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Opening extract from
National Velvet

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Our story began over a century ago, when seventeen-year-old Egmont Harald Petersen found a coin in the street.

He was on his way to buy a flyswatter, a small hand-operated printing machine that he then set up in his tiny apartment.

The coin brought him such good luck that today Egmont has offices in over 30 countries around the world. And that lucky coin is still kept at the company's head offices in Denmark.



CHAPTER I

Uneathly humps of land curved into the darkening sky like the backs of browsing pigs, like the rumps of elephants. At night when the stars rose over them they looked like a starlit herd of divine pigs. The villagers called them Hullocks.

The valleys were full of soft and windblown vegetation. The sea rolled at the foot of all as though God had brought his herd down to water.

The Hullocks were blackening as Velvet cantered down the chalk road to the village. She ran on her own slender legs, making horse-noises and chirrups and occasionally striking her thigh with a switch, holding at the same time something very small before her as she ran. The light on the chalk road was the last thing to gleam and die. The flints slipped and flashed under her feet. Her cotton dress and her cottony hair blew out, and her lips were parted for breath in a sweet metallic smile. She had the look of a sapling-Dante as she ran through the darkness downhill.

At the entrance to the village the sea was pounding up the sewer with a spring gale behind it. She passed to the third cottage, stopped at the door, opened it, let a gush of light on to the pavement, closed it and carried her tender object inside.

Edwina, Malvolia and Meredith sat in their father's Mr Brown's sitting-room just before supper time. It was dark outside and hot inside, and outside in the darkness the Hullocks went up in great hoops above the village. There was an oil stove in the corner of the sitting-room and lesson books on the table. The ceiling was low and sagged. An Albert lamp with a green glass shade lit the table. There was no electric light. Donald, the boy of four, was asleep upstairs.

Edwina, Malvolia and Meredith were all exactly alike, like golden greyhounds. Their golden hair was sleek, their fine faces like antelopes, their shoulders still and steady like Zulu women carrying water, and their bodies beneath the shoulders rippled when they moved. They were seventeen, sixteen and fifteen. Velvet was fourteen. Velvet had short pale hair, large, protruding teeth, a sweet smile and a mouthful of metal.

Mr Brown was swilling down the slaughter-house, as Mi Taylor was away for the day. The sound of the hose swished at the wooden partition which separated the slaughter-house from the sitting-room.

‘He went beautifully!’ said Velvet, and laying down a tiny paper horse on the table she wrenched at the gold band that bound her teeth back and laid it beside the horse.

‘Father’ll be in in a minute,’ said Edwina warningly.

‘It’s going in again directly I hear a sound,’ said Velvet and sitting down she swept the plate into her lap.

‘Look at him,’ she said lovingly, taking up the paper horse. ‘I must unsaddle him and rub him down.’ The heads were bent on the lesson books again and Velvet took a tiny bridle of cotton threads from the horse. Then going to a shell-box on the sideboard she brought it to the table.

‘It’s just supper,’ said Mally. ‘You’ll have to clear.’

Velvet opened the box and took out a stable rubber two inches square, a portion of her handkerchief hemmed round. Laying the little horse flat on the table she rubbed him with delicacy in circular motions, after having taken a paper saddle from his back.

The horse was a racer cut from the Bystander. He stood three inches high and had a raking neck and a keen, veined face. By dint of much rubbing the paper had given off a kind of coat, and now as Velvet rubbed there came a suède-like sheen on the horse’s paper body. He was dark, most carefully cut out, and pasted upon cardboard. The bridle was made by the fingers of a fairy, noseband, chinstrap and all, in black cotton.

‘He has a high action,’ said Velvet. ‘A lovely show canter, but a difficult trot. I didn’t jump him today as he needs to settle down.’

In the shell-box other horses lay.

‘There’s a marvellous picture of mares on the back of *The Times* today, but you can’t cut a single one clear. They’re all mixed up with the foals.’

‘I saw it,’ said Velvet. ‘I called at the Post Office. But it was no good.’

‘I called in too,’ said Mally. ‘They said in the Post Office that one of us looking at *The Times* was enough. We’d better take turns.’

‘Yes,’ said Velvet. ‘You can’t think how lovely it was galloping up there. It was nearly dark. He never put a foot wrong. Somehow you can trust a horse like that.’

‘It’s blood that counts,’ said Mally darkly.

‘I haven’t got the racing saddle cut right,’ went on Velvet. ‘I wish I could find a picture of one. I ride short when I ride this horse and with this saddle the knees come right off on to his shoulder.’

‘You need kneeflaps,’ said Edwina.

‘I suppose there’s not time,’ said Velvet, ‘to take the chestnut down for a stand in the pond? His hocks are still puffy.’

‘It’s not you to lay tonight,’ said Mally. ‘You’ve got ten minutes.’