

October Rain is a story of a Southern family's fight for survival.

OCTOBER RAIN

By J.W. Dunn

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*October
Rain*

J. W. DUNN

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Chapter Two

Thurston Knox's eighty acres lay on the west side of the Hennessey Creek and the Buskin Road. The road followed the crest of a pine ridge that wandered from south to north ranging a mile to three miles west of the creek. As the road approached the Knox house from the south, a short lane forked left to the front gate in a picket fence that enclosed the house and yard. The road continued north skirting the picket fence and passed a second gate at the side of the house, a kitchen-house, a log smokehouse, and a barn. The board and batten walls of the main house, the kitchen-house and the barn had weathered to a silver-gray. A four foot wide by six foot long walk made of two by six boards spanned the gap between the back porch of the main house and the kitchen-house. The main house and outbuildings were roofed with cypress board shingles.

In the failing daylight, Luke Knox rode a brown and white pinto horse from the north toward the barn. With his hat pulled low over his eyes, he sat easy in the saddle and balanced a double bit ax across the saddle bow. A lone calf inside the barn lot followed along the board fence, and he knew his pa was in the barn at the evening milking. Woodsmoke drifted from the kitchen-house stovepipe and hung in the February chill.

"Whoa, Button," he said and tugged the reins. He swung from the saddle and raising the ax in one hand, he drove the bit into a chopping block near the fence. He unlatched the gate and led the horse into the lot. The calf edged against his leg. He pushed it away with a gentle nudge of the knee, latched the gate and walked Button toward the barn, the calf following.

Hired man back from chores. Hired man, but no wages. Durn him.

Iron hinges squalled as Luke pulled open the barn door and led the horse into the hay dust and corn-fed effluvium. In the jaundiced light,

Thurston straightened on the milking stool, craned his neck to see over the ridge of the cow's back, and wiped his palm over his pepper-gray mustache. He felt certain he was dying, but he had told nobody; nobody else knew.

"Mind you don't let the calf in, son." Thurston said thinking, *Luke's a good boy, hardworking*. "Did you chop down plenty of green fodder?" He had sent him to chop down holly saplings to feed their woods stock in the late winter poverty.

"Yes sir, Pa," he said. Square-framed but already taller by an inch than his pa, he talked over the saddle as he hung the stirrup iron on the pommel and loosened the cinch. "I went clear up the ridge nigh to Matt's turnoff lane." He pulled the saddle and blanket from the horse. "There's still plenty of acorn mast."

"I know there is, son, but them cows need some green browse. They're apt to founder on too many acorns. Did you happen across Matt Tarroll while you was up there?"

"No, sir, not hide nor hair of him," he said. "Steady, Button." Luke moved with the even rhythm of habit, without haste, but without sloth and swung the saddle astride a hickory pole nailed catty-corner in the near end of the barn and draped the blanket over the saddle. And he knew he was going to have to say it again. *Hard-headed old goat*. Taking up the bridle reins, he walked the horse down the barn hall beyond the mules' stalls and the corncrib.

For a moment, Thurston watched Luke. He had thought of talking to Matt Tarroll about his condition, but on mulling it over, he grew dubious about the idea. Matt Tarroll was Retty's younger brother, and he might, without intending, let it slip to her. It wouldn't do to have her upset when there was nothing to be done. He bent over, and pressing his head against the barrel of the cow's belly, he sopped a washrag in a pail of warm water and gently rinsed the milk-tight udder and teats. His ears piqued at the faint click of teeth on steel bit

as Luke slipped the bridle off Button's head. The sound of finality, the end of the day sound of promised rest. He believed everything was in God's hand, but he felt he had to fix things for Retty and the young'uns the best he could, make it easier for them after he was gone. He wanted to break new ground and plant ten more acres of cotton come spring if God granted him the time. It would mean an extra year's cash for Retty and the young'uns. They wouldn't want after he was gone. As for himself, he'd been ready for a while. He married Retty one month and was baptized within the year. *Washed in the blood of the Lamb*. She just wouldn't let him rest until he joined the church, and he was glad for it.

The cow restively shifted her weight from one hind foot to the other.

"Sah, Penny," Thurston said.

Seth, their oldest, had left home a couple of years ago to make his own way and since had married. Always dependable, even tempered; Luke, nigh on to grown, still lived at home, but of late, he'd been raring to go on his own. Thurston knew he ought to set the boy free, but he needed his help to raise ten more acres of cotton one more season. Maud was sixteen. She was sweet on Joe Burgess, and Joe had been prompt and serious in his courting. They would be married by this time next year. Still, that left Retty with the three youngest. She could hardly fare on her own with three young'uns to provide for, could hardly make it without Luke's help. He had to find the right words to keep him working on the place for one more crop.

The stall door banged shut, and Luke shuffled back along the dark barn hall. He cut his eyes at his pa's back and unlatched the corncrib door. He stepped inside and pushing his hat to the back of his head, he squatted on his heels. A gray striped cat came to its feet in a dark corner, yawned, bowed its back in a stiff-legged arch, and stretched

on its forepaws then, sat on its haunches, and with half-closed, yellow eyes, watched Luke pick among the corn.

I'm gonna have to raise it again. Have to say it all over again. Confound it all, even he knows that he can't keep me here forever, Luke thought as the pale brown, dry corn shucks rattled and whispered in his hands.

Picking up one ear of corn, he tossed it back onto the pile, then another. Finally, he chose four that looked no different from any of the ears he had culled. He pushed three of them into one of the oversized pockets of his denim coat, and holding the last ear, he rose and stepped from the corncrib.

“Me and you and your Uncle Morgan are set to gather over to your grandpa’s place in the morning to mark and castrate pigs,” Thurston said. “You recall me telling you that, don’t you?” He bent, dipped the sop rag into the pail, and again, wiped the cow’s teats and udder.

“Yes sir,” he said, wondering how he would ever have anything that was his own if he wasn’t his own man. He was old enough. *Hard-headed!*

He leaned against the outside post of the milking stall, and his shoulder brushed his pa’s hat from the nail where he always hung it when he milked. Luke stooped and picked up the hat and dusted it against his leg.

“Be particular, Luke,” Thurston said. “You’ll knock trash in the milking pail.”

“Yes sir,” he said. He hung the hat on the nail and stepped to the middle of the barn hall and stood, his legs astride, eyes fixed on the back of his pa’s weather faded blue coat as he slowly parted the pale, dry shucks at the silk end of the ear. He opened his mouth, started to speak, hesitated, and tore open the ear of corn, folding the shucks back over the stem end of the cob.

“I figure it’s time you let me go on my own, Pa.” Luke’s words rushed, his voice a pitch higher than normal, and the tense sound of his voice angered him. He felt his face burn as he pushed the shucked ear into an empty pocket, then pulled another ear from the opposite pocket.

Aware that Luke had raised the troublesome question again, Thurston busied himself, trying to think of what he should say, how he should say it and wrung water from the washrag and hung it from the edge of the feed trough. Swishing the leftover rinse water inside the pail, he glanced up at Luke then dashed the water into the corner of the stall. He set the rinse pail to one side, and leaning forward, he pressed his cheek against the cow’s warm side and set the milking pail beneath her teats.

“I gotta have you to help me out on the place, Luke,” Thurston said.

“I don’t see how come, Pa,” Luke said. The terse edge faded from his voice, and he relaxed, having broached the subject of going on his own. He ripped the shucks opening another ear of corn, his hands and fingers working with habit, without thought.

“I just don’t see how I can get on without you, yet, son,” Thurston said. “Maybe in the fall after picking time, but I’m sure to need you ‘til then.” He bent to the milking, and squeezing a teat in first one hand then the other, needles of milk sang in the bottom of the pail.

“With Seth gone and married, it’s just me and you to break the new ground and make a crop,” he said. Foam began to head in the milking pail. “The girls help, too, but Asa ain’t but ten years old and won’t be any real help to me for a couple more years.”

“Yes sir, I know it, Pa. But I’m gonna be nineteen, come October,” he said, thinking, *What did Asa’s being but ten years old have to do with him going on his own? When Seth asked to go on his*

own, his pa just shook his hand and told him to walk upright and always remember who he was.

Luke stepped into the first mule's stall then the other's and dropped an ear of corn into each trough. Going into Button's stall, he slapped the horse's rounded rump and edged between him and the wall.

When he freed Seth, he didn't say, "Luke ain't but sixteen years old," or how old Asa was or if the girls helped, too, or anybody else. Rubbing Button's cheek, he let him take the ear of corn from his hand, the wet breath hot in his palm.

"I don't think it's fair for you to expect me to stay here till Asa's big enough to do a man's work," he said. Button and the mules slowly crunched the corn, and milk ripped into the foam head in the milking pail.

Coming from the stall, Luke latched the gate and smeared the horse slobber from his hand onto his britches leg and pulled the last ear of corn from his coat pocket. He edged around his pa's bent back, ducked his head under an unlit lantern hanging from a ceiling joist, and stood at the cow's feed trough.

"When Seth was my age, you'd done freed him," Luke said, his voice grating like a file on hardened steel, "and he was planning on getting married."

As he twisted the ear of corn in his tightened palms, yellow, blue and red kernels shelled from the cob, spilled through his fingers and pecked the bottom of the trough. The cow muzzled the grains from the smooth wood, and needles of milk ripped the rising froth in the pail.

Thurston knew it wasn't fair, but he didn't see how he could let Luke go. Seth had married a year ago, and he and his wife settled on forty acres on the other side of the Hennessey Creek. The day after Christmas, their baby was born; a son just five years and four months

younger than Callie, his and Retty's youngest. Thurston turned his head and laying his cold cheek against the cow's warm side, he looked up at Luke.

"Is that it, Luke?" he said, still milking. "You're looking to get yourself married?"

"No, sir, I ain't lookin to get married, Pa." He stepped around his pa and tossed the gleaned cob down the barn bay toward the door. Shuck wings fluttered as the corncob wheeled across the dying light. "How could I be looking to get married and I ain't even my own man yet? I just want a chance to work for me."

Agitated, tired, and afraid, Thurston pushed his head against the cow's ribs. The cow shifted her hind feet.

"Sah, cow," Thurston said. "Just where do you aim on getting work this time of year, Luke?"

"I figured I could work for Seth for starters," Luke said.

"For Seth? Have y'all talked about this? Has he promised you work?"

"No, sir, I ain't said nothing to Seth, but I figure he'd give me work."

Thurston let go of the cow's teats, sat up straight on the stool, and craned his neck so he could see over the cow's back and look Luke in the eye. He wiped his palm across his mustache, Luke staring back at him. Thurston thought about what he should say, how to explain to a boy, a young man, who wanted to be free, deserved to be free and on his own, that he needed him to stay and help him, how to tell him that he was tired, and he was the sole support of a woman and four young'uns, and that he was afraid because he had been tired of late, afraid that somewhere deep inside he was sick because he couldn't get rested? How to tell him all this without telling him that he was afraid? Say it without begging, without anger?

“I just don’t see how I can make it without you right now, Luke, and what I hear you saying is you wanna help support Seth’s household and leave me and your ma and the young’uns go. Is that it?”

“That ain’t what I’m saying, and it ain’t what I meant, Pa.”

“Looks to me like Seth’s gonna have a tough enough time making ends meet as it is with Martha and the baby, let alone paying extra for day help.” Thurston struggled to keep his voice steady, reasonable.

“All I’m saying, Pa, is ‘Don’t tie the ox that pulls the mill.’”

Luke’s words, twisted and contrary, rattled in Thurston’s ears. He tried to sort them out, tried to make sense of them, but it was more than he could handle.

“Don’t you try and spout Scripture at me, boy,” Thurston said. “Your ma gave you birth and gave you suck, and every morsel of meat and bread you ever ate, we put in your mouth. Now, I ain’t gonna set here and let you twist and bend the Scriptures against me like I’m some kinda heathen and none the wiser.”

Luke turned and walked toward the pale dusk hovering outside the barn door.

“I ain’t so sure who the heathen on this place is,” he said.

“Say?” Thurston said. “Say? What did you say, boy?”

He’d plainly heard Luke’s words, but he wanted to make him look him in the eye and say it. Say it to his face. He stood, overturning the milking stool. Luke broke and ran through the open barn door into the dying daylight. Thurston followed, square-framed, his back holding the slight stoop of his milking posture. He reached the door as Luke climbed the lot gate.

“What’s that you say, boy?” Thurston said. Fear welled in his chest, palpable, and rising, it tightened in his throat.

“I said, ‘I ain’t so sure who the heathen on this place is!’” Luke stood outside the fence in the Buskin Road. “And I ain’t gonna hang

around here to find out who is neither.” He pushed his hands into his pockets, hunched his shoulders, and turned north up the road, his stride, defiant and certain.

Thurston reached the lot gate and gripping the top board with both hands, he leaned forward and watched Luke trudge up the road. He’d gone and done what he feared he would do, but he couldn’t set him free, couldn’t agree to let him go. He needed his help on the place for one more year, for one more crop, another ten acres.

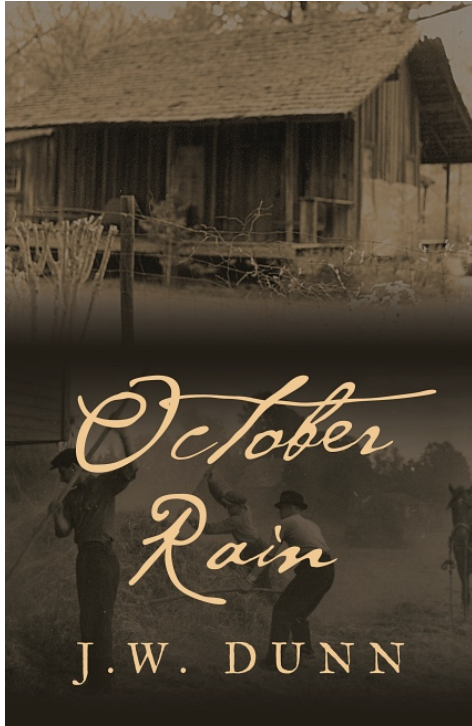
Luke rounded the near bend in the Buskin Road, and Thurston caught brief glimpses of him between the trunks of the tall, straight pines then he was gone. Slowly, he straightened from the gate, and taking his left hand in his right, with the tip of his forefinger, he traced a fishhook-shaped scar that curved round his left fore-knuckle. He turned and ambled back into the cavernous barn. Somewhere in the gloom, a mule in half-slumber, dreaming warm days of gnats and flies, stomped the packed dirt floor. Thurston breathed deeply, heaved a sigh through his nose that rustled the hairs of his mustache, and thought how pleasant it would be to curl up in the back of one of the stalls and go to sleep. Pinching the crown of his hat, he lifted it from its nail, set it on his head, and slapped the cow on the flat of her rump.

“Sah, Penny,” he said.

He stooped and picked up the milking pail. The cow swung her head around and looked at him, ball-eyed, ruminating, slobber dripping from her jaws. He pulled the slipknot on the lead rope around her horns and walked her through the barndoor into the lot and loosed her from the rope. The cow made one mournful, plaintive low, and her calf trotted to her and nuzzled her warm udder and teats. He went out the gate and latched it, and once more before turning toward the house, he looked beyond the cow and calf, across the barn lot, up the Buskin Road that curved into the failing light.

J. W. Dunn

“Confounded boy.” Shaking his head, he hung the coiled lead rope over the gatepost and walked to the kitchen-house.



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