

MONEY TREES

By Jane Nickerson

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THEY SAY MONEY DOESN'T grow on trees, but when I looked at the eight pecan trees surrounding our place, I saw dollar bills.

I had seen a sign in the window of a store downtown: "Pecans Bought, Top Dollar Paid." Come fall, I'd be wading knee-deep in nuts.

Stuck away in my school notebook I had a whole list of stuff I needed money for. I wanted a new football (mine had a slow leak and always needed pumping up), baseball equipment, and more marbles. Then there were always comic books, candy, and dimes for picture shows.

I knew times were hard. I knew we were in the middle of a depression; I could see it everywhere in the desperate faces. A fourth of the country was unemployed. That's why businesses were boarded up all along Main Street, and why my uncles had gone to Chicago looking for jobs. A colored man like my daddy was lucky to have work at all down here. But still...

I could have explained to Daddy how I needed that sports equipment to meet other kids. We moved so often that making new friends was a real chore. Like I say, I could have explained this to him, but poor old Daddy had enough to worry about since Mama died, without me being a whiny-baby. So that's where the pecans came in. I had to earn the money myself.

I asked Daddy if I could have the nuts. He said, "If you pick 'em up, John Michael, they're yours."

So all that sticky, sweltering Mississippi summer I waited. Autumn came, and cotton, fallen from the cotton wagons, lay in drifts like snow along the sides of the roads.

One night, as I lay in bed, I heard something fall on the tin roof. Then *plink, plink, plinkety*. The pecans were falling!

As soon as I got home the next day, I snatched up a pail and commenced hunting. I poked over every last inch of grass and through every bush. It was just like an Easter egg hunt. I reckoned I had a pound or two in my bucket when Daddy rattled up in his old truck.

He looked tired. Mud spattered his overalls, and his boots were caked with reddish clay. He didn't even say, "Hey." Just, "You finished your homework yet?"

I opened my mouth, then shut it quick and shook my head. Daddy grabbed the back of my neck and shoved me toward the house. "Then get in there and do it, boy. I don't pay for you to go to that fancy church school for nothing."

Daddy was sure ornery these days. I had to wipe my sleeve across my eyes to even see my arithmetic problems.

Almost every afternoon after that, I would finish my homework in class, race to my school's library to check out a new book, and then skedaddle home to gather pecans before dark.

One day, a kid was sitting there on the school steps. He was 'bout my age, but *big*. He was barefoot, and each of his feet would've made two of mine. He sat there and stared at me as I went in and came out, his huge hands dangling between his knees.

As I left the building, he spoke to me. "What book you got today?"

I held it up. It was *Tik-Tok of Oz*.

"It any good?" asked the boy.

I shrugged. "Don't know. I ain't read it yet."

"You think maybe when you're done with it, I could borrow it?"

"Why don't you check it out yourself?"

"Cause the colored section of the public library don't have it. I done read every last book it has. Twice."

I had forgotten the pitiful collection of books that most colored folks had to choose from in that place. "I guess you can take it home now, if you take good care of it and get it back to me," I said slowly. "I probably won't have time to read it today anyhow. I got to pick up pecans."

"I'll help you," the boy said, jumping up. He was *tall*. "My name's William."

So William came on home with me. We harvested nuts for a while.

"You get to keep all the money?" he asked once.

“Sure do.”

“Wish I had a way to make money,” he said. “I need it real bad.”

“What would you buy?” I asked idly. I reckoned he’d have a list ’bout like mine.

“I’d get me a bicycle. Mr. McDuffy at the grocery store says if I had one, he’d hire me to make deliveries.”

“What would you do with *that* money?”

“Everything. We got twelve kids at home. I don’t even got clothes that fit me.” He glanced down at his overalls, and so did I. Looked to me like he was fixing to bust out any second.

“William,” I said, to change the subject from dollars, “you look like you could play football.” We tossed my ball to each other till William had to leave.

After that, it got to be a habit. We’d meet on my school steps, and I’d loan William whatever book I checked out. He would help me pick up pecans, and we’d end by playing football or checkers or whatever.

One day, the bushelbaskets I used to store nuts in were full up.

“I got one at home,” William said.

“Let’s go get it,” I said.

He hesitated, like he didn’t want me to come with him, but I stuck like a tick. We went to a pitiful part of town, full of tumble-down shacks. I hoped William’s house wouldn’t be one of them. It was. The roof sagged, and the porch had rotted away. It overflowed with little kids. Some played with sticks and broken dishes in the mud that was their front yard. Some stared at us from a shattered window.

“Wait here,” William said. He hoisted himself through the doorway and soon returned with a basket. I pretended I didn’t notice how bad his house was—or the cockroach that scurried over the side of the basket.

By the time Daddy came home, I’d made my decision.

“Daddy,” I said, “you reckon you could carry me over to the store to sell the pecans?”

He guessed he could. I got twenty dollars and sixty-five cents. When we returned home, I put the money in an envelope and wrote “To William” on it. I put it with a pile of comic books and my jar of marbles. I reckoned William’s family could use all that stuff better than me.

Out on the porch that night, Daddy asked me, “What you gonna do with your money, boy?”

I felt my cheeks go hot. “I’m giving it to William. We’re poor, but he’s dirt poor.”

A slow grin spread over Daddy’s face. He rubbed my head. “You know, I was worried I couldn’t raise you decent without your mama around. I even been considering sending you to your grandma. But now I think we’re gonna do just fine.”

I looked up at the moon, all swelled up, like an overinflated football. Anyway, the money trees would be around for a lot of years. This was just the beginning for me and William.