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DIRTY DUST

by *Elva Howard Deeds*

Katy Passenger 306 was flagged to stop at the small depot at Martha, Oklahoma. Section foreman Henry Howard escorted his 18-year-old daughter aboard the train, and she was on her own—bound for college at Goodwell in the Panhandle of Oklahoma. Elva's trip by rail would end at Forgan, the last station on the northwestern division of the MKT Railroad. Friends at Forgan would meet her train and go on to Goodwell.

Her father's seniority after many years of employment on the railroad—beginning with the building of new branches in New Mexico, Texas, and Oklahoma—qualified him for his choice of sections. He had chosen the Hester-Martha location, which would be less stressful than big-line maintenance. His family members were entitled to free passes for traveling by rail. Elva loved railroad trips and always felt secure alone in passenger coaches, where she was acquainted with many of the trainmen, friends and relatives of her family.

Former School Superintendent of Martha, Sylvester Spann, had recently become an instructor at PAMC (now Panhandle University). His wife, Gertrude, and Elva had become friends in high-school Debate and Speech and in English courses taught by Mrs. Spann. The Spanns wrote to Henry about sending his daughter to Goodwell. He had turned down an offer of a business scholarship for her because he "didn't trust them."

Elva was excitedly interested in everything she encountered in the Oklahoma Panhandle. She was naive and inexperienced in social situations, sometimes amusing her new friends with pronunciation and terms different from any they were speaking. For instance, when she met some people, the O'Hairs, and asked them the name of their new baby, they answered "DUSTY." Their son had been born at the height of a dust storm.

Now, anything touched with dust or anything made of soil was "dirty" in Elva's vocabulary. When she visited the O'Hairs a few weeks later, the first question she asked was, "How is DIRTY?" She enjoyed the joke on herself. Friends commented, "Your lovely hands are so soft and white; you have probably never washed dishes or done much work." She smiled and answered that she used cold cream under her gloves while "pulling cotton" for farmers back home—and as an older daughter of a large family she had washed dishes since she was six years old. To friends in her home town, these chores were accepted in big families. However, her new northern acquaintances were skeptical, especially about the cotton labor, a demeaning chore to many wheat farmers.

Miss Howard became fond of the people in Western Oklahoma. She recognized their high quality of character and their simplicity of living with confidence in their own self-worth, sharing their humor and possessions with trusted friends.

When dust storms increased and caused their problems in farming and everyday activity to become more difficult, most people calmly accepted them and began to plan for farming methods which might improve in the future. Of course, there were some who couldn't afford to "stick it out," and some families became so discouraged that they packed up what they could and left for other states.

In the spring following the frightening episode of the black sandstorm, the registrar at Panhandle drove a group of students hoping for teaching positions to some of the area schools. One place they decided to visit was Felt, Oklahoma. As they approached the little school, they noticed that the sand had blown into heavy drifts that almost reached the window sills.

They turned away and headed back toward Goodwell.□