A Theft Condoned

Gertrude Smith

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ONE of the seven houses in Pawnee faced toward the south. It was the house where Mrs. Dyer lived. The other houses faced the west. The railroad track was across the street from these houses, with a broad plank walk and a little unpainted box of a station.

The houses in Pawnee were all one−story wooden buildings, with the gable−ends toward the street. Mrs. Dyer's house was painted a dull red; the other houses were not painted.

It had been a warm day and the sun had shone glaringly on the unbroken prairie around Pawnee.

The town was on a slight rise of ground. You could see more than twenty miles in three directions. A narrow strip of woods broke the view on the north, half a mile away.

Mrs. Dyer stood in her front door and looked off over the prairie. The railroad track wound away toward the south and disappeared where the earth and sky seemed to meet. The sun was going down and the short thin prairie−grass looked white and gold. The railroad track shone like silver. There were no clouds. In places the blue of the sky was so light that it was almost white. The air was cool and clear after the warm day.

“The sun's going down without any fuss to−night,” Mrs. Dyer said, sitting down on the doorstep. “Just droppin' off the edge, like the string that held it had been cut.”

She folded her arms in her lap and turned her face away from the bright light. She was a small, old woman with thin features. She wore her hair, which was still very black, combed smoothly behind her ears. Her eyes were black, with a keen look of resistance in them. This look was emphasized in the lines around her mouth.

Mrs. Dyer lived alone. Her son kept a little store and the post−office in the front room of one of the other houses. Two years before when her husband had died Mrs. Dyer had come west to be near her son. Her son had invited her to live with them, but she had refused.

“You ain't got room for your own. I didn't come out here to be beholden to anybody. I'll have my own place, and you'll see enough of me, dodgin' in and out, as it is.”

She had spent the greater part of the time watching the carpenters at work on her house, during her forced stay at her son's, urging them to work faster, and at last in her impatience moved in before they had finished shingling the roof. She had decided to postpone the plastering until some time when she should go away on a visit.

The sun had gone down. The air was a soft gray and very still.

“Well, I mustn't sit here gettin' the cramps,” she said, getting up from the step. “I do say I ain't seen them mover wagons before. I wonder now if they've stopped since I been sitting here. They camped near enough! I suppose they'll buy something up to the store. The movers bring in John quite a little, off and on. There comes John up this way. I wonder now what he's comin' up here for. What you want, John? They ain't anything the matter, is they?” she called.

John came slowly toward her. He was a large man, but his clothes, which hung loosely, gave him the appearance of being thin. He wore a soft felt hat pulled well over his forehead. His eyes were like his mother's in color, but there was none of the determination in them.

“Have you seen the movers campin' over yonder?” he asked, pointing across the prairie.

“Yes, I just was lookin' at them when I see you comin' up.”

“Well, they was just two of them up to the store, and they was evil−lookin', I can tell you. Marthy was in the store and see them, and she would have it you must come over and stay to our house to−night.”

“Why, I ain't afraid of movers, as I know of.”

“She don't want to think of you stayin' here by yourself, and I'll own I don't neither.”

“Well, I ain't goin' to leave my bed 'cause some movers happen to be campin' near. There's always movers

comin' and goin'. I guess if they stole me they'd drop me when it come light enough to see what they'd got."

"Well, I think you'd better come. Marthy won't feel easy unless you do."

"I ain't goin' to be so silly, to please Marthy or no one. I ain't got anything they want, without it's that money I've saved to have my carpet−rags wove up, and they'd never think of lookin' in a can for it. It's one of them cove−oyster cans. I've made a pin−cushion that fits down into the can, and sewed a silk cover around the outside. You'd never know it was a can to look at it. I see one made something like it when I lived east."

"You ain't got much money in it, have you?"

"It's all in nickels. Oh, I guess they must be four or five dollars. I ain't counted it just lately."

"Well, I think you're foolish to stay here by yourself, when you can just as well come over. I think you'd better change your mind and come along."

He turned and went back along the grassy road toward his own home. He walked with his head bent down and with a shambling gait. He was dreading his wife's reproaches that he had not been able to induce his mother to come back with him. He did not believe there was any real danger in letting his mother stay alone.

"I guess I ain't goin' to set up for a coward, at my time of life," said Mrs. Dyer. "I wonder now if Marthy really thought I'd come!"

An express train was coming from the south. The light from the engine could be seen for some time before there was any noise from the train. Night had come quickly. It was already quite dark.

Mrs. Dyer took off her gingham apron and put it over her head, and stood watching the light from the engine as it drew nearer, and finally when the train had dashed by the little station she turned and went into the house. There were but two rooms in the house — the living−room and a small bedroom opening out of it. Mrs. Dyer went over to the window and looked out.

"It does beat me how soon night comes out here," she said; "back in York State we had a little between−time. There's the moon shinin' away as if the sun hadn't only just left. You can see the movers plain as if 'twas day. They're much as half a mile away, too. They've got a big fire. 'Tain't likely there's any more harm in them than there's in me. I'm goin' to get out that money and count it. They must be most enough to have the carpet wove by this time. Six dollars, they say it'll cost me. They never charge no such price as that back east."

The can in which she kept the money was on a shelf behind the stove. She went over the took it down, and then sat down in an old rocking−chair, not far from the window. The moonlight shone in brightly. She took the cushion out of the top of the can and emptied the money into her lap. There was quite a pile of it.

"One would think there was considerable more'n there is to look at it," she said, fingering the money. "If you could call these pieces dollars 'stid of nickels, 'twould be. Might as well say five−dollar pieces while I'm about it, I suppose."

She began counting the money, dropping each piece into the can as she did so. She enjoyed the sound of the money's rattling. Two or three times she forgot her count, and emptied it back into her lap and began again. Suddenly she started, gathering the money up in her dress. She went over and looked out of the window. The prairie was flooded with moonlight. The light from the fire in the movers' camp lit up the white canvas−covered wagons. Everything was perfectly still. She went over and locked the door.

"It must have been a cloud passing over the moon. They ain't any chance of a person's gettin' out of sight so quick, unless he just went round the house."

She stood listening for some time. "It's all my imagination. I'm going to put the money right back and go to bed. They ain't no such great rush about its being counted, anyhow."

She sat down and put the money carefully back into the can. She did not let it fall in this time, but put each piece in carefully, counting it as she did so.

"There, they's five dollars and fifty−five cents, — 'most enough," holding the can between her hands and looking toward the shelf and then toward the window.

"Now I'm goin' to bed. I ain't goin' to be so silly as to think any one's goin' to get it. They'd never think of lookin' in this can anyhow. They'd never know it was a can."

She put it back on the shelf, then turned and looked quickly toward the window, trembling.

"Well, I didn't think I was so silly, but seems like I see somebody goin' by that window again. I hadn't any business countin' the money and thinkin' about it. That's what's upset me. If I'd lit the lamp and put down the window−curtain and gone to bed in a natural way, I'd been all right."

She lit the lamp and drew down the curtain. It was a dark−green paper shade. Then she went into the little bedroom, undressed quickly, blew out the light, and got into bed, leaving the door into the other room open. She did not go to sleep, but lay there listening, the fear growing every minute stronger and more beyond her control.

Once she sat up and looked out into the other room. Then she got up and pulled aside the curtain in her little bedroom and looked out. The moon had gone under a heavy cloud and the night was growing dark. She could see the other houses of the town from this window. There was a light burning in the back room of her son's house. It gave her a wonderful sense of security. She went back to bed and was soon asleep. Some time near one o'clock she woke suddenly and sat up in bed. The wind was blowing around the house and it was raining.

“There, that rain−trough ain't put up, so's I'll catch any water in that barrel! The tubs ought to be put out, too. I ain't had any soft water to wash with I don't know when.”

All the fear that she had had in the evening was gone. She began to think of putting on her clothes and going out to place the tubs. As she sat there in bed, the window in the other room was opened softly. A spool of thread that stood on the upper casing fell to the floor. She heard the green paper shade give way — then she knew that some one was in the room.

“Well, I wonder if I'm goin' to set here stiff and let them take that money,” she thought. “Just as like as not they'd kill me if I'd interfere. They no doubt have their weapons ready.”

Everything was perfectly still for some time. Then she heard the movement of some one crossing the room.

“Sounds as if they was makin' straight for that shelf! They are! I can feel their hand movin' right along the shelf toward it!”

She sprang out of bed and shut the door between the two rooms with such force that the house trembled. At that minute the can containing the money fell with a crash to the floor. The coins flew in all directions. Mrs. Dyer partly opened the door and looked out. In the dim light she could see the form of a man. He had one hand on the window−sill ready to spring through the open window.

“If you've got any of that money, you drop it!” Mrs. Dyer screamed, forgetting all fear and coming out into the room. “Don't you leave this house till you drop every cent you stole!”

The man disappeared through the window. Mrs. Dyer went and looked out. She could see him for a short distance running across the prairie. He was going in the direction of the wagons. She put down the window and lit the lamp and dressed. Then she found a nail and fastened the window securely. After this was done she got down on her hands and knees and began creeping around the floor, picking up the scattered money. It was a long and difficult task. The money had rolled and hidden itself in every conceivable nook and crack in the room.

At last she gave up the search. She had found all but six of the pieces, and these she decided the man must have taken. Her loss could not have troubled her more if it had been her entire hoard.

“To think of my standin' in there and lettin' him pick it up after I'd scared him into knockin' it off the shelf! As soon as it begins to get light I believe I'll go down to the wagon and make him give it up. Like's any way he'll hitch right up and get off without waitin' for it to be light.”

She decided that it would not do to risk the safety of the money in the can again, and after counting it the second time, she tied it into an old stocking−leg and buried it in the depths of the paper−rag bag that hung behind her bedroom door.

“There ain't any use goin' to bed again now; it'll soon be mornin'. I believe I'll look over those beans I'm goin' to cook, and then get the carpet−rags down out of the loft and look them over and see if they're in a condition to send away. I half believe I'll take them over to the woman to−morrow or next day and not wait to save up the rest of the money the way I begun. Or perhaps she'll wait for the balance.”

The morning was clear, and the sun, which came early at that time of the year, lit up the wet prairie−grass and made it dance and sparkle like jewels.

Mrs. Dyer waited impatiently for the first light to see if the movers had broken camp. When it came she saw that they were still there, though evidently making preparations to go.

It was broad daylight when Mrs. Dyer put on her sunbonnet and started across the prairie toward the wagons. Her courage had nearly forsaken her, and at one time she had given up the idea of going at all, but when she saw that they were getting ready to go the sense of her loss was too strong to let her remain.

It was a longer walk to the wagons than she had thought. The prairie−grass was still very wet and draggled her

dress. She was tired after the long night, and before she had reached the wagons she wished she had not come.

She found the men hitching the horses. There were two of them. The one woman of the camp was sitting up in one of the wagons, ready to go. She was very thin and looked sick. Her blue calico sunbonnet hung loosely about her face. She looked so weak and child−like that it went to Mrs. Dyer's heart.

“Good mornin'!” she said, looking first at the men and then at the woman.

No one made any reply. The woman looked at her absently with pale blue eyes.

“You're sick, ain't you?” Mrs. Dyer said, going up to the side of the wagon.

“Yes, I be,” she said, in a whining tone, hardly looking at her visitor.

“What's the matter with you? I should not think you'd be travelin' over the country this way when you can't hardly sit up.”

“That's what we're trav'lin' for. Jeff's taking me out to Arkansas Springs. They say it'll cure me. I don't believe it will. We've got out of money and I don't get enough to eat. I feel like I'd die before I get there. I wish I would, I get so tired ridin' all day.”

The other wagon with one of the men had started. The woman's husband went around to the other side of the wagon and sprang in, sitting down beside his wife.

“Stop your gabblin' to everybody that comes alongside of the wagon,” he said roughly, and taking up the lines he started off across the prairie after the other wagon.

Mrs. Dyer stood watching them for a minute, and then walked slowly back toward the house.

“To think of that sick woman ridin' clear out to Arkansas Springs to get well, and they out of money and her goin' hungry? I declare I feel as if I ought to made them wait and give her every cent of that carpet−money. I'll never look at that rag carpet but I'll see just how sick and hungry she looked. I half believe I wish he'd stole it all.”
Gertrude Smith.
