

Story of The Five Dollar Lawn

as told by Bishop Vaughn J. Featherstone

I am indebted to a good friend of mine, Aldin Porter, for a story and I would like to share it with you. He shared it with me about two years ago. No one in our Utah town knew where the Countess had come from; her carefully precise English indicated that she was not a native American. From the size of her house and staff we knew that she must be wealthy, but she never entertained and she made it clear that when she was at home she was completely inaccessible. Only when she stepped outdoors did she become at all a public figure--and then chiefly to the small fry of the town, who lived in awe of her.

The countess always carried a cane not only for support, but as a means of chastising any youngster she thought needed disciplining. And at one time or another most of the kids in our neighborhood seemed to display that need. By running fast and staying alert, I had managed to keep out of her reach. But one day when I was about thirteen, as I was short-cutting through her hedge, she got close enough to rap my head with her stick.

"Ouch!" I yelled, jumping a couple of feet.

"Young man, I want to talk to you," she said. I was expecting a lecture on the evils of trespassing, but as she looked at me, half smiling, she seemed to change her mind. "Don't you live in that green house with the willow trees in the next block?"

"Yes, ma'am." . . .

"Good. I've lost my gardener. Be at my house Thursday morning at seven, and don't tell me you have something else to do; I've seen you slouching around on Thursdays." When the Countess gave an order, it was carried out. I didn't dare not come on that next Thursday. I went over the whole lawn three times with a mower before she was satisfied and then she had me down on all fours looking for weeds until my knees were as green as the grass. She finally called me up to the porch.

"Well, young man, how much do you want for your day's work?"

"I don't know. Fifty cents, maybe."

"Is that what you figure you're worth?"

"Yes'm. About that."

"Very well. Here's the fifty cents you say you're worth and here's the dollar and a half more that I've earned for you by pushing you. Now I'm going to tell you something about how you and I are going to

work together. There are as many ways of mowing a lawn as there are people, and they may be worth anywhere from a penny to five dollars. Let's say that a three-dollar job would be just what you have done today, except that you'd have to be something of a fool to spend that much time on a lawn. A five-dollar lawn is well, it's impossible, so we'll forget about that. Now then, each week I'm going to pay you according to your own evaluation of your work."

I left with my two dollars, richer than I remembered being in my whole life, and determined that I would get four dollars out of her the next week. But I failed to reach even the three dollar mark. My will began to falter the second time around her yard.

"Two dollars again, eh? That kind of job puts you right on the edge of being dismissed, young man."

"Yes'm. But I'll do better next week."

And somehow I did. The last time around the lawn I was exhausted, but I found I could spur myself on. In the exhilaration of that new feeling, I had no hesitation in asking the Countess for three dollars. Each Thursday for the next four or five weeks, I varied between a three-and a three-and-a-half dollar job. The more I became more acquainted with her lawn, places where the ground was a little high or a little low, places where it needed to be clipped short or left long on the edges to make a more satisfying curve along the garden, the more I became aware of just what a four-dollar lawn would consist of. And each week I would resolve to do just that kind of a job. But by the time I had made my three dollar or three and-a-half dollar mark I was too tired to remember even having had the ambition to go beyond that.

"You look like a good consistent \$3.50 man," she would say as she handed me the money.

"I guess so" I would say, too happy at the sight of the money to remember that I had shot for something higher. "Well don't feel too bad," she would comfort me. 'After all, "there are only a handful of people in the world who could do a four-dollar job."

And her words were a comfort at first, but then, without my noticing what was happening, her comfort became an irritant that made me resolve to do that four-dollar job, even if it killed me. In the fever of my resolve, I could see myself expiring on her lawn, with the Countess leaning over me, handing me the four dollars with a tear in her eye, begging my forgiveness for having thought I couldn't do it. It was in the middle of such a fever, one Thursday night when I was trying to forget the day's defeat and get some sleep, that the truth hit me so hard that I sat upright, half choking in my excitement. It was the five-dollar job I had to do, not the four-dollar one! I had to do the job that no one could do because it was impossible.

I was well acquainted with the difficulties ahead. I had the problem, for example, of doing something about the worm mounds in the lawn. The Countess might not even have noticed them yet, they were so small; but in my bare feet I knew about them and I had to do something about them. And I could go on trimming the garden edges with shears, but I knew that a five-dollar lawn demanded that I line up each edge exactly with a yard stick and then trim it precisely with the edger. And there were other problems that only I and my bare feet knew about.

I started the next Thursday by ironing out the worm mounds with a heavy roller. After two hours of that I was ready to give up for the day. Nine o'clock in the morning, and my will was already gone! It was only by accident that I discovered how to regain it. Sitting under a walnut tree for a few minutes after finishing the rolling, I fell asleep. When I woke up minutes later, the lawn looked so good and felt so good under my feet, I was anxious to get on with the job.

I followed this secret for the rest of the day, dozing for a few minutes every hour to regain my perspective and replenish my strength. Between naps, I mowed four times, two times lengthwise, two times across, until the lawn looked like a green velvet checkerboard. Then I dug around every tree, crumbling the big clods and smoothing the soil with my hands, then finished with the edger, meticulously lining up each stroke so that the effect would be perfectly symmetrical. And I carefully trimmed the grass between the flagstones of the front walk. The shears wore my fingers raw, but the walk never looked better.

Finally about eight o'clock that evening it was all completed. I was so proud I didn't even feel tired when I went up to her door.

"Well, what is it today?" she asked.

"Five dollars," I said, trying for a little calm and sophistication.

"Five dollars? You mean four dollars, don't you? I told you that a five-dollar lawn job isn't possible."

"Yes it is. I just did it."

"Well, young man, the first five-dollar lawn in history certainly deserves some looking around."

We walked about the lawn together in the light of evening, and even I was quite overcome by the impossibility of what I had done.

"Young man", she said, putting her hand on my shoulder, "what on earth made you do such a crazy, wonderful thing?"

I didn't know why, but even if I had, I could not have explained it in the excitement of hearing that I had done it.

"I think I know," she continued, "how you felt when this idea first came to you of caring for a lawn that I told you was impossible. It made you very happy when it first came, then a little frightened. Am I right?"

She could see she was right by the startled look on my face.

"I know how you felt, because the same thing happens to almost everyone. They feel this sudden burst in them of wanting to do some great thing. They feel a wonderful happiness but then it passes because they have said, "No, I can't do that. It's impossible." Whenever something in you says, "It's impossible," remember to take a careful look and see if it isn't really God asking you to grow an inch, or a foot, or a mile, that you may come to a fuller life."

Since that time, some 25 years ago, when I have felt myself at an end with nothing before me, suddenly, with the appearance of that word, 'impossible,' I have experienced the unexpected lift, the leap inside me, and known that the only possible way lay through the very middle of impossible.

(Richard Thurman, "The Countess and the Impossible," Reader's Digest, June 1958.)