THE HUNDRED-DOLLAR BILL

Rose Wilder Lane

This true story is told by Rose Wilder Lane, the daughter of Laura Ingalls Wilder, who wrote the Little House *series of books. Rose describes an incident that happened during her family's move from De Smet, South Dakota, to the "Land of the Big Red Apple" in Missouri. The Wilders traveled with their friends the Cooleys, whose sons Paul and George were slightly older than Rose, who was seven at the time.*

My mother had saved one hundred dollars to take to the Land of the Big Red Apple. All those dollars were one piece of paper, named "a hundred-dollar bill." She hid it in her writing desk, a fascinating wooden box which my father had made and polished so shiny smooth that stroking it was rapture. It opened on little brass hinges to lie spread flat and be a slanting green felt

surface to write on. At the top was a darling wooden tray to hold my mother's pearl-handled pen, and beside this was an inkwell. And the green felt was on a lid that lifted up on tinier hinges to reveal the place for writing paper underneath it. I was allowed to see and touch the desk only when my mother opened it.

The hundred-dollar bill was a secret. My mother locked it in the desk. Mr. and Mrs. Cooley knew, perhaps Paul and George did, but we must not talk about it. I must never, never, speak one word about that hundred-dollar bill, not to anyone. Never, no matter what happened.

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I do not remember how many days my father spent hunting for land that the secret hundred-dollar bill would buy. Every morning he rode away with some land agent to limp up and down the hills and to come back at evening, nothing found yet.

Paul and George and I were joyous. After the long boredom of so many dull days that we hardly remembered De Smet, now every day was Sunday without Sunday's clean clothes and staid behavior. The camp was a Sunday camp; the Cooleys' wagons on one side, ours on the other; in the grove between them the table and chairs were set and the hammock hung in the shade. The camp stove stood a little way apart over cooling ashes. Farther away the horses were tied under

the trees, and behind the wagons were screened places for our Saturday baths.

We must stay within sight or at least within hearing if our mothers called us, but as soon as morning tasks were done, we were free to play in the woods. All day we climbed trees, picked berries, ate unripe walnuts and hazel nuts, cracked between two stones. We startled rabbits that we must not chase far; we watched squirrels and birds, beetles and anthills. The hot air was full of good smells of rotting logs, dusty weeds, damp underneaths of mats of last year's oak leaves. Dandelion stems curled bitter on my tongue's tip, and the green curls wilted over my ears.

Sharp flat stones were thick underfoot; we stubbed our toes on them, and all our big toes were wrapped in rags. Stone bruises on our summer-calloused heels didn't stop our running. We found toadstools and mosses like teeny-tiniest forests, flat greenish gray lichen on rocks, little perfect skins of locusts, empty, thin, and brittle, clinging with tiny claws to the bark of trees.

We picked up strange stones. When I showed my father a thin triangular one, wavy all over and sharp pointed, he said it was an Indian arrowhead. We collected dozens of them, and Paul found a stone ax head.

One day I had to stay in camp with Mrs. Cooley; I must mind her and not go out of her sight. My father had found a place, my mother was going with him to see it, and they wanted no worry about me while they were gone. There never had been such a long morning. I was embarrassed and so was Mrs. Cooley. When at last I saw

the team coming, my father and mother coming back, I felt like exploding; I could hardly be still and not speak until spoken to.

My father was glowing and my mother shining. She never had talked so fast. Just what they wanted, she told Mrs. Cooley; so much, much more than they'd hoped for. A year-round spring of the best water you ever drank, a snug log house, in woods, on a hill, only a mile and a half from town so Rose could walk to school, and to cap all—just think!—four hundred young apple trees, heeled in, all ready to set out when the land was cleared. They'd bought it; as soon as dinner was over they were going to the bank to sign the papers. We were moving out that afternoon.

When he was excited, my father always held himself quiet and steady, moving and speaking with deliberation. Sometimes my quick mother flew out at him, but this day she was soft and warm. She left him eating at the camp table, told me to clear it and wash the dishes when he was through, and went into the screened place to get ready to meet the banker.

I perched on a stump and watched her brush out her hair and braid it. She had beautiful hair, roan brown, very fine and thick. Unbraided, it shimmered down to her heels; it was so long that when it was tightly braided she could sit on the braids. Usually it hung down her back in one wide braid, but when she dressed up she must put up her hair and endure the headache.

Now she wound the braid around and around into a big mass on the back of her head, and fastened it with

her tortoise-shell pins. She fluffed her bangs into a soft little mat in front, watching her comb in the small looking glass fastened to a tree, and suddenly I realized that she was whistling; I remembered that I hadn't heard her whistling lately.

"Whistling girls and crowing hens always come to some bad ends," she'd say gaily. She was whistling always. She whistled like a bird whistling a tune, clear and soft, clear and sweet, trilling, chirping, or dropping notes one by one as a meadowlark drops them from the sky. I was pleased to hear her whistling again.

Whistling, she buttoned up her new shoes with the buttonhook. She took off her calico dress and folded it neatly. Standing in her bleached muslin petticoats and corset cover trimmed with crocheted lace, she took her best dress, her black cloth wedding dress, out of the box in which it had traveled from Dakota. Whistling O Susanna, don't you cry for me, she put on the skirt and smoothed the placket. I was sorry that the skirt hid her new shoes. She coaxed her arms into the basque's tight sleeves and carefully buttoned all the glittery jet buttons up its front to her chin. With her gold pin she pinned the fold of ribbon, robin's-egg blue, to the front of the stand-up collar. Then, the very last thing, the climax: she pinned on her black sailor hat with the blue ribbon around the crown and the spray of wheat standing straight up at one side. The braids in back tilted the hat forward just a little; in front, the narrow brim rested on the mat of bangs.

She looked lovely; she was beautiful. You could see my father think so, when she came out and he looked at her.

She told him to hurry or they'd be late, but she spoke as if she were singing, not cross at all. He went into the screened place to change his shirt and comb his hair and mustache, and put on his new hat. To me my mother said that I could clear the table now, be sure to wash every dish while they were gone, and, as usual, she told me to be careful not to break one. I never had broken a dish.

I remember all this so clearly because of what happened. I had taken away the dishes and wiped the table. My mother put down on it her clean handkerchief and her little red cloth pocketbook with the mother-of-pearl sides; she was wearing her kid gloves. Carefully she brought the writing desk and set it on the table. She laid back its slanted upper half and lifted out the narrow wooden tray that held the pen and the inkwell.

The hundred-dollar bill was gone.

There was a shock, like stepping in the dark on a top step that isn't there. But it could not be true. It was true; the place in the desk was empty. Everything changed. In the tight strangeness my father and mother were not like them; I did not feel like me.

They asked, Had I told someone? No. Had I never said anything to anyone, ever, about that money? No. Had I seen a stranger near the wagon when they were not there? No. Or in camp? No.

My mother said it wasn't possible; not the Cooleys. My father agreed, no, not them. It *must* be there. My mother had seen it last in Kansas.

They took every sheet of writing paper out of the desk and shook it; they took each letter out of its envelope, unfolded it, looked into the empty envelope. They turned the desk upside down and shook it, the felt-covered inside lids flapping. My mother said they were losing their senses. Suddenly she thought, hoped, asked, Had I taken it myself, to play with?

NO! I felt scalded. She asked, Was I sure? I hadn't just opened the desk sometime, for fun? My throat swelled shut; I shook my head, no. "Don't cry," she said automatically. I wouldn't cry, I never cried, I was angry, insulted, miserable, I was not a baby who'd play with money or open that desk for fun, I was going on eight years old. I was little, alone, and scared. My father and mother sat there, still. In the long stillness I sank slowly into nothing but terror, pure terror without cause or object, a nightmare terror.

Finally my mother said, "Well." She meant, No use crying over spilled milk. What can't be cured must be endured. My father told her not to blame herself, it wasn't her fault. Carefully she peeled off her thin kid gloves. She turned them right-side-out finger by finger, smoothed them. She said that he'd better go explain to the banker.

Somehow the worst was over when he tried to put it off, saying something might turn up, and she flared out that he knew as well as she did, "nothing turns up that we don't turn up ourselves." Then she told me to run

away and play, and I remembered the unwashed dishes. She had forgotten them.

For days, I don't remember how many days, everything was the same as ever and not at all the same. I said nothing about the disaster; I didn't want to. My mother told Mrs. Cooley that they thought best to take time to make up their minds. My father looked for work in town. My mother knew nobody there. Mr. Cooley sold one of his teams and one wagon; and Paul and George were going to move into the hotel and help run it. I knew we could sell the horses, but what then? Covered wagons were going by every day, going both ways as usual, some camping overnight nearby. Often I tried to think what would happen when we had nothing to eat; I couldn't.

Blackberries were fewer now and smaller. I was deep in the briary patch, hunting them, when my mother called, and called again before I could get out without tearing my dress on the clutching thorns and run over the sharp stones to the camp. My father was hitching up, my mother was putting last things into the wagon. They had bought the farm. She had found the hundred-dollar bill. In the writing desk. The jolting had slipped it into a crack in the desk, and I was to stop asking questions and get into the wagon. Just as she was, my mother had found my father and gone to sign the papers, and just as I was, without even washing my feet, I was to obey her and get up onto that wagon seat, *now*, and no more words about it.