

Comfort, Pease And Her Gold Ring.

By MARY E. WILKINS.

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CHAPTER IV.

Comfort felt again and again, with trembling fingers, she could not believe that the ring was gone but she certainly could not feel it. She was quite pale and shook as if she had a chill. She was too frightened to cry. Had she lost Aunt Comfort's ring?—the real gold ring she had given her for her name? She looked at the pin Miss Tabitha had pinned into the top of her pocket, but she dared not take it out. Suppose Miss Tabitha should ask if she had, and she had to tell her and be whipped? That would be almost worse than losing the ring.

Comfort had never been whipped in her life, and her blood ran cold at the thought of it. She kept feeling wildly of the pocket. There was a little roll of writing paper in it, some leaves of an old account book which her mother had given her to write on. All the hope she had was that the ring had slipped inside the slate-pencil's stump, and pins. Then she went out in the yard and looked carefully, then she went down the road to the old Loomis place, where she and Matilda had walked at recess. Miss Tabitha Hanks went home that way. The road was as smooth as a white floor too, for the snow was old, and well trodden.

Comfort began to search all over the schoolroom floor, but all she found were wads of paper and apple cores, slate-pencil's stumps, and pins. Then she went out in the yard and looked carefully, then she went down the road to the old Loomis place, where she and Matilda had walked at recess. Miss Tabitha Hanks went home that way. The road was as smooth as a white floor too, for the snow was old, and well trodden.

Comfort Pease went back to the schoolhouse, and opened her dinner-pail. She looked miserably at the pan-sakes, the bread and butter, and the apple pie and cheese, and tried to eat but she could not. She put the cover on the pail, leaned her head on the desk in front, and sat quite still until the scholars began to return. Then she lifted her head, got out her spelling-book and tried to study. Miss Tabitha came back early, so nobody dared tease her, and the cold was so bitter, and the sky so overcast, that they were not obliged to go out at recess. Comfort studied and recited, and never a smile came on her pale, sober, little face. Matilda whispered to know if she were sick, but Comfort only shook her head.

Sometimes Comfort saw Miss Tabitha watching her with an odd expression, and she wondered forlornly what it meant. She did not dream of going to Miss Tabitha with her trouble. She felt quite sure she would get no sympathy in that quarter.

All the while Comfort had that one little foreboding hope that the ring might be in that roll of paper, and she should find it when she got home. It seemed to her that the school never would be done. She thought wildly of asking Miss Tabitha if she could not go home, because she had the tooth-ache. Indeed, her teeth did begin to ache, and her head, too, but she waited and sped home like a rabbit when she was let out at last. She did not wait even to say a word to Matilda. Comfort, when she got home, went right through the sitting-room and upstairs to her own chamber. "Where are you going, Comfort?" her mother called after her. "What ails the child?" said Grandmother Atkins.

"I'm coming right back," Comfort faltered as she went. "The minute she was in her own little cold chamber she took the pin from her pocket, drew forth the roll of paper and smoother it out—the ring was not there. Then she turned the pocket and examined it. There was a little rip in the seam.

"Comfort," Comfort called her mother from the foot of the stairs. "You'll get your death of cold up there," chimed in her grandmother from the room beyond.

"I'm coming," Comfort gasped in reply. She turned the pocket back and went downstairs. It was odd that, although Comfort looked so distressed, neither her mother nor grandmother asked her what was the matter. They looked at her, then exchanged a meaning look with each other. And all her mother said was to bid her go and sit down by the fire and toast her feet. She also mixed a bowl of hot ginger tea, plentifully sweetened with molasses, and bade her drink that so she could not catch cold, and yet there was something strange in her manner all the time. She made no remark, either, when she opened Comfort's dinner pail and saw how little had been eaten. She merely showed it silently to Grandmother Atkins behind Comfort's back, and the nod she made to each other with solemn meaning.

However, Mrs. Pease made the cream toast that Comfort loved for supper, and obliged her to eat a whole plate of it. "I can't have her get sick," she said to Grandmother Atkins, after Comfort had gone to bed that night. "She ain't got enough constitution, poor child," assented Grandmother Atkins.

Mrs. Pease opened the door and listened. "I believe she's crying now," said she. "I guess I'll go up there."

"I would if I was you," said Grandmother Atkins.

Comfort's sobs sounded louder and louder all the way, as her mother went upstairs.

"What's the matter, child?" she asked when she opened the door, and there was still something strange in her tone. While there was concern, there was certainly no surprise.

"My tooth aches dreadfully," sobbed Comfort.

"You had better have some cotton wool and paregoric on it, then," said her mother. Then she went downstairs for cotton wool and paregoric, and she ministered to Comfort's aching tooth, but no cotton wool nor paregoric was there for Comfort's aching heart.

She sobbed so bitterly that her mother looked alarmed. "Comfort, look here, is there anything else the matter?" she asked, suddenly, and she put her hand on Comfort's shoulder.

"My tooth aches dreadfully, oh!" Comfort wailed.

Poor Comfort stifled her sobs under the patchwork quilt, but she could not stop crying for a long time, and she slept very little that night. When she did she dreamed that she had found the ring, but had to wear it around her aching tooth for punishment, and the tooth was growing larger and larger, and the ring painfully tighter and tighter.

She looked so wan and ill next morning, that her mother told her she need not go to school; but Comfort begged hard to go and said she did not feel sick, her tooth was better.

"Well, mind you get Miss Hanks to excuse you and come home if your tooth aches again," said the mother.

"Yes, ma'am," replied Comfort. When the door shut behind Comfort, her Grandmother Atkins looked at her mother. "Em'ly," said she, "I don't believe you can carry it out, she'll be sick."

"I'm dreadfully afraid she will," returned Comfort's mother.

"You'll have to tell her," said Mrs. Pease turned on Grandmother Atkins, and now England motherhood was strong in her face. "Mother," said she, "I don't want Comfort to be sick, and she shan't be, if I can help it, but I've got a duty to her that's beyond looking out for her health. She's got a lesson to learn that's more important than any she's got in school, and I'm afraid she won't learn it at all, unless she learns it by the hardest way, and it won't do for me to help her."

"Well, I suppose you're right, Em'ly," said Grandmother Atkins, "but I declare I'm dreadful sorry for the child."

"You ain't any sorer than I am," said Comfort's mother, and she wiped her eyes now and then, as she cleared away the breakfast dishes.

As for Comfort, she went on her way to school, looking as industriously and anxiously at the ground as if she were a little robin seeking for her daily food. Under the snowy blackberry vines

peered Comfort, under frozen twigs, and in the blue hollows of the snow, seeking, as it were, in the little secret places of nature for her own little secret of childish vanity and disobedience. It made no difference to her that it was not reasonable to look on that part of the road, since she would have lost the ring there. She had waited for a long time, and she determined to look everywhere.

It was very cold still, and when she came in sight of the school house, not a scholar was to be seen. Either they were not arrived or were huddling over the red-tipped sleds.

Comfort trudged past the school house and went down the road to the old Loomis place. She searched again every inch of the road, but there was no gleam of gold in its white-frozen surface. There was the cold sparkle of the frost crystals, and that was all.

Comfort went back. At the turn of that road she saw Matilda Stebbins coming down the other. The pink tip of Matilda's nose and her winking black eyes just appeared above her red tip.

"Hello!" she sung out, in a muffled voice.

"Hello!" responded Comfort, faintly. Matilda looked at her curiously when she came up. "What's the matter?" said she.

"Nothing," replied Comfort. "I thought you acted funny. What have you been up to that road for?" Comfort walked along beside Matilda in silence.

"What have you been up to that road for?" repeated Matilda.

"Won't you ever tell?" said Comfort.

"No, I won't. Honest and true, Black and Blue, Lay me down and cut me in two."

"Well, I've lost it!" Matilda knew at once what Comfort meant. "You ain't," she cried, stopping short and opening wide eyes of dismay at Comfort over the red tip.

"Yes, I have."

"Where'd you lose it?" "I felt my pocket after I got back to school yesterday, after we'd been up to the old Loomis house, and I couldn't find the ring."

"My!" said Matilda. Comfort gave a stifled sob. Matilda turned short around with a jerk. "Let's go up that road and hunt again," said she, "there's plenty of time before the bell rings. Come along, Comfort Pease."

So the two little girls went up the road, and hunted, but they did not find the ring. "Nobody would have picked it up and kept it, everybody round here is honest," said Matilda. "It's dreadfully funny."

Comfort went painfully under the folds of her mother's green shawl, as they went back.

tell you what I'll do. I'll ask my Uncle Jared to give me a gold dollar, and then I'll give it to you to buy a gold ring."

"I don't believe he will," sobbed Comfort.

"Yes, he will. He always gives me everything I ask him for. He thinks more of me than does of Rosy and Imogen, you know, because he was going to get married once, when he was young, and she died, and I look like her."

"Were you named after her?" inquired Comfort.

"No, her name was Ann Maria, but I look like her. Uncle Jared will give me a gold dollar, and I'll ask him to take us to Bolton in his sleigh Saturday afternoon, and then you can buy another ring. Don't you cry another minute, Comfort Pease."

And poor Comfort tried to keep the tears back, as the bell began to ring, and she and Matilda hastened to the schoolhouse.

Matilda put up her hand and whispered to her in school-time: "You come over to my house Saturday afternoon, and I'll get Uncle Jared to take us," she whispered, and Comfort nodded soberly. Comfort tried to learn her arithmetic lesson, but she could not remember the seven-multiplication table, and said in the class that five times seven were fifty-seven, and went to the foot. She cried at that, and felt a curious satisfaction in having something to cry for besides the loss of the ring.

Comfort did not look any more for the ring that day nor the next. The next day was Friday, and Matilda met her at school in the morning with an air of triumph. She plucked her hand deep in her pocket, and drew it out closed in a tight, pink fist. "Guess what I've got in here, Comfort Pease," said she. She unfolded her fingers a little at a time, until a gold dollar was visible in the hollow of her palm. "There, what did I tell you?" she said; "and he says he'll take us to Bolton, if he don't have to go to Ware to see about buying a horse. You come over tomorrow, right after dinner."

The next morning after breakfast Comfort, as if she might go over to Matilda's that afternoon. "Do you feel fit to go?" her mother said, with a keen look at her, Comfort said, with a keen look at her, Comfort

was pale and sober and did not have much appetite. He had struck her also her grandmother's manner toward her was a little odd, but she did not try to understand it.

"Yes, ma'am," said Comfort.

"What are you going to do over there?"

Comfort hesitated, a pink flush came on her face and neck, her mother's eyes upon her were sharper than ever.

"Matilda said maybe her Uncle Jared would take us a sleigh-ride to Bolton," she faltered.

"Well," said her mother, "if you're going a sleigh-ride, you'd better take some yarn stockings and pull on over your shoes, and wear my fur tipper. It's most too cold to go sleigh-riding, anyway."

Directly after dinner Comfort went over to Matilda Stebbins, with her mother's stone marten tipper around her neck, and the blue yarn stockings, to wear in the sleigh, under her arm.

But when she got to the Stebbins' house, Matilda met her at the door with a crestfallen air. "Only think," said she, "ain't it too bad?" Uncle Jared's had to go to Ware to buy the horse, and we can't go to Bolton."

Comfort looked at her piteously. "Guess I'd better go home," said she. But Matilda was gazing at her doubtfully. "Look here," said she.

"What's that?" "It ain't none of your business to Bolton. Mother's walked there and so has Imogen."

"Do you s'pose—we could?" "I don't believe it would hurt us one mite—say, I tell you what we can do—I'll take my sled and I'll drag you a spell, and then you can drag me, and that will rest both of us, anyhow."

"So it will," said Comfort.

CHAPTER V. But Matilda looked doubtful again. "There's only one thing," she said. "Mother ain't at home. She and Rosy went over to grandmother's to spend the day this morning and I can't ask her. I don't see how I can go without asking her exactly."

Comfort thought miserably: "What would Matilda Stebbins say if she knew I took that ring, when my mother told me not to?"

"Well," said Matilda, brightening. "I don't know but it will do just as well if I ask Imogen. Mother told me once if there was anything very important come up when she was away that I could ask Imogen."

Imogen was Matilda's oldest sister. She was almost eighteen and she was going to a party that night, and was hurrying to finish a beautiful crimson thibet dress to wear.

"Now, don't you talk to me and hinder me one moment. I've everything I can do to finish this dress to wear to the party," she said when Matilda and Comfort went into the sitting-room.

"Can't I go to Bolton with Comfort Pease, Imogen?" asked Matilda.

"It wouldn't hurt us one mite. Do let us go, Imogen." "Well, I'll tell you what you can do," said Imogen. "You can walk over there; I guess it won't hurt you to walk one way, and then you can ride over about half past 4. I'll give you some money."

"Oh! that's beautiful. Thank you, Imogen," cried Matilda gratefully. "Well, run along, and don't say anything over the wire," said Imogen, scowling over the crimson thibet; "wrap up warm."

When they started Matilda insisted upon dragging Comfort first in the sled. "I'll drag you as far as Dr. Hutchins," said she; "then you get off and drag me as far as the meeting house. I guess that's about even."

It was arduous, and it is probable the little girls were much longer reaching Bolton than they would have been had they traveled on their two sets of feet all the way, but they persuaded themselves otherwise.

"We can't be a mite—tired," panted Matilda, as she tugged Comfort over the last stretch; "for we each of us rode half the way, and a mile and a half ain't anything. You walk that every day to school and back."

"Yes, I do," asserted Comfort. She could not believe that she was tired, either, although every muscle in her body ached.

Bolton was a large town, and the people from all the neighboring villages went there to do their trading and shopping. There was a wide main street, with stores on each side, and that day it was full of sleighs and pungs and wood sleds, and there were so many people that Comfort felt frightened. She had never been to Bolton without her father or mother. "Just look at all the folks!" said she, and she had an uncomfortable feeling that they all stared at her suspiciously, although she did not see how they could know about the ring. But Matilda was bolder. "It's such a pleasant day, they're all out trading," said she. "Guess I'll storm tomorrow. Now we want to go to Gerrish's. I went there once with mother and Imogen to buy a silver spoon for Cousin Hannah Green, when she got married."

Comfort, trailing the sled behind her, started timidly after Matilda.

Gerrish's was a small store, but there was a large window full of watches, and chains, and clocks, and a man with spectacles sat behind it, mending watches.

The two little girls went in and stood at the counter, and a thin man with gray whiskers, who was Mr. Gerrish himself, came forward to wait upon them. Matilda nudged Comfort. "You ask him, it's your ring," she whispered.

But Comfort shook her head. She was almost ready to cry. "You'd ought to when I'm giving you the dollar," whispered Matilda, with another nudge. Mr. Gerrish stood waiting and he frowned a little; he was a nervous man. "Ask him," whispered Matilda, fiercely.

Suddenly Comfort turned herself about and ran out of Gerrish's with a great wall of inarticulate words about not wanting any ring. The door banged violently after her. Matilda staggered after her in a bewilderment. "If you girls don't want anything, you'd better stay out of doors with your sled," said he. And Matilda trembled and gathered up the sled rope, and the door banged after her. Then Mr. Gerrish said something to the man mending watches in the window, and went back to his desk in the rear of the store.

Matilda could just see Comfort running down the street toward home, and she ran after her. She could run faster than Comfort. As she got nearer she could see people turning and looking curiously after Comfort, and when she came up to her she saw she was crying.

"Why, you great baby, Comfort Pease," said she, "going along the road crying?"

Comfort sobbed harder, and people stared more and more curiously. Finally one stout woman in a black velvet bonnet stopped. "I hope you haven't done anything to hurt this other little girl?" she said suspiciously to Matilda.

"No, ma'am, I ain't," replied Matilda. "What's the matter, child?" said the woman in the black velvet bonnet to Comfort, and Comfort choked out something about losing her ring.

"Where did you lose it?" asked the woman. "I don't know," sobbed Comfort. "Well, you'd better go right home."

After Comfort was in bed and asleep that night, her elders talked the matter over. "I knew she would tell, finally," said Mrs. Pease, "but it's been a hard lesson for her, poor child, and she's all worn out; her long tramp to Bolton, too!"

"I most wish her Aunt Comfort hadn't been so dreadful careful about getting her a ring big enough to tell me of your own accord, and I'm glad you have, Comfort."

Then Comfort's mother carried her almost bodily back to the warm kitchen and set her before the fire to toast her feet while she made some cream toast for her supper.

Her grandmother had a peppermint in her pocket and she slid it into Comfort's hand. "Grandma knew she would tell, and she won't never do such a thing again, will she?" said she.

"No, ma'am," replied Comfort, and the peppermint in her mouth seemed to be the very flavor of peace and forgiveness.

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right on the sled and I'll drag you as far as the meeting house, and then you can drag me as far as the sawmill!"

Comfort huddled herself up on the sled in a miserable little bunch and Matilda dragged her. Her very back looked censorious to be real, but finally she turned around and said:

"The big girls were real mean, so there, and they pestered you dreadfully," said she. "Don't you cry any more, Comfort. Just you tell your mother all about it, and I don't believe she'll scold much. You can have this gold dollar, buy you another ring, anyway, if she'll let you."

The road home from Bolton seemed much longer than the road over had done, although the little girls hurried and dragged each other with fierce jerks.

"Now," said Matilda, when they reached her house at length, "I'll go home with you while you tell your mother if you want me, to Comfort. My mother's got home. I can see her head in the window. I'll run in and ask her."

"I'd just as lief go alone, I guess," replied Comfort, who was quite pale. "I'm real obliged to you, Matilda."

"Well, I'd just as lief go as not, if you want me," said Matilda. "I hope your mother won't say much. Good-by, Comfort."

"Good-by," returned Comfort. Then Matilda went into her house, and Comfort hurried home alone, down the snowy road in the deepening dusk. She kept thinking of that dreadful story which Matilda had read. Anxiety and remorse and the journey to Bolton had almost exhausted poor little Comfort Pease. She hurried as long as she could, but her feet felt like lead and it seemed to her that she should never reach home. But when at last she came in sight of the lighted kitchen windows her heart gave a joyful leap, for she saw her mother's figure moving behind the door, and that Matilda's story was not true to her case.

When she reached the door she leaned against it a minute. She was out of breath and her knees seemed failing under her. Then she opened the door and went in.

Her father and mother and grandmother were all there and they turned and stared at her.

"Comfort Pease," cried her mother, "What's the matter?"

"You didn't fall down or anything, did you?" asked her grandmother.

Then Comfort burst out with a great sob of confession. "I took it," she gasped. "I took my gold ring, that Aunt Comfort gave me for her name—and I wore it to school, and Miss Tabitha pinned it in my pocket, and I lost it. And Matilda she gave me the gold dollar her Uncle Jared gave her to buy me another, and we walked a mile and a half apiece to Bolton, to buy it in Gerrish's and I couldn't—and I was afraid something had happened to mother, and I'm sorry." Then Comfort sobbed until her very sobs seemed falling her.

Her father wiped his eyes. "Don't let that child cry that way, Em'ly," said he to Mrs. Pease, then he turned to Comfort. "Don't you feel so bad, Comfort?" he coaxed, "father'll get you some peppermints when he goes down to the store tonight." Comfort's father gave her a hard pat on her head, and then he went out of the room with something that sounded like an echo of Comfort's own sobs.

"Look here, Comfort," said she, and Comfort looked. There in its own compartment lay the ring. "Miss Tabitha Hanks found it in the road, and she thought you had taken it unbeknownst to me, and so she brought it here," explained her mother. "I didn't let you know because I wanted to see if you would let me and give me enough to tell me of your own accord, and I'm glad you have, Comfort."

Then Comfort's mother carried her almost bodily back to the warm kitchen and set her before the fire to toast her feet while she made some cream toast for her supper.

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