

TREASURES I HAVE KNOWN

by

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* The author wishes to acknowledge Joel Falgui, who suggested the character of The White Elephant, and her reference to Household Antiques and Heirlooms by Felice Sta. Maria, published by GCF Books in 1983. The ceramic elephant, from which the descriptions of the character are based on, and the Silver Dog are pictured there.

When I was a small mouse, my family moved about constantly. We lived in one rundown shelter after another. But I had seen elegant homes in pictures and on television, and I always longed to live in one once I was old enough to be on my own. And, some months ago, it seemed my dream was about to come true.

I had discovered a wonderful old house. It had a sign saying *Old Treasures*. That sounded promising. I found a side window that had lost some of its *capiz* panes. I climbed through one hole, gnawed through the screen and I was in!

I could see by the glow of the streetlights that it was a beautiful place, filled with carved furniture, paintings, and all kinds of curios. I was so eager to settle in that I didn't bother to look for the kitchen first. I found the perfect home – a drawer at the bottom of a tall cabinet without doors. The drawer knob had been lost, leaving a hole just the right size for me to squeeze through. Despite a huge curving leather object inside, it was roomy. I couldn't wait to furnish it. I poked my head out the hole, ready to search for treasure.

"Good choice of home," a deep voice said. "Miss Gracia, the storekeeper, only uses that cabinet for display since it's so battered and has no doors. And she never opens that drawer."

I looked about to see who was speaking. Beside the cabinet was a large old rocking horse seemingly smiling at me. "You can speak?" I squeaked. There had been toys in my last home – ugly plastic things – but none of them spoke.

"Anything that has an animal or human form and has been made with love and care has a soul," the Rocking Horse said.

"Welcome," clucked a green glass chicken-shaped container above me. "You've just got to be careful Miss Gracia doesn't see you. She likes the store to be clean."

"I'm not dirty," I protested, giving my pale gray fur a furtive lick just to be sure. "I plan to keep a neat home myself. Where's the kitchen? I have to stock up."

A little Buddha and all the children on his lap began to laugh. "The kitchen's upstairs, where Miss Gracia lives. She keeps the rooms there locked at night."

"Try the garbage can in the back," a kindly cherub on the wall suggested. A white ceramic elephant planter snorted, expressing my own feelings. Live on garbage? I climbed out of the drawer.

"Are you leaving already?" the sharp-eyed eagle atop a *baston* asked.

"Oh, stay!" begged a Kewpie doll. A silver dog with a pineapple on his head and a pail in his mouth whimpered. "He'd beg you to stay, only he can't speak with that pail in his mouth," a graceful silver lady holding a dish explained.

"Let him go if he wants to," the White Elephant blared. "Why would he want to stay here? We're no use to him."

"Why do you want to leave?" the Kewpie asked.

I explained, "I want an easier life."

"An easy life is a dull life," the Eagle on the *Baston* said. "I had to support a Spanish official for years. It wasn't easy but it was worthwhile because I got to travel."

"We served our owners well in our time, too, the Silver Dog and I," said the Lady with a Dish. "Silly as he looks, he's been useful – a hundred years ago he held toothpicks in his pail."

"That's all anyone should hope for – to be worth one's salt," the Glass Chicken Container stated.

"Speak for yourself," the White Elephant retorted. "All you ever held was salt. I had to hold heavy pots of plants for my owners for years. Even now, Miss Gracia uses me to display Chinese jars. Why couldn't that dish on my back have broken off, instead of a piece of my foot?"

I noticed the elephant's patched-up rear foot. "Nobody will buy him because of that," the Buddha's children giggled.

"It's what I still dream of," the Rocking Horse said quietly. "I have never yet fulfilled the purpose I was created for."

I was about to ask what he meant when I heard a door creaking open upstairs. I scrambled back into my drawer, curling into the curve of the leather object inside for a nap.

I grew thin in my new home, living on thrifty Miss Gracia's few scraps. I had to keep very still all day. If I grew restless and decided to roam, I had to be careful. My new friends served as my lookouts, and I would hide or freeze once Miss Gracia looked up or a customer entered. Once I huddled in the Silver Dog's pail for an hour. Other times I posed as a paperweight, part of an ornament or a perfume bottle stopper. Once my head got stuck in a perfume bottle and what a time I had pulling it out! This was not the easy life I had dreamed of.

I stayed because of the stories. My new friends all had wonderful stories to tell. I wrote them down on scraps of paper with the end of a pencil I'd found in a desk. I had a writing table I'd made from a coaster and some corks I'd discovered in an old kitchen cabinet. A spool from the drawer of an antique sewing machine was my seat.

The Lady with the Dish told me of grand parties she and the Silver Dog had served at in the days when women wore Maria Clara dresses.

The Cherub told me of miracles he had witnessed in the days when he had adorned a chapel.

The Eagle told me how his owner had once used him to fight off a band of thieves.

The White Elephant told me how naughty children had cracked him by riding on him when their parents' backs were turned.

But the story that interested me most was the Rocking Horse's.

Years ago, a woodcarver was asked by an American to make horses for a carousel. The first one he created was too small. The American suggested he make it a rocking horse instead and make bigger horses for the carousel. The woodcarver did as the American suggested. And so the first horse meant for the carousel became our Rocking Horse.

Other horses were made and painted in beautiful colors, then went to prance around with children on their backs. But no children ever rode on the Rocking Horse. Though the woodcarver and his wife kept him, hoping their children would ride him one day, they never had children. So the woodcarver simply displayed the Rocking Horse as a sample of his work. When he died, a very old man, the Rocking Horse was sold to the antique shop.

Miss Gracia's brother and his wife owned it then. They had a son, Rafael, whom they hoped would run the shop one day.

They were a happy family. As soon as they closed the shop at night, Mr. Gracia played lively tunes on a violin. Rafael and his mother would dance around. Mr. Gracia even taught his son to play a little. He had once dreamed of being a famous musician, but he was not talented enough. So he opened the antique shop instead. He didn't make much money, but he and his family were very happy.

Sadly, he and his wife died in an accident. Rafael's aunt came to take care of him and the store. She did not care for music and did not understand his interest in it. She was afraid he would break the violin, which was a family heirloom. So she hid it in the drawer where I now lived. She no longer allowed him to touch anything in the shop, so he couldn't find it.

Rafael went about with a sad face. The Rocking Horse felt sure playing music would help him feel better. One afternoon, when Miss Gracia was overseeing deliverymen outside, the Rocking Horse called to the boy, sitting behind the counter. "Rafael."

Rafael stood up to see who had spoken. "It is I, the Old Rocking Horse."

Rafael was delighted to hear him speak. He used to try to imagine what the antique animal and human figures would say if they could speak. "What is it?" he asked, approaching the horse.

"Look in the drawer."

Forgetting his aunt's rules, Rafael pulled it open. He gasped with delight when he saw the leather case that held the violin. He took out the instrument and embraced it.

"Tonight, slip down while your aunt sleeps," said the Rocking Horse, "and play softly."

Night after night, Rafael went down to play the violin, the Old Rocking Horse encouraging him. He could not learn everything on his own, but his music teacher at school agreed to help him, finding he had natural talent.

After some years of study and practice, he got a scholarship for a faraway high school for the arts and went away. Now and then the Rocking Horse heard of him through Miss Gracia's conversations with friends. In the years that followed he did well in school, went to a music college, won contests, and played all over the world. Now he was already old enough to run the store. Still, he had not returned.

But the Rocking Horse waited, wishing to see him again. He would let no one buy him, whispering to interested customers that he was useless, bulky and expensive, and would not be appreciated by their children. They thought it was their own minds speaking, and did not buy him.

The White Elephant kept telling him to forget about Rafael. "He'll never come back. He hardly remembers his parents anymore. He rarely calls Miss Gracia. He's sure to forget his friends too, now that he's famous."

But the Rocking Horse stayed. Antiques came and went, but he did not leave. Miss Gracia grew older and grayer. She heard from Rafael less and less. Still, the Rocking Horse stayed, awaiting Rafael's return.

One day, Miss Gracia went to the hospital and did not come back. We learned from some women who came to clean the house that Miss Gracia had died. "Surely he will take over the store now," the Glass Chicken said.

But nobody knew where to find Rafael. Sadly, I began to pack my things – the buttons I used for plates, the stamps I had stuck to the wall, the stories I had written down. I would miss my friends badly. But I would starve if I remained in this empty home.

Suddenly, the telephone rang. "Who could that be?" shrieked the White Elephant.

The Rocking Horse looked hopeful.

"It couldn't be. He never calls," snorted the Elephant. "Even if it is him, there's nobody to answer the phone."

The Rocking Horse caught my eye.

I didn't really think it was Rafael. But how could I be sure unless I answered it? I dropped my bundle and scurried to the phone. I managed to lift the receiver. "Hello!" I screamed.

Silence. The White Elephant sniffed.

I started to lower the receiver...

And then –

"Auntie?" a young man's voice said.

Two days later, at sunset, a young man entered the store. He had traveled across the world for his aunt's funeral.

He looked about. He opened my drawer, begging my pardon, and took out his old violin. And, to everyone's surprise, he mounted the Rocking Horse and began playing a lively tune.

"I feel like a carousel horse!" the Rocking Horse cried, as Rafael rocked him to the rhythm of the song.

"Well, that was your dream, wasn't it, old friend?" Rafael smiled. "I haven't forgotten how you helped me achieve mine."

I settled back in my drawer to write the happy ending to the Rocking Horse's story, glad that I had played a part in bringing it about.