

Uncle Ben's Gift, THE MISSING BOX.

TWO sisters, Emily and Helen, the one about eighteen, the other perhaps two years older, sat busily plying their needles, while their tongues kept up a merry rattle.

They had been invited to the wedding of one of their intimate associates, and, of course, had each a new dress to manufacture for the occasion.

"I suppose Mary feels bad because she was not invited," said Emily; "but then she could not expect it, and besides she has nothing fit to wear, and father had to submit to an unusual amount of teasing before he would consent to get these new dresses for us, you know."

"No," replied Helen, "she could not expect it. She has not been into company at all, and it would be a pretty beginning to make her 'come out' in so elegant a party as she would find at Laura's wedding. How she would look, then, standing in the middle of the room, in her striped fustian and brogans, with her finger in her mouth!"

A hearty laugh from both girls followed this fancy picture, when the door that led to the kitchen, which had been ajar, was gently closed by an unseen hand, indicating to the heartless girls that their ungenerous words had been overheard by the subject of their merriment.

Mary, a very beautiful and sensible girl of seventeen years, was their cousin. Her father, a brother of Mr. Curtis, had died in poverty while she was an infant, and her worthy mother, after twelve years of widowhood and hard labor, had followed him; leaving Mary, hopeless and heart-broken, to add another name to the long catalogue of orphans. On the death of her mother, her uncle had taken her into his family, partly from the necessity of the case, and partly from the sympathy he felt for the desolate condition of his little niece. Though he knew that some sacrifice must follow the addition of another dependent for food and raiment, yet self-respect and natural affection forbade the rejection of her claims. But his wife, unfortunately, almost destitute of both these virtues, saw no duty in the matter, and met the innocent girl on the threshold with an air of jealousy and pride. The uncle would have welcomed and cared for her as his own child, but it was soon evident that the aunt had marked out for her the lowly walk of a servant.

Mr. Curtis was a broken-down merchant, once successful and tolerably rich, but without the requisite skill to regain his former elevation against the bustling obstacles which always oppose a business man when he suddenly finds himself at the bottom of the ladder. He now occupied a subordinate position in the large establishment of Curtis & Co., and discharged its duties with commendable faithfulness and resignation, and would have made himself and family happy, had his wife been a sensible woman. But she still retained all the haughty pride which had been cultivated in more sumptuous days—a pride whose appetite became the more keen and sensitive, the more its natural aliment diminished.

Mary had been cradled in poverty, and its yoke, though always irksome, was the more easily borne. Had she been told that she was to enter her uncle's family as a servant, no higher hopes would have been indulged; but knowing his wish to regard her as one of his own daughters, her disappointment at being installed the menial of the house, with "a great gulf fixed" between her and those she wanted to love, almost broke her little heart. Her uncle was kind enough to her when he had time to notice her, but her aunt ruled, and was always present.

The daughters very naturally imbibed their mother's spirit, and copied her example; and thus Mary had spent five years in the service of three mistresses. She could well bear the labor, but what heart is effectually fortified against the power of contempt? There is more hope in combating an army than in struggling against neglect; for in the former case one may cut his way through, but in the latter there is nothing to cut. So our little heroine grew up under influences more negative than positive, all the tendencies of which were to withe, rather than foster and develop an amiable and virtuous character.

That very evening, while engaged in her kitchen duties, Mary had been reflecting on her unhappy position; and when she heard the remark about the fustian and brogans, with the laugh that followed, those reflections were pointed with an exquisite pain, and two or three great rain-drops fell into the plate before her.

"If they could only look into my heart," she murmured to herself, "they would find no desire there to share the expected enjoyment that is now occupying their thoughts. If they and aunt would only love me, my fustian would be a royal robe, and my brogans golden slippers. But," added she, "mother always said that nobody was truly happy till they learned how to forgive; and with a humming song, and a gleam of returning cheerfulness, she plied her task anew. How elastic is the

human heart! What a strong swimmer is hope!

Let us look into the other room again.

The sisters had regained their cheerfulness, and were rapidly discussing all the momentous matters pertaining to the empire of fashion, and criticising the taste of their various acquaintances.

"What horrid sleeves Julia Rogers has to her new dress!" said Helen.

"Not half so horrid as the gaudy trimmings on Martha Pike's bonnet," replied Emily.

And so forth. Our lady readers can fill up the dialogue to their liking—we have no relish for it.

While they were thus engaged, Mrs. Curtis entered the room with an expression of displeasure on her face. She passed through and delivered some sharp orders to Mary, and returning seated herself by her daughters. Mary's song had ceased.

"Helen, what does William Betts want of Mary?"

"I don't know, mother; has he been here?"

"Yes, and this is the third time, too. I told him each time that she was not in; and to-night he seemed uneasy at my answer, and left the door without saying a word."

The girls looked at each other with surprise and curiosity. Young Betts was a clerk in the house of Stuart & Co., an intelligent, enterprising and promising young man, whom both Helen and Emily, with a score of other cap-setters, had singled out as the object of particular conquest. The question, therefore, what he wanted of Mary, electrified their nerves, and set in march a whole regiment of surmises.

"I was the more surprised at his silence to-night," continued the mother, "because I asked him why he wished to see her, and he gave me a glance which said, 'It is none of your business,' and then turned off without answering me."

The mother perceived by the silence and flushed faces of her daughters that she had effected her object, and with an air of satisfaction, left them to nurse the bitter seed of jealousy which she had dropped in their hearts.

From those hearts, thenceforth, all semblance of love for Mary was banished.

After a long silence, Helen exclaimed, with petulant energy,

"I know William Betts mistook the name!"

"What name did he mean?" said Emily, with a slight start. This was a delicate question, and remained unanswered.

Emily, though the younger, was the greater philosopher, and from the beginning had divined the true state of the case. She had already begun to cultivate a feeling of resignation to the disappointment of her half-formed hopes, and was not unwilling to tantalize Helen a little, seeing she took it so much to heart. Had she mingled a little generosity with her resignation, and sympathized with her poor cousin in her supposed good fortune, it would have been nobler and saved her some remorse in after years.

"Helen," said she, in a solemn tone without raising her eyes, "William is in love with Mary. I know it."

"How do you know?" replied Helen, dropping her work.

"I have known it for a long time."

"What! and not tell me?"

"Oh, I thought it might pain you."

"Pain me!" said Helen, with an angry blush, "why should I care if he does love her?"

"Because you love him," said Emily, coolly.

"Helen was too full of vexation to reply, and giving her sister a very emphatic look, she threw down her work, took a light and went to her room."

Mary, meanwhile, unconscious of the important part her name had borne in the evening's discourse, had finished her daily task, and seated herself, with weary limb and heavy heart, in the chair just vacated at Emily's side.

Earning for social sympathy, she was about to attempt a cheerful conversation, when she was abruptly and cruelly cut short by her cousin, who exclaimed with a haughty peevishness,

"It's bed time, and I've talked enough!"

Mary rose from her chair, imprinted a silent kiss on Emily's brow, and without receiving any returning token of affection, sought her couch and fell asleep amid prayers and tears. Prayers and tears! must they always flow together?"

Emily soon followed with an unhappy heart, full of conflicting and tremulous passions. That coal of fire was still burning on her brow!

The sun rose the next morning—a habit it has—the busy hum of active life had already commenced in the streets, but the first token of animation in the Curtis family was the sprightly step of Mary at her morning task of preparing breakfast. Her face wore a cheerful look, and her heart seemed unladen of every oppressive thought. Had an angel appeared to her by night and bade her be of good cheer? Nothing but the angel of sleep. Yet, unconscious girl, the day that has now dawned upon thee is destined to be the most momentous of thy life.

Her cousins appeared in due time for breakfast, and in their anticipations of the wedding which was to take place that eve-

ning seemed to have forgotten the unpleasant conversation of the previous night.

Mary, true to her noble nature, forgot her slight, and did all she could to aid her cousins and enhance their pleasure; contented to draw her own happiness from the happiness of those around her.

Dinner hour came and passed, and the girls, after a hundred twistings and turnings before the glass, to be sure that every ribbon was smooth, and every silken fold right, made an early start for the scene of attraction. Mary watched their graceful movements out of sight; and though a smile of borrowed joy was still on her face, she was startled by the falling of a tear upon her hand as it lay upon the window-sill—startled, as we sometimes are at a drop of rain, and look all around the sunny sky and wonder whence it came.

Mrs. Curtis had already gone to visit a friend, where her husband was to meet her at tea and spend the evening, and so Mary, with the exception of two little boys, at play in the yard, was left alone to enjoy, to her, the real luxury of solitude. Her heart was like a desolate field, all uncultivated, yet showing here and there great clusters of native flowers surpassing in beauty, richness and fragrance all that the hand of art could ever boast. She little knew how soon another was to enter, to claim and cultivate. True to female instinct, as soon as she was left alone, she proceeded to "dress up" in her best attire. It was a brief task. Her pretty calico black apron and plain linen collar were soon adjusted. They were all the wardrobe she had outside the kitchen, and had served her on extra occasions like this for more than a year. Fashions had changed two or three times; but like the birds and the flowers, beauty and simplicity, left to themselves, are never tired of each other. Mary had just finished her toilet in the kitchen, where her seven-by-nine looking-glass was large enough to reflect all her pride, and had hardly seated herself in the parlor with a book, when she was startled by a knocking at the door. She opened it and confronted William Betts; whom, though she had often seen, she had never spoken to in her life.

He bowed, and said, "Good evening," and waited to be invited in; while she waited to hear his errand. At length she said, with embarrassment,

"The family are all gone out."

"I know it," replied William, "and that is why I am here! Can't you say, come in?" he added, with a smile.

Mary repeated the words mechanically after him, half ashamed of her awkwardness, and half amazed at a novel emotion which at that moment flashed through her heart; for love needs no bugle to announce his approach. William followed her in, and took the chair offered him by a trembling hand. He was a noble-hearted, ingenious young man, and had long indulged an affection for Mary, which the cool treatment he had received from the aunt, and his suspicion of its cause, had not tended to abate. "Love hath a thousand eyes," and he had discovered the present opportunity of finding Mary alone, and determined to improve it.

We shall not go through with the description of a love-making scene; it ought never to be soiled with printer's ink; and, besides, everybody understands the process already, either by experience or hearsay. Suffice it to say, after a few minutes of ordinary conversation, William who had sledged an hour from his business, had no time to make "regular approaches," as the military men say, but came with the intention of storming the citadel at once. After a little pause, therefore, in the conversation, he turned his handsome eyes full on his timid hostess, and said,

"Mary, I came to tell you that I love you," and without waiting for any reply, and to save her embarrassment, he went on to narrate the history of his affection—where he first saw her—how he had found out her name—how he had tried to resist his feelings, and couldn't—how he had endeavored to get introduced to her—and much to her surprise, how he had learned all about her unhappy and neglected condition in her uncle's family.

Mary's pretty face, as in nature bound, was covered with trickling tears, not of affection, or mere sentiment, but prompted by an indelible mixture of emotions, the most prominent of which was a tremulous joy that she feared was too excessive. What wonder? Her ears had never listened to such professions before, and her heart, which was made up of yearning amabilities, had never known what it was to be so loved away from her mother's bosom, and it bounded at once with a violence of attachment toward her confessed lover; and like a brave-hearted, honest girl, she told him so, without any periphrastic figures of speech. The contract, completed, it was ratified, and "sealed" in the approved way; and William took his departure with no unelastic step, though he dragged a "lengthening chain behind."

Mary retired to her little kitchen, the scene of many toils and tears, and seated herself there that the contrast of her present joy might be the sweeter. Wherever she looked a rainbow was before her! She peeped into her looking-glass to see if she could divine the reason for William's love—and was startled at her own beauty; her happy emotions had so illuminated

every feature. Did she feel a flash of triumphant pride that she was preferred before her cousins? Naughty girl! but Mary was not perfect.

As the shades of night approached, Mary bolted the outer doors, re-assumed her kitchen garb, and having put the tired boys to bed, her dancing heart was forcing a song from her lips, when she was again startled into sudden silence by a loud rapping at the front door. Could it be William? Her song ceased, but her heart was dancing still. She took a candle, and timidly opened the door, when a gust of wind blew out the light and left her in darkness and fear.

"Does Mr. James Curtis live here?" said a deep-toned but not unpleasant voice.

"Yes, sir—be so good as to wait till I light the candle."

On her return the man was standing inside the door, but did not wait for her to speak.

"Is Mr. Curtis at home?"

"No, sir," said Mary, with a trembling voice.

"Any of the family?"

Mary hesitated, for she did not dare to inform him that she was alone. The man interpreted her fears, and said, with a pleasant smile,

"I see you are alone, my girl, but don't be afraid; my name is Benjamin Curtis—I am a brother of Mr. James Curtis, and have come to see him."

The rough, open-hearted frankness of his manner, and more especially a strong resemblance to her uncle, which Mary discovered whenever she dared to look him in the face, convinced her that he was not imposing on her. Besides, she knew that she had an "uncle Ben" somewhere in the world, though she had never seen him. So she invited him in.

He was the oldest of the three brothers, as well as the most enterprising; and had in early life yielded to a passion for the sea, upon which he spent about twenty years, in almost every capacity, from the cabin boy of a fishing smack to the captain of a Canton packet-ship.

He was a true man of the world—a keen observer, abundantly intelligent, and an honest, out-spoken talker, full of jovial generosity. Nearly twenty years had passed since he last visited his native city, and he had now just arrived from South America, where he had been a long time engaged in commerce. As old age approached, he pined for his native land and the friends of his youth; and had just completed arrangements for the transfer of his handsome fortune to the city of his birth. The object of his present visit was the permanent investment of his property in stocks and real estate. He was without family, having never been married. Such is the abridged biography of "uncle Ben." Mary and her cousins had often heard wonderful stories of his adventures, and their lively imaginations had thrown a lively romance around his name and history. It was not strange, then, that Mary's curiosity was excited to the highest pitch at his unexpected introduction, so that she forgot for a time the extraordinary event of the afternoon.

Having warmed his hands over the fire for some time in thoughtful silence, he at length inquired,

"Where is brother Jim, to-night?"

"He is spending the evening at Col. Grant's in C—street."

"Jim used to live in C—street himself, in a fine house; what is he living in this box for?" Hasn't he broken down, has he?"

"He—he has been unfortunate," said Mary, with hesitation.

A long pause followed, which was broken by Mary.

"Will you lay off your cloak, Uncle?"

"Uncle!" said he, with a start of surprise, and then eyeing her from head to foot, added,

"Are you a daughter of brother James?"

"No, sir; but I am a daughter of your other brother, Joseph, and my name is Mary."

The sober, business aspect of uncle Ben's face changed in a moment into a smile of surprise and affection, as he exclaimed,

"Is this little Moll?" and jumping from his chair he planted a kiss on her glowing cheek, that echoed through the room like a percussion cap.

"There!" said he, "the last time I was in P—, just as I was leaving the city, you was in your mother's arms. I discharged at you just such a broadside as that, and then had to scud under bare poles before a thundering squall!"

Though Mary felt the tears starting to her eyes at this allusion to her mother, yet she could not help laughing heartily at her uncle's broad humor.

"But how happens it that you are fitted out in such coarse rigging?" said he, again eyeing her from top to toe. "I thought, at first, you was the servant girl, and tried to act with becoming dignity," he added, with a laugh. Mary knew not what to answer, and, therefore, wisely said nothing; while uncle Ben, with a quick perception of her embarrassment, relieved her by starting a hundred other ingenious questions concerning the family history, by means of which he gained, without Mary's suspecting it, a pretty accurate knowledge of the whole state of affairs. The unaffected kindness, not to say tenderness, which marked every look and tone of the rough old sailor, indicated that Mary had found in him a warm-hearted and invaluable friend. To be concluded in two weeks.

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