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# His Heart's Desire<sup>1</sup>

ALICE DUNBAR-NELSON

No one knew the secret desire which Andy Belton cherished in his inmost heart.<sup>2</sup> He had never breathed it even to the sympathetic lady whom he had chosen as his love, who worked in a factory, and had a beautiful hat with plumes on it, and knew everything. Sometimes at night he lay awake and thought it over, and wondered how it might come about that he might attain his heart's desire, but he always fell asleep before any plan could be worked out, and the morning found him as far from the goal as ever.

It is possible that if Andy told anyone his secret longing, it might have been granted. But Andy was a boy, and boys don't tell their hearts out, and he would have died rather than confess his weakness for the world to laugh at and jibe and jeer. For Andy wanted a doll.

He was no weak, puny boy. He was sound<sup>3</sup> and sturdy and hard fisted, and he was five years old, and had already learned to bully his small sister, and to gaze enviously at Dobson and Abe Powers, of the gang. That was a red letter day in his life when one of them noticed him and called a careless "Hello Kid!" at him. Then would Andy swell his little chest, and strut and answer with a comical imitation of the larger boy's manner, and go to the small sister and push her over to show his joy.

He could fight, too. Willie Brown had taught him how to put up his fists, and make passes and fenints. All in all, he was a regular boy.

Still, Andy wanted a doll. Sissy wanted one too, but she had one already. Somewhere out of the odds and ends that were pushed in dark corners of their one room, Andy had gathered together material, and ~~under pretence of gratifying Sissy's wishes,~~ had fashioned it into a queer semblance of a baby. Its eyes were buttons, and its mouth the sprig of a bit ^figured^ of calico which formed its head. None of the arms and legs matched, but Sissy was content, and so was Andy. Under pretence of showing her how to handle the baby-doll, he held and crooned over it and loved it, the while Sissy looked on and clapped her hands. These were happy moments; cuddled up close to Sissy, watching their mother as she bent over her tub, rubbing, wringing, rubbing, wringing, and taking her water-soaked arms out of the suds to put back a faint wisp of dingy hair, that strayed now and then across her forehead.

"When I get to be a man," whispered Andy to Sissy one day, "I'm going to buy you a big, big, doll."

Sissy clapped her hands, and whispered a happy, "Yeth." Andy did not tell her that the big, big, doll would, like the little rag one, be as much for his own pleasure as for hers.

"She's gointer have blue eyes, an' purty hair, an'—an'—she'll walk an' talk," continued Andy, "Won't it be fine, Sissy?"

"Yeth, deed," murmured Sissy.

"An—an'—she'll have on a pink silk dress, an' we'll have to put her to bed."

"Um," ^g^roaned Sissy, "Witht you watha man!"

"Nev' mine, Sissy, you'll have a doll some time." But in his heart of hearts, he was consoling Andy, and bidding him be patient.

Then a great joy came into Andy's life, and the doll, for the time being was forgotten. Mrs. Belton had been persuaded, no one knew how, for she was a most unpersuadable person, to allow Andy to go to the kindergarten at the Pure in Heart Mission. Mrs. Belton was a woman who did not like new things; she thought them unnecessary. She had never had a wringer or a washing machine, nor would she even think of one without a scornful sniff; although her daily bread and the children's came from bending over the tubs in their one little dark room. The kindergarten, she had called a "mess", invented merely to make children more troublesome. Besides, like many others, she still resented the Pure in Heart Mission in 'Steenth Street. She had never gotten over the feeling that she and all the women in the street were being spied upon.

Still, she was persuaded to let Andy go to the kindergarten, and he went joyously, taking Sissy with him, and Sissy, like the true mother that she was, took the rag doll, too. Andy found it convenient to keep close to his sister in the class room. The kindergarten teacher wondered at the love and protecting care of this very small boy for his smaller sister. He hovered near her in all the games, and would sit near her ~~in all the games~~ holding her hand, and looking as nearly like an angel, as a round-headed, pug-nosed small boy can look. Andy's hand and Sissy's met on the pliable, and dirty form of the rag doll, and they caressed it, and stole loving glances at it when it had to rest in Sissy's small lap.

Andy's new joy, however, was not in the mere attendance at the kindergarten; though that, in itself, was great enough; it was in the concert. The Pure in Heart felt that it should do something for itself to raise funds to carry on its work, and the Board of Managers decided that an entertainment should be given at a little hall on Third Avenue. The program was left to the kindergarten teacher.

So Andy had been cast for a speaking part. His big eyes and habit of gazing hard right into the kindergarten teacher's eyes had made him an outstanding personality. So he was chosen as one of the leaders in the pageant. The news crushed him with joy, and he hung his head in awful confusion when his name was called, and gripped Sissy and the doll in wild agony of fear for fear it might

not be true. The next minute he let her hand go, and sat up straight. He must put aside such trifling childish things. He was a big boy, now, like Dobson and Jimmy Brown. But in the night, he reached out and clutched the rag doll now and then at the thought of losing her, and then, for shame, would hide his face in the bed clothes, and kick Sissy violently until she whimpered.

That was a great affair, that concert. The little hall up three flights of stairs was decorated with flags and many wonderful tissue paper flowers. A stage was at one end with a most gorgeous green cambric curtain, that hitched always at the critical moment. There were little dressing rooms one each side, and many rows of chairs. But all of these were lost to Andy's eyes in the glories of the booths ranged along the lower walls, where fancy work and refreshments were to be sold.

Mrs. Bolton came early. Andy's hair and face glistened with soap and water and towel. His little chest swelled with pride at the occasion, but there were funny sick-like thumps within him now and then which he could not understand. Sissy had been for bringing the doll along, but Andy was stern.

"Don't need no dolls," he growled to her in their corner, as the mother hurried through her work.

"I want my doll," wailed Sissy.

Andy said nothing, but his actions were swift and emphatic. Sissy howled her protest, and Andy almost got a spanking, but the rag doll stayed at home.

The booths in the hall delighted Andy. There was one where nothing but dolls was sold. Sitting primly by his mother before it was time for the program to begin, he held tight to Sissy's hand, and tried to turn his face away from the tempting sight. But turn where he might, there were lovely doll faces and flaxen curls. They seemed to stare from every wall, and even to peer from behind the green cambric curtain. Surely, surely, one glimpse could not hurt. He jerked his head about, and oh, joy, of joys, there was his golden-haired lady doll in the pink-silk frock.

Nothing else mattered after that. Life was a blank. He knew nothing except that his doll, the doll of his dreams was there, and he could not have her. Dobson and Jimmy Brown and Scrappy Franks came swaggering in, and even tweaked his ear playfully, but they were heroes no longer. The world was going round and round in a whirl of blue eyes and golden curls and pink silk, and Andy was heartsick.

But there was not much more time to think. The piano began a tinkly tune, and the small folks were marched behind the green curtain. Sissy wept when Andy went from her side. She was too small to go on the stage, and it was lonely for her in all the crowd, without Andy and without the rag doll. She was afraid to creep close to her mother; she looked so strange in her high collar and hat, and black cotton gloves.

Andy's role as a star did not begin until near the end of the concert. Dressed in a *pièce* <sup>^</sup>drape<sup>^</sup> of American flag, with a small college mortarboard on his head <sup>^</sup>he was<sup>^</sup> to represent Young America in the grand Peace Finale. G<sup>^</sup>u<sup>^</sup>s Schwartz, after much pleading on the part of the teacher, had consented to stand for World Peace, and pose in a heroic attitude at the side of Miss Liberty. Gus knew that he was losing caste by doing so, but he had a deep motive at the bottom of his consent. At a certain moment, Andy was to step forth from the throng of variously flag-draped children, and repeat with a dramatic gesture:

“Lovely <sup>^</sup>Noble<sup>^</sup> Peace, to thee we sing,  
Better far than sword or king;  
Let us raise our voices sweet,  
Laying laurels at thy feet.”

Andy's laurel wreath of green paper was ready, and Andy had stepped forth at the teacher's whisper. He was not timid, not he. His breast swelled with pride, as with his eyes fixed on Gus Schwartz' perspiring face, he began:

“Lovely <sup>^</sup>Noble<sup>^</sup> Peace, to thee we <sup>^</sup>s<sup>^</sup>ing—,”

Then he stole a glance at the audience to see how they were appreciating his genius. His mother sat upright, proud of her son.

“Better far than sword or king—”

His eyes sought the booth where<sup>4</sup> the golden-haired goddess sat. Mrs. Jackson, in charge of the booth, had that particular doll in her hand. There was no gainsaying that; the pink silk frock was too brilliant to be mistaken. Andy gulped a little and faltered—

“—Let—us—raise—”

Gracious! Mrs. <sup>^</sup>J<sup>^</sup>ackson had handed the doll to a young woman, and there was the flash of coin between them. What did it mean?

“—our—voices—sweet—”

The young woman had turned from the booth with the doll in her arms. She was going away. His doll was sold. He forgot everything. Peace, his *rig* lines, the crowd—With one agonized cry, he threw the laurel wreath viciously at the feet of World Peace, and sobbed aloud,

“My doll, my doll! He's tooked my doll!”

There were explanations after the green cambric curtain had hitched its way painfully over the broken tableau. The kindergarten teacher was provoked, for she had written the World Peace finale herself, and it was the *pièce de resis-tance*<sup>5</sup> of the evening. But Mrs. Morton listened with a twinkle in her eye to Andy's sobbing explanations.

"It was the pink silk doll, I wanted it, an' the lady,—she—she—tooked it."

"Are you sure it's gone?" inquired Mrs. Morton.

"I mean—I mean—" said Andy straightening up in an instant, "I mean I wanted it for Sissy."

"Of course," said Mrs. Morton sympathetically.

There were games and plays and ice-cream for the children afterwards. But Andy took no part in the good times. He sat still and miserably by his mother, gripping Sissy's hand in an agony of shame and disappointment. He had seen his heart's desire only to lose it. He had spoiled the kindergarten teacher's play. His career as a public speaker had been ruined at the outset. It was heart-breaking.

Mrs. Morton was coming toward him with something in her arms. He did not look up; he was too ashamed, broken and bruised to care to look anyone in the face again. She stopped and held out something to him. His eyes crept up, up, up her skirt, to a flash of pink and lace—and he realized with a shock that she was holding out to him the beautiful goddess in pink and lace.

"A present from a friend of yours, Andy," she said gently. She never told of her hurried chase after the young woman, who had bought it, and her earnest pleadings to buy it back.

Andy took the doll wildly, hardly realizing what he was doing. His hand wandered over the soft silk of its frock, the golden splendor of its hair. He hugged it close to his bosom and cooed softly. Then he looked up to see Mrs. Morton's quizzical gaze upon him, and his dignity returned.

"I wanted it for Sissy," he said sheepishly, and slowly placed it in her waiting arms.

But Sissy understood how to be partners in the ownership of a doll.

Alice Dunbar-Nelson

#### EXPLANATORY NOTES

1. This is the first published appearance of "His Heart's Desire," an undated typescript story in MSS 113, Alice Dunbar-Nelson Papers, Special Collections, University of Delaware Library, Newark. A brief introduction to the story can be found in "Recovered from the Archive: Two Stories by Alice Dunbar-Nelson," by Caroline Gebhard with Katherine Adams and Sandra A. Zagarell, elsewhere in this issue.

2. Note on the text: Whenever possible, the editors have preserved the characteristics of Dunbar-Nelson's original typescript manuscripts, including strikethroughs and insertions. We have silently corrected extra or missing spaces between words or characters when they appear to be the result of typewriter error, and particularly when

Dunbar-Nelson has edited them with pencil annotations. When otherwise altering the original text, we have inserted endnotes to clarify what was in the original.

3. In the original this word has an uncorrected typographical error and appears as “found.”

4. In the original this word has an uncorrected typographical error and appears as “were.”

5. This underlining was added by hand by the author.

