

The Blanket by Floyd Dell

It was a fine September night. A thin white moon rose over the valley. Peter, eleven years old, did not see the moon. He did not feel the cool September breeze blow into the kitchen, for his thoughts were fixed on a red and black blanket on the kitchen table.

The blanket was a gift from his Dad to his Grandad . . . a going-away gift. They said that Grandad was going away . . . that's what they called it "going away."

Peter had not really believed his Dad would send Grandad away. But now -- there it was -- the going-away gift. Dad had bought it that very morning. And this was the last evening he and his Grandad would have with each other.

Together the old man and the young boy washed the supper dishes. Dad had gone out . . . with that woman he was to marry. He would not be back for some time. When the dishes were finished, the old man and the boy went outside and sat under the moon.

"I'll get my harmonica and play for you," the old man said. "I'll play some of the old tunes."

But instead of the harmonica, he brought out the blanket. It was a big, double blanket. "Now, isn't that a fine blanket?!" said the old man, smoothing it over his knees. "And isn't your father a kind man to be giving the old man a blanket like this to go away with? It costs something, it did look at the wool in it! And warm it will be these cold winter nights to come. There will be no other blanket like it up there."

It was like Grandad to be saying that. He was trying to make it easier. Ever since they had talked about "going away," Grandad had said it was his idea. Imagine -- leaving a warm house and friends to go to that building . . . that government place where he would be with so many other old fellows, having the best of everything. But Peter had not really believed Dad would do it . . . until this night when he brought home the blanket.

"Oh, yes, it's a fine blanket," Peter said and got up and went into the house. He wasn't the kind to cry, and besides, he was too old for that. He had just gone in to get Grandad's harmonica.

The blanket dropped to the floor as the old man took the harmonica. It was the last night they would have together. Neither the old man nor the young boy had to say a word. Grandad played a few notes and then said, "You'll remember this one."

The thin moon was high overhead and the gentle breeze blew down the valley. The last time, Peter thought. He would never hear Grandad play again. It was well that Dad was moving to a new house -- away from here. He did not want to sit here outside on fine evenings under a white moon with Grandad gone. The music ended, and the two sat for a few minutes in silence. Then Grandad spoke "Here is something happier."

Peter sat and looked out over the valley. Dad would marry that girl. Yes, that girl who had kissed him and who had said she would try to be a good mother to him and all that.

The tune stopped suddenly and Grandad said, "It's a poor tune, except to be dancing to." And then, "It's a fine girl your father's going to marry. He will feel young again with a pretty wife like that. And what would an old fellow like me do around the house . . . getting in the way . . . an old fool with all the talk about backaches and pains!" "And then there will be babies coming, and I don't want to be around listening to them cry all hours of the night. No, it's best that I leave. Well, one more tune or two, and then we will get to bed, get some sleep. In the morning I'll get my new blanket and take my leave. Listen to this. It's a bit of a sad tune but a nice one for a night like this."

They did not hear the two people coming down the road, Dad and the pretty girl with a hard bright face like a doll. But they heard her laugh and the tune stopped suddenly.

Dad did not say a word, but the girl walked up to Grandad and said prettily, "I'll not be seeing you in the morning, so I came over to say good-bye." "It's kind of you," said Grandad, looking down at the floor; and then seeing the blanket at his feet, he bent down to pick it up. "And will you look at this," he said, sounding himself like a little boy. "Isn't this a fine blanket my son has given me to go away with?" "Yes," she said, "it's a fine blanket." She felt the wool again . . . and said, "A fine blanket indeed." She turned to Dad and said to him coldly, "Must have cost a pretty penny."

Dad cleared his throat . . . "I . . . I wanted him to have the best. . . ."

The girl stood there, still looking at the blanket. "Mmmm . . . it's a double one, too."

"Yes," the old man said, "it's a double one . . . a fine blanket for an old fellow to be going away with."

The boy suddenly walked into the house. He could hear the girl, still talking about the expensive blanket. He heard his Dad get angry in his slow way. And now, she was leaving. As Peter came out, the girl turned and called back, "No matter what you say, he doesn't need a double blanket!" Dad looked at her with a funny look in his eye.

"She is right, Dad," the boy said. "Grandad doesn't need a double blanket. Here, Dad" -- and he held out a pair of scissors -- "Cut it, Dad . . . cut the blanket in two." Both of them looked at the boy surprised. "Cut it in two, I tell you, Dad. And keep the other half"

"That's not a bad idea" said Grandad gently. "I don't need such a big blanket."

"Yes" the boy said "a single blanket is enough for an old man when he's sent away. We'll save the other half, Dad; it will come in useful later."

"Now what do you mean by that?" asked Dad.

"I mean," said the boy slowly, "that I'll give it to you, Dad -- when you're old and I'm sending you away."

There was a big silence, and then Dad went over to Grandad and stood before him, not saying a word.

But Grandad understood, for he put out his hand and laid it on Dad's shoulder. Peter was watching them. And he heard Grandad whisper softly . . . "It's all right, son. I knew you didn't mean it. . . ." And then Peter cried. But it didn't matter because all three were crying together.

