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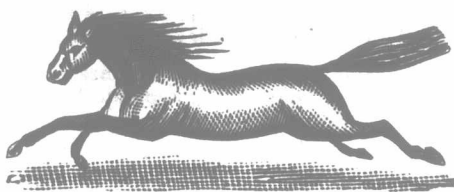
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backed sofa, facing her visitor, who bloomed in the dusky, high-wainscoted room like a brilliant flower.

"Brother," she said, wiping her eyes, "always was delicate. Over and over again I've heard ma say she never did expect to raise him—he was such a puny baby. Then, when he was two years old he had meningitis; 'twas that that left him deaf. And afterwards he all but died of scarlet fever. I don't remember all that, because it was before I was born. (He was the oldest and I was the youngest. The three children between—two girls and a boy—all died when they were babies.) But I remember like it was yesterday how low he was with pneumonia when he was just grown, because I helped to nurse him. They put fly blisters over his lungs, and did everything they could think of, and with it all he just did pull through by a narrow margin.

"That was the year before ma died—thirty years ago next October. There was just us three then, and ma died and there were just brother and me. And after that spell he never did really have any health, though he worked the farm some sort of way up to three months ago. And then—he took that chill—"

She paused to dry the tears that streamed over her cheeks.

"Dear, dear!" Anna Harding said, "how sad! how terribly sad! We simply cannot understand these things! How many chairs, Miss Mattie, have you to match that sofa?"

It took time for Miss Mattie to take in the question and to arrive at the answer.

"These four," she said, "are all the good ones—if you can call these good. The covers of the two in the garret are so worn out—"

"Two in the garret!" said Anna Harding, thrillingly. "Six chairs and this sofa; and that delicious marquetry cabinet, and that double-triangle corner table, and those adorable glass vases with the dangling prisms, in this room alone!"

A curious feeling of not being sure she was awake came over Miss Mattie. She looked about her, as if for some key to the amazing mystery of Anna Harding's enthusiasm.

"I always thought it was pretty to see the light through the glass dangles of the vases," she said, timidly. "It makes rainbows! But I didn't think you would care for old things like these."

"I just dote on them," said Anna Harding. "Do show me everything."

She darted about the dim old house like a mammoth butterfly, Miss Mattie, dazedly, delightedly following—rather than leading. In her slow-moving mind (in ten years she had not learned to call Anna Harding by her new name) credence lagged behind experience. Even though with her own eyes she saw Anna Harding pouncing with ecstasy upon one and another of the unconsidered things which had been immemorial constituents of her spare humdrum life, it was too preposterous for belief. It was dreamlike, unreal. But everything had been unreal, more or less, since the happening which had put a definite period to the things which were. She could but float upon the current of events, too bewildering to be coped with. And Anna Harding was pleased. That at least was clear. With simple-hearted elation she abandoned herself to the enjoyment of that strange, indisputable, most flattering fact.

In a way obscurely personal it flattered her—almost as she might have been flattered by praise (if such a thing were thinkable) of hand or eyes or hair. They were not to her possessions, the things her visitor eulogized, save in the sense almost precisely that hands and eyes and hair were possessions; appurtenances rather—elements of selfhood almost. Not the least factor in the sensation of strangeness, of unreality, which had come upon her, was the prospect of being, as it were, disembodied by

divorce from life's familiar envelope of visibilities. But that, too, hovered just beyond the full grasp of apprehension—inagile toward novelty.

"Everything, I understand, is to be sold next Thursday," Anna Harding said. "Dear, dear! how you must hate to part with them! It would simply break my heart, I know. But since you must sell them, I positively must have that lyre-back furniture, and the marquetry cabinet, and that corner table, and those dear dangle vases, and this claw-foot dining-table, and these Chipendale chairs, and these brass andirons—and I don't know what else! Before we go any further and I lose all my senses over these enchanting things that look like they might be straight out of Noah's Ark, won't you tell me what you will take for these? Suppose we begin with the parlor sofa and chairs. Now, what would you be willing to take for the set, including the two in the garret, which you say are very shabby?"

She led Miss Mattie back into the parlor.

"May I have a little more light?" she said. Miss Mattie assenting, she threw open the blinds, admitting an unfriendly glare upon the faded furnishings of the room.

"Now, what," she urged, "would you take for these?"

"For these?" said Miss Mattie, helplessly. Obviously it was a mere echo, preluding nothing.

"Would you be willing to take ten dollars for the set?" the visitor inquired, after a reasonable pause.

The marvel of her wanting them, the strangeness of parting with them, left no room for detail in Miss Mattie's mind.

"They've got to go," she said. For the first time something like a realization of the fact was dawning upon her. Her face took on a touch of blankness. "They've got to go," she said. "But what in the world you want with them—"

"Will you take ten dollars for the set?"

Slowly Miss Mattie took hold of the question. "Do you think they are worth it?" she queried, anxiously.

Four dollars and a half for the claw-foot table in the dining-room, two dollars for the marquetry cabinet, a dollar for the corner table, seventy-five cents apiece for the dining-room chairs, thirty cents for the andirons, twenty-five cents for the pair of vases—it was very wonderful, very exhilarating. If she just could be sure the things were worth it!

"I'm afraid there isn't anything that's really worth buying," she said. "All the silver's gone long ago—the little that was left after pa bought a pair of mules with it. And there isn't any jewelry now, either, except this breastpin I've got on with ma's and pa's hair in it. And I couldn't just part with that!"

"I wouldn't ask you to!" said Anna Harding, cordially. Her competent glance was travelling swiftly over the dark old dining-room.

"Do open that fascinating cupboard. (I wish I could afford that, but I've got one something like it, and I must make that do!) There might be something in glass or china—"

There was. There was blue china, with the right duck's-egg complexion of ground, jugs and platters, cups, saucers, plates and bowls; there were quaint wine-glasses and decanters and dishes of cut glass—

"And a pewter tea-set!" said Anna Harding. "A pewter tea-set! What will you take for that, Miss Mattie?"

"For what?"

She struggled through the speechlessness of her surprise.

"It isn't silver," she said. "It isn't even plated. It's just—"

"It's just old pewter," said Anna Harding, crisply. "What will you take for it, Miss Mattie?"

"I couldn't take anything," said Miss Mattie, distressfully. "It isn't worth anything."

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