

The Revolt of Sophia Lane

Mary Eleanor Wilkins Freeman

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THE level of new snow in Sophia Lane's north yard was broken by horse's tracks and the marks of sleigh-runners. Sophia's second cousin, Mrs. Adoniram Cutting, her married daughter Abby Dodd, and unmarried daughter Eunice had driven over from Addison, and put up their horse and sleigh in Sophia's clean, unused barn.

When Sophia had heard the sleigh-bells she had peered eagerly out of the window of the sitting-room and dropped her sewing. "Here's Ellen and Abby and Eunice," she cried, "and they've brought you some wedding-presents. Flora Bell, you put the shawl over your head, and go out through the shed and open the barn. I'll tell them to drive right in."

With that the girl and the woman scuttled — Flora Bell through the house and shed to the barn which joined it; Sophia, to the front door of the house, which she pushed open with some difficulty on account of the banked snow. Then she called to the women in the sleigh, which had stopped at the entrance to the north yard: "Drive right in — drive right in. Flora has gone to open the barn doors. She'll be there by the time you get there."

Then Sophia ran through the house to the kitchen, set the teakettle forward, and measured some tea into the teapot. She moved with the greatest swiftness, as if the tea in so many seconds were a vital necessity. When the guests came in from the barn she greeted them breathlessly. "Go right into the sittin'-room," said she. "Flora, you take their things and put them on the bedroom bed. Set right down by the stove and get warm, and the tea'll be ready in a minute. The water's 'most boilin'. You must be 'most froze." The three women, who were shapeless bundles from their wraps, moved clumsily into the sitting-room as before a spanking breeze of will. Flora followed them; she moved more slowly than her aunt, who was a miracle of nervous speed. Sophia Lane never walked; she ran to all her duties and pleasures as if she were racing against time. She hastened the boiling of the teakettle — she poked the fire; she thrust light slivers of wood into the stove. When the water boiled she made the tea with a rush, and carried the tray with cups and saucers into the sitting-room with a perilous sidewise tilt and flirt. But nothing was spilled. It was very seldom that Sophia came to grief through her haste.

The three women had their wraps removed, and were sitting around the stove. The eldest, Mrs. Ellen Cutting — a stout woman with a handsome face reddened with cold, — spoke when Sophia entered.

"Land! if you haven't gone and made hot tea!" said she.

Sophia set the tray down with a jerk, and the cups hopped in their saucers. "Well, I guess you need some," said she, speaking as fast as she moved. "It's a bitter day; you must be froze."

"Yes, it is awful cold," asserted Abby Dodd, the married daughter, "but I told mother and Eunice we'd got to come to-day, whether or no. I was bound we should get over here before the wedding."

"Look at Flora blush!" giggled Eunice, the youngest and the unmarried daughter.

Indeed, Flora Bell, who was not pretty, but tall and slender and graceful, was a deep pink all over her delicate face to the roots of her fair hair.

"You wait till your turn comes, Sis, and see what you'll do," said Abby Dodd, who resembled her mother, being fat and pink and white, with a dumpy, slightly round-shouldered figure in a pink flannel shirt-waist frilled with lace. All the newcomers were well dressed, the youngest daughter especially. They had a prosperous air, and they made Sophia's small and frugal sitting-room seem more contracted than usual. Both Sophia and her niece were dressed in garments which the visitors would characterize later among themselves, with a certain scorn tinged with pity, as "faded up." They were not shabby, they were not exactly poor, but they were painfully and futilely aspiring. "If only they would not trim quite so much," Eunice Cutting said later. But Sophia dearly loved trimming; and as for Flora, she loved whatever her aunt Sophia did. Sophia had adopted her when her parents died, when she was a baby, and had brought her up on a pittance a year. Flora was to be married to Herbert Bennet on the next day but one. She was hurrying her bridal preparations, and she was in a sort of delirium of triumph, of pride, of happiness and timidity. She was the centre of attention to-day. The visitors' eyes were all

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upon her with a half-kindly half-humorous curiosity.

On the lounge at the side of the room opposite the stove were three packages, beautifully done up in white paper and tied with red and green ribbons. Sophia had spied them the moment she entered the room.

The guests comfortably sipped their tea.

"Is it sweet enough?" asked Sophia of Mrs. Cutting, thrusting the white sugar-bowl at her.

"Plenty," replied Mrs. Cutting. "This tea does go right to the spot. I did get chilled."

"I thought you would."

"Yes, and I don't like to, especially since it is just a year ago since I had pneumonia, but Abby thought we must come to-day, and I thought so myself. I thought we wanted to have one more look at Flora before she was a bride."

"Flora's got to go out now to try on her weddin'-dress the last time," said Sophia. "Miss Beals has been awful hurried at the last minute; she don't turn off work very fast, and the dress won't be done till to-night; but everything else is finished."

"I suppose you've had a lot of presents, Flora," said Abby Dodd.

"Quite a lot," replied Flora, blushing.

"Yes, she's had some real nice presents, and two or three that ain't quite so nice," said Sophia, "but I guess those can be changed."

Mrs. Cutting glanced at the packages on the sofa with an air of confidence and pride. "We have brought over some little things," said she. "Adoniram and I give one, and Abby and Eunice each one. I hope you'll like them, Flora."

Flora was very rosy; she smiled with a charming effect, as if she were timid before her own delight. "Thank you," she murmured. "I know they are lovely."

"Do go and open them, Flora," said Eunice. "See if you have any other presents like them."

"Yes, open them, Flora," said Mrs. Cutting, with pleasant patronage.

Flora made an eager little movement toward the presents, then she looked wistfully at her aunt Sophia.

Sophia was smiling with a little reserve. "Yes, go and open them, Flora," said she; "then bring out your other presents and show them."

Flora's drab skirt and purple ruffles swayed gracefully across the room; she gathered up the packages in her slender arms, and brought them over to the table between the windows, where her aunt sat. Flora began untying the red and green ribbons, while the visitors looked on with joyful and smiling importance. On one package was marked "Flora, with all best wishes for her future happiness, from Mr. and Mrs. Adoniram Cutting."

"That is ours," said Mrs. Cutting.

Flora took off the white paper, and a nice white box was revealed. She removed the lid and took out a mass of crumpled tissue-paper. It was in three pieces. When she had set them on the table, she viewed them with admiration but bewilderment. She looked from one to the other, smiling vaguely.

Abby Dodd laughed. "Why, she doesn't know how to put them together!" said she. She went to the table and quickly adjusted the different parts of the present. "There!" said she, triumphantly.

"What a beautiful — teakettle!" said Flora, but still in a bewildered fashion.

Sophia was regarding it with an odd expression. "What is it?" she asked, shortly.

"Why, Sophia," cried Mrs. Cutting, "don't you know? It is an afternoon-tea kettle."

"What's that thing under it?" asked Sophia.

"Why, that's the alcohol-lamp. It swings on that little frame over the lamp and heats the water. I thought it would be so nice for her."

"It's beautiful," said Flora.

Sophia said nothing.

"It is real silver; it isn't plated," said Mrs. Cutting, in a slightly grieved tone.

"It is beautiful," Flora murmured again, but Sophia said nothing.

Flora began opening another package. It was quite bulky. It was marked "Flora, with best wishes for a life of love and happiness, from Abby Dodd."

"Be careful," charged Abby Dodd. "It's glass."

Flora removed the paper gingerly. The present was rolled in tissue-paper.

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"What beautiful dishes!" said she, but her voice was again slightly bewildered.

Sophia looked at the present with considerable interest. "What be the bowls for?" said she. "Oatmeal?"

The visitors all laughed.

"Oatmeal!" cried Abby. "Why, they are finger-bowls!"

"Finger-bowls?" repeated Sophia, with a plainly hostile air.

"Yes, — bowls to dip your fingers in after dinner," said Abby.

"What for?" asked Sophia.

"Why, to — to wash them."

"We wash our hands in the washbasin in the kitchen with good hot water and soap," said Sophia.

"Oh, but these are not really to wash the hands in — just to dabble the fingers in," said Eunice, still giggling.

"It's the style. You have them in little plates with doilies and pass them around after dinner."

"They are real pretty," said Flora.

Sophia said nothing.

"They are real cut glass," said Mrs. Cutting.

Flora turned to the third package, that was small and flat and exceedingly dainty. The red and green ribbon was tied in a charming bow with Eunice's visiting-card. On the back of the card was written, "Flora, with dearest love, and wishes for a life of happiness, from Eunice." Flora removed the ribbons and the white paper, and opened a flat white box, disclosing six dainty squares of linen embroidered with violets.

"What lovely mats!" said she.

"They are finger-bowl doilies," said Eunice, radiantly.

"To set the bowls on?" said Flora.

"Yes; you use pretty plates, put a doily in each plate, and then the finger bowl on the doily."

"They are lovely," said Flora.

Sophia said nothing.

Abby looked rather aggrievedly at Sophia. "Eunice and I thought Flora would like them as well as anything we could give her," said she.

"They are lovely," Flora said again.

"You haven't any like them, have you?" Abby asked, rather uneasily.

"No, she hasn't," answered Sophia for her niece.

"We tried to think of some things that everybody else wouldn't give her," said Mrs. Cutting.

"Yes, you have," Sophia answered dryly.

"They are all beautiful," said Flora, in a soft, anxiously deprecating voice, as she gathered up the presents. "I keep my presents in the parlor," she remarked further. "I guess I'll put these in there with the rest."

Presently she returned, bringing a large box; she set it down and returned for another. They were large suit-boxes. She placed them on the table, and the visitors gathered round.

"I've had beautiful presents," said Flora.

"Yes, she has had some pretty nice presents," assented Sophia. "Most of them are real nice."

Flora stood beside the table and lifted tenderly from the box one wedding-gift after another. She was full of shy pride. The visitors admired everything. When Flora had displayed the contents of the two boxes, she brought out a large picture in an ornate gilt frame, and finally wheeled through the door with difficulty a patent rocker upholstered with red crushed plush.

"That's from some of his folks," said Sophia. "I call it a handsome present."

"I'm going to have a table from his aunt Jane," remarked Flora.

"Sit down in that chair and see how easy it is," said Sophia, imperatively, to Mrs. Cutting, who obeyed meekly, although the crushed plush was so icy cold from its sojourn in the parlor that it seemed to embrace her with deadly arms and made her have visions of pneumonia.

"It's as easy a chair as I ever sat in," she said, rising hastily.

"Leave it out here and let her set in it while she is here," said Sophia, and Mrs. Cutting sank back into the chair, although she did ask for a little shawl for her shoulders.

Mrs. Cutting had always had a wholesome respect for her cousin Sophia Lane, although she had a certain feeling of superiority by reason of her wealth. Even while she looked about Sophia's poor little sitting-room and

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recalled her own fine parlors, she had a sense that Sophia was throned on such mental heights above mahogany and plush and tapestry that she could not touch her with a finger of petty scorn even if she wished.

After Flora had displayed her presents and carried them back to the parlor, she excused herself and went to the dressmaker's to try on her wedding-dress.

After Flora had gone out of the yard, looking abnormally stout with the gay plaid shawl over the coat and her head rolled in a thick old worsted hood of Sophia's, Mrs. Cutting opened on a subject about which she was exceedingly curious.

"I'm real sorry we can't have a glimpse of the wedding-dress," said she, ingratiatingly.

Sophia gave an odd sort of grunt in response. Sophia always gave utterance to that nondescript sound, which was neither assent nor dissent, but open to almost any interpretation, when she wished to evade a lie. She was in reality very glad that the wedding-dress was not on exhibition. She thought it much better that it should not be seen in its full glory until the wedding-day.

"Flora has got many good presents," said Sophia, "and few tomfool ones, thanks to me and what I did last Christmas."

"What do you mean, Sophia?" asked Mrs. Cutting.

"Didn't you hear what I did, Ellen Cutting?"

"No, I didn't hear a word about it."

"Well, I didn't know but somebody might have told. I wasn't a mite ashamed of it, and I ain't now. I'd do the same thing over again if it was necessary, but I guess it won't be; I guess they got a good lesson. I dare say they were kind of huffy at the time. I guess they got over it. They've all give Flora presents now, anyhow, except Angeline White, and I guess she will."

"Why, what did you do?" asked Abby Dodd, with round eyes of interest on Sophia.

"Why, I'd jest as soon tell you as not," replied Sophia. "I've got some cake in the oven. Jest let me take a peek at that first."

"Wedding-cake?" asked Eunice, as Sophia ran out of the room.

"Land, no!" she called back. "That was made six weeks ago. Weddin'-cake wouldn't be worth anything baked now."

"Eunice, didn't you know better than that?" cried her mother.

"It's white cake," Sophia's explanatory voice came from the kitchen, whence sweet odors floated into the room. The oven door opened and shut with an exceedingly swift click like a pistol-shot.

"I should think she'd make the cake fall, slamming the oven door like that," murmured Abby Dodd.

"So should I; but it won't," assented her mother. "I never knew Sophia to fail with her cake."

Sophia flew back into the sitting-room and plumped into her chair; she had, indeed, risen with such impetus and been so quick that the chair had not ceased rocking since she left it. "It's done," said she; "I took it out. I'll let it stand in the pan and steam a while before I do anything more with it. Now I'll tell you what I did about Flora's Christmas presents last year if you want me to. I'd jest as soon as not. If I hadn't done what I did, there wouldn't have been any weddin' this winter, I can tell you that."

"You don't say so!" cried Mrs. Cutting, and the others stared.

"No, there wouldn't. You know, Herbert and Flora have been goin' together three years this December. Well, they'd have been goin' together three years more, and I don't know but they'd been goin' together till doomsday, if I hadn't taken matters into my own hand. I ain't never been married myself, and maybe folks think I ain't any right to my opinion, but I've always said I didn't approve of young folks goin' together so long unless they get married. When they're married, and any little thing comes up that one or the other don't think quite so nice, why, they put up with it, and make the best of it, and kind of belittle that and make more of the things that they do like. But when they ain't married it's different. I don't care how much they think of each other, something may come up to make him or her kind of wonder if t'other is good enough to marry, after all. Well, nothin' of that kind has happened with Flora and Herbert Bennet, and I ain't sayin' there has. They went together them three years, and, far as I can see, they think each other is better than in the beginnin'. Well, as I was sayin', it seemed to me that those two had ought to get married before long if they were ever goin' to, but I must confess I didn't see how they were any nearer it than when they started keepin' company."

"Herbert has been pretty handicapped," remarked Mrs. Cutting.

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"Handicapped? Well, I rather guess he has! He was young when his father died, and when his mother had that dreadful sickness and had to go to the hospital, he couldn't keep up the taxes, and the interest on the mortgage got behindhand; the house was mortgaged when his father died, and it had to go; he's had to hire ever since. They're comin' here to live; you knew that, I s'pose?"

"Sophia, you don't mean his mother is coming here to live?"

"Why not? I'm mighty glad the poor woman's goin' to have a good home in her old age. She's a good woman as ever was, just as mild-spoken, and smart too. I'm tickled to death to think she's comin', and so's Flora. Flora sets her eyes by his mother."

"Well, you know your own business, but I must say I think it's a considerable undertaking."

"Well, I don't. I'd like to know what you'd have her do. Herbert can't afford to support two establishments, no more than he earns, and he ain't goin' to turn his mother out to earn her bread an' butter at her time of life, I rather guess. No; she's comin' here, and she's goin' to have the south chamber; she's goin' to furnish it. I never see a happier woman; and as for Herbert — well, he has had a hard time, and now things begin to look brighter; but I declare, about a year ago, as far as I could see, it didn't look as if he and Flora ever could get married. One evenin' the poor fellow came here, and he talked real plain; he said he felt as if he'd ought to. He said he'd been comin' here a long time, and he'd begun to think that he and Flora might keep on that way until they were gray, so far as he could help it. There he was, he said, workin' in Edgcomb's store at seven dollars a week, and had his mother to keep, and he couldn't see any prospect of anything better. He said maybe if he wasn't goin' with Flora she might get somebody else. 'It ain't fair to Flora,' said he. And with that he heaves a great sigh, and the first thing I knew, right before me, Flora she was in his lap, huggin' him, and cryin', and sayin' she'd never leave him for any man on the face of the earth, and she didn't ask anything any better than to wait. They'd both wait and be patient and trust in God, and she was jest as happy as she could be, and she wouldn't change places with the Queen. First thing I knew I was cryin' too; I couldn't help it; and Herbert, poor fellow, he fetched a big sob himself, and I didn't think none the worse of him for it. 'Seems as if I must be sort of lackin' somehow, to make such a failure of things,' says he, kind of broken like.

"'You ain't lackin',' says Flora, real fierce like. 'It ain't you that's to blame. Fate's against you and always has been.'

"'Now you look round before you blame the Lord,' says I at that — for when folks say fate they always mean the Lord. 'Mebbe it ain't the Lord,' says I; 'mebbe it's folks. Wouldn't your uncle Hiram give you a lift, Herbert?'"

"'Uncle Hiram!' says he; but not a bit scornful — real good-natured.

"'Why? I don't see why not,' says I. 'He always gives nice Christmas presents to you and your mother, don't he?'"

"'Yes,' says he. 'He gives Christmas presents.'

"'Real nice ones?'"

"'Yes,' said poor Herbert, kind of chucklin', but real good-natured. 'Last Christmas Uncle Hiram gave mother a silver card-case, and me a silver ash-receiver.'

"'But you don't smoke?'" says I.

"'No,' says he, 'and mother hasn't got any visitin'-cards.'

"'I suppose he didn't know, along of not livin' in the same place,' says I.

"'No,' says he. 'They were real handsome things — solid; must have cost a lot of money.'

"'What would you do if you could get a little money, Herbert?'" says I.

"'Bless you! he knew quick enough. Didn't have to study over it a minute.

"'I'd buy that piece of land next your house here,' says he, 'and I'd keep cows and start a milk route. There's need of one here,' says he, 'and it's just what I've always thought I'd like to do; but it takes money,' he finishes up, with another of them heart-breakin' sighs of his, 'an' I ain't got a cent.'

"'Something will happen so you can have the milk route,' says Flora, and she kisses him right before me, and I was glad she did. I never approved of young folks bein' silly, but this was different. When a man feels as bad as Herbert Bennet did that day, if the woman that's goin' to marry him can comfort him any, she'd ought to.

"'Yes,' says I, 'something will surely happen. You jest keep your grit up, Herbert.'

"'How you women do stand by me!' says Herbert, and his voice broke again, and I was pretty near cryin'.

"'Well, we're goin' to stand by you jest as long as you are as good as you be now,' says I. 'The tide'll turn

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before long.'

"I hadn't any more than got the words out of my mouth before the express drove up to the door, and there were three Christmas presents for Flora, early as it was, three days before Christmas. Christmas presents so long beforehand always make me a little suspicious, as if mebbe folks wanted other folks to be sure they were goin' to have something. Flora she'd always made real handsome presents to every one of them three that sent those that day. One was Herbert's aunt Harriet Morse, one was Cousin Jane Adkins over to Gorham, and the other was Mis' Crocker, she that was Emma Ladd; she's a second cousin of Flora's father's. Well, them three presents came, and we undid them. Then we looked at 'em. 'Great Jehosophat,' says I. Herbert he grinned, then he said something I didn't hear, and Flora she looked as if she didn't know whether to laugh or cry. There Flora she didn't have any money to put into presents, of course, but you know what beautiful fancy-work she does, and there she's been workin' ever since the Christmas before, and she made a beautiful centrepiece and a bureau scarf and a lace handkerchief for those three women, and there they had sent her a sort of a dewdab to wear in her hair! Pretty enough, looked as if it cost considerable — a pink rose with spangles, and a feather shootin' out of it; but Lord! if Flora had come out in that thing anywhere she'd go in Brookville, she'd scared the natives. It was all right where Herbert's aunt Harriet lived. Ayres is a city, but in this town, 'way from a railroad — goodness!

"Well, there was that; and Cousin Jane Adkins had sent her a Japanese silk shawl, all over embroidery, as handsome as a picture; but there was poor Flora wantin' some cotton cloth for her weddin' fix, and not a cent to buy a thing with. My sheets and pillow-cases and table-linen that I had from poor mother was about worn out, and Flora was wonderin' how she'd ever get any. But there Jane had sent that shawl, that cost nobody knew how much, when she knew Flora wanted the other things, — because I'd told her. But Mis' Crocker's was the worst of all. She's a widow with a lot of money, and she's put on a good many airs. I dun'no' as you know her. No, I thought you didn't. Well, she does feel terrible airy. She sent poor Flora a set of chessmen, all red and white ivory, beautifully carved, and a table to keep 'em on. I must say I was so green I didn't know what they were when I first saw 'em. Flora knew; she'd seen some somewhere she'd been.

"For the land sake! what's them little dolls and horses for?' says I. 'It looks like Noah's ark without the ark.'

"'It's a set of chess and a table,' said Flora, and she looked ready to cry, poor child. She thought, when she got that great package, that she really had got something she wanted that time, sure.

"'Chess?' says I.

"'A game,' says Flora.

"'A game?' says I.

"'To play,' says she.

"'Do you know how to play it, Flora?' says I.

"'No,' says she.

"'Does Herbert?'

"'No.'

"'Well,' says I, and I spoke right out, 'of all the things to give anybody that needs things!'

"Flora was readin' the note that came with it. Jane Crocker said in the note that in givin' her Christmas present this year she was havin' a little eye on the future — and she underlined the future. She was twittin' Flora a little about her waitin' so long, and I knew it. Jane Crocker is a good woman enough, but she's got claws. She said she had an eye on the underlined future, and she said a chess set and a table were so stylish in a parlor. She didn't say a word about playin'.

"'Does she play that game?' says I to Flora.

"'I don't know,' says Flora. She didn't; I found out afterward. She didn't know a single blessed thing about the game.

"'Well, I looked at that present of poor Flora's, and I felt as if I should give up. 'How much do you s'pose that thing cost?' says I. Then I saw she had left the tag on. I looked. I didn't care a mite. I don't know where she got it. Wherever it was, she got cheated, if I know anything about it. There Jane Crocker had paid forty dollars for that thing.

"'Why didn't she give forty dollars for a Noah's ark and done with it?' says I. 'I'd jest as soon have one. Go and put it in the parlor,' says I.

"'And poor Flora and Herbert lugged it into the parlor. She was almost cryin'.

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"Well, the things kept comin' that Christmas. We both had a good many presents, and it did seem as if they were worse than they had ever been before. They had always been pretty bad. I don't care if I do say it."

There was a faint defiance in Sophia's voice. Mrs. Cutting and her daughters glanced imperceptibly at one another. A faint red showed on Mrs. Cutting's cheeks.

"Yes," repeated Sophia, firmly, "they always had been pretty bad. We had tried to be grateful but it was the truth. There were so many things Flora and I wanted, and it did seem sometimes as if everybody that gave us Christmas presents sat up a week of Sundays tryin' to think of something to give us that we didn't want. There was Lizzie Starkwether; she gave us bed-shoes. She gave us bed-shoes the winter before, and the winter before that, but that didn't make a mite of difference. She kept right on givin' 'em, red and black bed-shoes. There she knits beautiful mittens or wristers, and we both wanted mittens or wristers; but no, we got bed-shoes. Flora and me never wear bed-shoes, and, what's more, I'd told Lizzie Starkwether so. I had a chance to do it when I thought I wouldn't hurt her feelin's. But that didn't make any difference; the bed-shoes come right along. I must say I was mad when I saw them that last time. 'I must say I don't call this a present; I call it a kick,' says I, and I'm ashamed to say I gave them bed-shoes a fling. There poor Flora had been sittin' up nights makin' a white apron trimmed with knit lace for Lizzie, because she knew she wanted one.

"Well, so it went; everything that come was a little more something we didn't want, especially Flora's; and she didn't say anything, but tried to look as if she was tickled to death; and she sent off the nice, pretty things she'd worked so hard to make, and every single one of them things, if I do say it, had been studied over an hour to every minute the ones she got had. Flora always tried not to give so much what she likes as what the one she's givin' to likes; and when I saw what she was gettin' back I got madder an' madder. I s'pose I wasn't showin' a Christian spirit, and Flora said so. She said she didn't give presents to get their worth back, and if they liked what she gave, that was worth more than anything. I could have felt that way if they'd been mine, but I couldn't when they were Flora's, and when the poor child had so little, and couldn't get married on account of it, too. Christmas mornin' came Herbert's rich uncle Hiram's present. It came while we were eatin' breakfast, about eight o'clock. We were rather late that mornin'. Well, the expressman drove into the yard, and he left a nice little package, and I saw the Leviston express mark on it, and I says to Flora, 'This must come from Herbert's uncle Hiram, and I shouldn't wonder if you had got something real nice.'

"Well, we undid it, and if there wasn't another silver card-case, the same style as Herbert's mother had given her the Christmas before. Well, Flora has got some visitin'-cards, but the idea of her carryin' a silver card-case like that when she went callin'! Why, she wouldn't have had anything else that come up to that card-case! Flora didn't say much, but I could see her lips quiver. She jest put it away, and pretty soon Herbert run in — he was out with the delivery wagon from the store, and he stopped a second. He didn't stay long, — he was too conscientious about his employer's time, — but he stayed long enough to tell about his and his mother's Christmas presents from his uncle Hiram, and what do you think they had that time? Why, Herbert had a silver cigarette-case, and he never smokin' at all, and his mother had a cut-glass wine set.

"Well, I didn't say much, but I was makin' up my mind. I was makin' it up slow, but I was makin' it up firm. Some more presents came that forenoon, and not a thing Flora wanted, except some ironin' holders from Cousin Ann Drake, and me a gingham apron from her. Yes, Flora did have another present she wanted, and that was a handkerchief come through the mail from the school-teacher that used to board here — a real nice fine one. But the rest — well, there was a sofa pillow painted with wild roses on boltin'-cloth, and there every sofa we'd got to lay down on in the house was this lounge here. We'd never have a sofa in the parlor, and Minerva Saunders — she sent it — knew it; and I'd like to know how much we could use a painted white boltin'-cloth pillow here? Minerva was rich, too, and I knew the pillow cost enough. And Mis' George Harris, she that was Minnie Beard — she was Flora's own cousin, you know, — what did she send but a brass fire-set — poker and tongs and things, — and here we ain't got an open fireplace in the house, and she knew it. But Minnie never did have much sense; I never laid it up against her. She meant well, and she's sent Flora some beautiful napkins and table-cloths; I told her that was what she wanted for a weddin'-present. Well, as I was sayin', I was makin' up my mind slow but firm, and by afternoon it was made up. Says I to Flora: 'I wish you'd go over to Mr. Martin's and ask him if I can have his horse and sleigh this afternoon. Tell him I'll pay him.' He never takes any pay, but I always offer. Flora said: 'Why, Aunt Sophia, you ain't goin' out this afternoon! It looks as if it would snow every minute.'

"Yes, I be,' says I.

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"Well, Flora went over and asked, and Mr. Martin said I was welcome to the horse and sleigh — he's always real accommodatin' — and he hitched up himself and brought it over about one o'clock. I thought I'd start early, because it did threaten snow. I got Flora out of the way — sent her down to the store to get some sugar; we were goin' to make cake when I got home, and we were all out of powdered sugar. When that sleigh come I jest bundled all them presents — except the apron and holders and the two or three other things that was presents, because the folks that give 'em had studied up what Flora wanted, and given to her instead of themselves, — an' I stowed them all in that sleigh, under the seat and on it, and covered them up with the robe.

"Then I wrapped up real warm, because it was bitter cold — seemed almost too cold to snow, — and I put a hot soapstone in the sleigh, and I gathered up the reins, an' I slapped 'em over the old horse's back, and I set out.

"I thought I'd go to Jane Crocker's first, — I wanted to get rid of that chess table; it took up so much room in the sleigh I hadn't any place to put my feet, and the robe kept slippin' off it. So I drove right there. Jane was to home: the girl came to the door, and I went into the parlor. I hadn't been to call on Jane for some time, and she'd got a number of new things I hadn't seen, and the first thing I saw was a chess-table and all them little red and white Noah's-ark things, jest like the one she sent us. When Jane come in, dressed in black silk stiff enough to stand alone — though she wa'n't goin' anywheres and it looked like snow, — I jest stood right up. I'd brought in the table and the box of little jiggers, and I goes right to the point. I had to. I had to drive six miles to Ayres before I got through, and there it was spittin' snow already.

"'Good afternoon, Jane,' says I. 'I've brought back your presents.'

"Jane she kind of gasped, and she turned pale. She has a good deal of color; she's a pretty woman; well, it jest slumped right out of her cheeks. 'Mercy! Sophia,' says she, 'what do you mean?'

"'Jest what I say, Jane,' says I. 'You've sent Flora some playthings that cost forty dollars — you left the tags on, so we know, — and they ain't anything she has any use for. She don't know how to play chess, and neither does Herbert; and if they did know, they wouldn't neither of 'em have any time, unless it was Sundays, and then it would be wicked.'

"'Oh, Lord! Sophia,' says she, kind of chokin', 'I don't know how to play myself, but I've got one for an ornament, and I thought Flora —'

"'Flora will have to do without forty-dollar ornaments, if ever she gets money enough to get married at all,' says I, 'and I don't think a Noah's ark set on a table marked up in squares is much of an ornament, anyhow.'

"I didn't say any more. I jest marched out and left the presents. But Jane she came runnin' after me. 'Sophia,' says she — and she spoke as if she was sort of scared. She never had much spunk, for all she looks so up an' comin' — 'Sophia,' says she, 'I thought she'd like it. I thought —'

"'No, you didn't, Jane Crocker,' says I. 'You jest thought what you'd like to give, and not what she'd like to have.'

"'What would she like to have?' says she, and she was 'most cryin'. 'I'll get her anything she wants, if you'll jest tell me, Sophia.'

"'I ain't goin' to tell you, Jane,' says I, but I spoke softer, for I saw that she meant well, after all, — 'I ain't goin' to tell you. You jest put yourself in her place; you make believe you was a poor young girl goin' to get married, and you think over what little the poor child has got now and what she has to set alongside new things, and you kind of study it out for yourself,' says I. And then I jest said good-by, though she kept callin' after me, and I run out and climbed in the sleigh and tucked myself in and drove off.

"The very next day Jane Crocker sent Flora a beautiful new carpet for the front chamber, and a rug to go with it. She knew Flora was goin' to have the front chamber fixed up when she got married; she'd heard me say so; and the carpet was all worn out.

"Well, I kept right on. I carried back Cousin Abby Adkins's white silk shawl, and she acted awful mad; but she thought better of it as I was goin' out to the sleigh, and she called after me to know what Flora wanted, and I told her jest what I had Jane Crocker. And I carried back Minerva Saunders's boltin'-cloth sofa pillow, and she was more astonished than anything else — she was real good-natured. You know how easy she is. She jest laughed after she'd got over bein' astonished. 'Why,' says she, 'I don't know but it is kind of silly, now I come to think of it. I declare I clean forgot you didn't have a sofa in the parlor. When I've been in there I've been so took up seein' you and Flora, Sophia, that I never took any account at all of the furniture.'

"So I went away from there feelin' real good, and the next day but one there come a nice haircloth sofa for

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Flora to put in the parlor.

"Then I took back Minnie Harris's fire-set, and she acted kind of dazed. 'Why, don't you think it's handsome?' says she. You know she's a young thing, younger than Flora. She's always called me Aunt Sophia, too. 'Why, Aunt Sophia,' says she, 'didn't Flora think it was handsome?'

"'Handsome enough, child,' says I, and I couldn't help laughin' myself, she looked like sech a baby, — 'handsome enough, but what did you think Flora was goin' to do with a poker and tongs to poke a fire, when there ain't any fire to poke?'

"Then Minnie she sort of giggled. 'Why, sure enough, Aunt Sophia,' says she. 'I never thought of that.'

"'Where did you think she would put them?' says I. 'On the parlor mantel-shelf for ornaments?'

"Then Minnie she laughed sort of hysterical. 'Give 'em right here, Aunt Sophia,' says she.

"The next day she sent a clock — that wasn't much account, though it was real pretty; it won't go long at a time, — but it looks nice on the parlor shelf, and it was so much better than the poker and tongs that I didn't say anything. It takes sense to give a present, and Minnie Harris never had a mite, though she's a pretty little thing.

"Then I took home Lizzie Starkwether's bed-shoes, and she took it the worst of all.

"'Don't they fit?' says she.

"'Fit well 'nough,' says I. 'We don't want 'em.'

"'I'd like to know why not,' says she.

"'Because you've given us a pair every Christmas for three years,' says I, 'and I've told you we never wear bed-shoes; and even if we did wear 'em,' says I, 'we couldn't have worn out the others to save our lives. When we go to bed, we go to sleep,' says I. 'We don't travel round to wear out shoes. We've got two pairs apiece laid away,' says I, 'and I think you'd better give these to somebody that wants 'em — mebbe somebody that you've been givin' mittens to for three years, that don't wear mittens.'

"Well, she was hoppin', but she got over it, too; and I guess she did some thinkin', for in a week came the prettiest mittens for each of us I ever laid eyes on, and Minerva herself came over and called, and thanked Flora for her apron sweet as pie.

"Well, I went to all the others in town, and then I started for Ayres, and carried back the dewdab to Herbert's aunt Harriet Morse. I hated to do that, for I didn't know her very well; but I went, and she was real nice. She made me drink a cup of tea and eat a slice of her cake, and she thanked me for comin'. She said she didn't know what young girls liked, and she had an idea they cared more about something to dress up in than anything else, even if they didn't have a great deal to do with, and she had ought to have known better than to send such a silly thing. She spoke real kind about Herbert, and hoped he could get married before long, and the next day she sent Flora a pair of beautiful blankets, and now she's given Flora all her bed linen and towels for a weddin'-present. I heated up my soapstone in her kitchen oven and started for home. I was almost dark, and snowin' quite hard, and she said she hated to have me go, but I said I didn't mind. I was goin' to stop at Herbert's uncle Hiram's on my way home. You know he lives in Leviston, half-way from Ayres.

"When I got there it was snowin' hard, comin' real thick.

"I drew up at the front gate and hitched the horse, and waded through the snow to the front door and rung the bell; and Uncle Hiram's housekeeper came to the door. She is a sort of cousin of his — a widow woman from Ayres. I don't know as you know who she is. She's a dreadful lackada'sical woman, kind of pretty, long-faced and slopin'-shouldered, and she speaks kind of slow and sweet. I asked if Mr. Hiram Snell was in, and she said she guessed so, and asked me in, and showed me into the sittin'-room, which was furnished rich; but it was awful dirty and needed dustin'. I guess she ain't much of a housekeeper. Uncle Hiram was in the sittin'-room, smokin' a pipe and readin'. You know Hiram Snell. He's kind of gruff-spoken, but he ain't bad-meanin'. It's more because he's kind of blunderin' about little things, like most men; ain't got a small enough grip to fit 'em. Well, he stood up when I come in. He knew me by sight, and I said who I was — that I was aunt to Flora Bell that his nephew Herbert Bennet was goin' to marry; and he asked me to sit down, but I said I couldn't because I had to drive a matter of three miles to get home, and it was snowin' so hard. Then I out with that little fool card-case, and I said I'd brought it back.

"'What's the matter? Ain't it good enough?' says he, real short. He's got real shaggy eyebrows, an' I tell you his eyes looked fierce under 'em.

"'Too good,' says I. 'Flora she ain't got anything good enough to go with it. This card-case can't be carried by

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a woman unless she has a handsome silk dress, and fine white kid gloves, and a sealskin sacque, and a hat with an ostrich feather,' says I.

"Do you want me to give her all those things to go with the card-case?' says he, kind of sarcastic.

"If you did, they'd come back quicker than you could say Jack Robinson,' says I, for I was gettin' mad myself.

"But all of a sudden he burst right out laughin'. 'Well,' says he, 'you've got horse-sense, an' that's more than I can say of most women.' Then he takes the card-case and he looks hard at it. 'Why, Mrs. Pendergrass said she'd be sure to like it!' says he. 'Said she'd got one for Herbert's mother last year. Mrs. Pendergrass buys all my Christmas presents for me. I don't make many.'

"I shouldn't think you'd better if you can't get more sensible ones to send,' says I. I knew I was saucy, but he was kind of smilin', and I laughed when I said it, though I meant it all the same.

"Why, weren't Herbert's all right?' says he.

"Right?' says I. 'Do you know what he had last year?'

"No, I don't,' says he.

"Well, last year you sent him a silver ash-tray, and his mother a card-case, and this year he had a silver cigarette-case, and his mother a cut-glass wine-set.'

"Well?'

"Nothin', only Herbert never smokes, and his mother hasn't got any visitin'-cards, and she don't have much wine, I guess.'

"Hiram Snell laughed again. 'Well, I left it all to Mrs. Pendergrass,' says he. 'I never thought she had brains to spare, but then I never thought it took brains to buy Christmas presents.'

"It does,' says I, — 'brains and consider'ble love for the folks you are buyin' for.'

"Christmas is tomfoolery, anyhow,' says he.

"That's as you look at it,' says I.

"He stood eyin' me sort of gruff, and yet as if he were sort of tickled at the same time. 'Well,' says he, finally, 'you've brought this fool thing back. Now what shall I give your niece instead?'

"I don't go round beggin' for presents,' says I.

"How the devil am I going to get anything that she'll like any better if I don't know?' says he. 'And Mrs. Pendergrass can't help me out any. You've got to say something.'

"I sha'n't,' says I, real set. 'You ain't no call to give my niece anything, anyway; you ain't no call to give her anything she wants, and you certainly ain't no call to give her anything she don't want.'

"You don't believe in keepin' presents you don't want?'

"No,' says I, 'I don't — and thankin' folks for 'em as if you liked 'em. It's hypocrisy.'

"He kind of grunted, and laughed again.

"It don't make any odds about Flora,' says I; 'and as for your nephew and your sister, you know about them and what they want as well as I do, or you'd ought to. I ain't goin' to tell you.'

"So Maria hasn't got any cards, and Herbert don't smoke,' says he, and he grinned as if it was awful funny.

"Well, I thought it was time for me to be goin', and jest then Mrs. Pendergrass came in with a lighted lamp. It had darkened all of a sudden, and I could hear the sleet on the window, and there I had three miles to drive.

"So I started, and Hiram Snell he followed me to the door. He seemed sort of anxious about my goin' out in the storm, and come out himself through all the snow, and unhitched my horse and held him till I got nicely tucked in the sleigh. Then jest as I gathered up the reins, he says, speakin' up loud against the wind.

"When is Herbert and your niece goin' to get married?'

"When Herbert gets enough money to buy a piece of land and some stock and start a milk route,' says I. Then off I goes."

Sophia paused for a climax. Her guests were listening, breathless.

"Well, what did he give Herbert?" asked Mrs. Cutting.

"He gave him three thousand dollars to buy that land and some cows and put up a barn," said Sophia, and her audience drew a long simultaneous breath.

"That was great," said Eunice.

"And he's made Flora a wedding-present of five shares in the Ayres street-railroad stock, so she should have a little spendin'-money," said Sophia.

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"I call him a pretty generous man," said Abby Dodd.

"Generous enough," said Sophia Lane, "only he didn't know how to steer his generosity."

The guests rose; they were looking somewhat uncomfortable and embarrassed. Sophia went into the bedroom to get their wraps, letting a breath of ice into the sitting-room. While she was gone the guests conferred hastily with one another.

When she returned, Mrs. Cutting faced her, not unamiably, but confusedly. "Now look here, Sophia Lane," said she, "I want you to speak right out. You needn't hesitate. We all want the truth. Is — anything the matter with our presents we brought to-day?"

"Use your own judgment," replied Sophia Lane.

"Where are those presents we brought?" asked Mrs. Cutting. She and her daughters all looked sober and doubtful, but not precisely angry.

"They are in the parlor," replied Sophia.

"Suppose you get them," said Mrs. Cutting.

When Sophia returned with the alcohol-lamp and afternoon-tea kettle, the finger-bowls and the doilies, the guests had on their wraps. Abby Dodd and Eunice at once went about tying up the presents. Mrs. Cutting looked on. Sophia got her little shawl and hood. She was going out to the barn to assist her guests in getting their horse out.

"Has Flora got any dishes?" asked Mrs. Cutting, thoughtfully.

"No, she hasn't got anything but her mother's china tea-set," replied Sophia. "She hasn't got any good dishes for common use."

"No dinner-set?"

"No; mine are about used up, and I've been careful with 'em too."

Mrs. Cutting considered a minute longer. "Has she got some good tumblers?" she asked.

"No, she hasn't. We haven't any too many tumblers in the house."

"How is she off for napkins?" asked Eunice, tying up her doilies.

"She ain't any too well off. She's had a dozen give her, and that's all."

The guests, laden with the slighted wedding-gifts, followed Sophia through the house, the kitchen, and the clean, cold wood-shed to the barn. Sophia slid back the heavy doors.

"Well, good-by, Sophia," said Mrs. Cutting. "We've had a nice time, and we've enjoyed seeing Flora's presents."

"Yes, so have I," said Eunice.

"I think she's fared real well," said Abby.

"Yes, she has," said Sophia.

"We shall be over in good season," said Eunice.

"Yes, we shall," assented Abby.

Sophia untied the horse, which had been fastened to a ring beside the door; still the guests did not move to get into the sleigh. A curious air of constraint was over them. Sophia also looked constrained and troubled. Her poor faithful face peering from the folds of her gray wool hood was defiant and firm, but still anxious. She looked at Mrs. Cutting, and the two women's eyes met; there was a certain wistfulness in Sophia's.

"I think a good deal of Flora," said she, and there was a hint of apology in her tone.

Simultaneously the three women moved upon Sophia, their faces cleared; lovely understanding appeared upon them.

"Good-by, Sophia," said Mrs. Cutting, and kissed her.

"Good-by, Cousin Sophia," said the daughters, and they also kissed her.

When they drove out of the snowy yard, three smiling faces turned back for a last greeting to Sophia. She slid together the heavy barn doors. She was smiling happily, though there were tears in her eyes.

"Everybody in this world means to be pretty good to other folks," she muttered to herself, "and when they ain't, it ain't always their fault; sometimes it's other folks'."