

The Foot of God

Kip – Older narrator and young girl
Father – Her father, a simple farmer
Mother – Her mother
Dorothy – Her best enemy
Mr. Howard – City Man

(Recorded Sound)

Faster than a speeding bullet. More powerful than a locomotive. Able to leap tall buildings in a single bound. Look! Up in the sky. It's a bird. It's a plane. It's Superman! Yes, it's Superman - strange visitor from another planet who came to Earth with powers and abilities far beyond those of mortal men.

Kip

The year was 1952, and I was nine years old. Our family had just gotten a TV at the end of the harvest. Dad told me I had done a good job with my chores and thought the family deserved replacing the old radio that had given us so much pleasure.

I had listened to Superman on the radio, but he had never been my favorite. The Great Gildersleeve and Jack Benny were the ones I laughed at the most.

I didn't have too many heroes. In Sunday school I was held spellbound by the exploits of Sampson, and hated Deliah and her betrayal. I vowed never to trust a woman when I got older. It never occurred to me at the time that I would grow up to be one.

But on our little 11 inch black and white television, I saw a hero for the first time. He was as strong as Sampson, but could fly like an eagle. Bullets bounced off his chest, and he always saved the day.

I'm not quite sure what I had been thinking, but one Saturday morning, after watching the show the night before, I found myself hauled before my father by my angry mom.

Mother

Do you know what Kip was doing just now? Do you know?

Kip

My dad sighed – he knew it wasn't any good.

Father

What is it now, Martha?

Mother

She was up on the barn roof – up there in her underwear – with my dishtowel tied around her neck!

Kip

That sounded a whole lot worse than it was. First of all, my underwear was a t-shirt and panties. And it wasn't a dish towel, it was a bath towel. Well, okay, so maybe it wasn't all that good, but they didn't understand.

You don't understand!

Father

(Gently) You know you're not supposed to be up on the roof, Kip.

Kip

But Dad! I was only gonna jump off!

Somehow that didn't come out as I wanted.

Mother

Benjamin!

Father

Kip!

Kip

So I spent time in the corner, and Dad took my Superman cape away. I know it pained him to do it. Later, when Mom had gone out to the chicken coop to get the eggs, he came to me.

Father

Honey, you can't be playing at Superman. It's very dangerous. It scared your mother and me... very much.

Kip

This was an odd notion. Mother, I knew, was scared by everything. She didn't want me out after dark, because the wolves would get me. I thought this unlikely – in all my years in Iowa I had yet to see any wolves and while I thought privately there still might be one or two that lurked where I could not see them, I knew if any came I could always outrun them. Whenever a big spider got into the house, which was often, she would shriek and Dad would have to come in from the fields and smash it, unless I saw it first when she wasn't looking, when I would pick it up and put it outside the back porch. And when a big storm came, she knew it was God putting an end to the world, and was always somewhat disappointed when we came out of the cellar and found the house just as we had left it.

But Dad being scared? I had **never** seen him scared, not when the river flooded and he and the other men had to work non-stop to sandbag the shores, not when the cotton-mouth snake that came up near the house almost got Bessie, not when the tractor overturned and pinned him under it for three hours.

Now that I thought about it, he was a lot like Superman. He wasn't afraid of anything and although he was telling me that I had scared him I just wasn't buying it.

Still, he and I always had a special bond. I knew I wasn't what he wanted – heck, every father wanted a son to be able to work the fields when he grew too old to be able to. But I always tried to do the best I could, and he and I would share secret glances at the dinner table whenever Mom's back was turned. While Mother always came to him for the discipline, he would always relent afterwards and parole me early and I knew if it was up to him he wouldn't have sent me to the corner in the first place.

So I knew what I had to say, although my heart was not in it.

Okay, Dad. I promise not to get on the roof anymore.

And that was the end of that. Dad let me go but not before we shared a glass of cold milk and a cookie. I had thought that was the end of that, but my young mind could not have imagined what was to be.
(Sounds of kids playing in the water)

The next day, after Sunday school, I joined the rest of the kids out at the river. I was proud of that spot, because I felt we owned the river, even though only a small portion passed through our property. Dad always called it Miller's creek, but to us kids it was the mighty Mississipp, farther across than you could easily swim, and with a raging current that could carry you floating down many yards from where you started if you got out into the middle.

There was a series of large boulders that marked the start of our property, and from which formed backwaters of the creek that was a perfect spot for swimming. Some of the older kids jumped off the top of the rocks into the water, but without my cape I felt this was foolish to try.

My nemesis, Dorothy Jones, was there and it was the only sore spot of the day. She was in the same grade as I, but her family didn't live on a farm, they lived in town, and her dad was some kind of big shot at the local department store. And even though it was my swimming hole, somehow she made it seem like she was doing me a favor by using it.

Dorothy

Well, if it isn't little Miss Superman!

Kip

(Embarrassed) *I don't know what you mean!*

Dorothy

I heard that someone was trying to fly off their barn roof – but got their bottom walloped instead!

Kip

I did not get my bottom walloped!

Dorothy

Oh! So you did get on the roof – and in your underwear, too!

(General kids laughter)

Kip

I don't know how Dorothy knew the things she did, but somehow she always knew things that concerned me, sometimes even before I did.

Dorothy

And now you're going to lose the creek, and your back acres. My Daddy says you'll probably go bankrupt!

Kip

I didn't know what this meant, but it definitely wasn't good, and I found myself on top of her pushing her face into the mud. Despite the fact that it felt very good I knew it would only end in trouble, and sure enough I found myself sitting in the corner that night while Mother railed at me.

Mother

I can't believe you got into a fight with Mr. Jones daughter! They say she had a bloody nose... and a black eye!

Kip

She started it!

Which, while technically true, coming on the heels of the Superman barn incident was not a firm position to hold.

Mother

Benjamin, I want you to have a good talking to her. I want you to... Benjamin?

Kip

But Dad was preoccupied and Mother saw right away that his heart was not in to standing judgment just now. He didn't even look at me, but just went wandering back into the study, where he busied himself with some papers.

Later that evening a man came to see him. It was after my bedtime, but I had decided I couldn't get into any more trouble that day, so had snuck on down the stairs where I had a prime listening position.

Father

This just isn't fair, Mr. Howard.

Howard

I don't see what's so unfair about it.

Father

It isn't the way we do things around here.

Howard

Well, perhaps that is something that should have changed a long time ago.

Kip

At first I thought they were talking about me. While I didn't know this Mr. Howard, I had the distinct impression he was No Good. It occurred to me that I might be in more trouble than I had first thought.

Father

But the land you're talking about has been in my family for generations! It's prime farming land – I make all of my seed crop and nearly all of the livestock feed from it each year.

Howard

Well, your family may have used that land, but it hasn't been yours. The land deed is quite specific on this – it holds the boundary as being Miller's creek, and that creek has been flowing that way for hundreds of years.

Father

Perhaps that's what's written – but that's not right. You can't just come in here and buy up my neighbor's farm and then tell me that most of my own doesn't belong to me. It isn't fair!

Howard

I'm going to have the official survey done on Wednesday – then we'll get it recorded and the land will be once and for all laid out. If at that time you decide you want to buy it from me...

Kip

So it wasn't about me – it had something to do with what Dorothy had said. I leaned around the side of the stairs to catch a glimpse of this man, but instead I saw Father and for the first time in my life I saw him afraid.

Father

You know I can't afford that! I'm barely making things meet as it is! If you take that land away from me...

Howard

As I said, it wasn't yours to begin with.

Kip

Right then and there I was so mad I didn't know what to do. I wanted to come out there and do something to Mr. Howard, to get that smug look off his face.

If Superman was there... but he wasn't, and I didn't know what he'd do if he was. Maybe throw Mr. Howard out the door, but **something**... Tears welled up and splashed down my face hotly, to see my Father so afraid and helpless.

Howard

I'll be going now – you don't have to see me out.

Kip

I came around the corner and saw my father standing with his back to the door. His shoulders – always proud, strong, square just like George Reeves on the Superman show – now were hunched over. I came up to him and put my arms around him and when he put his own around me I began to sob, soundlessly.

I knew his fear, his loss – it wasn't for himself, it was for us, for Mother and me. I knew he couldn't protect us and I felt afraid as well.

Mother came in shortly after, with the two of us still standing there, and she put her arms around Father and then did something that surprised me. She seemed strong and sure and forceful as she spoke.

Mother

The Lord will provide.

Kip

That, of course, was my Mother's answer to anything. It wasn't simplemindedness – she truly believed it. When the crops were running bad and Dad was breaking his back trying to make ends meet she put her faith in the power of God who, in general, didn't seem like he was being all that helpful.

Father

(Quietly) The Lord helps those who help themselves.

Kip

And that was the essential dichotomy between the two of them. I tended to come down on Father's side, as the only evidence I had ever seen of the Lord helping was when he helped out those I didn't care for much. The hand of God seemed to be on the shoulder of my enemies more than it seemed to be there for me. Still, that night I found myself lost in thought at the foot of my bed as I composed my night's prayers.

I was mightily tempted to pray for something bad to happen to Mr. Howard, but since my prayers were vocal in nature, me believing that if the Lord were to listen you first had to gain his attention by speaking up, I wasn't about to make the mistake I had at the start of summer.

At that time Dorothy Jones was giving me grief again about a local boy who seemed to have some kind of foolish notion about me. I wasn't smart enough to have considered asking the Lord to keep the boy from moonin' after me, but instead for the first and only time I wished something Bad to happen to her, preferably something fairly permanent and awful.

It was just my bad luck that Father happened to be passing my room at the time, and hearing me invoking the power of the Lord to smite my enemy, something I had heard numerous times before from the pulpit on Sundays, did not sit well with him. Indeed, he promptly swept me up and walloped my bottom good, for the first and only time in my life, all the while declaring it was hurting him more than me.

I never quite understood that, since I was the one that couldn't sit properly at the dinner table for several days after. Still, the lesson had been learned, and retribution and punishment for Mr. Howard seemed out of the question now.

So now I started off without any clear thought of what I wanted to accomplish – but I felt sure I needed to give the Lord a path, some sort of idea on how he could help us. That was surely helping him, wasn't it, to give him the solution to the problem? I tried to use some language from Sundays but I'm afraid my thoughts weren't too composed.

Dear Lord. I don't want you to smite anyone, but I need you to deliver us from the evil that is about to smite us. Uh, if you could do something about the back acres, keep them forever and forever in our family, with thy will being done and all that, it would be holy and just and of great comfort to us. Amen. Oh, and if you could make Dorothy Jones suffer unto her a plague that isn't too awful that would be nice as well. Amen.

Well, it seemed okay to me, except for the part about Dorothy, but I consoled myself with the fact that things were bad and I felt bad as well.

Monday came and went with no plagues or smiting that I could see. Wednesday loomed ever closer, but by Tuesday morning all thoughts of losing the back acres were vanished from my mind by the announcement of a possible storm that was being broadcast everywhere.

Even on our tiny TV the announcers were talking about it, and it seemed doubly frightening to see them as they advised us to make preparations. As usual Mother was stoic up until the actual storm warnings were posted – then she knew the end was coming and had made her peace with the Lord and announced it for all to hear.

Father had just put away the livestock in the barn and was gathering us all up to head for the cellar when we looked out and all saw it.

A few years earlier, when I was only six, my parents had taken me to the movies. It was the first movie I had ever seen, and it was a glorious and wonderful tale with witches, talking scarecrows, and a beautiful girl (unfortunately, named Dorothy) who went to a magical place.

The witch scared me, but what scared Mother the most was seeing the tornado approach the house. It was a living, evil thing, and she stared at the screen like a mouse fixed by a snake. Afterwards for three nights in a row she slept in the cellar, despite the weather being clear and despite the desperate pleas of Father for Common Sense.

It didn't scare me – but now, as I looked out across the field, I saw the same sight. It was the same, the same black, funnel snaking its way quickly across field and stream. It was huge, easily bigger than our house, and I was filled with a certainty that it was going to pick our own house up and take it somewhere that might not be nearly as nice as Oz.

(Sound of approaching storm)

We ran into the cellar and waited it out. The whole time Mother clutched her Bible and prayed, while Father kept a watchful eye on the cellar doors.

In all my young years I had never heard a storm like that – it seemed as if the very earth was shaking all around us. I felt sure that we would face a scene of devastation and destruction when we made our way out of the cellar, but our house was still there and in one piece and, in fact, it seemed as if the storm had never happened.

Except – it was clear that something had changed. I couldn't put my finger on it at first, but the sounds outside had a distinctly different voice to them. Then I realized what it was: I could no longer hear the river.

The river, the sound of which was a constant companion as soon as I stepped out of the house, was now silent. And when Father, Mother and I had walked down to the start of the fields we saw why.

The boulders which had marked the start of our property had been moved – kicked down just like giant tin cans by what surely was the foot of God. They blocked the river and completely diverted the path. As it flowed around them it now took a right angle and was several miles to the east of us.

And it remained thus when the survey was done on Wednesday, with the result that we not only kept the acreage that was previously bounded by the river, but we had actually increased our own property by quite a bit.

Father was more than generous about this – he agreed to give back all the land that he had not considered his throughout the years. Both Mother and I felt he was unreasonable in this stand, but we could not budge his determination.

Friday night we gathered around the TV in the living room and watched what had become one of our favorite shows.

(Recording)

Yes, it's SUPERMAN, strange visitor from another planet, with powers and abilities far beyond those of mortal men! Superman, who can change the course of mighty rivers, bend steel with his bare hands...

Kip

Change the course of mighty rivers. Well, it was only fitting that if Superman could do it, so could the Lord.