

CHRISTMAS MONEY.

By MARTHA MOULLOOH WILLIAMS.

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A dozen heads turned to look as Betty went up the street to Lawyer Westfield's office. Though it was coming on to noon of a bright December day there was still a biting touch in the air. The critical loungers hugged the sunny side of the street—and even there the wind made them shiver—though to one in rapid motion the day was a delight.

Some of its frosty vitality seemed to radiate from the girl.

"Steps pretty high, considerin'," one of those who watched her said to his gossip as the slim shape, lithe for all its bundled shawl, passed out of earshot. The girl had looked neither to right nor left. Her cheek wore habitually the fine red it now showed, but the most casual glance saw a hardening of the lines about the mouth and below the eyes.

"Yes, considerin' most of all that she's got to walk back the seven miles home," a third man said, coming up to the two. He had lurched down the street in Betty's wake—further, he was her close neighbor, John Burley, known to his intimates as Toad.

"Now mind what you say, Toad," the first speaker admonished. "Miss Betty she don't b'ar you no mighty good will, an' solid as she is with her lawyers you better mind how you cut yer notches, else you might git yourself in the rest o' us in er label suit."

"Aw, go 'long, you Doc Green. We all know you'd be skeered out o' seven years' growth if she jest looked hard at you," Toad returned with a great guffaw. "I ain't like you. I know what I'm talkin' erbout, an' shore's you're knee high to er grasshopper that gal has done sold Lightfoot an' her cyart an' steers too."

"Wh-e-e-w! That every boof o' stock that is on the Walton place," Doc said, digging his hands deep in his trousers pockets. "It must be she's goin' ter quit the ranch."

"You hush," some one whispered violently, clucking at Doc's coat and nodding toward another who came trudging along the pavement. He was tall, with broad shoulders and level looking eyes that did not fall to the faces about, though he gave the group a comprehensive good morning. He had a fine ear too. It had caught the import of their talk, but he made no pause for further speech.

"Ain't he in er swivet this mornin'?" Doc Green asked sarcastically. Toad nodded assent. The third man, Toke Fellow, said with a judicial half closing of eyelids:

"Shet up, you fellers. That's young Lawyer Westfield, an' he'd have you ter understand the Westfields ain't got no use for common folks, except round 'lection times, when they want our votes."

"Be 'shamed o' yourselves, you all. You know as well as I can tell you that ain't nobody o' clearer grit nor less stuck up than Ned Westfield. Look how he fought an' hung on fer pore Sam Walton, an' knowin' all the time he was bound ter have his trouble fer his pains," Uncle Billy Trotter said soberly.

The ripple of sarcastic laughter hushed itself to a sudden quick shame. Toad shifted uneasily upon his feet and said apologetically behind his hand:

"He did that. Pore Sam, 'tain't a year yit since he went erway, an' I'm thinkin' this'll be er terrible Christmas fer him. Whatever else he done Sam thought a heap o' his children an' give 'em Christmas money."

"Yes, he did. Pore old Sam! They had er dead open an' shot case on him, but nobody can make me believe he was sober enough ter know what he was doin' when he took that critter," Doc returned in Toad's key, studying the pavement as he spoke.

"He never took it," Uncle Billy said with emphasis. "Whisky don't make men mean. I tell you it jest lets loose



"YES, CONSIDERIN' MOST OF ALL THAT SHE'S GOT TER WALK BACK THE SEVEN MILES," the fathead mean in er follow. Now, while Sam wa'n't no saint, neither out cut, an' called fer no missionary, he never had er mean way erbout him, ner bare drap o' low-down thief's blood in him. I told his lawyer so, an' wanted ter git on the jury, but the state's attorney wouldn't have it. I'm glad now he wouldn't. That that mution headed judge frum up country hilt 'em down so far the law an' the fact's they couldn't do nothin' but fetch in er verdict o' guilty. But in spite o' everything I couldn't sleep o' nights if I'd had any hand in makin' of them Walton children a heap worse'n orphans."

"But see here, Uncle Billy," Toke Fellow protested, "now jest look at them facts. Three witnesses that didn't want er do it had er sw'ar they seen Sam at his ghost onit that critter frum the rack, mount an' ride off; then he was found with the beast an' his neck was found with high as much light that he'd been seen ter leave. It's a miracle. I know he told er lame lawyer, an' er lame man, overtakein' him fer er way, an' when he had roped gallopin back the way

he had come, but though Ned Westfield raked the country with er fine tooth comb he couldn't find nare 'nother soul that had saw the other man."

"Still Sam Walton ain't no horse thief," Uncle Billy said stoutly. "Fellows twiddled his fingers an' said tentatively:

"That ain't neither here ner there. Say, you all, it's jest two weeks tell Christmas. Somethin' oughter be done."

All the rest gathered about him and fell into eager consultation. None was more eager than Burley. As he marked the looks of surprise in the other faces he said, a curious grayness settling about his mouth:

"Lemme carry it ter 'em. Maybe it'll fetch me luck. I ain't told you before, but I've sold out stock, look an' barrel, an' am goin' ter Texas about old Christmas day."

"H'm'm! Who'd you sell ter?" Uncle Billy asked a trifle sharply. "It ain't, though, be nobody else—but that



"I THINK OF NOTHING ELSE DAY AND NIGHT," BETTY SAID.

rip tearin' Johnny Gates. You an' him have been as thick as thieves ever since he come inter his pile o' money last year."

Betty walked the vacant office with quick, impatient steps. A leaping fire crackled in the grate. Uncle Edson, the black manservant, had drawn the easiest chair beside it, but nothing could induce her to rest in it. She had peach blossom cheeks now. Uncle Edson had told her, "Do ole big boss, ma'am, he done goned fer er week, but Marse Ned he'll be down in dest er little while."

She wished of all things to escape an encounter with Ned. She could never make him understand—her father and his had been social equals, class and college mates—hence the old man would have known intuitively how impossible it was that her father's daughter should leave his defense to be ranked among anybody's charity cases. His son—Betty's thought went no farther—the racing blood made connected thought impossible. She stood motionless, trembling, wishing herself 100 miles away, yet in nowise rejecting the thing that had brought her. There was a back door, of which she knew nothing. Ned came through it and took her unawares. He walked straight up in front of her, saying with a little frown:

"Betty, why will you do such very foolish things?"

"I—I do not quite understand you," Betty faltered.

"Who bought Lightfoot?" he demanded, his voice still hard.

"Who says I have sold her?" Betty asked with spirit.

"I know. It was because of what Johnny Gates said when you refused him again," Ned went on relentlessly. Betty flung off her shawl as though its weight stifled her. Her eyes sparkled, her voice was an edged flute note as she said:

"Mr. Westfield, is there anything in the relation of lawyer and client to authorize questions such as you have seen fit to ask?"

"I am more than your lawyer," Ned said stoutly. "Betty, this is no fit time or place, but you know I love you, you know I mean to marry you as soon as I come into my grandmother's legacy and am independent of my father. I told you that over and over in the summer. Then you at least listened, now you try to shut me away from your concerns. You have stripped yourself of work stock. You live on a farm alone with the children. They must have fire and food and clothes. You have perhaps a right to sacrifice yourself and me, Betty, but not the children. Do have a thought for them."

"I think of nothing else day and night," Betty said. "But—but can't you see? Oh, do please take the money for your father. It is not much, only \$200, but when it is paid people cannot say—"

"Let them say what they like," Westfield broke in. "Betty, Betty, marry me at once. You shall not starve, dear."

"Please, please never say such things again," Betty entreated. "Think of your father, of how good he was to me, and his pride, and how it would break his heart to know his only son had married a convict's daughter!"

"Stop!" Ned said, speaking low and hard. "I have been over all that, Betty, but if you love me anything is better than knowing you as you are, with nothing between you and the crush of things."

"I do not think so," Betty cried, dropping the roll of bills on the desk before him and hurrying away. She dared not trust herself to listen further. If only she could rush home—away from everything. But that was impossible. She had still to deliver Lightfoot. Trab had her now—Trab, who was next herself, though five years younger, and just fairly in roundabout. They had stopped that morning upon the sear common where it made a sort of bay up among back gardens and stable yards. As Betty came up to him she noted with a choke in the throat the tear stains all over his thin, wistful face. "You—you staid a long time, Betty," he said, pressing his face close to the mare's glossy neck. Lightfoot was

thoroughbred and Betty's own property, a gift from one of her father's boon companions, who found the foal, then less than a week old, a serious hindrance to his pleasure. He did not dream the newcomer could bring up his gift. He did not know, as Betty did, how wise and kind was Soak, the bell cow. After a sniff or two and one faint protesting moo Soak let the colt snick beside her own new calf quite as though they were twins.

Next year Lightfoot came out in her glossy new coat as fine and lusty a yearling as stepped on four hoofs. The children frolicked with her, talked to her and shared their dainties quite as though she had been human, which they more than half believed she was. And that a famous 3 year old she made—bride wise, full gaited and handsome as a picture. Betty began to ride her then. Today it came back to her how her father had looked at her frayed, worn saddle and harness and said:

"Ah, Betty, you could show off your mare if only you had a father worth even hanging."

Her dear father! He had been always the pattern of kindness so long as he kept at home. A pattern of industry and thrift, too, until the restless he seized him; then he rode away, drunk and gambled or indulged other men's worthless paper, which later his own household was pinched to pay.

"I most thought you had forgot us, Betty," Trab said unsteadily. "If—if you had staid a little longer, I meant to take Lightfoot back home again. Have you taken the money for her, Betty? If you haven't—"

"A sob finished what he could not say. "Yes, I took it and spent it," Betty said huskily. "Mr. Lane had the money ready. I told him you would bring her—"

"Nodding toward the mare—"and he said next week would do."

"Let's take her back. I'll bring her then. Honest I will. Oh, Betty, how can we part with her?" Trab wailed, burying his face in his hands. Betty had taken the halter rein. She let it drop and flung both arms about Lightfoot's neck.

"I—don't—quite—know, Trab," she said, swallowing hard. "But we must not take her back. That would be like dying twice over. We will comfort ourselves thinking how much she has gained—such a nice warm stable and no more hard work."

"But nobody will love her like we do, an' she don't mind work fer us. Why, last summer, when she plowed so hard, she would frisk about when I turned her loose an' look at me, as if she said, 'See, I ain't tired.' Trab said, wiping his eyes. "She knew how we needed her work, the darlin'. I am goin' to ask Mr. Lane to keep her until I can work an' buy her back."

"He will keep her. Be brave now. Run along with her, then meet me at his store. I know a boy about your size who deserves some new boots," Betty said, trying to smile. Trab sighed and again wiped his eyes.

"So you've got the money back an' Brandy brought to spend," he said. "I thought a heap of them, but nothing would be hard if—"

Lightfoot back home for good."

Seven o'clock that night found Betty safe at home in the big double log house that her grandfather had built. It belonged to her mother's children, else would long ago have been swallowed by those security debts her father was always making. Betty was infinitely glad of this assured shelter, though her best friends had begged her to leave it, scatter the children about and give herself the distraction of a new neighborhood, but she had steadfastly refused.

All through her father's trial she had hoped against hope that his innocence would be miraculously proved. He had said to her, "Betty, I have done nearly all that was wrong to my poor children, but I am no thief," and she had believed him. All through the long day she had sat, leaning forward, her eyes fast on the judge, the strange, stern judge of whom even the sheriff was afraid. He had not seemed to see her, but at the last there was a break in even his cold voice as he said, "In consideration of all the circumstances of the case, I sentence you to imprisonment for three years, the shortest time allowed by the statute under which you are convicted."

Then, when those about looked to see her faint, Betty had pressed up to where she could touch her father and whisper in his ear:

"I believe in you just the same. Three years is not so long, and you shall find us all here when you come back."

So you may guess what answer she made to her advisers. If they shook their heads, they let her take her own way. Tonight the way did not seem so hopelessly hard for all the stress and strain of the day.

"We must believe, after this, in special providences," she said to Patty. "To think how we got home. Mr. Pelley's wagon brought all our bu— It just happened to be coming our way, and nothing would do Uncle Billy Trotter but to fetch us both to our gate instead of dropping us at the big road, two miles away. And then my money held out so. I have bought all we really need—shoes, frocks, sugar, salt, nails, spelling books, a new hood for Marian, a red tin cup for Tess—and have two whole dollars left for Christmas money, and \$2 will buy such a heap of things."

"Will pappy come home Christmas?" Tess asked, nestling her head against Betty.

"You little idiot! You know he won't," Marian broke out. "I wish I was where he is," she sobbed.

"Tommy Adkin said today at school he wouldn't even dare to show his face here again; he was a jailbird."

"I'll kill Tommy Adkin," Trab shouted, his eyes flashing. Marian laughed, though she was sobbing hard.

"He won't say it again," she said, putting up her hand to hide a long scratch on her cheek.

"Hush! Somebody's comin'. Hear how Ring barks," Pete said, walking

to a front window. The curtains there were drawn, but at the back they hung so far apart it was easy to see from the outside the group in front of the fire.

"'Twas just some wagon passin'. Old Ring is a big story teller," Patty said, looking up from her new linsey frock.

"He don't tell stories. He smells somebody sure, an' he knows 'em," cause he barks in place o' growlin'."

Pete returned. Tess sat up and pushed the yellow curls out of her sleepy eyes, then broke into a passion of weeping.

"Pappy! Pappy! I want to see my pappy, oh, so bad."

Patty and Marian both caught her in their arms, sobbing in unison. The boys, too, were crying, but Betty had dry eyes. She had been through so much that day she was like one frozen.

"Hush, dears," she said clearly. "It would kill father to see you now. Be brave for him. It is all we can do."

Trab held up a hand for silence. "There must be somebody about," he said after a minute. "I heard walkin' like somebody was tryin' to step easy."

"'Tis! 'Tis! 'Tis! That old blue dawg o' Toad Burley's. Yonder he goes, strakin' in it down the front lot," Pete called from the window. Outside there was brilliant moonshine. The tree shadows lay in fairy lace upon the frozen earth.

"Ah, ha! He came after eggs and didn't get a one," Patty said triumphantly. "I do hate a suck egg dawg. Wonder what does make Toad keep that ugly thing?"

"He is not quite as ugly as his master," Betty said, laughing. "I dare say both of them admire each other." Then she shook her purse till the silver in it jingled and said, trying to speak gayly: "Now for a Christmas treat! Remember, everybody has one vote and majorities rule."

As the last word left her lips something came clattering down the big wide throat spout chimney and rolled to her feet. It was a round tin box, wire fastened and bearing upon one side a bit of paper with the words, "Not dangerous," laboriously printed upon it.

"Well, this beats all," everybody said in a breath. Then Trab cried out, "I know there was somebody," and Marian began to plead, "Oh, Betty, do open that."

"I know how it got there. Somebody climbed up the big tree and threw it down from the limb that hangs over," Pete said as Trab undid the wire that bound the lid. He shook the box over Betty's lap, and five half eagles fell from it. They were wrapped in a paper upon which some one had written:

"For the children's Christmas. Make it a happy one."

For the first time that day Betty dropped her head and cried.

While she sobbed a man was rushing away outside as though pursued by furies. He had been hanging about the



"WELL, THIS BEATS ALL," EVERYBODY SAID IN A BREATH.

minutes. He had seen and heard what went on within. As he came up to his tethered horse he was shaking all over, but not with the cold.

"Lord, O Lord!" he muttered, fumbling with the saddle girths. "How that little gal cried! I can't stand it, yet I must. That ain't no other way, not unless I—"

He broke off there and galloped furiously away. For perhaps a mile he held his course, then turned square about and went toward the county town at the same breakneck pace.

The day before Christmas shone warm and moist, with a blue sky so soft and springlike the nipped chrysanthemums under the edge of the south piazza perked themselves up with a semblance of blossoming anew. Human nature seemed in like kindly mood. All day a stream of wagons had rolled up to leave logs cut in fire lengths at the Walton back gate. Then Uncle Billy Trotter and Aunt Nan had come, their big buggy loaded down. Such a big, splendid bronze gobbler as peered from between Uncle Billy's knees, such a thick frosted pound cake as Mrs. Trotter held in her lap, such old ham and pickles, the buggy box disgorged, not to mention a pig for Pete and a pair of pullets for Marian!

"Heard you had started in the chicken business," Uncle Billy said, pinching the child's ear. "So me an' me thought maybe you'd like some o' our red game breed. You're sorter game obliken yourself, eh, Marian?"

"Yes, I fight when I have to," Marian returned. "An' I am goin' to raise eggs an' chickens next year. We all said we'd put the money that fell down the chimney in somethin' we could work with an' try to buy back Lightfoot."

"You'll git her," Uncle Billy said, chuckling hard, while Aunt Nan said aside to Betty:

"Ef it's fitten weather, Betty, I'm comin' in the carryall next preachin' day to take you all to church."

Before Betty could answer a black lad rode up with a big basket before him. Dropping his hat, he said cheerily:

"Miss Betty, Miss Sairy Fellow say here's er piece er fraish beef an' some mince meat she done made pettiokier good, 'cause Christmas don't comes but once er year."

"I don't know how to thank every-

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