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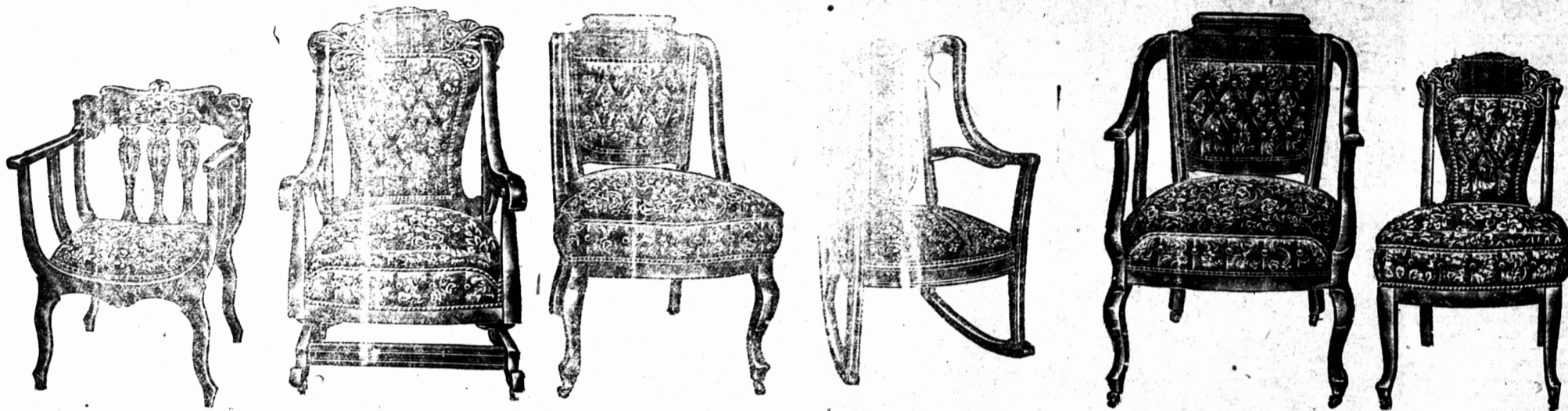


ON GUARD



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Raising Christmas Funds

I WAS going home to spend Christmas. As I had no children—indeed, was not married—holidays, especially Christmas, bored me. I wished the season were over and the new year begun. The train pulled out of the station, and I took up a newspaper.

Suddenly my paper was crushed back on my face, a pair of small arms were thrown around my neck and the round face of a boy about four years old was thrust within an inch of my nose. By what right he assumed to treat a perfect stranger in this demonstrative fashion I could not conceive.

"You little scamp, what do you mean?"
"I'm goin' home to spend Christmas." At that moment the conductor came along for tickets and told me that the boy had been put in his charge. He was to meet his father at St. Louis. The little imp unclasped his hands as suddenly as he had clasped them and made a dash for the door. I dashed after him, reviling the parent who would put a child his age in the care of a conductor, and dragged him back. This I did a dozen times during the day. When not trying to get on the platform he was trying to sell an old knife (no blades) to the passengers to raise Christmas money. At first they put him away, some of them impatiently, others gently, but he was so persistent and got up such remarkable financial schemes that at last every one in the car was laughing at him.

There was something in this irresponsible naturalness that won my heart. At nightfall, since there was no one to pay any attention to him, I called the porter, fed him and told him to make up the child's berth, which happened to be directly opposite my own. Then the boy got sleepy, and I told him the sandman was coming around to weigh his lids, and if he didn't keep awake till he was undressed he wouldn't see the old fellow. I wished to keep him awake till the



A PAIR OF SMALL ARMS WERE THROWN AROUND MY NECK.

porter could undress him. Nevertheless he fell asleep in my arms, and as the porter was busy I concluded to undress him myself.

"Wake up!" I said, shaking him. He opened his eyes. "Has the sandman been around?" was his first question.

"I should think so; long ago. It's bedtime." It was a hard hunt I had all over his little body for buttons, but I found them. His shoe laces were in a knot, but I untied them and put him to bed in his undergarments. Giving me a hug like a bear cub he fell back on the pillow and was asleep before I could cover him up.

Before turning in myself I took a look at him to assure myself he was all right. Drawing the curtains, the lamplight fell on his face. What a picture of innocence! Where was he going? He didn't know. Who took care of him? He didn't care. Perhaps the parent who had sent for him was at that moment anxious about him and regretted letting him come in such a way. I had a dread that he would wake up in the middle of the night with colic. But if his parent worried, if I worried, there was one who was

not in the least troubled about him. It was himself.

In the night I dreamed that I was being garrotted. I awoke and found myself tightly clasped around the neck. I put my hand up to discover what was choking me and felt a tiny arm with a hand on it no bigger than my watch and five soft little fingers. A stream of lamplight came in where the curtains hung loose. It revealed the boy sound asleep. How he got there I didn't know, and I doubt if he knew himself.

The next morning he resumed his negotiations with the passengers to raise Christmas money, but the most impudent thing he did was to ask me if he had not lent me 3 cents the night before. This to me, who had spent money for him and had taken such care of him!

I felt a touch on my shoulder and turned my head. A gentleman in the seat behind me, with a benevolent face and a twinkle in his eye, was looking at me.

"One can admire even impudence," he said, "if it amounts to genius. This boy is certainly a genius of effrontery. He ought to be encouraged. What do you say to a collection for him for Christmas?"

By way of reply I dropped a silver dollar in my hat and gave it to the speaker, who duplicated the coin and sent the hat through the car, the passengers' passing it from hand to hand. When it came back it contained \$6.50. I let the child handle it, then took care of it for him till his arrival at his destination. When we stopped at a station on the outskirts of St. Louis a man boarded the car and, coming up to the boy, took him in his arms and kissed him. But the one who can become familiar on short acquaintance is not likely to permit familiarities in others. The child planted his fist right between the eyes of his captor.

The man explained to us that he was the boy's father and his child had been away long enough to forget him.

I took the father's address and during the day (Christmas) went to the house. I found very nice people in impoverished circumstances. Their boy had taken home with him the wherewithal to buy a Christmas dinner.

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