

THE ONE CHRISTMAS DOLLAR

By Beth Slater Whitson

“Tad” dropped the latch noiselessly into place and sat down on the cabin steps to await the coming of day. About him lay the thick, breathing blackness of the hour which proceeds the dawn; above him dropped an ebony sky, set with great, quivering white stars; and there was a tense stillness which Tad knew would presently be broken by the dawn wind.

There was something soothing, to the child of the hills, in the soft darkness of dusk and dawn -something he loved without understanding why. Sometimes he thot it was because the darkness shut out the ugly “barrens” stretching away from the cabin on the one side, and the half-tilled cornfields on the other, and in the dim half-light he could imagine in their stead, smooth, green meadows like those he had read about in his schoolbooks, and in place of the rough cabin walls a cottage all gleamy and smelly with white paint, and overgrown with tangled, blossomy growing things.

But on this particular morning there was no room in Tad’s brain for dreams-even dreams of green meadows and painted cottages – for it was Christmas Eve and he was going to walk to the “settlement” – as the Hill people called the nearest town – to buy Christmas things for his mother, Mary Lucy – his twin – and the three younger members of the family. The splendid part of it was – from Tad’s point of view – that no one guessed his errand, for no one knew of the whole wonderful dollar in this smallest pocket. He had asked to go to the settlement to see the Christmas “purties” and his mother had readily consented as she was in the habit of doing to nearly all of Tad’s requests, for Tad was her only help about the place since the death of the father two years before.

He had not taken his mother into his confidence concerning the dollar. He had earned it the past summer carrying water to the “loggers” at the noon hour when his mother thot his resting from the morning’s work, down by the spring at the foot of the hill. Day after day for three weeks he had carried two great stone jugs from the cool spring to the men cutting timber almost a mil away. It had been a man’s work, but the twelve-year-old boy had squared his thin shoulders and offered to do the task for one dollar – and it was this dollar Tad was going to the settlement to spend this Christmas Eve.

The excitement of anticipation had waked him early and he found himself growing almost impatient before the first indications of the dawn came. But after awhile a silver veil was drawn shimmeringly across the darkness; there was a sudden stir of leaves and the chill dawn wind swept across Tad’s face. Simultaneously, the cabin door opened and closed softly, and his mother stood at his side – a little angular figure, scarcely taller than the boy – with prematurely sharpened features that yet took on a certain beauty in the silvery radiance.

“Ain’t it purty, Tad?” she breathed, as if fearful of breaking some spall. “I’ve allers took a heap o’ intrist in Nachur,” she went on in the same low tone, “n it’s mighty comfortin’ when a pers’n gits low sper’ter t’ look up at them big stars out there ‘n’ think who ever it is tendin’ of ‘m an’ keepin’ ‘m trimmed ‘n’ shinin’ all the time so bright ain’t agoin’ t’ have the heart t’ keep the road down here dark all the way erlong.”

“I guess that’s about right, mammy,” agreed Tad, solemnly, “n it ‘pears t’ me the stars git mightly close to the ground sometimes.”

The mother was silent for a moment, then she spoke in an apologetic tone.

“I got somethin’ t’ tell you, sonny,” she began. “it’s wor’ld me consider’ble all night for I knew how disapp’inted you air goin’ t’ be –.” She paused, and Tad moved a bit restlessly and his hand involuntarily sought his pocket and clasped about the precious dollar.

“What air it, mammy?” he questioned, at last.

“It air about that spice cake, Tad,” she returned, “that I was a-goin’ t’ make for Christmas dinner. I’m mighty a-feared we ain’t a goin’ t’ have it now, ‘n I ‘low that Mary Lucy’s goin’ t’ be clean upset when she hears what I done. But I’m a-countin’ on you t’ uphold me, sonny, when I give you the perticllars.”

She paused again, and Tad urged her, faintly, to go on.

“Sissy Moorlan’ was over yisterday, Tad,” she continued, “n her Jany is sotur’ible poorly she can’t eat nothing scarsely at all. I was a tellin’ Sissy th’ spice cake I was plannin’ t’ bake for Christmas ‘n she jest broke down ‘n cried, a-sayin’ she hed hoped t’ make one more cake fer poor Jany, bt her flour was gone ‘n her hins didn’t lay no more so’s she could git sweet’nin’ ‘n things like she use’ to. It was offul the way she took on, Tan, ‘n after she was gone I got t’ thinkin’ how hearty like my little fellers air, n’ I sent Mary Lucy Over there with all the fixin’s for my spice cake. I’ll git some more aigs, likely today, but I jest can’t buy the flour n’ sweetinin’ fer ernother’n right now – but co’n bread n’ chicken air mighty fine eattin’ fer Christmas dinner ‘thout cake, ain’t they, sonny?” she finished anxiously.

“Yes, they are mighty good, mammy,” agreed Tad heartily, “an’ we don’t need no spice cake nohow.”

If there was disappointment in the small boy’s heart, there was not hint of it in his voice or manner, and the mother’s customary cheerfulness came back in a rush.

“I done slip’t up n’ cooked you a bit, Tad,” she said happily. “Let’s go round t’ the back so’s not t’ wake the child’n.”

Tad ate his breakfast in the small “lean to” and while the morning was still gray with long shadows, he started for the settlement, his mother looking after him from the kitchen door.

“Go roun’ t’ Mr. Jenkinses’ ‘n git you’self some cheese ‘n crackers for dinner,” she called after him, “ ‘n tell him mammy’ll send him some more aigs next week fer it.”

Tad’s little figure moved buoyantly in the early light. He wore his Sunday best and tho they were worn and much mended, he stepped proudly and his heart san a little low song of joy at the prospects of the wonderful day before him and the surprise he would have in store for his mother and Mary Lucy on his return.

It was eight miles to the settlement; eight miles of rough road that wound alternately by the “clearings” of other folks like Tad’s, and under huge overlapping trees whose leaves still clung, and where the only sunbeams dripped thru and made splashes of gold; and every foot of the way Tad’s heart grew more joyous. Long before, he had planned the spending of the precious dollar. The previous summer he had learned something of figures and in his thots had divided the magic coin into six parts – fifteen cents each for the children, including himself – and the splendid sum of twenty-five cents for his mother. But, after her story of the spice cake – her evident disappointment that she had thot so skillfully concealed – Tad resolved that in someway his figures must be changed so as to buy her the “flour and sweet’nin’ “ for another. Tad knew nothing about the buying value of a dollar but he had heard his mother say a number of times that “a dollar goes a long ways” and he thot it would be a very simple matter to arrange so as to get the extra things; yet he had followed the long road within sight of the town’s red roofs before a solution to the problem presented itself. Then his boyish smile grew even brighter and his step even more buoyant as he hurried into the little southern town where Santa Claus had so many wonderful things displayed.

The narrow sidewalks were thronged with merry shoppers. A dilapidated cart, drawn by a lean, patient mule, and loaded with Christmas trees of dark, pungent cedar, was being driven round and round the court-house square, while the driver, a lanky backwoodsman, called out at regular intervals, “Heah’s your purty Chris’mus trees fer fifty cents – git one before that air all gone.”

Tad, skirting the crown, saw big, awkward country boys dressed like himself in their Sunday best, carrying huge branches of holly and selling it easily for five cents a spray. He remembered the great holly tree overshadowing the cabin, and a wave of regret swept over him and he had not known in time to do what those other boys were doing.

The regret was but momentary; however, for it was Tad’s second trip to town and everything was brimming with interest to him as he followed the crowd round and round the square.

Little tots carried brilliantly colored toy balloons, and town boys of Tad’s own size made the air raucous with blatant tin bugles. Sometimes one a bit more rude and thotless than the

other, would stop blowing long enough to note Tad's country air and clothes and would call out: "Hello, Hill Billy!" and Tad's thin cheeks would flush for a instant, but in a moment he had forgotten the insult, for him, the scene was Fairyland, where the ugly things of life had no place.

He was reminded of the noon hour by uncomfortable pangs of hunger, but after looking vainly for Mr. "Jenkinses" he soon forgot them in the excitement of the day.

Many times during the morning he had stopped before one window in particular, containing a display of lovely dolls. That was its chief feature, yet it had other things which had held Tad's interest. There was a lovely crimson hood, a pair of gray knitted bed-room slippers with rose colored ribbons, two little crimson knitted sacks and one specially knitted doll.

At last his eagerness to purchase, drew him into the store, and after waiting about for almost an hour, he finally attracted the attention of one of the busy clerks and timidly inquired the price for the doll. The answer almost took his breath – his whole dollar would not buy it! Then, with a skinning heart, he priced the hood, the slippers, the little knitted sacks that he had hoped to get for the twins. Not one of the articles would his dollar buy – the dollar he had thought so wonderful! Tremulously, he asked to be shown some ten-cent dolls, but the clerk only laughed and turned away to wait on another shopper, and Tad went out – in his heart a strange bitterness that he had never known before.

Keen-witted, the incident had clearly show him that none of the pretty things on sale were within his reach, so, with unusual courage for a boy, he went from place to place, timidly asking to see some of the Christmas things that sold for ten cents. They showed him foolish tin horns and birds and little two-wheeled wagons drawn by horses. They sickened Tad, and each time he turned away with more and more bitterness and misery to his heart.

Once he noticed a jack-knife, and remembering he had meant to buy one with his share of the Christmas dollar, he dully inquired about the price, and was told that he might have it for twenty-five cents. The temptation to buy was strong, but, while he hesitated the clerk hurried away, saying he hadn't time to wait on people who didn't know what they wanted.

After awhile, a little shop just off the square, attracted Tad's attention by the steady stream of poorly dressed folks going in and out. He recognized them as his own kind. Over the narrow entrance the name of Bob Jenkins & Co. was printed in faded lettering, and in the dingy window some small china dolls stood side by side, marked "ten cents" and Tad, mentally comparing them with the one he had hoped to buy, stood hesitating a moment, then went in.

A half hour later he emerged; across his shoulder he carried a large unwieldy burden, and in his arms some clumsy packages. Tad had purchased his Christmas things.

It was growing dark as he set out on the long road home, a drooping, pathetic figure, very unlike the one that had entered the town a few hours before. The look of disappointment seemed to have deepened and after a while the tears came and trickled, unchecked and unheeded, down his thin, boyish cheek as he plodded patiently and steadily homeward.

His young arms grew painfully tired and his shoulder ached from the weight upon it, but Tad was scarcely conscious of physical discomfort. The weight of disappointment was so much greater – so much more painful, and the cold wind blowing thru his clothes that he now knew to be mean and poor was not so bitter as the chill about his heart.

* * * * *

At the cabin door the mother of Tad stood, straining her eyes thru the night. The children were all sleeping, and four little limp stockings hung from the rough mantel. The flickering light from a tallow candle showed the watchers face, drawn and haggard with suspense. Moment after moment slipped by, and at last she closed the door noiselessly behind her and started down the long road that Tad had gone in the morning.

“I ought-n’t a let him gone by hisself,” she kept saying over and over. “I jest furgit he ain’t grow’d up at times.”

About a half-mile from the cabin a turn of the road brought them suddenly face to face.

“Tad!” she cried, tremulously, the habitual reserve of the hill women for the moment in the background, “I was gittin’ might uneasy about you, Honey.”

“I didn’t mean to be late, mammy.” There was something in Tad’s voice that made the mother forbear to question him at the moment, and, looking close at him, she discovered his packages.

“W’y, you air all loaded down, Tad,” she burst out, excitedly. “W’y, Honey, where did you git so many bundles? Let Mamy help you tote ‘em.”

“Wait till we get t’ the house, mammy, Tad admonished, but he let her relive him of part of the parcels, and for the first time since he left the town, the tightness about his throat seemed to loosen a bit and by the time they reached the cabin, much to his own astonishment, the icy feeling about his heart seemed to be thawing out.

They stole in the back way as they had done in the morning. A little fire still burned in the cook stove, and Tad’s mother, putting down her packages, opened the oven door and brought out some food she had been keeping warm.

“I bet you air most starved after that long walk,” she said, putting the things on the table.

“You op’n them bundles while I eat mammy,” ordered Tad, with just a hint of returning joy in his voice.

She unwrapped the package Tad had carried on his shoulder and gave a cry of delight at the small bag of flour revealed, and more of Tad’s misery vanished with that expression of pleasure.

“Look at it all, mammy,” he urged with a touch of eagerness.

She followed his instructions, and one low, pleased ejaculation after another escaped her.

Sugar, coffee, red apples, oranges and a large bundle of striped candy were disclosed. In the last one she unwrapped was a chine doll – little and homely to critical eyes – but the mother’s face grew radiant.

“Where did they come from, Tad?” she asked breathlessly.

And Tad, his face losing its lines of pain at sight of his mother’s joyous one, related the whole story of the Christmas dollar – how it was earned and how he had planned to buy them all Christmas presents – but found he hadn’t had enough, and so had bought as he did at the very last moment. He thot he was carefully concealing the bitter disappointment of the day, but the mother’s eyes grew dim. She, too, had been at the settlement one Christmas Eve and had longed to buy pretty things, and had never gone again. And when Tad finished his story, she stoof up and placed her hands on his shoulders:

“Of course mammy would have liked the purties, Tad,” she said in a low glad voice, “but what you got air a heap more suitable all round; none of the children ever had all the candy they could eat before, ‘n with these here oranges ‘n apples they cert’nly will have one fine Christmas, not t’ speak uf the baby’s doll which all of them’ll enjoy, ‘n they spice cake which I’m a-goin’ t’ make this ve’y night before I sleep. I shore air glad I got such a helper, Tad, things air boud to git better all the time.”

A sudden puff of wind blew the kitchen door ajar, and the mother, reaching to close it, glanced out into the night and her face took on an expression of rare beauty. Slipping her arm about Tad’s shoulder, she turned him facing the direction on which her eyes were fixed:

“The stars are cert’nly mighty close tonight, ain’t they, Tad?” she questioned, solemnly.

From: People’s Popular Monthly Magazine
Vol. 22, No. 12, Pg. 6
December, 1917