

The Tinkling Cymbal

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ters flapped and creaked mournfully. Occasional squalls of sleety rain hissed against the window-glass.

The town square was deserted, save by a ramshackle wagon weaving thru muddy ruts and pools crusted with thin ice. On the wagon was a bale of cotton. A man sat on the seat, cowering before the biting blast, his patched coat soaking wet, and rain dripping from his hat-brim. The colonel's eyes lighted as he beheld the approaching vehicle.

The man hitched, and came in, shedding water at every step. His teeth chattered and his lips were blue, as he eagerly hovered about the scarlet stove. He reached under his coat and handed a sample of cotton to the colonel.

"The last bale," he said wearily.

The colonel took a lock of it and ran it thru his thumbs and forefingers, measuring the length of the fiber.

"Not much cotton—mighty short staple," he announced dryly. The man said nothing. "I'll allow you eight cents a pound."

"I heered cotton was nine—"

"That was yesterday. It's down today."

It meant five dollars a bale less.

"Well, I got to sell. There ain't nothin' to eat at home. If I wait, it mout go down lower. Let it go."

The colonel nodded to a clerk, who got two negroes and rolled the bale upon the store porch.

"Come on back to the desk. Let's see how your account stands."

The man shambled after him. The colonel figured and figured.

"Thought you said you'd make six bales this year?"

"I would 'a' done hit, but that long hot spell stunted the crap an' made hit shed. Ef you'd 'a' let me have that mule an' plow I ast ye fer, I'd 'a' more'n paid fer hit with the two extry bales I'd 'a' made. Bein's as there warn't nobody but me an' my li'l gal, we jes' nacherly couldn't work hit all out with hoes, like we could 'a' done with a plow."

The colonel was busy figuring.

"Allowing forty dollars for this bale, and the other two you brought in, you still owe me twelve dollars and sixty cents."

"Great Godermighty! I made four bales—you got all four—ain't I never goin' to catch up?"

The colonel shrugged his shoulders slightly. He was accustomed to the bleating of sheared sheep.

"You should not be profane. The Lord will not prosper them that speak His name lightly," he said, in his prayer-meeting tone of voice.

"Amen!" exclaimed the Rev. Ephraim Patterson, who was not out of ear-shot, and whose musings were of the shortest cut to great jorums of rich, foamy milk.

The man merely clenched his hands until the nails bit into the calloused palms. He knew that he had not had a fair reckoning, but he could not dispute the account. He could not read anything but printing.

"Twelve dollars and sixty cents," repeated the colonel, glancing at him sharply.

The man was thinking of the wintry, fenceless hillside. He could hear the patter of sleet upon the shingles of the unceiled cabin. There was one particularly large crack in the wall, thru which the north wind always moaned weirdly. He could hear the querulous accents of the bedridden woman, and see the child sitting before the fireplace, gazing into the embers, awaiting his return. He stood as one in a dream.

"Well, cunnel, maybe better luck nex' year. Of co'se you'll carry me tell next fall?" he queried anxiously.

"Times are tight, and I'm going to reduce my supply business, but I reckon I'll have to carry you one more year. But you have got to cut things down to bed-rock living, you hear?"

As if he had ever been extravagant, when he had not had a piece of tobacco of his own for five months!

"Yes, sir," answered the man humbly.

There was nothing else to do. They had used the last dust of meal for the morning hoe-cake. They had been out of meat for a week. It was actual hunger that had driven him out on this drear day.

The colonel closed the ledger, first thriftily posting the twelve dollars and sixty cents on the new account, so that it might at once start to drawing its temper-cent. interest. Then he walked to where the Rev. Ephraim was basking

before the stove like some sleek, well-fed tomcat. The man shuffled along behind, his mind in a daze. The colonel beckoned a clerk to him, and indicated the man with a jerk of his head.

"Fix him up ten pounds of salt meat, half-bushel of meal, ten pounds flour, five of rice, three of onions, three of brown sugar, three of green coffee, and a gallon of molasses. Put the stuff in an empty box, so it won't get wet. Might put in a package of soda, nickel's worth of coarse salt, and two pounds of lard. That's all."

"Cunnel, lemme have half a pound o' tea for my old woman! She's bed-ridden, you know, an' tea seems to comfort her. An' I want a bottle of liniment for her!"

The colonel started to deliver another lecture on economy and refuse these luxuries, but the Rev. Ephraim smiled fatly and nodded approval.

"Ah, such sweet thoughtfulness! If every one were only so sweetly thoughtful of others!" he murmured.

The colonel hesitated and was lost. He nodded assent to the clerk, who scuttled off to fill the order.

"An'—an' cunnel, there's somethin' else. I ain't askin' nothin' myself, but it's gittin' Christmas time, an' I made a promise this summer I shore want to keep. I'm powerful disappointed 'bout that crap bein' short, an' that I ain't able to pay out—"

"Nothing more now. I must hold credits down. The boll-weevil is coming. Wait till you get your crop planted and up, and we see what the paying prospects are."

His thin lips tightened into a line above his square-cut, brindled chin-whiskers.

"But this ain't much, cunnel—jes' a dollar or two—jes' a little bit, an' I'll pay you double, dollar fer dollar, nex' fall!"

"You had better be guided by the good advice of the colonel, my brother. He is a success—a godly man, and the talents the Lord gave him have wonderfully multiplied. Follow his advice, and you cannot go wrong."

The Rev. Ephraim felt safe in patronizing the man, and the tribute to the colonel would help that cow proposition along.

"But—but, cunnel, you don't understand. I've got a li'l gal out thar at my cabin, an' for three years now I've been a promisin' her somethin'. She ain't but thirteen, cunnel, an' she helped me work them fo' bales you got. She worked as hard as any nigger; an' I told her I'd shore git her some shoes an' stockin's this year—"

The colonel was slowly shaking his head from side to side.

"Please, sir, cunnel, lemme have them shoes for Lucy! Jest the cheapest ones you got! She ain't never had on a shoe in her life, cunnel, an' the cold is cruel hard on her. Why—why, cunnel, them pore li'l feet of hern jes' cracks an' chaps an' bleeds in right col' weather. Please sir!"

The colonel picked his teeth with a solid gold pocket-toothpick set with diamonds, which the local missionary society had given him. He spread his coat-tails wide apart and turned his back to the stove. A clerk lighted one of the big coal-oil lamps that hung from the ceiling; dusk was approaching rapidly. The colonel made no answer.

"Cunnel, what am I goin' to tell that pore li'l baby child of mine when I git home? She's sot her heart so on them shoes an' stockin's! I'd rather be dead—I'd a heap rather be dead—than face her when she comes a runnin' out to meet me in the dark, an' I got to tell her this third year that her daddy can't keep his promise, an' she can't have them shoes. She afn't a goin' to cry, ner holler, ner take on, but she'll jes' set an' look in the ashes an' grieve ter herself; an' then the pore li'l thing is goin' ter come an' hug me an' try to make me b'lieve she don't keer—but I'll hear her cryin' soft to herself, 'way in the night. She ain't never had no Sandy Claws, ner no pretty clo'es, ner ribbins, ner nothin' like other chillern. She's jest fought 'longside of me, workin' all the time, takin' her mammy's place, an' hern, too. These here shoes an' stockin's is the first thing she's ever let on she wanted much. Cunnel, lemme take 'em out ter that pore li'l preshus, lonesome gal of mine!"

"I told you no, and that settles it," snapped the colonel, in tones of finality.

The man winced, as if a whip-lash had seared his face. His lips moved as if to plead further. His eyes roved in mute misery to the Rev. Ephraim, who avoided his glance.

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