

## Uncle Ben's Gift,

## THE MISSING BOX.

CONTINUED.

THE evening passed rapidly away in a conversation, the most delightful to Mary—excepting, of course, that other interview, still woven in her memory, and destined always to be woven, should she live a thousand years.

Just as the clock was striking eleven, footsteps were heard at the door, and Mr. Curtis and his wife made their appearance. They were not a little surprised to find a stranger quietly enjoying Mary's hospitality; but before either had time to speak, uncle Ben jumped up, and thrusting out his hand, hallooed almost as loud as if he was hailing a ship.

"How are you, Jim?" His brother, though not recognizing his countenance, could not mistake the voice, and seized the proffered hand with a truly fraternal grip. The meeting of the brothers was one of heartfelt happiness—a happiness almost worth a twenty year's separation. Has the ocean spray not yet evaporated from uncle Ben's cheek? or was it something else that was glistening there?

Mrs. Curtis seemed equally happy with her husband, and gave "the captain" a boisterous welcome. But, alas, for the motives of human friendship! How few of them spring right out of the heart! Had a sea-horse just arrived, loaded with bags of gold, she would have given him as cordial a welcome, and for the same reason. She knew that the captain was rich, and her selfishness had already begun to slime over her prey with deception, preparatory to swallowing it.

In the midst of her smiles and loquacious compliments, she caught an opportunity of casting an intrusive frown at Mary, which shot through her heart like a bullet, and sent her straight to the kitchen.

Uncle Ben accidentally observed the whole movement; and if a noble purpose at that moment took possession of his soul, it was not altogether in gratitude for Mrs. Curtis' extraordinary efforts to please him.

Just at this moment the daughters were heard bidding their attendants good night at the door; and their arrival turned aside the heavy billow of sadness, which threatened to break over the captain's spirits. He was delighted to meet and caress his blooming nieces; and they, already wrought up to the highest pitch of animation, would willingly have staid up all night to hear him talk. But the morning watches had already commenced, and it was time for all to retire. The girls, with a cheerful "good night, uncle," took their departure.

Why did uncle Ben look so sharp at their elegant silk dresses? Did he never hear one rustle before?

Turning to Mrs. Curtis he said carelessly,

"Mary did not go to the wedding?"

"No, captain; she was a little unwell to-day, and preferred to stay at home," and then added, with a smile.

"She is a little singular in her tastes, and is so fond of domestic life, that I really believe she prefers the kitchen to any other place; and so we let her have her own way."

"A sensible girl!" replied the captain; "I noticed she had a very domestic look."

The captain knew how to wield a two-edged cutlass—he was once boarded by pirates, off Trinidad, and was still alive! But the lady's self-complacency was proof against the double thrust. Yet the captain's hearty eulogy of Mary did inflict a wound on the ambitious woman, and complaining of headache, she went to bed.

The next morning all were up betimes, except uncle Ben; who, yielding to the effects of much previous fatigue and wakefulness, thought he would enjoy the rare indulgence of a morning nap. His sleep must have been very deep, for he awoke prodigiously, producing a sonorous echo in every corner of the little house, much to the wonder and merriment of the smaller fry who had not yet seen him, and who would venture near his door to listen and then scamper away as if frightened by some wild beast.

"I wonder what a big nose uncle Ben has got!" said little Ned, casting a wondering glance at a huge pair of strange boots in the corner.

"I guess it is more bigger than this," replied Tommy, who was trying to untie a hard knot in his shoe, which he held up as a measure of his opinion in the case. And so they went on, their eyes and imaginations dilating alike, till the stove-pipe became too small to serve for a comparison with the mysterious nose; when looking over their shoulders, they saw uncle Ben himself, who had overheard their conversation, creeping toward them, slippers in hand, as if to grab them. They took to their heels, this time, in no mock alarm.

"Ship, ahoy!" cried uncle Ben, "I ought to have run up a friendly flag, for the little junks have outsailed me, and are already hull down!"

Mrs. Curtis was both early and busy in the kitchen this morning. Perhaps so unusual a thing arose from her solicitude to provide an especially good breakfast for

her guest, and perhaps not. At any rate she did nothing but oversee; and her oversight brought more annoyance than aid.

As soon as the meal was over, uncle Ben proposed to return to his hotel, where his business in the city would make it more convenient for him to stay. But he promised compliance with the reiterated request to come as often as he could. Noticing that Mary was not present in the group that was bidding him good morning at the door, he said to the girls,

"Dress up in your best, and to-morrow afternoon I will come with a carriage and take you and your cousin Mary to ride. Good morning."

The mother and daughters exchanged looks of alarm. They had not so much objections to Mary's joining them in their drive, but it was too cold for calico, and how would fustian and brogans look in such a nice carriage as uncle Ben would be sure to bring? But the pinch must be got round in some way—a plausible explanation must be fabricated for uncle Ben; and worst come to worst, she might pass to the public eye as a servant. The latter idea was rather pleasing than otherwise. Nothing was said to Mary till noon the next day, with the full expectation that she would decline the invitation. But to their surprise she expressed herself delighted with the anticipated pleasure, and running away, soon appeared in her perennial calico.

"Mary, go and take that dress right off," said Mrs. Curtis.

"Why, aunt, it is the best I have got." "No matter, the weather is too cold for that; and if that is your best, then I suppose there is an end to your jaunt."

Mary crept in her "domestic" garb again, and went quietly to work.

Soon came the fine carriage, and horses, and driver, and out jumped uncle Ben in high spirits.

"Come, my chicks," said he, "all ready?"

"All but Mary," said Mrs. Curtis; "she is not inclined to go out to-day. What a beautiful carriage you have brought, captain!"

"Yes, fine craft," replied he, "but I must have my full cargo."

So pushing his way through the rooms to the kitchen, he found Mary busy at her work.

"Aha!" said he, "not so easy dodging an old skipper!" and spying a rusty bonnet on a nail, he clapped it on her head, seized her arm, and trotted her out to the carriage and tossed her in.

Mary, though half provoked at his rough oddity, could not help laughing all the time, while her aunt and cousins did not know whether to be amused or astonished.

That ride was one to be remembered. Instead of driving into the country, as they expected, uncle Ben pushed for the most fashionable streets, and spent the afternoon in visiting the various places of genteel resort—the museums, picture-galleries, and millinery store—making Mary, all the while, his principal care, and addressing his remarks chiefly to her, whenever others were present. He bought them many little gifts, and at last took it into his head that he must have all their likenesses in daguerreotype, with their bonnets on, before they went home. There was no resisting him, he was so kind and amusing. The pictures were excellent; and Mary's was so ludicrous that all three of the girls were convulsed with laughter over it, in which uncle Ben heartily joined. Thrusting them into his pocket, he drove home.

Mary now began to suspect that there was something deeper in her uncle's thoughts than mere love of amusement, and determined hereafter to comply with whatever whims he might indulge. Helen and Emily were better pleased with their ride, than they were with their uncle's taste.

Uncle Ben became absorbed in his own cares, and the winter was fast wearing away. He must return to South America early in the spring, to look after some personal matters which he left unsettled, and his visits to the cottage were consequently rare.

Young Betts had once more called to see Mary, but was flatly refused admittance by Mrs. Curtis, who upbraided him with coming where he was not wanted, and forbade him ever to approach her house again; declaring that Mary was aware of his attempted visits, and had conceived a perfect hatred for him. He soon contrived, however, to gain an interview; and a pledge of constancy passed between them to be kept inviolate wherever their lots might be cast, and whatever might betide them. Their meetings were few and stolen, and as the course of their love ran very rough, it gave the best evidence of being true.

Mary was more and more neglected by her cousins, while the treatment of her aunt ripened into actual persecution, not of a violent and flagrant kind, but inflicted by crosses and taunts, more exquisitely painful to her sensitive heart than all the thumb-screws and scourges in the world. In addition to her ordinary sorrows, she had begun to fear that uncle Ben had lost his regard for her, as he had called once or twice and gone away without seeing her. This she struggled on for many weary

weeks, alternately hoping and despairing, and wondering why all the world should unite to oppress her, while she could love everybody in it.

Keep up good courage, Mary; the world is made up of sorrows, and yours have hardly begun!

It was soon rumored in the family that uncle Ben was about to set out on his journey beyond the equator.

"I will see him before he goes," thought Mary, "and tell him all my troubles. I know such a good heart as his will pity me."

That very afternoon uncle Ben came bustling into the cottage and surprised them all by announcing that the ship, on which he had engaged passage, would sail that night, and he had come to bid them good-bye. The near prospect of a good snuff at the salt water had put him in the best of spirits, and he was lavish of his good nature and drollery.

"What have you got here, uncle!" said Helen, looking suspiciously at a large bundle that he had laid on the table, and about to put her hand upon it.

"Take care!" shouted he, "it may go off!" and the frightened girl bounded to the other side of the room, amid roars of laughter.

Taking it into his own hands, the captain sat down and began to unroll it, with a group of interested spectators around him, among whom was Mary, who had been attracted from the kitchen by the uproar.

"It is only some farewell duds for the children," said he, and he began to distribute various toys to Ned and Tommy. And here was a beautiful dress-pattern for Helen, and another for Emily, and then a good tumbler for mother and a box of gloves for all three.

"Is there nothing for me, then?" thought Mary.

What right have you to expect anything, little outcast?

As the last of the stuff was removed it revealed something to Emily's sharp eyes, who snatched up a beautiful ebony work-box, richly ornamented with silver, and went dancing around the room, exclaiming,

"This is for me! this is for me! isn't it, uncle?"

"Hush! you rude girl!" said her mother, "what could you do with a work-box, when I am the seamstress of the family?" This she said with a smile, directed to uncle Ben, which she intended for a hint as to the proper appropriation of the beautiful gift.

Uncle Ben, who had been heartily laughing all the while to witness the tumult he had occasioned, spake as soon as he could be heard, and said with decided emphasis,

"That box is designed for Mary, as an encouragement to her domestic tastes and industrious habits;" and taking it gently out of Mrs. Curtis' hands, he presented it to her. Mary's eyes filled with tears as she took it, and thanked him with a choking voice. The mother and daughters bit their lips in vexation and silence for a moment, but the former at length inquired,

"Where did you get that elegant thing, captain?"

"It was given to me by a Spanish lady in Valparaiso," he said. "The lady was always reprimanding me for my obstinacy, as she called it, in persisting to lead a single life; and one day, after railing at me a great deal about it, she declared that though I didn't deserve it at all, she would do what she could to supply the defect; and so she tripped into another room and brought this box, which she had purchased and freighted expressly for the occasion. So I have always called it my wife—but have been a most cruel husband, for I have kept it 'locked up' all the time! But," added he, taking a little silver key from his vest pocket, "you have seen nothing but the upper deck yet; take a peep into the cabin and see how near it comes to the thing." Taking it from Mary's hands, he opened it, displaying the interior, ingeniously filled with the utmost variety of materials, and little conveniences for sewing.

After everything had been duly examined and admired, uncle Ben tapped Mary pleasantly under the chin, saying,

"Come, Moll, let me show you how to use it;" and leading the way into another room, he shut the door after them, plainly indicating that he wanted nobody to follow.

"Now," thought Mary, "is my only time!" and throwing herself upon her uncle's neck before he was hardly seated, she exclaimed; "Dear uncle—I am so unhappy!" and burst into tears.

"Hush! hush!" said uncle Ben, "no noise—no time for tears"—brushing them rapidly from his own cheeks—"I know all about it. I have watched too many nights at mast-head, and strained my eyes through too much fog not to see all your troubles, and a way, too, to steer out of them. There is a light ahead! I shall be back in September, and then we will see," said he, smiling, as he wiped the tears from her beautiful face with his great, strong hand, and kissed her.

That assurance and that kiss kindled such a glow of joy in her breast that her tears were all dried up in a moment, and she returned the good man's caresses with a heart-

iness that paid him a hundred fold for his kindness.

"But we must hurry," said he; "hand me the box." He turned it over and pointed to a double row of silver nails that thickly studded the lower edges.

"This box," said he, "is itself of little value; but be careful of the contents. I don't mean the threads and needles and that truck." So saying, he directed her attention to two nails in opposite corners, a little smaller than the rest, and pressing hardly upon both at the same moment, a false bottom started up with a spring, which he immediately closed, saying,

"Keep that secret—don't open it yourself till I am gone, and promise me that nobody else shall know this secret, and that you will never let the box go out of your possession."

Mary eagerly gave the promise, and uncle Ben, opening the cover of the box, took something from his pocket, tucked it in among the sewing utensils, and handed box and key to Mary.

They returned together to the little parlor, and, after chatting a few minutes with the rest of the family, the captain took his leave, with the cheerful remark,

"Look out for me in September."

All three of the girls followed him to the gate for a last good-bye, where they remained some time, watching his progress down the street, and dreading to lose sight of one whose presence always wrought with it an indescribable charm.

What a pity everybody is not like uncle Ben—never so happy as when imparting happiness to others! But "a good deed in a naughty world" would not seem half so good but for the naughtiness. Mary and her cousins were leaning over the gate in silent reflection, when she suddenly thought herself of her precious box, which she had laid on the parlor table. She ran back to take care of it, but it was gone! She looked around in amazement at first, but immediately quieted herself with the thought that it had, perhaps, been removed to some other room, or at worst, been hid from her for a moment, just to tantalize her.

"Aunt, do you know where my box is?" said she, as that lady came in from her own private room.

"I know where my box is," replied she, with a dignified air. "You would never know how to use it if you had it, and it would be a pity for such a useful thing to be kept as a mere toy. There," added she, dropping a half eagle into Mary's lap, "that will be better for you than a cart load of boxes."

This generous price was offered, partly because she hoped it would reconcile Mary to the loss of her gift, and partly because it was only one of twenty just such pieces which she had found in a beautiful purse in one corner of the box. Mary's anger was inflamed, and her first impulse was to hurl the coin across the room; but that golden precept of her mother rushed into her memory, "Never truly happy till you learn how to forgive," and she quietly dropped the money and a tear on the table and retired to the kitchen. She was fully determined, however, on seizing her property at the very first opportunity, and delivering it immediately to the care and keeping of her dear William, as the surest way of fulfilling her promise to her uncle.

Poor Mary! will her troubles never end? Oh, that uncle Ben could only step in to help her recover her treasure! She had food enough now for reflection; and her curiosity concerning the box was intense. What could there be in that secret apartment so precious that her uncle should be so earnest to have kept secret? What could it be?

While Mary's head was busy planning schemes for recovering the box, her aunt's was equally busy devising means to keep it out of her reach; and she succeeded.

The next day a lady called on Mrs. Curtis, and in the course of conversation, an ingenious plan came into the mind of the latter for disposing of the troublesome possession. For, in reality, her conscious guilt in connection with it had become so great that the very sight of the box was growing irksome to her. Why not restore it to its rightful owner, then? Because that would be doing a real kindness to Mary; and such a thing had gone out of practice with Mrs. Curtis. She preferred to cover up, rather than undo the wrong, forgetting, reflective reader, that however long and deep an evil may be buried, it will one day sprout up and bring forth fruit after its kind.

"By the way, Mrs. Todd," said she, "I have something very pretty to show you." So saying, she went into another room, and returned with the ebony box. Mrs. Todd was charmed with it, and eagerly inquired where she got it.

"I am not at liberty to say," said Mrs. Curtis, "for it was left here by an unfortunate friend, to be sold."

"Indeed! and at what price?" Mrs. Curtis was anxious to drive a bargain, and replied,

"At a price far below its value, Mrs. Todd. It can be had for ten dollars—and the silver on it is worth twice that sum."

Mrs. Todd, without replying, took out her purse, counted the money, and took possession of the coveted treasure.

Poor Mary! A few days afterwards she ventured once more to ask her aunt for the

box, but was told flatly that she had given it away to a worthy friend, who had removed to a distant part of the country. We will not record the details of Mary's sorrows during a few ensuing months, but bring the sympathetic reader at once to the next great era in her trials, which, like a "tenth wave," will nigh overwhelm her. She had made many efforts to trace her lost gift, but without success; and, by a special exertion of will, had somewhat reconciled herself to the grievous disappointment; looking forward to the time of her uncle's return with a patient expectation of true sympathy, if not of entire relief from her unhappy condition.

One night, about the first of September, Mr. Curtis came home from his place of business with an unusually sad and thoughtful air, and seated himself by the fire without speaking. So strange a thing attracted the attention of all the family, who were present, ready to sit down to supper.

"What is the matter, father?" asked Emily, putting her arm around his neck, and looking affectionately into his face. He made no reply, but taking a newspaper from his pocket, pointed out a paragraph, and handed it to his daughter. Emily took it, and read aloud:

"By advices from Havana, we learn that the ship Dolphin, Capt. Bruce, of this port, when three days out from St. Salvador, struck a sunken reef and bilged. A heavy sea running, she was driven high, and in five hours parted amidships. Fortunately, a French brig at this moment hove in sight, bore down upon the wreck, and saved all but four or five passengers, who were lost when the vessel broke up. Among the latter, we regret to learn, was Captain Benjamin Curtis, formerly of this city, and well known to our commercial readers as an enterprising merchant of Rio Janeiro. Capt. Curtis lost his life in noble efforts to save a fellow-passenger."

This sudden announcement was a terrible shock to the whole family, and filled every heart with mourning. Even Mrs. Curtis, witnessing the violent grief of her daughters, indulged herself in a paroxysm of tears.

But where is Mary, and who cares for her? There she lies, with her head hanging over the end of the sofa; and there long after the rest have brushed away their stormy tears, she still lies—her eyes dry and her heart petrified. There is a drouth below the deepest wells.

The family at length seated themselves at the tea-table; but Mary's chair was empty—she had gone supperless to bed, not to sleep, but to think—to perform in appropriate darkness the funeral obsequies of a departed hope.

The wakeful night passed swiftly away, and the dawn found her quietly employed at the unfinished task of the previous day. What makes that look, though sad, so peaceful? She had learned another hard lesson of resignation, and submitted her heart to the will of Providence.

Was the remarkably cheerful face with which Mrs. Curtis greeted the family, that morning, to be explained in the same way? She too had passed a sleepless night, but it was because her husband had informed her that he was the only legal heir to all his brother's estate; the captain having executed a will to that effect many years before, and sent it home to his care; and her sleep had been driven away by her busy castle-buildings of future grandeur. She was a woman of active mind and determined will; and that night's musings had mapped out a variety of purposes from which no ordinary influences would be able to swerve her.

Mr. Curtis having satisfied himself that there was no other will, it became necessary for him to proceed at once to look after his inheritance. In order to do this it seemed desirable to change his residence to a more convenient part of the city. Much to his gratification, and that of his wife's, he succeeded in negotiating the purchase of the fine dwelling he formerly owned in C—street, which happened to be vacant, and for sale. Immediate preparations were made for removal, attended with all the excitement, hurry, and confusion incident to that periodic plague of domestic life. The strength and patience of our heroine were of course tasked to the utmost, during these days of extra labor; and her spirit received no cheering impulse when after the family became settled she found her sphere of servitude more degraded in proportion as the pride and pretensions of her aunt and cousins were increased. Seeing nothing before her but a life of ignoble toil, her ambition was aroused, and she determined to assert her freedom. Her resolution was deliberately taken, and wisely kept to herself till ready for execution. Concluded next week.

In 1785, when on a visit to Lord Mexborough's Foots broke his leg while hunting. Shortly afterwards Lord B—condoling with him on his misfortune, the inveterate joker could not forbear his jest at the expense of the silly nobleman, and rejoined, "Pray, my lord, do not allude to my weak point—I have not alluded to yours," at the same time significantly pointing to the nobleman's head.

Half the ills we board within our hearts are ills because we board them.