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An Old-time Christmas

Paul Laurence Dunbar

When the holidays came round the thoughts of 'Liza Ann Lewis always turned to the good times that she used to have at home when, following the precedent of anti-bellum days, Christmas lasted all the week and good cheer held sway. She remembered with regret the gifts that were given, the songs that were sung to the tinkling of the banjo and the dances with which they beguiled the night hours. And the eating! Could she forget it? The great turkey, with the fat literally bursting from him; the yellow yam melting into deliciousness in the mouth; or in some more fortunate season, even the juicy 'possum grinning in brown and greasy death from the great platter.

In the ten years she had lived in New York, she had known no such feast-day. Food was strangely dear in the Metropolis, and then there was always the weekly rental of the poor room to be paid. But she had kept the memory of the old times green in her heart, and ever turned to it with the fondness of one for something irretrievably lost.

That is how Jimmy came to know about it. Jimmy was thirteen and small for his age, and he could not remember any such times as his mother told him about. Although he said with great pride to his partner and rival, Blinky Scott, "Chee, Blink, you ought to hear my ol' lady talk about de times dey have down w'ere we come from at Christmas; N'Yoick ain't in it wid dem, you kin jist bet." And Blinky, who was a New Yorker clear through with a New Yorker's contempt for anything outside of the city, had promptly replied with a downward spreading of his right hand, "Aw fu'git it!"

Jimmy felt a little crest-fallen for a minute, but he lifted himself in his own estimation by threatening to "do" Blinky and the cloud rolled by.

'Liza Ann knew that Jimmy couldn't ever understand what she meant by an old-time Christmas unless she could show him by some faint approach to its merrymaking, and it had been the dream of her life to do this. But every year she had failed, until now she was a little ahead.

Her plan was too good to keep, and when Jimmy went out that Christmas eve morning to sell his papers, she had disclosed it to him and bade him hurry home as soon as he was done, for they were to have a real old-time Christmas.

Jimmy exhibited as much pleasure as he deemed consistent with his dignity and

promised to be back early to add his earnings to the fund for celebration.

When he was gone, 'Liza Ann counted over her savings lovingly and dreamed of what she would buy her boy, and what she would have for dinner on the next day. Then a voice, a colored man's voice, she knew, floated up to her. Some one in the alley below her window was singing "The Old Folks at Home."

"All up an' down the whole creation,Sadly I roam,Still longing for the old plantation,An' for the old folks at home."

She leaned out of the window and listened and when the song had ceased and she drew her head in again, there were tears in her eyes—the tears of memory and longing. But she crushed them away, and laughed tremulously to herself as she said, "What a reg'lar ol' fool I'm a-gittin' to be." Then she went out into the cold, snow-covered streets, for she had work to do that day that would add a mite to her little Christmas store.

Down in the street, Jimmy was calling out the morning papers and racing with Blinky Scott for prospective customers; these were only transients, of course, for each had his regular buyers whose preferences were scrupulously respected by both in agreement with a strange silent compact.

The electric cars went clanging to and fro, the streets were full of shoppers with bundles and bunches of holly, and all the sights and sounds were pregnant with the message of the joyous time. People were full of the holiday spirit. The papers were going fast, and the little colored boy's pockets were filling with the desired coins. It would have been all right with Jimmy if the policeman hadn't come up on him just as he was about to toss the "bones," and when Blinky Scott had him "faded" to the amount of five hard-earned pennies.



Well, they were trying to suppress youthful gambling in New York, and the officer had to do his duty. The others scuttled away, but Jimmy was so absorbed in the game that he didn't see the "cop" until he was right on him, so he was "pinched." He blubbered a little and wiped his grimy face with his grimier sleeve until it was one long, brown smear. You know this was Jimmy's first time.

The big blue-coat looked a little bit ashamed as he marched him down the street, followed at a distance by a few hooting boys. Some of the holiday shoppers turned to look at them as they passed and murmured, "Poor little chap; I wonder what he's been up to now." Others said sarcastically, "It seems strange that 'copper' didn't call for help." A few of his brother officers grinned at him as

he passed, and he blushed, but the dignity of the law must be upheld and the crime of gambling among the newsboys was a growing evil.

Yes, the dignity of the law must be upheld, and though Jimmy was only a small boy, it would be well to make an example of him. So his name and age were put down on the blotter, and over against them the offence with which he was charged. Then he was locked up to await trial the next morning.

"It's shameful," the bearded sergeant said, "how the kids are carryin' on these days. People are feelin' pretty generous, an' they'll toss 'em a nickel er a dime fur their paper an' tell 'em to keep the change fur Christmas, an' foist thing you know the little beggars are shootin' craps er pitchin' pennies. We've got to make an example of some of 'em."

'Liza Ann Lewis was tearing through her work that day to get home and do her Christmas shopping, and she was singing as she worked some such old song as she used to sing in the good old days back home. She reached her room late and tired, but happy. Visions of a "wakening up" time for her and Jimmy were in her mind. But Jimmy wasn't there.

"I wunner whah that little scamp is," she said, smiling; "I tol' him to hu'y home, but I reckon he's stayin' out latah wid de evenin' papahs so's to bring home mo' money."

Hour after hour passed and he did not come; then she grew alarmed. At two o'clock in the morning she could stand it no longer and she went over and awakened Blinky Scott, much to that young gentleman's disgust, who couldn't see why any woman need make such a fuss about a kid. He told her laconically that "Chimmie was pinched fur t'rowin' de bones."

She heard with a sinking heart and went home to her own room to walk the floor all night and sob.

In the morning, with all her Christmas savings tied up in a handkerchief, she hurried down to Jefferson Market court room. There was a full blotter that morning, and the Judge was rushing through with it. He wanted to get home to his Christmas dinner. But he paused long enough when he got to Jimmy's case to deliver a brief but stern lecture upon the evil of child-gambling in New York. He said that as it was Christmas Day he would like to release the prisoner with a reprimand, but he thought that this had been done too often and that it was high time to make an example of one of the offenders.

Well, it was fine or imprisonment. 'Liza Ann struggled up through the crowd of spectators and her Christmas treasure added to what Jimmy had, paid his fine and they went out of the court room together.

When they were in their room again she put the boy to bed, for there was no fire

and no coal to make one. Then she wrapped herself in a shabby shawl and sat huddled up over the empty stove.

Down in the alley she heard the voice of the day before singing:

"Oh, darkies, how my heart grows weary,Far from the old folks at home."

And she burst into tears.

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