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Georgia Knotts

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## Christmas Money

By GEORGIA KNOTTS

MR. RHODES sat in his stuffy little office, wishing very much that there were no such thing as Christmas. He sat on his high stool by the desk, pencil in hand, absently making circles fit in squares and playing games of tatu with an imaginary partner.

Christmas, he reflected, is the one season of the year when men are supposed to lay aside daily cares—join in the spirit of good will toward men—be grateful for health and happiness, and wish friend and foe alike a “Prosperous New Year.”

Yet, Christmas this year was short of a nightmare. Prior to the year 1931, it was customary for the large plantation owners to furnish their tenants with Christmas money, which might be gotten back, but which more than likely would not be gotten back.

So many things could happen. It might be too dry, and the crop would burn up. It might be too wet and the grass would get it, then the boll-weevil had a habit of making a visit at inopportune times.

These negative elements bothered the negroes little, if at all. They wanted their Christmas money, and if “Ol’ Boss” would not let them have it, Colonel Stewart would. He had a fine place, too, ready for most any good negro that wanted to come over . . .

There was a respectful knock on the white-washed door of the office, and a black husky youth of about twenty came in.

“E’nen, Boss.”

“Evening, Peter.” Mr. Rhodes reached out and took a note from Peter’s huge black hand.

“All right, Peter, tell yo’ pappy he can have his Christmas money cause I can depend on him to pay out. But I’m not—” he reached in a cigar box and began counting out some bills—“But I’m not going to make this loan to every-

body. Times too hard, and we have to learn how to do without."

"Yas suh, sho' is fer a fack."

"Give this to yo' pappy and wish him a fine Christmas for me."

Mr. Rhodes stepped to the window and saw the boy lumbering slowly away. A good negro, he thought. Someday, not far away, he would take his daddy's place on the plantation. He was an honest, good boy. He'd never been into any trouble that amounted to anything. He was already one of the deacons in the church, which position was undoubtedly due to a loud voice and an unlimited amount of wind. No, he had not made a mistake there. After all, \$50.00 was not too much to loan to a negro like Uncle Alf. He had four fine sons, Peter, Paul, Andrew, and John, all good workers.

Mr. Rhodes paid out some other smaller sums during the afternoon to different darkies, locked his rusty safe, slammed the office door and went home feeling quite at peace with the world, and his negroes. He felt sure that he was being as generous as any neighboring planter and that he would begin the New Year with the same hands that he had now. That was always a sign of a good year ahead.

After breakfast next morning, Mr. Rhodes walked to his office, enjoying the cool, quiet morning, and the drizzle that was just beginning. He shut the door behind him and pulled his chair up before the little stove. There were some letters he had to get off—and a little figuring for his family's Christmas.

He was in the midst of writing a letter on his trusty 1920 model Royal, when he saw Uncle Alf shuffling up to the door.

"Come on in Alf. What's your trouble?"

"Boss, I lowed as how I'se gwine need de res' of mah Christmas money. I thought fer a while I wuzn't gonna need it, but I has to pay de doctor fer getting my little gal well."

"The rest of your money! What are you talking about? I gave you \$50.00 yesterday. What else do you want in these times?"

It was Alf's time to be surprised. He straightened up, and a certain amount of fire came into his eyes.

"Me? You don't give me \$50.00 dis year boss? Naw suh, you ain't, Mr. Rhodes. Naw suh."

They stood silent for a minute. "Alf, you or me's crazy. I'll look anyhow."

The file was opened, and Alf's note removed. Mr. Rhodes read aloud, "Please give me \$5.00 fer Christmas, please Mr. Rhodes." It was signed Alf Hunter.

"Well I'll be." These three words conveyed the bleakest despair imaginable. For one who had never seen a plantation negro's hand writing to make such a mistake, there might have been some excuse, but for Mr. Rhodes, after twenty years experience to do such a thing, it was unpardonable.

Of course the boy had known that his pappy asked for only \$5.00. Yet he had said nothing when he was given \$50.00. Mr. Rhodes recalled that he had not seen Peter in the store lately. Could it be that he had taken the money in his pocket, got his ginger-colored flapper, and departed?

"How much money did Peter give you?"

"Five dollars, boss."

"Peter at home?"

"Naw suh—he's over at Mis' Victoria Saulsberry. Dey is to be married soon dey orders fer de license."

"Well, you come with me. I'll tell you why when we get started."

They hurried to the old Model T at the back of the office. Uncle Alf had considerable difficulty in getting the door open, but once in he sat very straight, and smiled condescendingly at the one or two negroes who stood around the store.

They stopped at Victoria's house. Alf was not smiling now. He acted much as any white father would on hearing of his son's alleged dishonesty.

"Oh Pete."

Peter did not answer, but the laughter that they had heard when they first stopped had ceased, and there was a scared silence inside.

"Peter," called Mr. Rhodes.

A very nice looking brown girl came to the door.

"How you do, Mr. Rhodes. Hi, Mr. Alf."

"Victoria, is Peter in there," Mr. Rhodes was calm.

"Yas suh. Pete he here." She turned to the door and called to Peter. "Pete, yo' pappy want you."

Pete came slowly out.

"Get in the car, Peter. Got a little business to talk over."

Peter walked as slowly to the car as he could, and stubbornly refused to open the door. Mr. Rhodes opened it, and shoved him in.

They drove to the office in silence. Once inside, Peter took on an offensive air. He threw back his shoulders, put his hands in his pockets, and studied the ceiling just as he might do at a family gathering if he became a bit bored.

"Peter, what did you do with that \$45.00?"

"I ain't had no \$45.00, Boss."

"Look here, didn't I give you \$50.00 to take to yo' pappy?"

"Don' know if you did or if you didn't, Boss."

"Well, you better know by the time we get to the Squire's place. You'll know all about it by then. Come on Alf. Come on Pete."

Alf was more anxious to keep up the good name of the family than to defend his son's honor, so he grabbed Pete by the arm, and led him to the car, muttering all the time, "You ole' bad boy you. I don' know whar you gits yo' badness no how. Taint fum me."

Mr. Rhodes climbed in the front seat. "All right, Peter. One more chance before the Squire gets you. Know where that money is?" Pete carelessly lifted his right hand to scratch his head.

"Mah Gawd, boss, yas suh, I certainly does know whar it's at, boss. Please suh, boss, I does' suh. You jes' go up to mah house, an' I'll git it fer you in one minute."

His pappy, who had been looking dejectedly at the floor, quickly raised his head at his son's unexpected confession. There sat Mr. Rhodes scratching his head with a hand that held a neat pearl-handled pistol. "Please suh, Mr. Rhodes, don' do nuthing to mah boy, he's gwine tell, ain't you, son?"

Peter burst wildly into a confession, pleading between sobs for Mr. Rhodes to hurry to the house. He did not wait for the car to stop, but jumped out and ran to the stump of an old tree, and began feeling around inside the stump. Finally he pulled out a paper sack, which he handed to Mr. Rhodes. "Here tis', boss. I tuk it suh. I knowed pappy asked fuh five dollars, but when you giv' me fifty, I figured dat maybe pappy wouldn't want no mo' and dat he wouldn't fin' out 'til settlin' up time. By den, me and Vic would done been married and I would don' paid pappy back. Sho' nuf, Boss, I didn't mean no wrong. I wuz jes' tempted, dat's all."

"All right, Peter. Stop crying. I'm ashamed of you. A good boy that yo' pappy was so proud of, stealing from him. Aren't you ashamed?"

Mr. Rhodes put the pistol back in his pocket, and fingered the sack thoughtfully for a minute. He must punish the boy. But how? The days of beating negroes had long passed, and Mr. Rhodes was not sorry. He could never visualize himself as a Simon Legree. He wouldn't send Peter to jail, both for sentimental reasons, and because in doing so, he would lose an excellent negro. Uncle Alf broke in on his thoughts.

"I knows what you is thinking, boss. Youse wondrin' if to giv' dat boy a lickin' or sending him to de jail-house. Boss, fuh mah sake, don' do neither. I'se been here a long

time, boss, an dis is de first time dat any wrongdoing is happened in mah family. Ain' dat de truf', boss?"

"Yes, that's the truth, Alf."

"Dat boy, he ain't naccherly bad, he jes' tempted. Now me, here, I'se too old an' bent fuh to beat him mahself." He looked at his brawny son. "But I'll tell you what, boss. His mammy sho' can hit hard."

Mr. Rhodes thought this over for a minute. After all, this would be the easiest way out for everybody. The three of them started walking to the cabin with Peter in the middle. He looked about him as only a scared darkie can look. If he had any hopes of running away, they were broken the minute his pappy yelled in as loud a voice as his seventy-odd years would permit, "Ohhh Becky."

The cabin door bounded open an Becky loomed out. Mr. Rhodes hadn't remembered that Becky had been this large. She was enough to inspire fear in anyone, and to her son, who couldn't fight back, she must have been appalling.

She grinned pleasantly at Mr. Rhodes. "Enen, Mr. Rhodes. How you is today?"

"I'm fine, Aunt Becky."

"Sho' is cool today, ain't it?"

"We got a job for you, Aunt Becky."

The details were given. Becky's face grew tenser at every word. After the recitation, Becky reached out, grabbed Peter by the collar, and dragged him into the house.

"You young Affican, you. All yo' life I'se tried to raise you to be a man like yo' pa, and den you go and steals all his money."

Peter made one last effort to get away, but Becky's clutch was iron, and he followed her into the house, whimpering along the way, "Oh please, Mammy, fo' Gawd's sake, please mam don' whip me. I is never gon' to do nothin' like this agin."

The door closed behind them, and while Mr. Rhodes could not see them he knew well enough what went on. He knew that Peter was stripped, and was lying on the bare

floor on his stomach, with a chair over his head, both to insure his staying there, and to give Becky somewhere to rest her bulk while she administered the blows. He knew that Becky had gotten the old plow line off the back porch to use as a whip.

Ten minutes later, after all the war-like sounds had ceased, Becky walked out.

"Ah think ah don' fix him to whar he cain't steal no mo.' Us sho' is proud dat you don' caught dat trifling boy. He sho' is bothersome, stealin' his pappy's and mammy's Christmas money."

"Aw, Becky, dat boy ain't bad. He jes' wuz tempted by de debil."

"Now listen here, I says de boy is bad, an' he is."

Alf evidently thought so too, for he had found it wise to agree with Becky.

\* \* \* \* \*

Mr. Rhodes went home, tired after the day's excitement. He was satisfied with the boy's punishment. It would be a lesson to him, and to the other boys, on the place. But Mr. Rhodes was worried about Peter. There was no doubt but that he would leave. It was not just getting caught for stealing that he would mind. It was that Victoria would hear about the beating, and probably would not marry him.

Mr. Rhodes spent a miserable night. He was awakened now and then by a voice, "Peter is going to leave. Peter is going to leave."

He arose earlier than usual next morning. He felt listless and tired. After a cup of coffee, he walked to his office and sat down to try to decide some way out. He could not lose Peter. He had counted on him for so long to carry on in his daddy's place when he died. Who would be hostler? Who would keep the garden?

Suddenly he jumped up, grabbed his hat, and started for the door. He would go and ask Peter to stay. It would be better to give in once than to regret it long after. He



opened the door and bounded out. As he rounded the corner of the store, he saw a familiar figure walking up the lane. As it came closer, he saw that it was Peter.

He did not know what Peter wanted, but he decided to wait and see. He closed the door behind him, took out a ledger, and began figuring just as though he had been there all morning. There was a knock on the door. It opened slowly, and there stood Peter, grinning sheepishly.

He looked first at the floor and then at Mr. Rhodes. He shifted uneasily from foot to foot.

"Well, Peter, what do you want?"

"Boss, I wants you to order off after me a pair of license. Me and Victoria is going to git married on Christmas day."

"Well, good for you, Peter. I sure will get you the license."

"An' Boss, us will need some furniture, too."

"Where are you going to live?"

"Us got the house back of pa."

"All right. Take this note to Mr. Lewis there in the store, and he will give you the furniture you need, or at least, what we can spare."

Peter thanked him and walked to the door. "Oh, and Peter, I forgot something." He reached in his pocket and pulled out a five dollar bill. "Better take this along for luck."