

Christmas Poverty
Chris Davis
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The Otis family lived in an old broken down tenement in Brooklyn, New York. One could not find a more destitute place in which to live. The cracked windows were stuffed with newspaper to keep the cold draft out. The curtains were starched, but faded, as a dollar bill that had been in circulation for many years. The furniture was sparse and dilapidated. One could feel the winding springs bounce up through the shabby plastic coverings which were used to protect what little was left for the family's comfort. The roof was damaged and the pipes were rusty and leaking. Mrs. Otis spent many hours mopping the water drippings from the weather beaten floor of this poverty stricken abode.

It was during the depression, and Mrs. Otis could hardly afford to buy coal for the black pot belly stove which kept her family from freezing. Christmas was nearing, and the white driven snow was falling heavily on the ground. The family needed warmth. They could not bundle up in woolen fringed blankets; nor could they curl up in knit sweaters or warm stockings; for the Otis family did not have these luxuries.

Since Mr. Otis deserted his wife and his three children two years ago, Mrs. Otis' only salvation for partially supporting her family was to get a job in a factory where she could earn a few pennies a day operating a foot peddle sewing machine. Besides Christmas was on its way and she wanted so much to please her children with even the smallest toys or playful gadgets. She knew that her children always had visions of creeping into their dark dismal living room on Christmas morning, and finding a few little trinkets wrapped in white paper and a red and green butcher's cord.

Since Mrs. Otis had always instilled into her children's minds the spiritual significance of Christmas, the children waited with anxiety and anticipation for the birthday of Christ to arrive. "St. Nicholas will be here soon," Mrs. Otis said, "You must be on your best behavior or you will be disappointed on Christmas Day." The youths always had a strong belief in Santa Claus. Every other Christmas they pretended they heard him come down the chimney and humbly present the gifts as he joyfully placed them under their tree. But, when the next morning arrived, they found not much other than coal in their stockings. But, Santa was still good, for coal was a source of heat and a precious commodity to the Otis family. After all, they are black diamonds.

On Christmas Eve, Mrs. Otis sat alone in her Brooklyn tenement working hard to make gifts for her three children. She no longer wanted them to feel deprived. With much love and enthusiasm, she gathered socks, buttons, string, and spools of thread for her home made trinkets. After mending the torn socks, Mrs. Otis filled them with pebbles and dry cereal to make bean bags for the little ones. She made trains out of the spools of thread and a chain of colorful beads out of the plastic buttons. Now, on Christmas morning her children's faces would light with surprise and laughter!

The children, knowing it was Christmas Eve and knowing they had to be on their best behavior, wanted more than anything to please their mother. With their patched pants and torn jackets, they ambled their way down to the Brooklyn coal yards and dragged their wooden wagons behind.

Some men were working hard in the years shoveling coal. Others were drinking beer, smoking pipes, and eating sandwiches. The children would have loved to jump the fence and collect all the coal they possibly could. But, they would not do that. They were taught never to steal. For a while the trio watched and stared. Later they yelled, "Hey fatso, Hey ugly!" The youths did not like being disrespectful to their elders, but that was the only way they could arouse the workers. In return, and out of annoyance, the men began throwing coal at the boys. Hungrily, the children gathered these valuables and quickly compiled them into their little red wagon. Now, they would have a Christmas gift to give mother.

Christmas morning arrived. Mrs. Otis and her three children crept into the living room. Suddenly, the faded curtains no longer looked faded. The sparse dilapidated furniture looked elegant and the rusty pipes shined. The dark dismal living room glowed. Santa Claus was good to all this year. The packages were beautifully wrapped in white paper and a red and green butcher's cord. The bean bags seemed like live people. The trains were almost real and the beads were like gold. How valuable everything seemed!

Mrs. Otis looked in her stocking. She knew how her children struggled to please her. She held the coal close to her heart and cried as her children gathered around her. It was a Merry Christmas in that Brooklyn palace.