

Ann Appleby's Parlor

Her Sacrifice Brought Its Reward

By CLARISSA MACKIE

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The minister passed a long white hand over his bald head and looked unappetizingly around the darkened interior of Miss Appleby's parlor.

The minister shifted his feet uneasily and looked across the room at Miss Appleby's face, which seemed merely a confused blur in the gloom. He was a youngish man, rather diffident in manner, but brave to recklessness in dealing with the problems offered by the stiff-necked, rock-bound members of his little flock. Then he said:

"Nevertheless I must adhere to my opinion that it is your duty to offer a home to your cousin. Suppose you had lost your house and its contents by fire and the exposure to weather had brought on an attack of rheumatism which rendered you helpless. Would you want to be cared for by kind neighbors when a relative—by the grace of God, Miss Appleby—had a roof over her head?"

"Mr. James, you know my house is filled up with summer boarders," said Ann Appleby in a strained voice.

"Every room?"

"Yes," said Ann firmly. "I'm sleeping in the clothespress myself."

"Can't you let one of your boarders go?"

"I can't spare the money."

"Then let your cousin have this room—you do not use it," ventured Mr. James boldly.

For a moment there was a silence fraught with horror; then Ann spoke:

"This room! Why, this is my parlor!"

The minister arose, and his tall form loomed near the ceiling of the room.

"It's not your parlor, Miss Appleby; it's God's parlor, and it is his command that you prepare it for the occupancy of his handmaid, Sarah Drew. I am going to your cousin now. Shall I tell her you have prepared a room for her and that she will be welcome?"

"Yes," said Ann Appleby grimly.

The rest of the afternoon Miss Appleby moved slowly about the parlor with reluctant feet, pushing the furniture into stiff rows against the walls, unfolding one slippery sofa into a springy couch, fresh with linen from some secret closet where homespun treasures were hidden in lavender.

Perhaps to one could quite estimate the mental anguish that was occasioned by these preparations. It was a violation of Ann's most sacred traditions that the Appleby house should be without a best room. About this gloomy apartment were centered recollections of joy and grief. Weddings and funerals and the minister's presence at a ceremonial tea were the only events that marked the opening of the parlor. The boarders had the use of the large sitting room across the hall, and even as a brief respite from the stress of a long day's work Ann would not have dreamed of withdrawing into the parlor's prim seclusion.

And now it must be opened for the coming of Sarah Drew! It was to be used as a sleeping room by an invalid. Sarah's medicine bottles would cumber the mantelpiece, and lint from the bedclothes would flock the cherished carpet. But Ann found a certain savage pleasure in leaving untouched the pictures and ornaments about the room. Sarah Drew might occupy this room, but she would always uncomfortably feel that she was violating the almost sacred precincts of her cousin's home. It must always be a parlor, and the occupant would be proportionately uncomfortable, for Little River folk were not given to desecrating family altars.

When Sarah Drew hobbled into the room the next day her mild eyes opened wide with amazement.

"You're never going to put me in here, Ann!" she gasped.

"Why not?" queried Ann grimly, twitching the washstand well into view and rattling the china bowl and pitcher. "I guess you'll find everything pretty comfortable, Sarah. If you don't just ring this here bell and Emeline will wait on you."

"But I can't sleep here, Ann," quavered her cousin tremulously. "Why, it's your best room. I never slept in anybody's best room."

"No more did I," returned Ann rather tartly. "But 'tisn't my room. Mr. James says it belongs to the Lord, so you see it's no credit to me that you're occupying it."

"Oh, did Mr. James say that before you would invite me? I'm dreadful sorry, Ann. I wish I didn't have to come; but, you see, the house burned all down, and I didn't have a stick left, and so I came to Little River to stay with Mrs. Bell, and now all the children are down with the measles, and there wasn't any place to go but here. I ain't got nothing till I collect my insurance money. I'll pay you!"

Ann pushed her into a chair and removed the straight brimmed hat that settled unbecomingly over Sarah's nose.

"Pay nothing!" she snorted contemptuously. "If I seem ungracious, Sarah Drew, you can lay it all to the fact that I never could find the canceled mortgage note on the place after Uncle Abel died. Your place was left free and clear, and I've had to pay Josiah Leeds \$150 dollars a year interest, and I'm wore to skin and bone taking a pack of city people to board."

Now, don't say a word. I'll send Emeline with your supper, and afterwards, when all these critters is fed, I'll come and set with you."

In the parlor, where the late afternoon sunshine poured through the unshuttered windows, Sarah Drew sat in wretched silence, while Emeline padded heavily to and fro, arranging a supper on the marble topped table. She moved the glass bell and the shell basket to one end of the table and spread a damask cloth. On it she placed a dish of creamed toast, fresh berries from the garden, ginger cookies and tea.

When Emeline had departed Sarah came to the table and tried to eat, but the coldness of the marble seemed to strike through the damask cloth and chill her rheumatic limbs to the bone. As she sipped the tea from one of Ann Appleby's fine china cups her mild eyes evaded the glances of the stern visaged family portraits. To her nervously wrought fancy these ancestors glowered in angry disapproval of one who was thus shattering all the Appleby traditions at one stroke.

"We wouldn't eat in the parlor," they seemed to mutter at her.

"I don't want to eat here, and I know I can't sleep here!" cried Sarah Drew desperately, pushing her teacup violently away from her. And then she gasped in terror, for the cup struck forcibly against the glass bell and above it over the edge of the table, where it fell crashing to the floor, bearing the delicate shell basket to utter ruin.

The noise brought Ann Appleby to the door. Her face grew white with anger as she understood what had happened, and the anger was not appeased at the sudden realization that this long cherished parlor had ceased to be. The sofa bed and the washstand with its toilet articles, the dresser shoved awkwardly in a crowded corner—all of these things intruding on her fine carpet seemed to degrade the other furnishings to a lower level. It was not a parlor; it was not a bedroom. To Ann Appleby's orderly mind it was chaos.

"What is the matter?" asked Ann in a strange voice.

Sarah Drew turned a frightened face toward her cousin and then shrank into a dejected heap over the disordered table. Some of the cream from the toast slopped over and dripped to the carpet, making a little white pool in the heart of a great blue rose.

"I can't eat in a parlor!" wailed Sarah mournfully. "I never did such a thing, and I know I shall never have a bite of sleep here! I feel like I was putting you out, Ann. If I didn't have to see all your best things—and I've broken your shell basket, Ann!"

"I see it," said Ann dully.

"When I get my insurance money I can pay you back again, only I don't believe you can get another shell basket like that. I know you was choice of it," mourned Sarah, stabbing herself with these pointed facts.

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