

the Christmas tree

Chapter Five by Kay Hively

Mary Jo helped her mother clean the house and gather up all the dirty clothes. Outside, her father filled the big black wash kettle with water. Then he lit a fire under it.

Mary Jo noticed that the stranger helped her father as he worked in the yard and barn.

Mrs. Drake said the man had asked for a job. She said he would be helping around the farm for a few days. He would sleep in the barn and eat in the kitchen.

When the water was hot, Mary Jo's mother put some of the dirty clothes and some lye soap in the big black kettle. With a long stick, she stirred the clothes back and forth in the water. After several minutes of stirring, she used the pole to lift the clothes out of the soapy water and put them into a tub of clean water.

Mary Jo stirred and swirled the clothes around in the clean water to rinse off the soap. After she and her mother wrung the clothes to remove most of the water, Mary Jo hung everything on the clothes lines to dry.

The wind was strong, making the clothes flop and pop in the breeze. It wasn't going to take long to get everything dry and back in the house.

While she was hanging the clothes on the line, Mary Jo saw the stranger looking at her Christmas tree. He seemed deep in thought, scratching his white beard.

When the clothes were all washed, Mrs. Drake put the hot water into a dishpan and carried it into the house. Using the wash water she scrubbed all the floors in the little house. With the leftover rinse water, she cleaned the back porch and the outhouse. But Mrs. Drake saved enough of the rinse water to fill the old tomato can. With it, Mary Jo watered her thirsty tree.

By supper time it was dark. Everyone was happy that so much work was done. Tomorrow they would go to town.

She had not been to school all week, so Mary Jo wanted to see her friends. Like her, they had been at home picking cotton.

After supper, Mary Jo helped her mother gather up the dishes. Carrying them to the kitchen she was surprised to see the stranger sitting by the stove.

She had forgotten about him.

Mrs. Drake introduced Mary Jo to the stranger, calling him Mr. Weaver. The old man rose to his feet, smiled, and made a little bow. Mary Jo smiled back at the old man. He thanked Mary Jo's mother for supper and said he would retire to the barn. Mrs. Drake offered him a blanket, but he said he had a bedroll.

When Mary Jo went to bed, she thought about her little tree. She hoped the can of rinse water would help keep it alive. Mary Jo wanted to pray for rain, but that would get the cotton wet and delay the harvest. That would be worse than having no Christmas tree.



Classroom Extensions

Things to Think About and Do –

- A. What is a “kettle?” What is “lye soap?” What is a “bedroll?” What is an “outhouse?” Ask an older person you know to tell you about one of these things.
- B. Why do you think Mr. Weaver slept in the barn and ate in the kitchen by himself?

Author Kay Hively and Illustrator Billie Gofourth-Stewart are both of Neosho, Missouri. Produced in partnership with this newspaper and the Missouri Press Foundation with support from Verizon Foundation. Copyright 2002.

Next Week: Chapter Six – A Trip to Town