Name: _____ Date: _____

The Debt of Ambrose Tilley

Reading level 12 (8th grade) · 1713 words

Ambrose Tilley, who was eleven and known to everyone as Pocket, stood on the wet planks of Cutler's Landing with a carpet bag in one hand and a ledger under his arm. He had worked out that he could repay every person on his list by Christmas, provided nobody asked how. The list had fourteen names. It began with Mr. Dunphy, the ticket agent in St. Louis, who had lent him four cents for a sandwich, and it ended with a woman on a train who had given him a handkerchief, value one cent, laundered. The woman on the train had hummed, a hair flat,. Pocket owed everybody. It was a point of honor with him, and also, he admitted, a way of counting how many people had been kind.

The ledger had been his mother's. She had been a laundress and had kept her accounts in it for twelve years in the small upright hand of a woman who did not believe in rounding up. On the flyleaf a different hand had written four words, *So you always know,* signed with a single loopy *L*. In March his mother had died. Inside the back cover the matron at the Home for Boys had found a letter from Aunt Lavinia, who had written once from somewhere below Natchez and never again. The letter said only this: *Ask for the woman with the gold tooth, who sings flat.* The Home had paid his fare as far as the money went, which was Cutler's Landing, and left the rest to Providence.

Providence arrived at noon as a stern-wheel steamboat called the *Marigold Queen*, white and tall as a wedding cake, with a captain on the upper deck who studied the landing the way a hawk studies a field. Captain Delphine Roark was six feet tall in her boots and strict in all of them. She listened without a flicker, then pointed at a stack of sacks. "How many?" "A hundred and forty-three," said Pocket. "Your mate says a hundred and forty, ma'am, but he missed three behind the red crate." She counted for herself, and her mouth went thin as a pencil line. "I need a boy to keep the freight book. Your passage to Natchez, no wages. Do not argue with me, or with the purser."

He worked on the *Queen* for eleven days, and he liked every one of them except the ones with Mr. Boyle in them. The galley belonged to a girl named Hester, who was thirteen and used her ladle to point at things, and on the first evening she handed Pocket a johnnycake without being asked. He wrote it down. "Johnnycake, Hester, two cents," he said, and Hester stared at him over the ladle as if he had grown a second nose. "You are putting a johnnycake in a book?" "I would rather owe you than be grateful," said Pocket, "because grateful is harder to pay back." Hester laughed so hard that she dropped the ladle, and from that evening onward the johnnycakes came faster.

Mr. Boyle, the purser, was a smooth pink man with a waxed mustache and a handwriting like

spilled ink, and he had kept the freight book for nine years without enjoying a single page of it. Every night Pocket copied the tallies into the clean new ledger the captain had given him, and every night the sums came out a little wrong, in the same direction, like a leaning fence. Sorghum syrup, twelve barrels loaded, fifteen on the bill. Cotton, two hundred bales taken aboard, two hundred and nine charged. Pocket knew perfectly well what that meant, and so, he suspected, did Mr. Boyle, who had begun to smile at him in a way that made the back of his neck go cold.

At Vicksburg landing, in front of two merchants, Mr. Boyle read out the bill for the syrup, and Pocket, who had never learned when to stop, said, "Three barrels short, sir." The silence was very long. Mr. Boyle turned the color of a boiled ham, and Captain Roark counted the barrels herself, and Pocket was right, but she did not look at him. "Mr. Tilley," she said in her cabin, "you were right, and you were a fool about it, and I cannot run a boat with two men who will not speak. I will do the sums myself. You leave at Fiddler's Ferry, and I am sorry." She gave him his bag, a sack of johnnycakes from Hester, and a look that was very nearly an apology.

Fiddler's Ferry was a flat raft on a rope, hauled across the brown water by an old man named Mr. Abernethy, who could not read. He took one cent from each passenger, dropped it into a coffee can, and trusted his memory, which was extremely poor. By noon he had lost count of whom he had carried, and by one o'clock he had lost his temper. Pocket sat on a crate with his ledger and watched for ten minutes, because he owed this man nothing yet and disliked the feeling. Then he borrowed a knife and a stick and began to cut notches, one for each crossing, five to a bundle with a slash through the fifth, until the stick looked like a tiny picket fence.

"That is a tally stick," he explained. "One notch for each person and one cent in the can for each notch, and when the stick and the can agree, nobody has been cheated." The old man turned it over in his hands for a long while. Then he gave Pocket the day's crossing, a night's sleep in the ferry hut, and a morning ride on a coal tug to a landing called Pelican Bend, fifty miles down, where he said a hay barge was loading for Natchez. Pocket entered it all in the ledger, and put the stick's value at a nickel, and Mr. Abernethy, who could not read the entry, said it was the first honest paper he had ever been given.

The hay barge was a long flat boat piled high with bales and towed behind a puffing little tug. It was run by a tall woman in a straw hat who said that she never took passengers and then took him anyway, because he found a mistake in her tally in four minutes. She was brown and quick, with a voice that carried across the water like a thrown rope, and she told him to call her Mrs. Beck. She hummed while she worked, and Pocket, who noticed what other people did not, noticed that she hummed flat, not terribly flat, only a hair under the note, in one particular place where the tune climbed. He did not think about it much, because he was busy counting bales.

On the twenty-sixth day the fog came down. It rose off the river at dusk, so thick that Pocket could not see the tug or the bank or the end of his own arm. The tow line parted with a crack like a pistol, and for a minute the barge swung loose while Mrs. Beck shouted for the lead line. Pocket found it under a hay bale. "Throw it and call the knots as they come," she said. So he stood in the bow with the wet rope in his fists, threw the lead into the fog, and called the knotted depths back to the woman at the sweep. "Mark three! Mark three! Mark two!"

The water was growing shallow, and the barge was drifting toward a sandbar that nobody could see. To keep her nerve, or perhaps to keep his, Mrs. Beck began to sing. It was a lullaby, quiet and slow, and she sang the climb in the middle a hair too low, exactly where his mother had sung it flat every night of his life, in the room over the laundry in St. Louis. He had always believed that was only her. For a moment the river and the fog and the shallow water all went away, and he stood with the lead line in his hand and the tune wrapping around him. Then the lantern swung, and he saw the gold in her smile.

The barge slid gently onto the bar and stopped with a sigh, and nobody was hurt. Mrs. Beck came forward through the dark and sat on a bale beside him. "What did you say your name was?" she asked, though he had not said it. "Ambrose Tilley," he answered, in a very small voice. "Pocket, mostly." She was quiet for so long that he thought she had fallen asleep. "Margaret Pruitt married a Mr. Tilley in eighteen eighty-six," she said at last. "I sent her a wedding present. I thought a book would suit a girl who could not add past twelve without using her fingers." Pocket opened the ledger to the flyleaf and held it up to the lantern, and they both looked at the loopy *L*.

In the morning the fog lifted, and the tug found them again, and as the barge came down toward Natchez the *Marigold Queen* overtook them going the other way. Her whistle blew three short blasts, which meant nothing in particular on the river, except that a girl on the hurricane deck with a ladle in her hand was jumping up and down and holding up three fingers. Three barrels. Mr. Boyle was nowhere to be seen, and Captain Roark, on the upper deck, lifted one finger to the brim of her hat, which on the river means well done.

Pocket sat on his bale for a long time with the ledger open on his knees. One at a time he crossed out the fourteen names, from the sandwich to the handkerchief, until the page looked like a fence that had been mended. At the bottom of the page he wrote one more line, in the small upright hand that he had from his mother. *Received: one aunt, with gold tooth. Cost: unknown.* He studied it for a while with his tongue in the corner of his mouth, and then, because he was honest, he added a note underneath. *Balance owing: all of it. To be paid in installments, beginning tonight.*

Questions

1. What did Ambrose write down whenever someone helped him?

A. The helper's name and what he owed for it

B. A poem about the river

C. The weather

2. Why was Ambrose put off the Marigold Queen?

A. He had no ticket at all

B. He stole a johnnycake

C. He corrected the purser's count in front of everyone

3. What did Ambrose notice about the song in the fog?

A. It was a song about money

B. It was the tune his mother used to hum, flat in the same place

C. It was in a language he did not know

4. In this story, what is a "tally"?

A. A running count kept by marks

B. A kind of boat

C. A sudden storm

5. Why did Ambrose make a tally stick for the ferryman?

A. To pay for the crossing with a gift

B. To play a game

C. So the old man could keep count of the people he carried

Words to know

ledger: book of accounts

landing: river dock

purser: ship's bookkeeper

barge: flat cargo boat

sandbar: hidden shallows

tally: running count

Answer key: The Debt of Ambrose Tilley

1. A. The helper's name and what he owed for it
2. C. He corrected the purser's count in front of everyone
3. B. It was the tune his mother used to hum, flat in the same place
4. A. A running count kept by marks
5. C. So the old man could keep count of the people he carried