MATILDA'S GOOD IMPRESSION

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BY HARRIET LUMMIS SMITH

"MATILDA!"

The girl turned to see her mother standing on the steps with a yellow envelope in her hand. Her fresh color, which was the only remnant of her girlish prettiness, had disappeared, and she was very pale. Matilda was beside her in a twinkling, breathless and big-eyed. "Oh, what is it, mother? Bad news?"

"I hardly know whether to call it bad news or not," said Mrs. Ellicott, with a little ripple of laughter, although the tears started to her eyes. "Your Great-Uncle John is coming."

Matilda dropped the hoe, with which she had been working among the tomato-plants, and sat down on the steps. She had heard about her Great-Uncle John ever since she could remember. She knew that he had brought up her father, and when he was twenty-one had given him his choice between letting books alone and going into business, or relinquishing all expectation of becoming his heir. It had not taken Matilda's father long to decide, and a number of people, Uncle John among them, thought his choice showed a lamentable lack of good sense. In the occasional letters that had come from him since Matilda was old enough to understand their import, he had always taken the ground that his nephew, working for a small salary in a little village academy, had made a failure of life.

"I suppose I ought not to feel as I do," sighed Matilda's mother, in self-reproachful accents, "but I dread his coming, dear. Your Uncle John is one of the people who think it a crime to be poor. I can't bear to have him looking down on father."

A hot resentment at the very suggestion rose in Matilda's heart and burned in her cheeks. "How long is he going to stay?" she demanded, clutching at the hoe-handle as if it had been a weapon of some sort.

"The telegram says a day or two," answered Mrs. Ellicott, referring to the yellow slip of paper in her hand, "and he will be here Thursday."

"Thursday! Oh, that's some days off! We must put our best foot forward, that's all." Matilda's forebodings vanished in a sudden rush of resolution. "We can fix things up so they'll pass for a day or two. My chickens are fine for eating now, and the garden is doing beautifully. It's the spare room that's the problem."

Ten minutes later, as she stood in the guest-room, a room seldom unoccupied, for the Ellicotts' hospitality was not proportioned to their bank-account, the problem seemed still more difficult of solution. Ordinarily, when family friends were expected, Matilda dusted the battered furniture and turned the rug so that the most worn portion would be covered by the bed—all with a light heart. But now she looked about her through the disapproving spectacles of Uncle John, and the result was not reassuring.

"He'll get such a bad impression at the start, with everything worn and shabby, looking as if it needed paint." Matilda stopped abruptly. Suddenly she recalled advertising pictures she had seen representing ladies in artistic gowns renovating dilapidated furniture, and her eyes lighted with eager resolution.

Five minutes later her brother John, Matilda's faithful henchman, was hurrying to the nearest hardware store. In half an hour the experiment was under way. The first results were not what Matilda had expected, and she called in John for suggestions.

"I guess maybe you ought to sandpaper it first," said John. "That's the way Harvey did when he painted his boat."

Matilda looked about the room and compressed her lips. Then she said shortly, "Run to the store and get some sandpaper. A good lot of it. We've got to be quick if we're going to make a good impression on Uncle John."

When Matilda went down to supper that night she looked tired and anxious. She had begun to lose faith in the advertising ladies, wielding their brushes without detriment to their dainty gowns. She had spotted her dress and spattered the floor, and had sent John out twice for turpentine to repair damages. Moreover, the original complexion of the furniture showed darkly through the white coating she had given it, as if determined to assert itself, and the spots and scars seemed more in evidence than ever.

"No wonder you can't cover up the hard knocks of twenty years in one day," her mother comforted her. "It will look better after another coat."

"I shouldn't wonder if it took twenty coats, one for each year," said Matilda, gloomily. "I wouldn't care if you didn't have to wait for one to dry before you put on the next; my time is so short."

Her forebodings were not altogether realized, however. By the third coat the furniture began to look really white, and after the fifth was applied the family held a jubilee.

"It looks beautifully clean and fresh," Mrs. Ellicott declared, "and you've got it on so smoothly, deary, that at first glance it would pass for new. I'm sure I should never know the old rocking-chair, would you, father?"

"I shouldn't recognize a thing in the room," said Matilda's father, admiringly. "Matilda is a fairy, with a paint-brush wand."

Time was really short now, but the rest of Matilda's preparations could be quickly made. From her own room she brought out all the pretty trifles which girlish ingenuity and good taste had evolved from little or nothing. When the transfer was complete, Matilda's room was as bare as a garret, while the spare room had so blossomed out that the most critical of bachelor great-uncles would have been obliged to look twice before finding fault.

As a rule, Matilda had a horror of borrowing, but in this case she did not scruple to ask the doctor's wife to lend her a rug for the front hall. And the doctor's wife, who knew the whole story, patted the small hands which had worked so faithfully, and insisted on adding a table-cover and a jardinière for the palm.

All the family treasures were brought out and put on display. The children went about, asking questions and admiring everything, as if they were attending some sort of exhibition. Matilda had explained to them that they must be careful not to move the cushions that covered the worn places of the parlor furniture, and to be sure that the footstool was left standing over the hole in the rug.

Uncle John arrived in the middle of the afternoon, and found his nephew's family arrayed in their best. It was evident that he was agreeably surprised by the appearance of things. When Matilda took him to his room, she flattered herself that he looked about him with an air of distinct approval. The girl's heart sang happily. There was fried chicken for supper, and the green corn and tomatoes from the garden could not be beaten anywhere. If Uncle John supposed that her father was a

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failure or that his family wanted anybody's pity, he should see!

Supper was a cheery meal. Matilda's father was in the best of spirits. He recalled one event after another of his boyhood, and Uncle John joined in his laughter over the reminiscences. But the old man's attention was not riveted on his nephew's chat. His sharp eyes rested now on the little woman behind the coffee urn, now on the tall girl across the table, whose deferential manner had in it a touch of defiance which amused, and, to tell the truth, rather pleased him, now on the freckled face of John, and more briefly on the well-mannered younger children with their air of contentment and happiness. Uncle John was thinking.

It was not till they were leaving the dining-room for the front porch that Matilda caught sight of something which drove the color from her cheeks, and then brought the blood crowding back in a flaming flood that scorched like fire. As Uncle John stood aside to let Mrs. Ellicott precede him, his back was toward Matilda, and it presented a most remarkable appearance. His well-fitting suit of black was specked with blotches of white, suggesting some new variety of trout. The children stared, fascinated. Only Matilda understood.

A moment later a crestfallen girl walked out on the front porch. "Uncle John," she said, in a stifled voice, "if you wouldn't mind putting on a suit of father's for a little while —"

"A suit of your father's!" cried Uncle John. He looked at his tall, slender nephew, and then down at his own generous proportions. "What does the girl mean?" he inquired, in a voice of mild bewilderment.

"It was that old rocking-chair!" cried Matilda, struggling with her tears. "I had to put on so much paint to get the cane part white that it didn't dry as quickly as the rest. You're all over spots of white, Uncle John, but I can get it off with turpentine if you'll let me have it right away. It's lots harder if it dries."

Later, when the change had been effected, and she worked over the spotted suit in the quiet of her own room, the breeze brought to her ears the sound of her father's boyish laughter. Matilda was glad some one could laugh over the occurrence, although the tears were rolling down her own flushed cheeks. A step sounded in the hall, and paused at the open door. Matilda did not look up.

"Please go away, John!" Matilda implored. She could not bear that any one should see her cry.

There was no indication that John was beating a retreat. Matilda looked up. Uncle John stood in the doorway, looking critically about the bare little room, stripped of all but the mere necessities. Then he looked at Matilda's tear-wet eyes.

"Look here," said Uncle John. "That's not worth crying about."

"I'm not crying about *that!*" returned Matilda, defiantly.

There was another pause. "Paint was pretty fresh," said Uncle John, thrusting his hands into the pockets of his nephew's dressing-gown.

"Yes, it was," answered Matilda. "I painted it after we heard you were coming."

"*You* painted it!" Apparently Uncle John was about to express surprise, but thought better of it. After a moment he asked, casually, "Why were you in such a hurry?"

Matilda laid down her work and turned toward him. The eyes lifted to his were like those Uncle John had seen in a boy's face twenty-five years before.

"Uncle John," Matilda began, "you think father's a failure because he hasn't made money. You're mistaken."

Her great-uncle leaned against the wall, as if to listen more comfortably. He showed no disposition to speak, which was fortunate, as Matilda was not in the mood to brook interruption.

"He's taught in this little school ever since I can remember," Matilda went on. "He's

waked up lots of young people, girls that were silly and lazy and boys that thought it smart to be dissipated. He's made them ambitious to amount to something. Hardly a week goes by that he doesn't get a letter from some of his old pupils, saying that he first opened their eyes to what life meant."

Uncle John cleared his throat.

"He wasn't much more than a boy when he came here," Matilda went on. "He knows and loves everybody and everybody knows and loves him. They send for him when people are going to die, and they name their babies after him. Lawyer Bell says father is all the time reducing his income patching up quarrels. And as far as we're concerned," said Matilda, explosively, "we're just the happiest family that ever lived!"

"Yes, but about that paint?"

"I'm coming to that," Matilda answered. "I knew that you wouldn't understand about these things. You'd look at the house to see if father had succeeded, and if it looked worn and shabby you'd make up your mind that he was a failure. The furniture in the spare room was so battered that I thought I'd better paint it. But it was such a short time that it didn't quite get dry. The rug in the front hall is borrowed, and so is the jardinière, and the pillows on the divan in the parlor are fixed so as not to show the holes in the upholstery."

Uncle John looked at the black suit. "Aren't you afraid that the paint will get too dry?" he inquired.

"Yes, I'm afraid it will. Thank you for reminding me." Matilda went to work with a will, and Uncle John walked off, whistling.

The next day's supper was an early meal, for Uncle John was to take the seven-thirty train. He had said very little to Matilda since their encounter of the evening before, and she was sure that she had mortally offended him, although her conscience acquitted her of doing more than telling him the truth. Consequently she was quite unprepared to hear him say abruptly:

"Nephew John, I have been talking with your wife about this girl of yours, and she confirms my idea that she has ability, is clever with the brush, in short."

Uncle John paused with a grim smile, and then continued, "I imagine she would profit a little, however, by a course in the Fine Arts Academy. If she thinks best to accept my offer, I shall consider it a privilege to meet her expenses."

For once Matilda was dumb, but her father accepted this good fortune as he had accepted all the events of his life, good or ill, with sweet and simple dignity.

"I'm glad to have you say that, Uncle John," he said, "for I am ambitious for my daughter. I am sure she has ability. She will do you credit."

"If she does, she won't be the first of the family to do it," said Uncle John. He put his hand on his nephew's shoulder and let it rest there heavily. "I hope," he said, "I may live to be as proud of Matilda as I am of her father."

And in that crowning moment, when all her dreams seemed coming true and the way was open to her heart's desire, Matilda had room for but one thought. All else was swallowed up in the joy of knowing that her father was vindicated, his success recognized.