

A SHORT MORAL ESSAY OR HOW TO GET RICH

By DOROTHY M. JOHNSON





FOR BOYS AND GIRLS

IN A FRONTIER TOWN

The raw new town where I grew up — Whitefish, Montana — swarmed with money-hungry children who were willing to do almost anything to make an honest nickel. The trouble was that just about everything you could do was part of your normal chores and you didn't get paid for it. Like filling the woodbox or lugging in a bucket of water while your mother admonished automatically, "Now don't hurt your back," or splitting kindling while she warned, "Now don't chop your foot." Or feeding the chickens, carrying out the slop bucket, washing dishes, picking potato bugs and shoveling snow.

You couldn't earn money by mowing lawns, because nobody had one. There was enough work for grownups to do just hacking the town out of the woods without planting and tending grass. A couple of yards near us had a good stand of clover, which the householders were willing to have me cut with a hand sickle and take home in a gunny sack, to be spread out and dried for winter feed for our chickens. Pour a kettle of boiling water over a bucket of dry clover and you get a nice salad for hungry hens, but this paid off in chicken and dumplings, not in cash.

There simply was no dependable source of income for children. Running errands (most people didn't need telephones — they had kids) was a thing they were SUPPOSED to do, free for their relatives and just possibly paid — a nickel from the prudent, a dime from the reckless — when done for neighbors. This wasn't a businesslike arrangement, though, like the one I have now with a boy down the street. When he mows my lawn with my power mower, we both know he's going to get a dollar for it. When a kid ran an errand in Whitefish, there was normally no previous discussion of remuneration. When he got back, all sweaty and eager, and was offered money, he was supposed to pretend surprise, even shock if possible, and refuse but not very convincingly. Then the lady who had commissioned the expedition insisted with persuasive charm and finally he let her press the coin into his hand and both of them thanked each other several times. This was the ideal; it didn't always hold. Sometimes he only got a cookie.



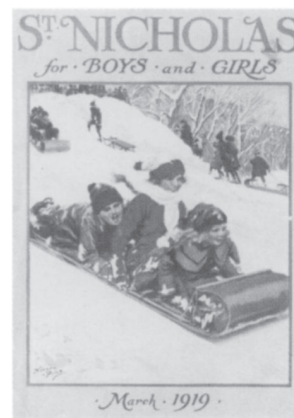
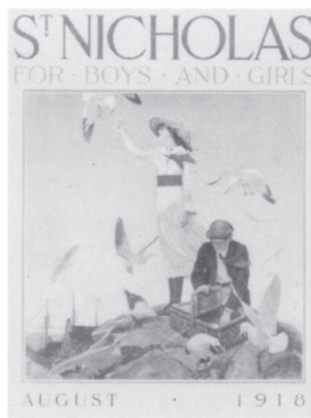
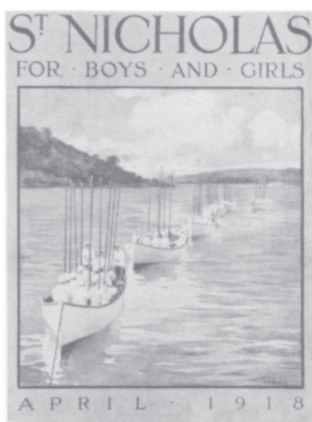
In reading a bound volume of *St. Nicholas Magazine*, I came upon the word *allowance*. The concept was attractive. I researched this pretty thoroughly. According to stories in *St. Nicholas*, an allowance was money your parents gave you regularly just because you were there. You didn't do anything to earn it. This struck me as an admirable idea. No child I knew in Whitefish received an allowance, not even the scions of locomotive engineers, those lords of creation who were paid a very great deal of money by the Great Northern Railroad.

A couple of errands that I ran for my mother ended in disaster. Right on the doorstep of a lady to whom I was delivering a lard pail containing a dozen beautiful eggs, I stumbled and dropped the whole works. It took her quite a while and several cookies to calm me down and mop my tears.

Assuming that an allowance was something my parents had simply overlooked, I brought up the subject, suggesting that any small amount would be acceptable as long as it was steady. My father, looking startled, asked where I had heard of such a thing, and I said, "In *St. Nicholas*." He and my mother stared at each other. *St. Nicholas* was a children's magazine of good repute. They hadn't suspected that it was subversive.

Another time, taking something to a Mrs. Soward, I was attacked by ducks. In the summer any child's bare legs were thoroughly mosquito bitten and well scratched, with plenty of big scabs in various degrees of healing. Mrs. Soward's ducks found my scabs very tasty, and I shrieked bloody murder, up to my knees in child-eating ducks. I never went back to her house again. Our chickens sometimes pecked at my scabs in a thoughtful, investigative way, but ducks *bite*.

After I explained gladly about allowances (it was seldom that I knew more about something than my parents did), they got the idea across tactfully that maybe *some* children in *some* places received allowances but no such outlandish custom was going to be introduced in Whitefish, anyway not at our house. That was back in the days when parents and children could still communicate with no trouble.



My copies of *St. Nicholas* were dated the same year I was and were bound as a big, heavy book. Once I asked how come we had these old magazines around, and my mother replied briefly that when I was born my father rushed out and bought a year's subscription. Some new fathers rally 'round with a catcher's mitt. Mine subscribed to a magazine. I see the philosophy behind it this way: He realized that, small as I was, I wouldn't be getting around much for a while and he thought I would appreciate having something to read in bed.

A copy came faithfully each month, but I wasn't as precocious as he expected, so he had them bound to keep them from getting scattered. I didn't learn to read *St. Nicholas* until a few years later. It was a good magazine, but some of the ideas in it didn't fit life in Whitefish very well.

There was a time when I thought everybody was good and kind and honest like my folks. Disillusionment rocked me at about age eight. There was an ad somewhere about how you could give away beautiful pictures to the neighbors and get a set of bluebird china absolutely free. It wouldn't cost you a cent. You wouldn't get a cent, either, but I visualized myself playing Lady Bountiful and presenting my mother with a set of china all painted with bluebirds of happiness. So I mailed the coupon.

The deal turned out to be not precisely as advertised. Before you could give a grateful neighbor lady one of the beautiful, artistic pictures, you had to sell her several packages of garden seeds. These included some species that wouldn't mature in our cold climate under any circumstances. Nobody wanted those garden seeds. Although art standards were not very high in Whitefish, the pictures were so garish that only one potential customer was attracted, and even she wouldn't be caught dead trying to raise cabbage and tomatoes from seed.

So I sadly gave up on the bluebird china and time passed and then a letter came from the company, a letter calculated to scare the wits out of a hardened criminal. They threatened to sue me — me, mind you, who had hardly a

blot on my record aside from having to stand in the corner a couple of times at school for whispering. Mother helped me pack up and return the seeds and the pictures, and she may have written them a letter. No more was heard about the proposed lawsuit.

Not everybody a child might try to do business with was crooked. *Youth's Companion* practically promised the earth, and it was ready to deliver. For them you simply sold subscriptions. *Youth's Companion* was a weekly publication for children, with highly moral stories and puzzles and such. For so many subscriptions and a little cash money, they offered the equivalent of ivory and apes and peacocks. My best customer was our dentist, Dr. Spinney, who either had an awful lot of young nieces and nephews or just enjoyed listening over and over to the sales pitch of a little girl who lisped. I found him fascinating, too. He had a human skull in his office and he let me borrow it. I took it to school and treasured it at home until my parents got tired of seeing it in the dining room and persuaded me to return it.





Thanks to Dr. Spinney and other nice people who were willing to pay for an uplifting magazine, I got a heavy gray sweater that lasted for years, six silver-plated fruit knives for my aunt (who had no great need for six fruit knives, but they made an impressive Christmas present), a magic lantern that threw an enlarged image of picture postcards on a sheet, and other marvelous things.

There was more. If you totaled up a whole lot of orders, *Youth's Companion* paid a bonus in honest-to-goodness gold, coin of the realm. They sent me a gold piece worth \$2.50, very tiny, and a slightly bigger one worth \$5.00. Wow! My mother reminded me that, however pleasant it was to handle these lovely coins, they would grow into even more money if deposited in my savings account. So I took them to the bank. But when I dropped in there one day, just wanting to see that my gold coins were all right, the bank didn't know where they were!



The bank explained that yes, they had my money; they would give it back any time I wanted it, plus four percent; they would even give it to me in gold. But they had not, as I expected, put those particular coins on a little shelf somewhere. They had mixed them in with their other, ordinary money and nobody knew where they were! I have never really trusted a bank since then. And I'll bet the entire staff of the First National went home that day with a splitting headache.

The bank's high-handed way of handling my money no doubt saved me from developing into a miser hovering with wild witch giggles over a pile of gold. Those two tiny coins were all the gold I ever had. A passbook simply doesn't have the same mad magic.

Although the term "baby sitting" had not yet entered our language, the custom was already a part of our culture. It was called "keeping care of kids." Some little girls made as much as two bits an evening at this if the parents of the kids they were keeping care of stayed out really late. But they were girls who had learned the technique at home and practiced it on their younger siblings. I had no siblings and no preparation, so the first time I tried it was the last.

There were two kids to keep care of. The parents left no instructions but sailed out merrily and stayed out until one in the morning. The baby slept soundly as he was supposed to, but the older child demanded "kigh-go" and wouldn't go to sleep without it. I didn't know what a kigh-go was. Tiger, maybe? There wasn't a tiger in sight, so I offered him a small stuffed horse. It didn't fool him for a minute. He kept yelling for kigh-go; he wept, he demanded, he implored. Although I frantically offered him everything but the heavier furniture, he was not appeased. He cried himself to sleep and I cowered in a corner until his folks came home. Queried about kigh-go, his mother replied casually, "Oh, yes, he always wants a cracker — they're right out in the kitchen." I left the money-making possibilities of keeping care of kids to girls who were better qualified. I preferred to deal with persons who spoke the same language I did.