

the Christmas tree

Chapter Four by Kay Hively

Every day Mary Jo and her family worked in the cotton fields. Each day was the same. They got up early, ate breakfast and then went to the fields to work. All their time was spent picking cotton, eating sausage sandwiches for lunch, and going back to the house just before dark.

When the family got home at night, Mary Jo and her mother cooked supper while her father and her brothers did chores in the yard and barn. After supper everyone washed up and went to bed. When Mary Jo went to her room at night, she was too tired to do anything but fall into bed. But each night before she fell asleep, Mary Jo thought about the Christmas tree.

After four days of picking cotton, Mary Jo could see that much of the field was now brown. Her father said those fields were "clean." The white cotton that had once been there had been picked and hauled to the gin in her father's big wagon.

On Friday the family picked cotton only until noon. Mary Jo's father said they had all worked hard, so they would take time off to do other work and even make a trip to town on Saturday.

With the sun high overhead, the family sat in the shade of the wagon and ate their sausage sandwiches. Then they loaded their sacks and their water can on the wagon and started for home.

As she rode across the fields, looking at the bare cotton stalks, Mary Jo was proud of the work they had done. In another week, school would open and she and her brothers would be back at their desks. Any cotton left in the fields would be picked by her parents. Then, in a few more days, it would be Christmas.

That's when Mary Jo thought again about the little tree in the back yard.

As soon as the mules stopped in the yard, she jumped off the wagon and hurried to see her tree. It stood bravely in the dry parched ground, but its branches were limp. Mary Jo examined the tree carefully and saw that one of its branches was starting to turn brown.

Mary Jo wondered if she should bring water to the little tree. She thought about that for a long time. Finally she decided it would not be right to water the tree and make the well run dry. But, deep in her heart, she wanted a tree for Christmas. There would be no money to buy one, so if she didn't save her little tree, there would not be one on Christmas morning.

Mary Jo walked to the house and found her father on the front porch talking to a stranger. Their conversation seemed very serious. She had never seen the man before.

Where did he come from, she wondered. There was no car or wagon in the yard.

Who was he? What did he want?



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Classroom Extensions

Things to Think About and Do –

- A. What do you think it was like for Mary Jo to pick cotton? Write a short story, telling what you think it was like to work hard like Mary Jo did.
- B. Do you think Mary Jo should water the tree? What could happen if she did? What would the family do if the well ran dry?

Next Week: Chapter Five – Meet Mr. Weaver