

ARTHUR

TIMOTHY SHAY

THE LAST PENNY AND
OTHER STORIES

Timothy Arthur

The Last Penny and Other Stories

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T. S. Arthur

The Last Penny and Other Stories

THE LAST PENNY

THOMAS CLAIRE, a son of St. Crispin, was a clever sort of a man; though not very well off in the world. He was industrious, but, as his abilities were small, his reward was proportioned thereto. His skill went but little beyond half-soles, heel-taps, and patches. Those who, willing to encourage Thomas, ventured to order from him a new pair of boots or shoes, never repeated the order. That would have been carrying their good wishes for his prosperity rather too far.

As intimated, the income of Thomas Claire was not large. Industrious though he was, the amount earned proved so small that his frugal wife always found it insufficient for an adequate supply of the wants of the family, which consisted of her husband, herself, and three children. It cannot be denied, however, that if Thomas had cared less about his pipe and mug of ale, the supply of bread would have been more liberal. But he had to work hard, and must have some little self-indulgence. At least, so he very unwisely argued. This self-indulgence cost from two to three shillings every week, a sum that would have purchased many comforts for the needy family.

The oldest of Claire's children, a girl ten years of age, had been sickly from her birth. She was a gentle, loving child, the favourite of all in the house, and more especially of her father. Little Lizzy would come up into the garret where Claire worked, and sit with him sometimes for hours, talking in a strain that caused him to wonder; and sometimes, when she did not feel as well as usual, lying upon the floor and fixing upon him her large bright eyes for almost as long a period. Lizzy was never so contented as when she was with her father; and he never worked so cheerfully, as when she was near him.

Gradually, as month after month went by, Lizzy wasted away with some disease, for which the doctor could find no remedy. Her cheeks became paler and paler, her eyes larger and brighter, and such a weakness fell upon her slender limbs that they could with difficulty sustain her weight. She was no longer able to clamber up the steep stairs into the garret, or loft, where her father worked; yet she was there as often as before. Claire had made for her a little bed, raised a short space from the floor, and here she lay, talking to him or looking at him, as of old. He rarely went up or down the garret-stairs without having Lizzy in his arms. Usually her head was lying upon his shoulder.

And thus the time went on, Claire, for all the love he felt for his sick child—for all the regard he entertained for his family—indulging his beer and tobacco as usual, and thus consuming, weekly, a portion of their little income that would have brought to his children many a comfort. No one but himself had any luxuries. Not even for Lizzy's weak appetite were dainties procured. It was as much as the mother could do, out of the weekly pittance she received, to get enough coarse food for the table, and cover the nakedness of her family.

To supply the pipe and mug of Claire, from two to three shillings a week were required. This sum he usually retained out of his earnings, and gave the balance, whether large or small, to his frugal wife. No matter what his income happened to be, the amount necessary to obtain these articles was rigidly deducted, and as certainly expended. Without his beer, Claire really imagined that he would not have strength sufficient to go through with his weekly toil—how his wife managed to get along without even her regular cup of good tea, it had never occurred to him to ask—and not to have had a pipe to smoke in the evening, or after each meal, would have been a deprivation beyond his ability to endure. So, the two or three shillings went regularly in the old way. When the six-pences and pennies congregated in goodly numbers in the shoemaker's pocket, his visits to the ale-house were often repeated, and his extra pipe smoked more frequently. But, as his allowance for the week diminished,

and it required some searching in the capacious pockets, where they hid themselves away, to find the stragglers, Claire found it necessary to put some check upon his appetite. And so it went on, week after week and month after month. The beer was drunk, and the pipe smoked as usual, while the whole family bent under the weight of poverty that was laid upon them.

Weaker and weaker grew little Lizzy. From the coarse food that was daily set before her, her weak stomach turned, and she hardly took sufficient nourishment to keep life in her attenuated frame.

"Poor child!" said the mother one morning, "she cannot live if she doesn't eat. But coarse bread and potatoes and buttermilk go against her weak stomach. Ah me! If we only had a little that the rich waste."

"There is a curse in poverty!" replied Claire, with a bitterness that was unusual to him, as he turned his eyes upon his child, who had pushed away the food that had been placed before her, and was looking at it with an expression of disappointment on her wan face. "A curse in poverty!" he repeated. "Why should my child die for want of nourishing food, while the children of the rich have every luxury?"

In the mind of Claire, there was usually a dead calm. He plodded on, from day to day, eating his potatoes and buttermilk, or whatever came before him, and working steadily through the hours allotted to labour, his hopes or fears in life rarely exciting him to an expression of discontent. But he loved Lizzy better than any earthly thing, and to see her turn with loathing from her coarse food, the best he was able to procure for her, aroused his sluggish nature into rebellion against his lot. But he saw no remedy.

"Can't we get something a little better for Lizzy?" said he, as he pushed his plate aside, his appetite for once gone before his meal was half eaten.

"Not unless you can earn more," replied the wife. "Cut and carve, and manage as I will, it's as much as I can do to get common food."

Claire pushed himself back from the table, and without saying a word more, went up to his shop in the garret, and sat down to work. There was a troubled and despondent feeling about his heart. He did not light his pipe as usual, for he had smoked up the last of his tobacco on the evening before. But he had a penny left, and with that, as soon as he had finished mending a pair of boots and taken them home, he meant to get a new supply of the fragrant weed. The boots had only half an hour's work on them. But a few stitches had been taken by the cobbler, when he heard the feeble voice of Lizzy calling to him from the bottom of the stairs. That voice never came unregarded to his ears. He laid aside his work, and went down for his patient child, and as he took her light form in his arms, and bore her up into his little work-shop, he felt that he pressed against his heart the dearest thing to him in life. And with this feeling, came the bitter certainty that soon she would pass away and be no more seen. Thomas Claire did not often indulge in external manifestations of feeling; but now, as he held Lizzy in his arms, he bent down his face and kissed her cheek tenderly. A light, like a gleam of sunshine, fell suddenly upon the pale countenance of the child, while a faint, but loving smile played about her lips. Her father kissed her again, and then laid her upon the little bed that was always ready for her, and once more resumed his work.

Claire's mind had been awakened from its usual leaden quiet. The wants of his failing child aroused it into disturbed activity. Thought beat, for a while, like a caged bird, against the bars of necessity, and then fluttered back into panting imbecility.

At last the boots were done, and with his thoughts now more occupied with the supply of tobacco he was to obtain than with any thing else, Claire started to take them home. As he walked along he passed a fruit-shop, and the thought of Lizzy came into his mind.

"If we could afford her some of these nice things!" he said to himself. "They would be food and medicine both, to the dear child. But," he added, with a sigh, "we are poor!—we are poor! Such dainties are not for the children of poverty."

He passed along, until he came to the ale-house where he intended to get his pennyworth of tobacco. For the first time a thought of self-denial entered his mind, as he stood by the door, with his hand in his pocket, feeling for his solitary copper.

"This would buy Lizzy an orange," he said to himself. "But then," was quickly added, "I would have no tobacco to-day, nor to-morrow, for I won't be paid for these boots before Saturday, when Barton gets his wages."

Then came a long, hesitating pause. There was before the mind of Claire the image of the faint and feeble child with the refreshing orange to her lips; and there was also the image of himself encheered for two long days by his pipe. But could he for a moment hesitate, if he really loved that sick child? is asked. Yes, he could hesitate, and yet love the little sufferer; for to one of his order of mind and habits of acting and feeling, a self-indulgence like that of the pipe, or a regular draught of beer, becomes so much like second nature, that it is as it were a part of the very life; and to give it up, costs more than a light effort.

The penny was between his fingers, and he took a single step toward the ale-house door; but so vividly came back the image of little Lizzy, that he stopped suddenly. The conflict, even though the spending of a single penny was concerned, now became severe: love for the child plead earnestly, and as earnestly plead the old habit that seemed as if it would take no denial.

It was his last penny that was between the cobbler's fingers. Had there been two pennies in his pocket, all difficulty would have immediately vanished. Having thought of the orange, he would have bought it with one of them, and supplied his pipe with the other. But, as affairs now stood, he must utterly deny himself, or else deny his child.

For minutes the question was debated.

"I will see as I come back," said Claire at last, starting on his errand, and thus, for the time, making a sort of a compromise. As he walked along, the argument still went on in his mind. The more his thoughts acted in this new channel, the more light came into the cobbler's mind, at all times rather dark and dull. Certain discriminations, never before thought of, were made; and certain convictions forced themselves upon him.

"What is a pipe of tobacco to a healthy man, compared with an orange to a sick child!" uttered half-aloud, marked at last the final conclusion of his mind; and as this was said, the penny which was still in his fingers was thrust determinedly into his pocket.

As he returned home, Claire bought the orange, and in the act experienced a new pleasure. By a kind of necessity he had worked on, daily, for his family, upon which was expended nearly all of his earnings; and the whole matter came so much as a thing of course, that it was no subject of conscious thought, and produced no emotion of delight or pain. But, the giving up of his tobacco for the sake of his little Lizzy was an act of self-denial entirely out of the ordinary course, and it brought with it its own sweet reward.

When Claire got back to his home, Lizzy was lying at the bottom of the stairs, waiting for his return. He lifted her, as usual, in his arms, and carried her up to his shop. After placing her upon the rude couch he had prepared for her, he sat down upon his bench, and as he looked upon the white, shrunken face of his dear child, and met the fixed, sad gaze of her large earnest eyes, a more than usual tenderness came over his feelings. Then, without a word, he took the orange from his pocket, and gave it into her hand.

Instantly there came over Lizzie's face a deep flush of surprise and pleasure. A smile trembled around her wan lips, and an unusual light glittered in her eyes. Eagerly she placed the fruit to her mouth and drank its refreshing juice, while every part of her body seemed quivering with a sense of delight.

"Is it good, dear?" at length asked the father, who sat looking on with a new feeling at his heart.

The child did not answer in words; but words could not have expressed her sense of pleasure so eloquently as the smile that lit up and made beautiful every feature of her face.

While the orange was yet at the lips of Lizzy, Mrs. Claire came up into the shop for some purpose.

"An orange!" she exclaimed with surprise. "Where did that come from?"

"Oh, mamma? it is *so* good!" said the child, taking from her lips the portion that yet remained, and looking at it with a happy face.

"Where in the world did that come from, Thomas?" asked the mother.

"I bought it with my last penny," replied Claire. "I thought it would taste good to her."

"But you had no tobacco."

"I'll do without that until to-morrow," replied Claire.

"It was kind in you to deny yourself for Lizzy's sake."

This was said in an approving voice, and added another pleasurable emotion to those he was already feeling. The mother sat down, and, for a few moments, enjoyed the sight of her sick child, as with unabated eagerness she continued to extract the refreshing juice from the fruit. When she went down-stairs, and resumed her household duties, her heart beat more lightly in her bosom than it had beaten for a long time.

Not once through that whole day did Thomas Claire feel the want of his pipe; for the thought of the orange kept his mind in so pleased a state, that a mere sensual desire like that for a whiff of tobacco had no power over him.

Thinking of the orange, of course, brought other thoughts; and before the day closed, Claire had made a calculation of how much his beer and tobacco money would amount to in a year. The sum astonished him. He paid rent for the little house in which he lived, two pounds sterling a year, which he always thought a large sum. But his beer and tobacco cost nearly seven pounds! He went over and over the calculation a dozen times, in doubt of the first estimate, but it always came out the same. Then he began to go over in his mind the many comforts seven pounds per annum would give to his family; and particularly how many little luxuries might be procured for Lizzy, whose delicate appetite turned from the coarse food that was daily set before her.

But to give up the beer and tobacco in toto, when it was thought of seriously, appeared impossible. How could he live without them?

On that evening the customer whose boots he had taken home in the morning, called in, unexpectedly, and paid for them. Claire retained a sixpence of the money and gave the balance to his wife. With this sixpence in his pocket he went out for a mug of beer, and some tobacco to replenish his pipe. He stayed some time—longer than he usually took for such an errand.

When he came back he had three oranges in his pocket; and in his hands were two fresh buns, and a cup of sweet new milk. No beer had passed his lips, and his pipe was yet unsupplied. He had passed through another long conflict with his old appetites; but love for his child came off, as before, the conqueror.

Lizzy, who drooped about all day, lying down most of her time, never went to sleep early. She was awake, as usual, when her father returned. With scarcely less eagerness than she had eaten the orange in the morning, did she now drink the nourishing milk and eat the sweet buns, while her father sat looking at her, his heart throbbing with inexpressible delight.

From that day the pipe and the mug were thrown aside. It cost a prolonged struggle. But the man conquered the mere animal. And Claire found himself no worse off in health. He could work as many hours, and with as little fatigue; in fact, he found himself brighter in the morning, and ready to go to his work earlier, by which he was able to increase, at least a shilling or two, his weekly income. Added to the comfort of his family, eight or ten pounds a year produced a great change. But the greatest change was in little Lizzy. For a few weeks, every penny saved from the beer and tobacco the father regularly expended for his sick child: and it soon became apparent that it was nourishing food, more than medicine, that Lizzy needed. She revived wonderfully; and no long time passed before she could

sit up for hours. Her little tongue, too, became free once more, and many an hour of labour did her voice again beguile. And the blessing of better food came also in time to the other children, and to all.

"So much to come from the right spending of a single penny," Claire said to himself, as he sat and reflected one day. "Who could have believed it!"

And as it was with the poor cobbler, so it will be with all of us. There are little matters of self-denial, which, if we had but the true benevolence, justice, and resolution to practise, would be the beginning of more important acts of a like nature, that, when performed, would bless not only our families, but others, and be returned upon us in a reward of delight incomparably beyond any thing that selfish and sensual indulgences have it in their power to bring.

HOW TO ATTAIN TRUE GREATNESS

"MY voice shall yet be heard in those halls!" said a young man, whom we will call James Abercrombie, to his friend Harvey Nelson, as the two walked slowly, arm in arm, through the beautiful grounds of the Capitol at Washington.

"Your ambition rises," Nelson replied, with a smile. "A seat in our State Legislature was, at one time, your highest aim."

"Yes. But as we ascend the mountain, our prospect becomes enlarged. Why should I limit my hopes to any halfway position, when I have only to resolve that I will reach the highest point? I feel, Harvey, that I have within me the power to do any thing that I choose. And I am resolved that the world shall know me as one of its great men."



A TALK ABOUT THE FUTURE.

"Some, if they were to hear you speak thus, James, might smile at what they would consider a weak and vain assumption. But I know that you have a mind capable of accomplishing great things;

that you have only to use the means, and take an elevated position as the natural result. Still I must say, that I do not like the spirit in which you speak of these things."

"Why not?"

"You seem to desire an elevated station more for the glory of filling it, than for the enlarged sphere of usefulness that it must necessarily open to you."

"I do not think, Harvey," his friend replied, "that I am influenced by the mere glory of greatness to press forward. There is something too unsubstantial in that. Look at the advantages that must result to me if I attain a high place."

"In either case, I cannot fully approve your motive."

"Then, from what motive would you have me act, Harvey? I am sure that I know of none other sufficiently strong to urge me into activity. Both of these have their influence; and, in combination, form the impulse that gives life to my resolutions."

"There is a much higher, and purer, and more powerful motive, James. A motive to which I have just alluded."

"What is that?"

"The end of being useful to our fellow-men."

"You may act from that motive, if you can, Harvey, but I shall not attempt the vain task. It is too high and pure for me."

"Do not say so. We may attain high motives of action, as well as attain, by great intellectual efforts, high positions in the world."

"How so?"

"It is a moral law, that any peculiar tendency or quality of the mind grows stronger by indulgence. The converse of the proposition is, of course, true also. You feel, then, that your motives of action are selfish—that they regard your own elevation and honour as first, and good to your neighbour as only secondary. Now, by opposing instead of indulging this propensity to make all things minister to self, it must grow weaker, as a natural consequence. Is not that clear?"

"Why, yes, I believe it is; or at least, the inference is a logical one, though I must confess that I do not see it as an unquestionable truth."

"That is because your natural feelings are altogether opposed to it."

"Perhaps so—for undoubtedly they are. I cannot see any thing so very desirable in the motive of which you speak, that I should seek to act from it. There is something tame in the idea of striving only to do good to others."

"It really pains me to hear you say so," the friend replied in a serious tone. "But now that we are on this subject, you must pardon me if I attempt to make you see in a rational light the truth that it is a much nobler effort to do good to others, than to seek only our own glory."

"Well, go on."

"You have, doubtless, heard the term 'God-like' used, as indicating a high degree of excellence in some individual, who has stood prominently before the eyes of his fellow-men?"

"Often."

"And to your mind it is no doubt clear, that the nearer we can approach the character of the Divine Being, the higher will be the position that we attain?"

"Certainly."

"And that the purest motives from which we can act, are an approach toward those from which we see Him acting."

"Certainly."

"Now, so far as we can judge of His motives of action, as exhibited in His Word and in His Works, do we see a desire manifested to promote His own glory, or to do good to His creatures, and make them happy?"

"Well, I cannot say, at this moment, for I have not thought upon the subject."

"Suppose, then, we think of it now. It is certainly worth a little serious attention. And first, let us refer to His Word, in which we shall certainly find a transcript of his character. In that, we perceive a constant reference to his nature as being, in one of its principal constituents, *love*. Not love of himself, but love going out in the desire to benefit His creatures. And His wisdom, which infinitely transcends that of man, is ever active in devising means whereby to render those creatures happy. And not only is His love ever burning with the desire to do good to His creatures, and His wisdom ever devising the best means for this end, but His divine love and His divine wisdom unite in divine activity, producing all that is required to give true happiness to all. In all parts of His Word we discover evidences of the strongest character, which go to prove that such is the nature and activity of the Lord. There could have been no seeking of His own glory, when he assumed a material body, and an infirm human principle, in which were direful hereditary evils, that he might redeem man from the corruptions of his own fallen nature, and from the influence and power of hell. Little glory was ascribed to him by the wicked men who persecuted him, and condemned him, and finally put him to death. But he sought not His own glory. In his works, how clearly displayed is His divine benevolence! I need only direct your thoughts to nature. I need only refer you to the fact that the Lord causes the sun to shine upon the evil and the good, and the rain to fall alike upon the just and the unjust. Even upon those who oppose His laws, and despise and hate his precepts, does He pour down streams of perpetual blessings. How unlike man—selfish, vain man—ever seeking his own glory."

"You draw a strong picture, Harvey," the friend said.

"But is it not a true one?"

"Perhaps so."

"Very well. Now if we are seeking to be truly great, let us imitate Him who made us and all the glorious things by which we are surrounded. He that would be chief among you, said the Lord to his disciples, let him be your servant. Even He washed his disciples' feet."

"Yes, but Harvey, I do not profess to be governed by religious principle. I only account myself a moral man."

"But there cannot be any true morality without religion."

"That is a new doctrine."

"I think not. It seems to me to be as old as the Divine Word of God. To be truly moral is to regard others as well as ourselves in all our actions. And this we can never do apart from the potency and life of a religious principle."

"But what do you mean by a religious principle?"

"I mean a principle of pure love to the Lord, united with an unselfish love to our neighbour, flowing out in a desire to do him good."

"But no man can have these. It is impossible for any one to feel the unselfish love of which you speak."

"Of course it is, naturally—for man is born into hereditary evils. But if he truly desires to rise out of these evils into a higher and better state, the Lord will be active in his efforts—and in just so far as he truly shuns evils as sins against him, looking to him all the while for assistance, will he remove those evils from their central position in his mind, and then the opposite good of those evils will flow in to take their place, (for spiritually, as well as naturally, there can be no vacuum,) and he will be a new man. Then, and only then, can he begin to lead truly a moral life. Before, he may be externally moral from mere external restraints; now, he becomes moral from an internal principle. Do you apprehend the difference?"

"Yes, I believe that I do. But I must confess that I cannot see how I am ever to act from the motives you propose. If I wait for them, I shall stand still and do nothing."

"Still, you can make the effort. Every thing must have a beginning. Only let the germ be planted in your mind, and, like the seed that seems so small and insignificant, it will soon exhibit signs of

life, and presently shoot up, and put forth its green leaves, and, if fostered, give a permanent strength that will be superior to the power of every tempest of evil principles that may rage against it."

"Your reasonings and analogies are very beautiful, and no doubt true, but I cannot *feel* their force," James Abercrombie said, with something in his tone and manner so like a distaste for the whole subject, that his friend felt unwilling to press it further upon his attention.

The two young men here introduced had just graduated at one of our first literary institutions, and were about selecting professions. But in doing so, their acknowledged motives were, as may be gathered from what has gone before, very different. The one avowed a determination to be what he called a great man, that he might have the glory of greatness. The other tried to cherish a higher and better motive of action. Abercrombie was not long in deciding upon a profession. His choice was law. And the reason of his choice was, not that he might be useful to his fellow-men, but because in the profession of law he could come in contact with the great mass of the people in a way to make just such an impression upon them as he wished. In the practice of law, too, he could bring out his powers of oratory, and cultivate a habit of public speaking. It would, in fact, be a school in which to prepare himself for a broader sphere of action in the legislative halls of his country; for, at no point below a seat in the national legislature, did his ambition rest.

"You have made your choice, I presume, before this," he said to his friend Harvey, in allusion to this subject.

"Indeed, I have not," was the reply. "And I never felt so much at a loss how to make a decision in my life."

"Well, I should think that you might decide very readily. I found no difficulty."

"Then you have settled that matter?"

"Oh, certainly; the law is to be my sphere of action—or rather, my stepping-stone to a higher place."

"I cannot so easily decide the matter!"

"Why not? If you study law, you will rise, inevitably. And in this profession, there is a much broader field of action for a man of talent, than there is in any other profession."

"Perhaps you are right. But the difficult question with me is—'Can I be as useful in it?'"

"Nonsense, Harvey! Do put away these foolish notions. If you don't, they will be the ruin of you."

"I hope not. But if they do, I shall be ruined in a good cause."

"I am really afraid, Harvey," Abercrombie said in a serious tone, "that you affect these ultra sentiments, or are self-deceived. It is my opinion that no man can act from such motives as you declare to be yours."

"I did not know that I had declared myself governed by such motives. To say that, I know, would be saying too much, for I am painfully conscious of the existence and activity of motives very opposite. But what I mean to say is, that I am so clearly convinced that the motives of which I speak are the true ones, that I will not permit myself to come wholly under the influence of such as are opposite. And that is why I find a difficulty in choosing a profession. If I would permit myself to think only of rising in the world, for the sake of the world's estimation, I should not hesitate long. But I am afraid of confirming what I feel to be evil. And therefore it is that I am resolved to compel myself to choose from purer ends."

"Then you are no longer a free agent."

"Why not?"

"Because, in that kind of compulsion, you cease to act from freedom."

"Is it right, James, for us to compel ourselves to do right when we are inclined to do wrong? Certainly there is more freedom in being able to resist evil, than in being bound by it hand and foot, so as to be its passive slave."

"You are a strange reasoner, Harvey."

"If my conclusions are not rational, controvert them."

"And have to talk for ever?"

"No doubt you would, James, to drive me from positions that are to me as true as that the sun shines in heaven."

"Exactly; and therefore it is useless to argue with you. But, to drop that point of the subject, to what profession do you most incline?"

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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