do about her—his crops a-burnin up an water goin by in the ditch, an him a member a the Church in good standin. He gets to lookin at that water an thinkin how many times he's hepped the Church an everybody out, an he don't suppose the Lord or anybody'd mind now if he hepped hisself a little; that is, if they knowed all the facks. So he aiges the headgate up a little some night an looses a tiny stream through, which mebbe gits higher if nobody ain't lookin. That's the way I see her."

Orson raised his head and looked nervously at the hills again.

"But I don't figger it was anybody in the Church either, Brother Orson." Obe continued softly. "Not by any stretch a the imagination. It must a been one a them Greeks."

Tade doubled up his knife and slid it back into his pocket. "I kind a figgered it might a been one a them Greeks all the time old Ben was tellin me," he said sheepishly.

"Well, anyhow," Obe went on, "it jist goes to show you, to some the light is given and to some the light is not given; an it behooves all us who has been given the light to live up to its teachins. A man, no matter who he is, be he Mormon, Jew, or Gentile, kin do most anything he wants in this life; an sometimes he gets away with it an sometimes he won't, but—" he waxed prophetic, looking one-eyed out into seething, heat-spiralling, blue space over the scorched hills—"the hour cometh an I tell you it ain't far off when things is goin to be a blame sight differnt. I tell you brethern right here an now, an lay it on the line, an bear

you my testamony, that I know beyond the peradventure of a doubt that the fullness a times, as mentioned in scripture, is about ketched up with us. An it behooves all a us—like you, Brother Tade, an Orson, here, an me—who ain't mebbe none of us what we're cracked up to be, to get our cracks up there where they ought a be.

"Fer soon the righteous 'll have their reward, as the scripture says, an the wicked 'll be burnt up like stubble."

Tade lifted his head and looked out over his grain-field. "Well, that's a fact, Obe," he said.

Obe shifted uncomfortably. He had felt for a moment as if he were that Obadiah mentioned in the Bible, or some other prophet. But now he realized he was only Obadiah A. Miller, the ornery, loud-mouthed, raggedy-assed shepherd of a wayward flock away out here in the wilderness, and all-to-hell honored in the calling. Only old Obe, as everyone called him; a man less concerned with prophecy than profits for himself and his people; a humble and distressed man now, whose crop, like all the rest, was out there burning.

He stood up.

"Well, I reckon we best be gittin on," he said. "You ready to shoot fer rain now, Brother Orson? You're the orator around here."

Orson arose, rebuked, meek, tall, with sagging shoulders. He wiped his eyes with the heel of his hand. A flustered smile again crossed his face. "Any time you say, Bishop."

"Fire away, then, Orson; an see ef you can't place a dent in her up there." Obe placed his hands behind him and closed his eyes. Tade rose stiffly from his haunches.

"Let us pray," Orson said. He raised his right hand, closed his eyes, and swallowed the lump down in his throat; then began low.

"Our Heavenly Father, we approach thee in humble supplement, that thou wilt hear us an grant us this day accordin to our needs. We pray that thou wilt remove the bars from before the

fountains a heaven, an open up the headgates an let thy waters pour down in great abundance over this wilderness. Let it rain in the mountains an collect in big torrents in the canyons an come a-rollin down into the lakes an rivers an fill up our reservoys. Let it rain in the hills an on the flats an benches, an in the fiels and pastures, until not one square inch a ground in this whole country shall be left dry, an ever dyin an wilted thing in this whole land, from the baldies on the north to the badlands on the south, shall be revived an receive new life an lift up its head again. Let it rain until ever ditch in this whole country is full a water, an none a us needs to worry about whose turn it is."

"Amen!" Obe burst out. "That's a-givin it to her, Ors, by grab!"

Orson was sobbing. He waited to gain control of his feelings before going on.

"This is a hell of a country, Heavenly Father, which thou hast given us to magnify an replenish; an it ain't here like in some a thy choicer vineyards out around Salt Lake an Provo where thou hast established some a the favored, an hast blest the land, an the land is fruitful an perduces in great abundance. This here land ain't flowin with milk er honey, er anything but rattlesnakes an grief; an so hot sometimes even the lizards has to hop along the ground holdin to a stick, a-screamin ever time their tails touches the ground. This here land hates people an their animals an crops like poison an just wants to be left alone.

"Why, I remember, Heavenly Father, the first I ever knowed my wife to swear, to speak of, was right after we left Provo fifteen years ago an come out here to settle. She moped around a whole day, not sayin a word. Then next day she says to me, 'Damn a man who'd bring a woman to such a God Forsaken Country.' An it's the truth, Lord; it's the truth. This here land ain't been looked at by you in a thousand year, and there ain't no kindness in its heart fer God er man er beast. It's full a the Old Nick an ain't obliged to us none whatsoever. Why, even in good years

when the water is plentiful, the foxtail kills our cattle an the liverfluke kills our sheep, an always the surroundin hills an endless cliffs an gullies an rocks an cedars an sage brush is ugly an hateful-lookin to our wives an families, an the coyotes a-howlin at night sometimes till we can't say our prayers. An even the lonely graveyard up there on the hill where we have to blast the rocks to bust a hole to bury us finely, reminds us a how bitter the land is against us."

He lowered his arm to reach for his handkerchief, and blew his nose long and hard, then slowly replaced the handkerchief and raised his arm as before. "Now, Heavenly Father, we ask that thou wilt take note a our distress an send forth thy Holy Spirit upon this howlin wilderness to either make er break it; to bust this country wide open from top to tailbone an build it right from the bottom up, if necessary, so Saints kin stay on it an make a vineyard out a it like out around Salt Lake an Provo.

"An we humbly beseech thee, our Heavenly Father, to let all this come to pass, if it be thy will. Amen."

They said Amen, and looked at Orson wonderingly. Obe said that was the outspokenest prayer he'd heard in some time, and even Tade nodded approval. "Ors," he marveled, "you really hit er on the tailbone all right there in a place er two."

"You hit her right on the prayerbone, Brother Orson, like you had a swagehammer," Obe said softly. "But it runs in my mind the Lord won't pay much personal mind to that last part about bustin up the country ass-over-end as long as he has Saints with plenty a guts an elbow-grease to do er for Him—not if I know the Lord, He won't. Still, that part about the rain fallin until this here whole country is waist-deep under water was bustin her right in her old fat crooper up there.

"Well, we better be gittin along," Obe finished, "before we git flooded out."

"Sure glad ya called," Tade said. "Don't hurt none a us to have a little spiritchel waterin down once in a while."

"You try to get out to Church more often," Obe admonished, "an don't let Sister Larsen pull all the load for you an her."

"Yeh, sure," Tade replied.

They mounted up and made ready to head for the gulch. "Well, goodbye," Obe called. "Sure hope the Sisters do us some good at the prayin meetin."

"Sure, guess they will, soon or later," Tade answered. "Least-ways they would if they all 'd get together an let fly in the same direction."

The afternoon wind was springing up and started shrilling around the corners of the house and through the screen door, grating on Tade's ears. He sat down glumly on the step again, watching Obe and Orson go. Big Obe sent back diminishing gales of laughter with the dust his horse was kicking up behind him, but cousin Ors apparently hadn't got the joke; or if he had, he hadn't thought it was funny. Tade didn't suppose it mattered, either way.