

The Tinkling Cymbal

By GARRARD HARRIS

The scorching sun of a July afternoon made the air vibrant with vague, wavering heat currents. Even the edges of the cotton-leaves were withering and curling in the sirocco-like breath of air.

In the patch behind the cabin toiled a man, rounded of shoulders, bent of back, his sunburnt, bearded face hidden below a flapping hat-brim. The sweat had soaked thru his coarse blue shirt and the faded trousers above his bare feet. His eyes were upon the ground, strained, unwinking, as if scared by the sunlight.

His arms rose and fell without suppleness, without variation, as if he were some grotesque marionette which had been hoeing cotton since the world began—as if he would continue inexorably bound to the task until the end of time. His hands, like gnarled knots of mahogany, clutched the implement.

He might have been forty years of age; he might have been sixty. The hoofs of a myriad trampling adversities had beaten his features to a barren hardness, upon which the mere passage of years had long since ceased to leave an impress.

"Daddy!" called a voice which held some of the plaintive, piping notes of the lonely field-sparrow's song. "Daddy, I reckon I'll have to stop a while. Things is kind o' swimmin' 'round like."

The vacant stare vanished. A light filled the eyes of the man, and he stumbled over the clods across to where a tattered gingham bonnet barely showed above the cotton-tops. The child was barelegged and sunburnt. Her hands also grasped the handle of a hoe.

"Why, yes, honey, you come right long 'ith me. We'll go rest a spell under that 'simmon-tree yander. You're overhet."

He lifted the little girl in his iron-muscled arms. She put her slender ones about his hairy neck, and gave him a hug.

"You know I want to help you, daddy. Since mammy's been 'flicted, I got to take her place and mine, too."

"Sho' now! Don't you worry, honey—you're a powerful help. I jes' couldn't git along 'thout ye."

He set her down in the shade, and fanned her with his ragged hat. The child's face was flushed, and her hair wet with perspiration.

"Well, any how, I hoed out four of them great long rows before I had to quit, daddy. That's four you won't have to work!"

"Sho' now! If you ain't the smartes' little gal in the worl'—four rows! Well, I do know!"

"An' I'm going to try to finish two more, soon's I rest some."

"What's the matter 'ith yore hand, Lucy, child?"

She was trying to keep both of them hidden under the bonnet in her lap.

"N-nothin', daddy—jes' blistered a little."

"Lemme see 'em."

He gently took the bonnet away. Four large water-blisters were on the right hand, three on the left, and one had burst, leaving a space large as a half-dollar, raw and bleeding. The man's eyes dimmed.

"My pore little baby girl! An' you done this tryin' to help yore daddy!"

He kissed her tenderly.

"I don't mind. It don't hurt—I mean much, except when I wiggle my fingers or try to close my hand," she answered bravely. "But I'm 'fraid I can't do much more to-day."

"I ain't a 'goin' ter let ye. Wait a minute—I'll ease them preshus lil' hands."

He half trotted to the vacant cow-lot, pulled up three immense jimson-weeds, and hurried back with them. The leaves he hastily stripped from the stems; then upon a flat stone, with another rock, he pounded them into a pulpy, gelatinous mass. There was no cloth in the house that could be used for a bandage. From a wild cucumber-tree he pulled four large, soft leaves. Rapidly he peeled a pawpaw withe, and got some thin strips of bark. Putting half the mass of jimson-leaves on the right hand, he folded two of the big wrappings from the cucumber tree around it, and tied it gently with the bark. The other hand was dressed in like manner.

"How they feel now, Lucy, honey?"

"Oh, daddy, it feels so good an' cool it's most worth gettin' 'em blistered jes' to

feel it," she laughed, resting the hands in her lap.

"Them jimson-leaves is fine for soreness. God A'mighty must 'a' made jimson-weeds, jes' fer pore folks an' their hurts. Nobody else seems to keer about neither one—weeds ner pore folks," he said.

They sat silently for a while.

"Daddy, we ought to make a heap of cotton this year, oughtn't we?"

"Yeh, honey, if we get a rain after we git hit all worked out good, we ought ter make six bales, anyhow. I got to pay one bale rent. That leaves five, an' I reckon hit'll take at leas' three ter pay the cunnel our furnishin' account, an' yer mammy's doctorin', an' the intrus', an' all. That'll leave us two bales clear."

"A bale is worth a heap of money, ain't it, daddy?"

"Yeh, fifty dollars, an' sometimes more. Then, out of the two we're goin' ter have left, I'm a goin' ter give one ter Doc Annerson, an' tell him jes' ter doctor an' physic yer mammy tell he cures her an' gits her on her feet ergin'."

The child's deep eyes lighted.

"Won't that be fine? Pore mammy! Three years is a awful long time to stay in bed."

"Lord knows, I'll shore be glad to see her up, ef fer nothin' else, to take some of

Sunday-school an' sich. That what I'm a goin' ter do before anything else comes outer that bale!"

For years she had been setting her heart on those shoes. She saw other little girls with shoes on, and her feet and legs got dreadfully cold in winter; but every year something happened, and the shoes had never come yet.

"No, daddy, you get mammy somethin' first, an' then you get you a good coat an' a hat; an' if there's enough left, then get me them things. I—I reely don't need 'em, honest I don't. I—I'd jes' like to have 'em, that's all."

"I reckon there'll be enough fer all of us, honey-child. Then I'm a goin' to pay up the cunnel an' move to where there's better lan'. This place is plumb wore out, an' so poor hit won't hardly sprout peas."

"Well, daddy, le's move. We can't get much worse off. Seems to me we're like the bottom of a wheel—whichever way we go we boun' to go up. It sort o' helps to think of that."

"That's so, honey. Jes' to think, eight year ago, when we took this place, we had lots of things—stock, cows—"

"Lawsee daddy, I c'n 'member how good the milk tasted when mammy 'd milk Spot, an' gimme a drink out'n the bucket!"

"Yes, baby, but ole Spot's gone, my mule's gone, them two oxes is gone, my



The Colonel picked his teeth with a solid gold toothpick

the load off'n these here brave little shoulders. They been a totin' a heap fer a lil' thirteen-year-old gal child, an' small fer her age, too. You shore have done noble, Lucy, honey!"

Her father proudly patted the brown curls. The two were good comrades in the daily battle.

"An' what else you goin' to do with the other bale, 'sides gettin' mammy well?"

"Why, the very fust thing I'm a goin' to do, I'm a goin' to give you yo' share of the crop. I'm a goin' to git that pair of shoes for you, an' some purty red stockin's fer Sundays, an' some nice warm black ones fer every day, so's you won't be runnin' aroun' here in the winter-time with them sweet little feet all blue with cold. That's what I'm a goin' to do, fust thing."

"Oh, daddy!" she gasped. "Really, do you reckon I c'n have 'em this year?"

"I know it," he answered bravely.

"Then I'm a goin' to git you a nice, warm wool dress an' 'pettycut—a red dress, with these hyar black cross checks on hit; an', by granny, a hat, too, so's you kin go to

hawgs is gone—the cunnel's got 'em all. I'm a goin' ter git off'n his old worn-out place afore he takes my little gal. She's the only vallyble thing I got left."

He patted her head and mused as he stared into the shimmering, heated distance.

"There's mammy," said the child reprovingly.

"Oh, well, she don't count in the takin' scheme. The cunnel don't take nothin' ceptin' what's useful. Yore mammy is bed-ridden an' paralyzed—she's safe!"

"It seems kind o' wrong, don't it, daddy, for folks to work so hard, like we do, an' then have somebody take it all, don't it?"

"Well, baby child, if I owned a little patch, an' didn't have ter pay-rent, an' buy everythin' on a credick, an' pay intrus', hit would be diff'runt, I reckon. But as 'tis, the cunnel's got me tied hand an' foot. I'm allers in debt to him, an' hit does sometimes look like I never will catch up."

"The cunnel must be awful rich, ain't he, daddy?"

"Lord, yes—he's wuth a hunnerd-thou-

san' dollars if he's wuth a cent. Biggest sto' in town—law, yes, he's big rich."

"I seen him wunst, when he come out to Mount Hebron. He give the folks in the settlemint that church—built it for 'em, they said. It cost two thousan' dollars."

She was awed by the very mention of the sum.

"Aw, yeh—he's great on this yer church business. He keeps up a half a dozen fat, chicken-eatin' preachers. They hang around him n' pray fer 'im. Oh, yeh—an' he's a keepin' up a mish'n'ry in Chiny, outer his pocket. Them preachers mirates over him a lot about that, too."

"Well, I reckon the Lord is good to him, daddy, because he's tryin' to do good."

"The Lord ain't got nothin' ter do with hit, Lucy. He made his start a sellin' whisky to the niggers, an' to white fools like me, in the flush times right after the war. That give him a lot of money, an' ef yer got money hit breeds money. Naw, I don't allow the Lord is much pardners with him in business. The cunnel makes his money by dreemin' folks dry. He's got a hunnerd or more white families like he's got us, an' half the niggers in the county."

"Well, we jes' got to git away from him, daddy."

"God knows how, chile, an' not even a mule or a wagon to go on, an' a bedrid wife. An' I do so want to give you a chanst, Lucy, honey—some decent clo'es, an' schoolin', an' shoes, an' sich."

"Never mind, daddy! We'll make a good crop this year, and we'll pay up and mov wh'r the land's better, an' you can have your chanst too, daddy dear," she said bravely. "But I shorely do want a pair of shoes. I wonder how they feel!"

II

The colonel's emporium was the largest establishment in the little town, and did the biggest business, "supplying" half the small white farmers and negroes in the county. As his store overshadowed the rest, so was he the commanding figure of the community. He practically owned the bank, he dictated the choice of town officers, he dominated the church, and he domineered over everybody else.

No man came near him with heavy pockets but what they were lightened of their load. He was at his store by six o'clock in the morning, and the omnipresent nightmare of servile, underpaid clerks until he locked the doors himself at night.

Also he was the model of the community in other ways. The man who took a drink of liquor was condemned to his everlasting disapproval. He kept pretty quiet about those who sold it. The memory of man is not long—and, anyway, it happened in another State, and nobody had ever proved it on him.

In his mind, the youth who smoked cigarettes was doomed to perdition. Si was the man who chewed. In fact, everybody who did not live according to his standard was doomed—the dancers, the card-players, the circus-goers, the novel-readers. He strongly disapproved of levity, or laughter, or the love of life. His was the austere religion of woe and self-abasement and anathema.

Somehow, there were always preachers within the proximity of his patronage. The unctuous panegyrics they pronounced upon him were the only joy of his frost-bitten soul. The public prayers offered for him were his just due; he expected them. Why else did he give and give? Why else did he maintain missionaries, preachers, organists, and build churches? Why else did he so labor to stamp out all earthly, human—and therefore sinful—happiness?

On this dismal day the Rev. Ephraim Patterson was on hand to urge the colonel to purchase a new Jersey cow for the use of the parsonage. He discreetly bided his time, dropping a pointed remark now and then, as customers came and went and the opportunity presented. The Rev. Ephraim was particularly fond of rich cream, buttermilk, and clabber.

It was miserable, forbidding weather outside—low-scudding clouds above a freezing sodden earth. The wooden shut-

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