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AN AUCTION SALE.

BY MISS C.M. SEDGWICK

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Did you ever attend an auction, my dear friend? a domestic auction – if that word domestic (of happiest associations) does not in this combination imply a contradiction in terms. I mean a sale of household furniture, held in a deserted home. I have lately been betrayed into an expenditure of time at two of these places, the only irretrievable loss—for the money made or lost, as bargains are made or missed—is a small matter. You may, it is true, gain experience, but that is, alas! the stern light, of improbable use to yourself, and who will lay his course by it? Who will take it from you as a gift?

However, my auction mornings were not all lost to me. _____ was my companion, and she coins into gold the hours passed with her, and stamps them with her own impression. Gold! They become imperishable treasures for memory. You do not know her. She is generous of every thing, even of time, of which other wise and good people are niggardly from principle. She makes existence so heavenly, that she loses all sense of mortality and finiteness. There is no rude appalling interruption of life before her. She lives here, as she will live in heaven, simply because she will live there as she does here – doing her Father's business – Showering her love and kindness upon just and unjust. Her unconsciousness of time—I can call it nothing else – is sometimes to be dreaded by those who, like myself, are of a less heavenly temperament. If I have half a dozen visits to pay I go last to her, or the rest would be forgotten. I avoid a seat next to her the latter part of the evening, lest I should forget there is a time to go. If I have any mortal care not to be evaded, I shun her as I would a Lethean draught. In short, there are times when she, a central source of social life and warmth, must be avoided by those who have not like her wings to spread and fly over the materialities of life. I say this feelingly, at this moment, my dear friend, having been beguiled into going to auction with her just before May-day, and May-day moving—that day of domestic desecration, discomfort, chaotic uproar, and household dissection—a day to convert the most spiritual Mary into a Martha. By the way, I fancy they had no moving-days in those good old cities of Judea. Certainly here, the Marthas are at a premium.

Our first auction was at a peremptory sale of "splendid furniture" – peremptory, because a wealthy proprietor chose to get rid of it even at a loss. It was at the court end of our great city, in a superb mansion, and it being well known that its possessor had selected it without any plebian reference to expense, and that some of it had been designed by the artistic taste of the lady of the mansion, purchasers of a more fashionable potential order than usual were attracted. Bargains were not expected, and, therefore, pawn-brokers, those "obscene birds of prey," did not darken the doors. I observed a few of those unfortunate ladies who brood over every auction—who, I presume, go to these

marts “as amateurs,” as a certain man confessed he went to a hanging, who take the conspicuous places, and occupy from the beginning to the end of the sale, the easiest seats, having nothing worse or better to do, there or anywhere, than to kill time—time that so soon dies a natural death.

Some were there to snatch a lucky change of possessing elegancies not to be compassed at their regular price, and others there were, leeches full to plethora of worldly goods, calling for more and more, whose brows are ploughed and their hearts eaten out with sordid cares. Oh, my countrywomen, is life, so full of import and so brief, to be thus thrown away? Can none of its pursuits with their plenitude of knowledge and happiness win you? Have you no fellow creature in ignorance to be instructed? None fallen to be rescued—none in sickness or sorrow to be tended?

The sale began. I do not know precisely what my friend’s objects were. I think she had a general and rather indistinct purpose to buy anything that tempted her taste and was within the circle of her means. She has a refined taste, which, if not a creator of wants is rather suggestive of them, so that noting within this richly furnished house was quite out of the field of her vision, quite beyond her possible possession. For myself though I earnestly desired that neither wood nor stone consecrated by the use of the late generous tenants of the mansion should be profaned by unworthy hands, I had no selfish purpose beyond the possession of one of three chairs of such construction that any one of them might have given ease to a monarch on his throne, so that he might with this

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luxurious appliance have slept almost as well as the “wet sea-boy in the cradle of the rude imperious surge.” These “sleepy hollows” would have been far beyond by hopes at the warehouse. Their carved rose-wood and tapestry covering I was not ambitious of, but the backs, sides, and arms so deliciously stuffed, I did covet. Their forms so skillfully turned and adjusted that I could fancy every bone, muscle, and even nerve of the nervous friend for whom I designed the gift, reposing and wrapped in Elysium on their soft cushions. Their could not be purchasers for all three of them. I should certainly get one – perhaps two! and then I might be munificent and self-indulgent too. How unqualified, how sure, my dear friend is one’s generosity of possible possessions! The auctioneer soon finished his kitchen sales, for there were few competitors for the mean mere necessities of life. The drawing rooms were crowded, and eager eyes bent on the man of power. As curtains, chairs and sofas passed under his hammer, my friend and I exchanged glances. She now and then timidly bid. Even I ventured upon a few articles; soared to them, but with a fluttering wing. They soon went far beyond my flight. The chairs were yet in perspective. In the meantime we were verging to a piano. “Do you think of bidding on the piano?” asked my friend. My reply “stuck i’ the throat.” I certainly did think of it – anxiously. I confessed I had been long looking for a piano, hoping to get one of the very best kind, but far from the highest price. This, I knew was made by Chickering, had been little used and had been tested by good musicians; it had striking beauty, a quality to be valued, though of as subordinate importance to the musical construction as a woman’s face to her

soul. I saw by some eager eyes bent on it, and by disparaging whispers about it that I should have formidable competitors. My heart beat as bid after bid carried it up, and it was soon struck off at a price beyond me. Then there was a little cabinet in the field – artistically carved, after an exquisite design of the proprietor, made for a coroner and that would just fit an empty corner that now seemed to me an aching void. Surely no one could desire to possess it so earnestly as I did, but alas! if they desired less, they bid more and away went the cabinet. Then there were some girandoles – sufficiently elegant for any townhouse, and modest enough for the country. My imagination at once lighted their pretty circlet of candles on a certain country tea-table. But they have gone to send their beams upon a stranger’s walls! In the meantime sofas, tables, curtains, carpets, &c. &c. passed before my friend’s consideration and beyond it. Of some things, she was not sure she knew the actual value. (_____ has a vein of prudence -- though it requires something like a prismatic director to show it.) Others were not quite the thing, and there were a few that she was not certain she wanted; so all were knocked down to other bids. At last one of my chairs was set up – mine! Voices rose from every part of the house. I did not even bid for it. “Never mind,” whispered my dear friend); (_____ has an antidote for every evil in life, be it great or small,) “the next will suit you better.” After waiting another mortal hour, the second was in the field, and so eager was the contest for it that one might have fancied the philosopher’s stone was imbedded within it. It soon went far beyond my grasp. At last, toward the close of the sale came, to my deferred hope, the last. But now to the wearied wretches who had been standing for hours, a chair was a vision of heavenly rest. “Show it—lift it up,” cried the auctioneer, and its soft cushioned sides were elevated to meet every eye. “You *all* want this!” he exclaimed, exultingly. He augured rightly; all did seem to want it, and one lucky mortal soon obtained it. “Let us go away now,” said I to my friend. She smiled pitifully upon the blank disappointment too evident and said, “Oh no, we must wait for the sweetmeat jars;” they are coming to them now. There were a lot of jars, that before the auction began we had agreed to buy (in some parenthesis of our purchases,) and divide between us. Before they were set up, my friend and I got separated by a half a dozen people. The jars were started at a reasonable price; I bid upon them. Some competitor seemed determined to have them—but her resolution was not stouter than mine. She as well as myself, had learned the skill by a nod, so the rival bids were only known by the announcement, “Eighteen cents is bid, ladies, nineteen—nineteen each---twenty—twenty-two –three, twen-three—twenty-four” – I turned my eye to the jars; “did they cost so much?” vaguely passed through my mind, but this was my last chance for anything and the jars I would have; so on it went, “twenty-five—six—twenty-six each—twenty-seven—going at twenty-seven—at twenty-seven going—twenty-eight! – twenty-eight! –going- gone! – The jars were mine. The auctioneer smiled. ‘Thank you ladies—a brave bid for the sweetmeat jars!’ I felt myself the object of the rather contemptuous observation of my neighbors, and of the rather thrilling suppressed laugh that was passing round. But imagine my consternation when my friend making her way to me said, in a voice of the most piteous deprecation: “My dear! that was my bid!” Never were two women more chop fallen. We left the auction together, after four hours lost there, and thus ended our first and last bargain aspiration of which the sweetmeat jars will long remain a ludicrous monument.

I have not done. This was not our last appearance on an auction theatre. We inverted the usual order, and went from comedy to tragedy. You know our friend Mrs. _____, is still languishing with an illness in a distant land. Her house is let, and as her furniture could not be otherwise conveniently disposed of, Mr. _____ decided to have it sold by auction. So my friend, (the joint proprietor of the sweetmeat jars,) being the earthly providence of all those she loves, determined to prevent, as far as she could, the sacrifice of her absent friend's possessions. I readily consented to meet her, and early on the morning of the auction, we met at that threshold which our beloved friend's last footsteps had sanctified. The odious red flag was flying over it. Very fitting that it should be of the piratical color! Strange and common faces were thronging in that home which beauty had graced, and cultivation, refinement, and elegance had embellished, and affection had sanctified. More than one pale form rose to our imaginations, and brimmed our eyes with tears. We were unfit members of the motley congregation about us, and both of us would gladly have run away from the sound of feet careering up and down our friend's house and desecrating the places that she and her's had made sacred to us, but our sentiment was to be turned to account, and not lost in air.

The sale began. "Oh, hear them!" whispered my friend, they are bidding off that China for nothing!" and visions of her friend's hospitable table came swimming before her. "Let us bid upon it," she continued eagerly, "and then either of us can take it!" And thus by a competition, unexampled at an auction I believe, we ran it up, till a late dawning of prudence, forbade our going further, and the China, to me an utter superfluity, was knocked down to my bid. Our absent friends as you know, are rather remarkable for their utter incapacity to possess anything that is not costly. Not from ostentation—heaven knows, there were never people farther from that vulgar vice—but refinement and taste are an essential part of their composition. The art and taste of the artisan must be required, and one cannot buy Meak's rosewood chairs for the price of a flag-bottomed one from a Yankee factory; and French China, of rare dye, is far more costly than "blue Liverpool." My friend and I are, as you know, prudent women, but our feelings stimulated by the occasion were destined to empty our purses that day. The amount of my purchases was, comparatively and small[1], if I bought champagne glasses with little prospect of ever using them, "fine cut lemonades" for a friend, who would look upon them as only suited for the orgies of the demon of dyspepsia, I was consoled by the thought that they would minister to pleasant memories, and were certainly saved from falling to the level of other household goods in the hands of those who had never seen them mantling with the hospitalities of our dear friends. For _____, you should know the irrepressible warmth of her friendships, as well as the unbounded liberality of her disposition, to understand the seeming recklessness with which she bought on the right hand with the left, to save her friend's property from sacrifice or vulgar possession. I was standing near a chair, which an old harpy, with a regular auction aspect, was examining. I was sure, by a certain devouring expression of her eye, that she meant to buy it, though turning the end of her nose up, and the corners of her mouth down, she called the attention of other birds of prey, who were hovering over it, to some darns on the chintz cover. A few moments after my friend came to examine it, and the darns catching her eye she bent over them as if she would have kissed them as holy relics, and pointing them

out to me said, “her own dear darns! – I must have this chair!” and chair, as curtain, beds, and chairs had done it before, passed into her possession. Where they are to be bestowed in a house already thoroughly furnished, I know not, but I am sure some mark, like the dear friend’s darn, will be upon them all, and they will remain as sacred in her eyes as were the holy vessels of the Temple to the ancient Jews.

“The heart’s the gold for a’ man.” If the trading of the “money changers” profaned the holy place, that of my friend sanctified one auction sale.