

## The Missing Ring.

"DEAR me, Phebe, are you asleep?" said my mother, in a tone of exasperation. "Here's your father down sick with the rheumatism, Dick has cut his hand nearly off, the dressmaker's in the sitting-room with a dress to fit, and nobody to fit it to; there isn't a mouthful to eat in the house, and there's all his folks from Newburg coming to tea, and you go about as if you were dreaming, and the world wasn't upside down! This comes of your sitting up so late nights last week with Reuben Haddam. I shall go distracted!"

If I had been asleep, I was fairly aroused now, and rushing into the kitchen, I exerted myself to the utmost in trying to bring the world back to its feet again, and relieve the overburdened mind of my material relative. Dick's cut—a slight scratch on the wrist, nearly hidden from view by a coating of tears and maple sugar—was speedily dressed, and what consolation the sufferer needed in addition to the sugar was duly administered. I peeped into the bedroom, but found father quietly sleeping, and mother was furnishing the desired "somebody to fit to" to the deprived dress-maker; so I went into the pantry and busied myself for the next hour in preparing the wherewith to replenish the bare cupboards. I baked pies, fried doughnuts, made tarts, and baked a plum cake large enough to furnish an army of giants. The chimney roared as if it were in anticipation of Thanksgiving day, the kitchen was scented like an Indian spice garden, and the fire burned in a delighted, determined way, as if it had more than ordinary interest in the good things it was cooking to such a lovely brown. Mother, tearing herself a moment from the dressmaker, relieved her soul with a satisfied sigh.

"Miss Crafts says she knows a beautiful way to make your new blue merino," said she with an air of penitence, at the same time tasting one of my light golden-coated doughnuts.

But just then, for a wonder, I was not particularly exercised about my new merino; and as it was still on the shelves of some Dalton store, and so, by no means, ready for Miss Crafts' beautiful pattern, I could not affect any enthusiasm.

"If your pies, and cakes, and tarts are as good as these doughnuts," she began again, "Mrs. Perkins won't be likely to turn her nose up at them, though all his folks think that nobody but themselves can cook anything fit to eat, and Mrs. Perkins is more conceited than any of them. What I suffered from that woman when I was first married is not to be told!"

"I wanted to ask you whether you'd have your trimmings cut bias or straight-way, Mrs. Curtis," said Miss Crafts, appearing at the door; and away went mother again, leaving me to proceed still further in my efforts to bring the world to its feet, and battling Dick's effort to keep it still struggling upside down. His wrist pained him so that he needed entertainment to keep his mind off of his troubles, and to that end, he stood on his head in my nicely buttered baking-pan, just ready for the cake, and was pulling out bits of the delicate dough with which to make mittens for the cat. Whereupon I boxed his ears, and he went into the sitting-room with such pain in his wound that mother feared mortification, and was anxious to send for old Dr. Stevens.

I enjoyed being left alone with my own thoughts that day, for they were very happy ones, and I could work now as well as I had dreamed, to the tune of them. I was young and foolish, you see, and had only known since last night that Reuben loved me. To be sure, I had a little idea that he liked me better than he did any other girl, because he always came home from church with me, and from spelling-school, though Hitty Wright, the squire's only daughter, who had been to boarding-school in the city because the village academy wasn't fine enough for her, shook her curls at him, and called him Mr. Haddam in her most fascinating lisp. Then of late he had been at our house three or four times in a week and I had supposed it was to see me, though he always asked for father, when he knew he was sick in bed all the time.

"Why, you know father couldn't get up and see you when he was sick abed. Mother says you come to see Phebe!" remarked Dick, pleasantly, to him, when he came last night; and Reuben's face was as red as mine, for Miss Crafts was there, and Mrs. Stevens, as well as mother herself.

They all laughed as if they thought it cunning, but I do believe if only Reuben had been there, I should have boxed his ears soundly on the spot. Mother says Reuben is dreadful bashful, and I suppose he is, though he isn't clumsy, and awkward over it, like Sam Davis. But when he has been alone with me sometimes, he has blushed and stammered dreadfully, as if he wanted to say something important, but couldn't for the life of him get it out. I couldn't think what it was then, but I have a suspicion now, for last night he left a little note in my hand when he left me, asking me to be his wife. He said that he had loved me a long time, but couldn't make up his mind to tell me so from want of courage; and inclosed in the note was a beautiful pearl ring, which had belonged to his mother, and which, if I returned his

love, I was to wear when he came to-morrow night—that was to-night. If it was not on my finger, he should know that it was all over between us.

I could hardly sleep all night my head was in such a happy tumult, though I said yes in my mind, as soon as I read his question; and the course of our true love was likely to run smoothly enough, for father and mother both set great store by Reuben, and he had no relatives whose interference would affect us in any way. Mother didn't think very much of his aunt Miss Debby Haddam, because she said that the butter that came from our house always had streaks of buttermilk in it, and was a perfect old gossip besides. And Miss Debby didn't think much of me, because I didn't do all the extra work in hay time. She said we would all go to rack and ruin and a servant-girl was so expensive, and I had just enough learning to make me hoity-toity and good-for-nothing. You see I had been one year to the academy, and she thought we couldn't afford to spend our money in that way. I had heard that she had said Reuben had too much sense to think of marrying a silly chit like me, and if he did do such a thing he'd have none of her property; she'd leave the old place to the town before she'd have one of the Curtises wasting what she'd slaved for! But Reuben was well enough off without the "old place," as he had the finest farm in Waterford county of his own, and bank stock besides, which was left him by his mother; and it seems that she had been unable to influence him against me, after all.

By four o'clock the cakes and pies were out of the oven, the gooseberry tarts, made with an especial thought for the taste of Uncle Isaiah, were filled to the top of their flaky rims; one of mother's best company tablecloths was brought from the great chest upstairs; the preserves were poured from their sealed jars into glasses as clear as their own juice, and everything looked nice enough to set mother's mind at ease, even with regard to the critical eye of Aunt Perkins. But I had worked pretty hard to bring about so much in so short a space of time, and the great three seated wagon drove up to the door, bearing the expected company, while I was filling the last tart. Dick was at the door before I had time to seize and extricate him from his coat of tears and sugar, and Aunt Perkins saw me with my sleeves rolled up, and in a dark calico gown, at that time of day; so mother's sunshine was dampened by a cloud at this early hour.

"Sakes alive! you don't say that poor John's laid up with the rheumatism again?" said grandmother, all the happiness of meeting gone from her dear good-natured old face. "Selina," turning to Aunt Perkins, "we had better go straight over to Ethan's, and make our visit there first. Sally and Phebe must have their hands full, without taking care of company."

"Just as you say, mother. I suppose Sarah does feel the exertion of taking care of John. Rheumatic people require much attention," said my aunt, with the little pucker which my mother called politeness.

"Not to-night. I'm going to see John, and cheer him up a little!" said hearty Uncle Isaiah. "Here's little Phebe, she won't call it trouble to look after her old uncle's supper and breakfast. By the way, I heard that Phebe had a beau, Tom Haddam's son. There's no need of growing so red over it, my dear; his father's son could not help being a likely fellow; and to be mistress of that Lynde farm is what nobody need be ashamed of!"

"Rube Haddam is Phebe's beau," exclaimed Dick. "He comes over here about every night, and squeezes Phebe's hand in the door. I see him. He gave her a ring!"

I gave that precocious youth a look which he understood, and fled up stairs to my own room.

How did Dick know that Reuben had given me a ring, I wondered? Had the little wretch been opening my drawer? He frequently ransacked my room when I was too busy to attend to him, but to-day I had only missed him during the time he was engaged in cutting his hand in the woodshed. But I had little room in my mind to give to vexation, Reuben was coming to-night, and though the company might prevent my seeing him alone in the best room for one moment, it would be happiness enough to see him, anyway; and what an eloquent recognition of my answer his eyes would give when they fell upon his beautiful pearl ring upon my engagement finger! I could not help stopping in the midst of my hurried doing of my hair to look at the ring once more. It was so precious! But when I opened the box where I had stored it away so carefully, no ring was there! My heart gave a great jump of dismay. What could have become of it? There were no thieves about, I was sure. Dick, with all his audacity, would hardly have dared to touch it, and mother would not have taken it away without speaking to me. I must have put it somewhere else, though I could not remember doing so. But no; I turned every drawer upside down, I searched in every crack and crevice of the little room, I felt in my pockets, even under my pillow, but there was no ring to be found.

"Phebe!" called mother at the foot of

the stairs, "Phebe, it's time to make the tea; aren't you ever coming down?"

"In a moment I answered, as quietly as possible under the circumstances. I was crying with fear and excitement, and there was my hair all unbraided, and my dress not yet changed.

The thought of Aunt Perkins came over me with a dreadful sinking of heart as I proceeded with my toilet.

"Phebe?" called mother again, before I was half through; and down I went without my cuffs on, and my hair fastened up any way with a comb. Mother looked aghast when I appeared in that style, and Aunt Perkins pucker more than ever as her critical eyes ran over my apparel. But tea was over at last, the dishes washed and put away. Father was better, and sitting in a great chair by the fire, and the tea had brightened everybody up, so they were talking merrily. I stole away unnoticed to search for my ring again. Reuben would be there in less than half an hour, probably, and what should I do if I could not find it before that time? In the first place I had a private interview with Dick, but he was all innocence, and declared that he had never touched the ring.

"How did you know that I had any ring?" I questioned, angrily.

"Coz I saw it on your finger. How could a fellow help knowing you had one?" he said, stoutly.

"But how did you know where I got it?" said I, suspiciously.

"That's telling!" said he, escaping into the other room with the most provoking grin he was capable of.

"Seems to me you're rather uneasy to-night, Phebe," said father. "Why don't you sit down and talk like other folks?"

So I sat down and tried to talk, but I kept thinking about the ring, of course, and answered grandma's questions at random, until mother looked at me as if she thought I were crazy. And so I was, pretty nearly. I wondered if I had worn the ring down stairs. I must have, else how could Dick have seen it on my finger? But still I was sure that when mother called me down stairs at noon I took it off and put it away in my box. She startled me so from my dream, though, that I was not quite in the possession of my senses, and I had hardly recovered them for all day, what with my work and hurry. The ring was rather loose for my first finger, and I must have lost it off, if I had worn it down stairs. It was very strange, for how could I have worn it without being conscious of it, when it had been on my mind every moment?

At last Reuben came. I heard his step on the walk, and hastened to the door, hoping to be able to make some explanation, though my foolish heart was beating so that I could scarcely speak. But Dick was there before me, announcing in a loud voice that "Phebe was at home!"

He looked half confident, half anxious when he came in, but when his eye fell upon my bare hand, I could see a change in his face. Uncle Isaiah gave me sly merry glances, and talked to Reuben as if he were already one of the family. I could say nothing, and Reuben himself, though he seemed more than ever at his ease, was not inclined to talk much, and long before nine o'clock rose to take his leave. Now I should have a chance to speak, I thought, for Dick was deeply engaged in a gymnastic performance behind the scenes, and father and Uncle Isaiah were getting so lively over a political discussion, that everybody's attention was turned in that direction. The fates were against me, however, for who should appear on the steps just as we opened the door into the still moonlight night but Miss Hibbard, coming to make a call? So I could only say good-night to Reuben, who shook my hand in a strange sad way, as if it were a last farewell, and usher the lady into the sitting-room as politely as possible.

O, how much more sweetly I should have slept that night if I could only have said, "I have lost the ring, Reuben, else I should have worn it;" but then, he would have thought me strangely careless of his gift. As it was, I slept very little, but lay awake planning how I should send a note to Reuben. I would not send it through the post-office, because Mrs. Roberts the post-mistress knew my handwriting, and she was such a gossip! I would not go to Reuben's house myself, of course, and I could not send Dick, for nothing in the world would keep him silent on the subject. At last I concluded to go in search of Jimmy Taylor—a boy who did chores for us sometimes, and who was as trustworthy and faithful as the day is long. I would write a note, and give him directions to give it only into Reuben's hands. But, dear me! I didn't know the next day as ever I should get time to write that note. Father was a great deal worse; Aunt Perkins had the neuralgia in her head, and needed no end of care; another aunt came bag and baggage, to spend a week with us; mother, all worn out with sitting up all night to take care of father, was quite overwhelmed with trouble, and toward night Dick mysteriously disappeared, and the house was in a panic, I assure you, when nine o'clock came and he was still missing. Sam, our hired man, went one way and I went another in search of him. Somewhere in the neighborhood of eleven o'clock I met him coming calmly up the road, but he was

bareheaded, and in a fearfully dilapidated and dripping state. He had been over to see Tom Smith, a friend of his who lived five miles away. His friend entertained him by giving free instructions in a new gymnastic feat, which in some way led them into the middle of the goose-pond, I could not understand just how. I was exasperated to see mother kiss him and cry over him. For my part, I thought he deserved a good whipping, and I had a little private interview with him after I had washed some of the mud from his clothes and got him ready for bed.

The next day I was also in demand every moment. My hands were not free until late at night, and I cried myself to sleep when my head did reach the pillow at last.

Sam came in on the third morning with a piece of news. Reuben Haddam had let his farm to Uncle Ethan, and had dismissed his housekeeper, shut up his house, and gone away.

"Gone where?" I found strength to gasp.

"I don't know. Somewhere out West, I believe. I s'posed you knew," said he, in his bungling way.

Mother looked at me quite aghast, but I managed to go on with my work as usual, and for a wonder nobody asked me any questions on the subject. Father was so sick that he neither thought nor cared anything about it, and mother was so busy and worried that it slipped her mind also, I suppose.

Two more wretched days passed, and on Saturday afternoon Aunt Perkins suddenly grew better, and was seized with a desire to drive over to Uncle Ethan's, and Dick and I must carry her there at once in the wagon.

"Debby won't be expecting her," said my mother to me in private, as we were preparing to start, "and she's never prepared for company, and she'll be in a dreadful stew if she isn't now, for she's as much afraid of that woman as I am. Supposing you carry over that loaf of cake we baked this morning, and some of those gooseberry tarts you made the other day. You baked so many of them that they'll get stale and dry before they're all eaten."

So I packed up the eatables, and Aunt Debby was glad enough of them, for she was an ailing, inefficient little woman, and as mother said, never was prepared for company.

"You and Dick must stay to tea," said she, patting me on the shoulder; "and by the way, Phebe, Reuben Haddam is here. He's going to spend Sunday with us, and is going to start for Chicago bright and early Monday morning. What makes you let him go away, child? I was so surprised when he came and told your uncle he could have the farm if he liked, because he was going to leave town! Your uncle was too glad to get it, though, to ask many questions. He's been coaxing him to let half of it for a good while. It joins ours, you know, and ours is all run out, and not half large enough for Ethan's notions."

My heart leaped for joy at the thought of seeing Reuben once more, but I said nothing, and Dick, for a wonder, behaved like an angel, and made no remarks concerning that gentleman. I was dreadfully nervous, though, and when Reuben's surprised eyes met mine, as he came in to the supper-table, I blushed until my very ears tingled, and I was afraid tears would drop into my plate. He noticed my confusion, I know, but he was as cool and calm as possible, called me Miss Curtis, and was wonderfully polite. He sat directly opposite me, and I am sure I didn't know whether I was eating or not, nor did I heed what any one was saying. I only thought of Reuben—that Reuben was going away, and I must get a chance to speak to him. He didn't seem to care much that I didn't wear his ring, though!

Reuben was eating one of my gooseberry tarts, when all of a sudden he looked embarrassed, and his teeth came in contact with some hard substance that sounded like metal. O dear, I thought, what had got into my tarts? I thought I made them so nice! That wicked Dick must have dropped a piece of coal or something of the kind in them; and Aunt Debby would be so mortified! He was taking something out of his mouth, but I dared not look up until Dick screamed out:

"Only see, Phebe, there's your ring that Reuben gave you, and you made such a time about losing. It got into the tart some way when you were filling it. I guess you dropped it into the jam-pot!" And he roared with laughter, as if he thought it were a great joke. Aunt Perkins looked horrified, Aunt Debby mystified, and Uncle Ethan laughed, and wanted to know what it was all about.

Reuben made him some answer, I didn't hear what, and then, to my relief, somebody called for Aunt Debby, and we all rose from the table. Nobody but Dick had seen the ring, they had only heard what he said, and he was such a rattlehead that they seemed to forget his announcement afterwards.

"Reuben," said I, never heeding Dick, who would not take himself away, "I have something to tell you before you go. You will come and see me, won't you?"

"Why not tell me now, Phebe?" said he, brightening. I looked toward the other end of the room where sat Aunt

Perkins watching us and puckering dreadfully.

"Why can't we go and take a little walk? It is a beautiful sunset. Won't your aunt excuse you?"

She did excuse me, and I didn't mind her meaning smiles very much. So we went to walk over the rosy spring fields, and everything was explained. Reuben said that the world was beginning to look bright again, though he never expected it would do so; and I said that I had never expected it would, either, for I thought he had gone away, and I should never see him again.

Reuben did not go to Chicago, for Uncle Ethan released him from his bargain in letting the farm; but when the roses began to peep out in the front-yard, and the honeysuckles to blossom over the great old-fashioned windows, I took possession of the farmhouse myself as Reuben's wife, and the sun never shone on a happier bride or bridegroom. I do believe. I wear the pearl ring which caused me so much trouble to this day, but the question as to how it came in the tart is still unsettled. I think Dick must have had something to do with it, though he always declares that he did not; but Reuben thinks that I myself must have lost it off my finger into the jam, and has had a piece taken out of it to prevent another such catastrophe. Still, I can't think that I wore the ring out of my own room, and mother says that she did not see it on my finger. However, an engagement ring is rather a novel spice for gooseberry tarts, and my children and grandchildren never tire of the story.

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