

## *The Hottest Day*



Garnet

*In the 1930s, farmers in the Midwest of America went through very hard times. This is a story about a girl, Garnet, who lived at that time. Citronella was her friend and neighbour.*



Citronella

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Garnet thought this must be the hottest day that had ever been in the world. Every day for weeks she had thought the same thing, but this was really the worst of all. This morning the thermometer outside had pointed a thin red finger to one hundred and ten degrees Fahrenheit\*.



It was like being inside a drum. The sky like a bright skin was stretched tight above the valley, and the earth too was tight and hard with heat. Later, when it was dark, there would be a noise of thunder, as though a great hand beat upon the drum; there would be heavy clouds above the hills, and flashes of heat lightning, but no rain. It had been like that for a long time. After supper each night, her father came out of the house and looked up at the sky, then down at his fields of corn and oats. ‘No,’ he would say, shaking his head. ‘No rain tonight.’

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\* Very hot temperature, roughly 46°C.

The oats were turning yellow before their time, and the corn leaves were torn and brittle, rustling like newspaper when the dry wind blew upon them. If the rain didn't come soon there would be no harvest.

Garnet looked up at the smooth sky angrily, and shook her fist. 'You!' she cried. 'Why can't you let down a little rain!'

At each step her bare feet kicked up a small cloud of dust. There was dust in her hair and up her nose, making it tickle.

Behind her, a door twanged shut and Citronella came down the steps of her house flapping a dish towel like a fan.

'Isn't it hot!' she called to Garnet. 'Where you going?'

'For the mail,' said Garnet.



Citronella had to help her mother with the ironing. 'A fine thing to have to do on a day like this,' she said rather crossly. 'I bet you I'll melt all over the kitchen floor like a lump of butter.'

Garnet giggled at this picture and started on her way.

'Wait a minute,' said Citronella, 'I might as well see if there's any mail for us too ... Days like this make me wish I could find a waterfall somewhere. One that poured lemonade instead of water. I'd sit under it all day with my mouth open.'

'I'd rather be up on an Alp,' said Garnet. 'You know, one of those mountains they have in Europe. There's snow on top of them even on the hottest days of summer. I'd like to be sitting in the snow looking miles and miles down into a valley.'

'Too much trouble climbing up,' sighed Citronella.

They turned the corner and came to the mailboxes. Garnet took the mail from her box. These weren't real letters, she could tell at a glance. The envelopes were thin and business-like with small printed names of companies in upper left-hand corners. No, these weren't real letters. Bills, that's what they were.

Bills. She knew what that meant. Tonight her father would sit late in the kitchen, worried and silent, doing sums on a piece of paper. Long after everyone else had gone to bed, he would be there by himself. If it would only rain! Then there would be good crops and more money. She looked up at the sky. It was as smooth, as empty, as it had been for weeks.

'I've got to get back to my precious ironing board,' said Citronella grimly.

As Garnet walked up the hill to her house, drops of perspiration rolled down her forehead and into her eyes like big tears. Her back felt wet. She wished that she didn't have to give those bills to her father. Slowly Garnet walked to the yellow house under tall maple trees and opened the kitchen door.

Her mother was cooking supper and her little brother Donald sat on the floor making a noise like a train.

Her mother looked up. Her cheeks were red from the hot stove. 'Any mail, darling?' she asked.

'Bills,' replied Garnet.

'Oh,' said her mother and turned back to her cooking. Garnet set the table by the open window. Knife, fork, knife, fork, knife, fork, but only a spoon for Donald. Then she went down to the cold room.



It was still and dim down there. A tap dripped peacefully into the deep pool of water below, where the milk cans and stone butter crock were sunk. Garnet filled a jug with milk and put a square of butter on the plate she had brought. She knelt down and plunged both her arms into the water. It was cloudy with spilled milk but icy cold. She could feel coolness spreading through her veins and a little shiver ran over her.

Going into the kitchen was like walking into a red hot oven.

Donald had stopped being a train and had become a fire engine. He charged round and round the room hooting and shrieking. How could he be so lively, Garnet wondered. He didn't even notice the awful heat although his hair clung to his head like wet feathers and his cheeks were red as radishes.

Her mother looked out of the window. 'Father's coming in,' she said. 'Garnet, don't give him the mail now, I want him to eat a good supper. Put it behind the calendar and I'll tend to it afterwards.'

Garnet hastily pushed the bills behind the calendar on the shelf over the sink.

The door opened with its own particular squeak and her father came in. He went to the sink and washed his hands. He looked tired and his neck was sunburned. 'What a day!' he said. 'One more like this –' and he shook his head.

It was too hot to eat.

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Garnet said goodnight and tiptoed up the stairs to her room under the eaves. It was so hot there that the candle in its holder had swooned till it was bent double. Garnet blew out the candles and lay down. It was too hot even for a sheet. She lay there, wet with perspiration, feeling the heat like heavy blankets and listening to the soft thunder, the empty thunder, that brought no rain. After a while she fell asleep and dreamed that she was in a rowing boat on a wide, flat ocean.

Late in the night Garnet woke up with a strange feeling that something was about to happen. She lay quite still, listening.

The thunder rumbled again, sounding much louder than it had earlier in the evening; almost as though it were in the earth instead of the sky, making the house tremble a little. And then slowly, one by one, as if someone were dropping



pennies on the roof, came the raindrops. Garnet held her breath: the sound paused. 'Don't stop!' she whispered. A noise of wind stirred in the leaves, and then the rain burst strong and loud upon the world. Garnet leaped out of bed and ran to the window. The watery air was cold against her face and as she looked the many-branched lightning stood for an instant on the horizon like a tree on fire.

Quickly she turned and ran down the little stairway to her father's and mother's bedroom. Loudly she banged upon the door and threw it open, calling, 'It's raining! It's raining hard!' She felt as though the thunderstorm were a present she was giving to them.

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