

Aunt Kipp

By

Louisa May Alcott

"Children and fools speak the truth."

I

"What's that sigh for, Polly dear?" "I'm tired, mother, tired of working and waiting. If I'm ever going to have any fun, I want it now while I can enjoy it."

"You shouldn't wait another hour if I could have my way; but you know how helpless I am;" and poor Mrs. Snow sighed dolefully, as she glanced about the dingy room and pretty Mary turning her faded gown for the second time.

"If Aunt Kipp would give us the money she is always talking about, instead of waiting till she dies, we should be so comfortable. She is a dreadful bore, for she lives in such terror of dropping dead with her heart-complaint that she doesn't take any pleasure in life herself or let any one else; so the sooner she goes the better for all of us," said Polly, in a desperate tone; for things looked very black to her just then.

"My dear, don't say that," began her mother, mildly shocked; but a bluff little voice broke in with the forcible remark,--

"She's everlastingly telling me never to put off till to-morrow what can be done to-day; next time she comes I'll remind her of that, and ask her, if she is going to die, why she doesn't do it?"

"Toady! you're a wicked, disrespectful boy; never let me hear you say such a thing again about your dear Aunt Kipp."

"She isn't dear! You know we all hate her, and you are more afraid of her than you are of spiders,--so now."

The young personage whose proper name had been corrupted into Toady, was a small boy of ten or eleven, apple-cheeked, round-eyed, and curly-headed; arrayed in well-worn, gray knickerbockers, profusely adorned with paint, glue, and shreds of cotton. Perched on a high stool, at an isolated table in a state of chaos, he was absorbed in making a boat, entirely oblivious of the racking tooth-ache which had been his excuse for staying from school. As cool, saucy, hard-handed, and soft-hearted a little specimen of young America was Toady as you would care to see; a tyrant at home, a rebel at school, a sworn foe to law, order, and Aunt Kipp. This young person was regarded as a reprobate by all but his mother, sister, and sister's sweetheart, Van Bahr Lamb. Having been, through much anguish of flesh and spirit, taught that lying was a deadly sin, Toady rushed to the other extreme, and bolted out the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, at all times and places, with a startling abruptness that brought wrath and dismay upon his friends and relatives.

"It's wicked to fib; you've whipped that into me and you can't rub it out," he was wont to say, with vivid recollection of the past tingling in the chubby portions of his frame.

"Mind your chips, Toady, and take care what you say to Aunt Kipp, or you'll be as poor as a little rat all the days of your life," said Polly, warningly.

"I don't want her old money, and I'll tell her so if she bothers me about it. I shall go into business with Van and take care of the whole lot; so don't you preach, Polly," returned Toady, with as much dignity as was compatible with a great dab of glue on the end of his snub nose.

"Mother, did aunt say anything about coming this week?" asked Polly, after a pause of intense thought over a breadth with three darns, two spots, and a burn.

"Yes; she wrote that she was too feeble to come at present, as she had such dreadful palpitations she didn't dare stir from her room. So we are quite safe for the next week at least, and--bless my soul, there she is now!"

Mrs. Snow clasped her hands with a gesture of dismay, and sat as if transfixed by the spectacle of a ponderous lady, in an awe-inspiring bonnet, who came walking slowly down the street. Polly gave a groan, and pulled a bright ribbon from her hair. Toady muttered, "Oh, bother!" and vainly attempted to polish up his countenance with a fragmentary pocket-handkerchief.

"Nothing but salt fish for dinner," wailed Mrs. Snow, as the shadow of the coming event fell upon her.

"Van will make a fool of himself, and ruin everything," sighed Polly, glancing at the ring on her finger.

"I know she'll kiss me; she never will let a fellow alone," growled Toady, scowling darkly.

The garden gate clashed, dust flew from the door-mat, a heavy step echoed in the hall, an imperious voice called "Sophy!" and Aunt Kipp entered with a flourish of trumpets, for Toady blew a blast through his fingers which made the bows totter on her bonnet.

"My dear aunt, I'm very glad to see you," murmured Mrs. Snow, advancing with a smile of welcome; for though as weak as water gruel, she was as kind-hearted a little woman as ever lived.

"What a fib that was!" said Toady, sotto voce.

"We were just saying we were afraid you wouldn't"--began Mary, when a warning, "Mind now, Polly," caused her to stop short and busy herself with the newcomer's bag and umbrella.

"I changed my mind. Theodore, come and kiss me," answered Aunt Kipp, briefly.

"Yes'm," was the plaintive reply, and, closing his eyes, Toady awaited his fate with fortitude.

But the dreaded salute did not come, for Aunt Kipp exclaimed in alarm,--

"Mercy on us! has the boy got the plague?"

"No'm, it's paint, and dirt, and glue, and it won't come off," said Toady, stroking his variegated countenance with grateful admiration for the stains that saved him.

"Go and wash this moment, sir. Thank Heaven, I've got no boys," cried Aunt Kipp. as if boys were some virulent disease which she had narrowly escaped.

With a hasty peck at the lips of her two elder relatives, the old lady seated herself, and slowly removed the awful bonnet, which in shape and hue much resembled a hearse hung with black crape.

"I'm glad you are better," said Mary, reverently receiving the funereal head-gear.

"I'm not better," cut in Aunt Kipp. "I'm worse, much worse; my days are numbered; I stand on the brink of the tomb, and may drop at any moment."

Toady's face was a study, as he glanced up at the old lady's florid countenance, down at the floor, as if in search of the above-mentioned "brink," and looked unaffectedly anxious to see her drop. "Why don't you, then?" was on his lips; but a frown from Polly restrained him, and he sat himself down on the rug to contemplate the corpulent victim.

"Have a cup of tea, aunt?" said Mrs. Snow.

"I will."

"Lie down and rest a little," suggested Polly.

"I won't."

"Can we do anything for you?" said both.

"Take my things away, and have dinner early."

Both departed to perform these behests, and, leaning back in her chair, Aunt Kipp reposed.

"I say, what's a bore?" asked Toady from the rug, where he sat rocking meditatively to and fro, holding on by his shoe-strings.

"It's a kind of a pig, very fierce, and folks are afraid of 'em," said Aunt Kipp, whose knowledge of Natural History was limited.

"Good for Polly! so you are!" sung out the boy, with the hearty child's laugh so pleasant to most ears.

"What do you mean, sir?" demanded the old lady, irefully poking at him with her umbrella.

"Why, Polly said you were a bore," explained Toady, with artless frankness. "You are fat, you know, and fierce sometimes, and folks are afraid of you. Good, wasn't it?"

"Very! Mary is a nice, grateful, respectful, loving niece, and I shan't forget her, she may depend on that," and Aunt Kipp laughed grimly.

"May she? well, that's jolly now. She was afraid you wouldn't give her the money; so I'll tell her it's all right;" and innocent Toady nodded approvingly.

"Oh, she expects some of my money, does she?"

"Course she does; ain't you always saying you'll remember us in your will, because father was your favorite nephew, and all that? I'll tell you a secret, if you won't let Polly know I spoke first. You'll find it out to-night, for you 'd see Van and she were sweethearts in a minute."

"Sweethearts?" cried Aunt Kipp, turning red in the face.

"Yes'm. Van settled it last week, and Polly's been so happy ever since. Mother likes it, and I like it, for I'm fond of Van, though I do call him Baa-baa, because he looks like a sheep. We all like it, and we 'd all say so, if we were not afraid of you. Mother and Polly, I mean; of course we men don't mind, but we don't want a fuss. You won't make one, will you, now?"

Anything more expressive of brotherly good-will, persuasive frankness, and a placid consciousness of having "fixed it," than Toady's dirty little face, it would be hard to find. Aunt Kipp eyed him so fiercely that even before she spoke a dim suspicion that something was wrong began to dawn on his too-confiding soul.

"I don't like it, and I'll put a stop to it. I won't have any ridiculous baa-baas in my family. If Mary counts on my money to begin housekeeping with, she'll

find herself mistaken; for not one penny shall she have, married or single, and you may tell her so."

Toady was so taken aback by this explosion that he let go his shoe-strings, fell over with a crash, and lay flat, with shovel and tongs spread upon him like a pall. In rushed Mrs. Snow and Polly, to find the boy's spirits quite quenched, for once, and Aunt Kipp in a towering passion. It all came out in one overwhelming flood of words, and Toady fled from the storm to wander round the house, a prey to the deepest remorse. The meekness of that boy at dinner-time was so angelic that Mrs. Snow would have feared speedy translation for him, if she had not been very angry. Polly's red eyes, and Aunt Kipp's griffinesque expression of countenance, weighed upon his soul so heavily, that even roly-poly pudding failed to assuage his trouble, and, taking his mother into the china-closet, he anxiously inquired "if it was all up with Polly?"

"I'm afraid so, for aunt vows she will make a new will to-morrow, and leave every penny to the Charitable Rag-bag Society," sighed Mrs. Snow.

"I didn't mean to do it, I truly didn't! I thought I'd just 'give her a hint,' as you say. She looked all right, and laughed when I told her about being a bore, and I thought she liked it. If she was a man, I'd thrash her for making Polly cry;" and Toady shook his fist at Aunt Kipp's umbrella, which was an immense relief to his perturbed spirit.

"Bless the boy! I do believe he would!" cried Mrs. Snow, watching the little turkey-cock with maternal pride. "You can't do that: so just be careful and not make any more mischief, dear."

"I'll try, mother; but I'm always getting into scrapes with Aunt Kipp. She's worse than measles, any day,--such an old aggrawater! Van's coming this afternoon, won't he make her pleasant again?"

"Oh, dear, no! He will probably make things ten times worse, he's so bashful and queer. I'm afraid our last chance is gone, deary, and we must rub along as we have done."

One sniff of emotion burst from Toady, and for a moment he laid his head in the knife-tray, overcome with disappointment and regret. But scorning to yield to unmanly tears, he was soon himself again. Thrusting his beloved jackknife, with three blades and a file, into Polly's hand, he whispered, brokenly,--

"Keep it forever 'n' ever; I'm awful sorry!" Then, feeling that the magnitude of this sacrifice atoned for everything, he went to watch for Van,--the forlorn hope to which he now clung.

II

"Sophy, I'm surprised at your want of judgment. Do you really mean to let your girl marry this Lamb? Why, the man's a fool!" began Aunt Kipp, after dinner, by way of opening a pleasant conversation with her relatives.

"Dear me, aunt! how can you know that, when you never saw him?" mildly returned Mrs. Snow.

"I've heard of him, and that's enough for me. I've a deal of penetration in judging character, and I tell you Van Bahr Lamb is a fool."

The amiable old lady thought this would rouse Polly, against whom her anger still burned hotly. But Polly also possessed penetration; and, well knowing that contradiction would delight Aunt Kipp, she completely took the wind out of her sails, by coolly remarking,--

"I like fools."

"Bless my heart! what does the girl mean?" ejaculated Aunt Kipp.

"Just what I say. If Van is a fool, I prefer simpletons to wiseacres. I know he is shy and awkward, and does absurd things now and then. But I also know that he has the kindest heart that ever was; is unselfish, faithful and loving; that he took good care of his old parents till they died, and never thought of himself while they needed him. He loves me dearly; will wait for me a dozen years, if I say so, and work all his days to make me happy. He's a help and comfort to mother, a good friend to Toady, and I love and respect and am proud of him, though you do say he is a fool," cried Polly heartily.

"And you insist on marrying him?" demanded Aunt Kipp.

"Yes, I do."

"Then I wish a carriage immediately," was the somewhat irrelevant reply.

"Why, aunt, you don't mean to go so soon?" cried Mrs. Snow, with a reproachful glance at the rebellious Polly.

"Far from it. I wish to see Judge Banks about altering my will," was the awful answer.

Polly's face fell; her mother gave a despairing sigh; Toady, who had hovered about the door, uttered a suppressed whistle of dismay; and Mrs. Kipp looked about her with vengeful satisfaction.

"Get the big carryall and old Bob, so the boy can drive, and all of you come; the trip will do you good."

It was like Aunt Kipp to invite her poor relations to go and "nip their own noses off," as she elegantly expressed it. It was a party of pleasure that just suited her, for all the fun was on her side. She grew affable at once, was quite pressing in her invitation, regretted that Sophy was too busy to go, praised Polly's hat; and professed herself quite satisfied with "that dear boy" for a driver. The "dear boy" distorted his young countenance frightfully behind her back, but found a balm for every wound in the delight of being commander of the expedition.

The big carryall appeared, and, with much creaking and swaying Mrs. Kipp was got into the back seat, where the big bonnet gloomed like a thunder-cloud. Polly, in a high state of indignation, which only made her look ten times prettier, sat in front with Toady, who was a sight to see as he drove off with his short legs planted against the boot, his elbows squared, and the big whip scientifically cracking now and then. Away they went, leaving poor Mrs. Snow to bewail herself dismally after she had smiled and nodded them out of sight.

"Don't go over any bridges or railroad crossings or by any saw-mills," said the old lady, as if the town could be suddenly remodelled to suit her taste.

"Yes'm," returned Toady, with a crack which would have done honor to a French postilion.

It was a fine day, and the young people would have enjoyed the ride in spite of the breakers ahead, if Aunt Kipp hadn't entertained the girl with a glowing account of the splendors of her own wedding, and aggravated the boy by frequent pokes and directions in the art of driving, of which she was of course, profoundly ignorant. Polly couldn't restrain a tear or two, in thinking of her own poor little prospects, and Toady was goaded to desperation.

"I'll give her a regular shaking up; it'll make her hold her tongue and do her good," he said to himself, as a stony hill sloped temptingly before him.

A sly chuck, and some mysterious manoeuvre with the reins, and Bob started off at a brisk trot, as if he objected to the old lady as much as her mischievous little nephew.

"Hold him in! Keep a taut rein! Lord 'a mercy, he's running away!" shrieked Aunt Kipp, or tried to shriek, for the bouncing and bumping jerked the words out of her mouth with ludicrous incoherency.

"I am holding him, but he will go," said Toady, with a wicked triumph in his eye as he glanced back at Polly.

The next minute the words were quite true; for, as he spoke, two or three distracted hens flew squalling over the wall and scattered about, under, over, and before the horse, as only distracted hens could do. It was too much for Bob's nerves; and, taking matters into his own hands, or feet, rather, he broke into a run, and rattled the old lady over the stones with a velocity which left her speechless.

Polly laughed, and Toady chuckled, as they caught glimpses of the awful bonnet vibrating wildly in the background, and felt the frantic clutchings of the old lady's hands. But both grew sober as a shrill car-whistle sounded not far off; and Bob, as if possessed by an evil spirit, turned suddenly into the road that led to the railroad crossing.

"That will do, Toady; now pull up, for we can't get over in time," said Polly, glancing anxiously toward the rapidly approaching puffs of white smoke.

"I can't, Polly,--I really can't," cried the boy, tugging with all his might, and beginning to look scared.

Polly lent her aid; but Bob scarcely seemed to feel it, for he had been a racer once, and when his blood was up he was hard to handle. His own good sense might have checked him, if Aunt Kipp hadn't unfortunately recovered her voice at this crisis, and uttered a succession of the shrillest screams

that ever saluted mortal ears. With a snort and a bound Bob dashed straight on toward the crossing, as the train appeared round the bend.

"Let me out! Let me out! Jump! Jump!" shrieked Aunt Kipp, thrusting her head out of the window, while she fumbled madly for the door-handle.

"O Toady, save us! save us!" gasped Polly, losing her presence of mind, and dropping the reins to cling to her brother, with a woman's instinctive faith in the stronger sex.

But Toady held on manfully, though his arms were nearly pulled off, for "Never say die," was his motto, and the plucky little lad wouldn't show fear before the women.

"Don't howl; we'll do it! Hi, Bob!" and with a savage slash of the whip, an exciting cry, a terrible reeling and rattling, they did do it; for Bob cleared the track at a breakneck pace, just in time for the train to sweep swiftly by behind them.

Aunt Kipp dropped in a heap, Polly looked up at her brother, with a look which he never forgot; and Toady tried to say, stoutly, "It's all right!" with lips that were white and dry in spite of himself.

"We shall smash up at the bridge," he muttered, as they tore through the town, where every one obligingly shouted, waved their hats, and danced about on the sidewalks, doing nothing but add to Bob's fright and the party's danger. But Toady was wrong,—they did not smash up at the bridge; for, before they reached the perilous spot, one man had the sense to fly straight at the horse's head and hold on till the momentary check enabled others to lend a hand.

The instant they were safe, Polly, like a regular heroine, threw herself into the arms of her dishevelled preserver, who of course was Van, and would have refreshed herself with hysterics if the sight of Toady hadn't steadied

her. The boy sat as stiff and rigid as a wooden figure till they took the reins from him; then all the strength seemed to go out of him, and he leaned against his sister, as white and trembling as she, whispering with an irrepressible sob,--

"O Polly, wasn't it horrid? Tell mother I stood by you like a man. Do tell her that!"

If any one had had time or heart to laugh, they certainly would have done it when, after much groping, heaving, and hoisting. Mrs. Kipp was extricated and restored to consciousness; for a more ludicrously deplorable spectacle was seldom seen. Quite unhurt, though much shaken, the old lady insisted on believing herself to be dying, and kept the town in a ferment till three doctors had pronounced her perfectly well able to go home. Then the perversity of her nature induced her to comply, that she might have the satisfaction of dying on the way, and proving herself in the right.

Unfortunately she did not expire, but, having safely arrived, went to bed in high dudgeon, and led Polly and her mother a sad life of it for two weary days. Having heard of Toady's gallant behavior, she solemnly ordered him up to receive her blessing. But the sight of Aunt Kipp's rubicund visage, surrounded by the stiff frills of an immense nightcap, caused the irreverent boy to explode with laughter in his handkerchief, and to be hustled away by his mother before Aunt Kipp discovered the true cause of his convulsed appearance.

"Ah! poor dear, his feelings are too much for him. He sees my doom in my face, and is overcome by what you refuse to believe. I shan't forget that boy's devotion. Now leave me to the meditations befitting these solemn hours."

Mrs. Snow retired, and Aunt Kipp tried to sleep; but the murmur of voices, and the sound of stifled laughter in the next room disturbed her repose.

"They are rejoicing over my approaching end, knowing that I haven't changed my will. Mercenary creatures, don't exult too soon! there's time

yet," she muttered; and presently, unable to control her curiosity, she crept out of bed to listen and peep through the keyhole.

Van Bahr Lamb did look rather like a sheep. He had a blond curly head, a long face, pale, mild eyes, a plaintive voice, and a general expression of innocent timidity strongly suggestive of animated mutton. But Baa-baa was a "trump," as Toady emphatically declared, and though every one laughed at him, every one liked him, and that is more than can be said of many saints and sages. He adored Polly, was dutifully kind to her mother, and had stood by T. Snow, Jr., in many an hour of tribulation with fraternal fidelity. Though he had long blushed, sighed, and cast sheep's eyes at the idol of his affections, only till lately had he dared to bleat forth his passion. Polly loved him because she couldn't help it; but she was proud, and wouldn't marry till Aunt Kipp's money was hers, or at least a sure prospect of it; and now even the prospect of a prospect was destroyed by that irrepressible Toady. They were talking of this as the old lady suspected, and of course the following conversation afforded her intense satisfaction.

"It's a shame to torment us as she does, knowing how poor we are and how happy a little of her money would make us. I'm tired of being a slave to a cruel old woman just because she's rich. If it was not for mother, I declare I'd wash my hands of her entirely, and do the best I could for myself."

"Hooray for Polly! I always said let her money go and be jolly without it," cried Toady, who, in his character of wounded hero, reposed with a lordly air on the sofa, enjoying the fragrance of the opodeldoc with which his strained wrists were bandaged.

"It's on your account, children, that I bear with aunt's temper as I do. I don't want anything for myself, but I really think she owes it to your dear father, who was devoted to her while he lived, to provide for his children when he couldn't;" after which remarkably spirited speech for her, Mrs. Snow dropped a tear, and stitched away on a small trouser-leg which was suffering from a complicated compound fracture.

"Don't you worry about me, mother; I'll take care of myself and you too," remarked Toady, with the cheery belief in impossibilities which makes youth so charming.

"Now, Van, tell us what to do, for things have come to such a pass that we must either break away altogether or be galley-slaves as long as Aunt Kipp lives," said Polly, who was a good deal excited about the matter.

"Well, really, my dear, I don't know," hesitated Van, who did know what he wanted, but thought it might be selfish to urge it. "Have you tried to soften your aunt's heart?" he asked, after a moment's meditation.

"Good gracious, Van, she hasn't got any," cried Polly, who firmly believed it.

"It's hossified," thoughtfully remarked Toady, quite unconscious of any approach to a joke till every one giggled.

"You've had hossification enough for one while, my lad," laughed Van. "Well, Polly, if the old lady has no heart you'd better let her go, for people without hearts are not worth much."

"That's a beautiful remark, Van, and a wise one. I just wish she could hear you make it, for she called you a fool," said Polly, irefully.

"Did she? Well, I don't mind, I'm used to it," returned Van, placidly; and so he was, for Polly called him a goose every day of her life, and he enjoyed it immensely.

"Then you think, dear, if we stopped worrying about aunt and her money, and worked instead of waiting, that we shouldn't be any poorer and might be a great deal happier than we are now?" asked Polly, making a pretty little tableau as she put her hand through Van's arm and looked up at him with

as much love, respect, and reliance as if he had been six feet tall, with the face of an Apollo and the manners of a Chesterfield.

"Yes, my dear, I do, for it has troubled me a good deal to see you so badgered by that very uncomfortable old lady. Independence is a very nice thing, and poverty isn't half as bad as this sort of slavery. But you are not going to be poor, nor worry about anything. We'll just be married and take mother and Toady home and be as jolly as grigs, and never think of Mrs. K. again,--unless she loses her fortune, or gets sick, or comes to grief in any way. We'd lend her a hand then, wouldn't we, Polly?" and Van's mild face was pleasant to behold as he made the kindly proposition.

"Well, we'd think of it," said Polly, trying not to relent, but feeling that she was going very fast.

"Let's do it!" cried Toady, fired with the thought of privy conspiracy and rebellion. "Mother would be so comfortable with Polly, and I'd help Van in the store, when I've learned that confounded multiplication table," he added with a groan; "and if Aunt Kipp comes a visiting, we'll just say 'Not at home,' and let her trot off again."

"It sounds very nice, but aunt will be dreadfully offended and I don't wish to be ungrateful," said Mrs. Snow, brightening visibly.

"There's no ingratitude about it," cried Van. "She might have done everything to make you love, and respect, and admire her, and been a happy, useful, motherly, old soul; but she didn't choose to, and now she must take the consequences. No one cares for her, because she cares for nobody; her money's the plague of her life, and not a single heart will ache when she dies."

"Poor Aunt Kipp!" said Polly, softly.

Mrs. Snow echoed the words, and for a moment all thought pitifully of the woman whose life had given so little happiness, whose age had won so little reverence, and whose death would cause so little regret. Even Toady had a kind thought for her, as he broke the silence, saying soberly,--

"You'd better put tails on my jackets, mother; then the next time we get run away with, Aunt Kipp will have something to hold on by."

It was impossible to help laughing at the recollection of the old lady clutching at the boy till he had hardly a button left, and at the paternal air with which he now proposed a much-desired change of costume, as if intent on Aunt Kipp's future accommodation.

Under cover of the laugh, the old lady stole back to bed, wide awake, and with subjects enough to meditate upon now. The shaking up had certainly done her good, for somehow the few virtues she possessed came to the surface, and the mental shower-bath just received had produced a salutary change. Polly wouldn't have doubted her aunt's possession of a heart, if she could have known the pain and loneliness that made it ache, as the old woman crept away; and Toady wouldn't have laughed if he had seen the tears on the face, between the big frills, as Aunt Kipp laid it on the pillow, muttering, drearily,--

"I might have been a happy, useful woman, but I didn't choose to, and now it's too late."

It was too late to be all she might have been, for the work of seventy selfish years couldn't be undone in a minute. But with regret, rose the sincere wish to earn a little love before the end came, and the old perversity gave a relish to the reformation, for even while she resolved to do the just and generous thing, she said to herself,--

"They say I've got no heart; I'll show 'em that I have: they don't want my money; I'll make 'em take it: they turn their backs on me; I'll just render myself so useful and agreeable that they can't do without me."

III

Aunt Kipp sat bolt upright in the parlor, hemming a small handkerchief, adorned with a red ship, surrounded by a border of green monkeys. Toady suspected that this elegant article of dress was intended for him, and yearned to possess it; so, taking advantage of his mother's and Polly's absence, he strolled into the room, and, seating himself on a high, hard chair, folded his hands, crossed his legs, and asked for a story with the thirsting-for-knowledge air which little boys wear in the moral story-books.

Now Aunt Kipp had one soft place in her heart, though it was partially ossified, as she very truly declared, and Toady was enshrined therein. She thought there never was such a child, and loved him as she had done his father before him, though the rack wouldn't have forced her to confess it. She scolded, snubbed, and predicted he'd come to a bad end in public; but she forgave his naughtiest pranks, always brought him something when she came, and privately intended to make his future comfortable with half of her fortune. There was a dash and daring, a generosity and integrity, about the little fellow, that charmed her. Sophy was weak and low-spirited, Polly pretty and headstrong, and Aunt Kipp didn't think much of either of them; but Toady defied, distracted, and delighted her, and to Toady she clung, as the one sunshiny thing in her sour, selfish old age.

When he made his demure request, she looked at him, and her eyes began to twinkle, for the child's purpose was plainly seen in the loving glances cast upon the pictorial pocket-handkerchief.

"A story? Yes, I'll tell you one about a little boy who had a kind old--ahem!--grandma. She was rich, and hadn't made up her mind who she'd leave her money to. She was fond of the boy,--a deal fonder than he deserved,--for he was as mischievous a monkey as any that ever lived in a tree, with a curly tail. He put pepper in her snuff-box,"--here Toady turned scarlett,--"he cut up her bestt frisette to make a mane for his rocking-horse,"--Toady opened his mouth impulsively, but shut it again without betraying himself--"he repeated rude things to her, and called her 'an old aggrewater,'"--here Toady wriggled in his chair, and gave a little gasp.

"If you are tired I won't go on," observed Aunt Kipp, mildly.

"I'm not tired, 'm; it's a very interesting story," replied Toady, with a gravity that nearly upset the old lady.

"Well, in spite of all this, that kind, good, forgiving grandma left that bad boy twenty thousand dollars when she died. What do you think of that?" asked Aunt Kipp, pausing suddenly with her sharp eye on him.

"I--I think she was a regular dear," cried Toady, holding on to the chair with both hands, as if that climax rather took him off his legs.

"And what did the boy do about it?" continued Aunt Kipp, curiously.

"He bought a velocipede, and gave his sister half, and paid his mother's rent, and put a splendid marble cherakin over the old lady, and had a jolly good time, and--"

"What in the world is a cherakin?" laughed Aunt Kipp, as Toady paused for breath.

"Why, don't you know? It's a angel crying, or pointing up, or flapping his wings. They have them over graves; and I'll give you the biggest one I can find when you die. But I'm not in a very great hurry to have you."

"Thankee, dear; I'm in no hurry, myself. But, Toady, the boy did wrong in giving his sister half; she didn't deserve any; and the grandma left word she wasn't to have a penny of it."

"Really?" cried the boy, with a troubled face.

"Yes, really. If he gave her any he lost it all; the old lady said so. Now what do you think?" asked Aunt Kipp, who found it impossible to pardon Polly,--perhaps because she was young, and pretty, and much beloved.

Toady's eyes kindled, and his red cheeks grew redder still, as he cried out defiantly,--

"I think she was a selfish pig,--don't you?"

"No, I don't, sir; and I'm sure that little boy wasn't such a fool as to lose the money. He minded his grandma's wishes, and kept it all."

"No, he didn't," roared Toady, tumbling off his chair in great excitement. "He just threw it out a winder, and smashed the old cherakin all to bits."

Aunt Kipp dropped her work with a shrill squeak, for she thought the boy was dangerous, as he stood before her, sparring away at nothing as the only vent for his indignation.

"It isn't an interesting story," he cried; "and I won't hear any more; and I won't have your money if I mayn't go halves with Polly; and I'll work to earn more than that, and we'll all be jolly together, and you may give your twenty thousand to the old rag-bags, and so I tell you, Aunt Kipp."

"Why, Toady, my boy, what's the matter?" cried a mild voice at the door, as young Lamb came trotting up to the rescue.

"Never you mind, Baa-baa; I shan't do it; and it's a mean shame Polly can't have half; then she could marry you and be so happy," blubbered Toady, running to try to hide his tears of disappointment in the coat-skirts of his friend.

"Mr. Lamb, I suppose you are that misguided young man?" said Aunt Kipp, as if it was a personal insult to herself.

"Van Bahr Lamb, ma'am, if you please. Yes, thank you," murmured Baa-Baa, bowing, blushing, and rumpling his curly fleece in bashful trepidation.

"Don't thank me," cried the old lady. "I'm not going to give you anything,--far from it. I object to you altogether. What business have you to come courting my niece?"

"Because I love her, ma'am," returned Van, with unexpected spirit.

"No, you don't; you want her money, or rather my money. She depends on it; but you'll both be disappointed, for she won't have a penny of it," cried Aunt Kipp, who, in spite of her good resolutions, found it impossible to be amiable all at once.

"I'm glad of it!" burst out Van, indignant at her accusation. "I didn't want Polly for the money; I always doubted if she got it; and I never wished her to make herself a slave to anybody. I've got enough for all, if we're careful; and when my share of the Van Bahr property comes, we shall live in clover."

"What's that? What property are you talking of?" demanded Aunt Kipp, pricking up her ears.

"The great Van Bahr estate, ma'am. There has been a long lawsuit about it, but it's nearly settled, and there isn't much doubt that we shall get it. I am the last of our branch, and my share will be a large one."

"Oh, indeed! I wish you joy," said Aunt Kipp, with sudden affability; for she adored wealth, like a few other persons in the world. "But suppose you don't get it, how then?"

"Then I shall try to be contented with my salary of two thousand, and make Polly as happy as I can. Money doesn't always make people happy or agreeable, I find." And Van looked at Aunt Kipp in a way that would have made her hair stand erect if she had possessed any. She stared at him a moment, then, obeying one of the odd whims that made an irascible weathercock of her, she said, abruptly,--

"If you had capital should you go into business for yourself, Mr. Lambkin?"

"Yes, ma'am, at once," replied Van, promptly.

"Suppose you lost the Van Bahr money, and some one offered you a tidy little sum to start with, would you take it?"

"It would depend upon who made the offer, ma'am," said Van, looking more like a sheep than ever, as he stood staring in blank surprise.

"Suppose it was me, wouldn't you take it?" asked Aunt Kipp, blandly, for the new fancy pleased her.

"No, thank you, ma'am," said Van, decidedly.

"And why not, pray?" cried the old lady, with a shrillness that made him jump, and Toady back to the door precipitately.

"Because, if you'll excuse my speaking plainly, I think you owe anything you may have to spare to your niece, Mrs. Snow;" and, having freed his mind, Van joined Toady, ready to fly if necessary.

"You're an idiot, sir," began Aunt Kipp, in a rage again.

"Thank you, ma'am." And Van actually laughed and bowed in return for the compliment.

"Hold your tongue, sir," snapped the old lady. "You're a fool and Sophy is another. She's no strength of mind, no sense about anything; and would make ducks and drakes of my money in less than no time if I gave it to her, as I've thought of doing."

"Mrs. Kipp, you forget who you are speaking to. Mrs. Snow's sons love and respect her if you don't, and they won't hear anything untrue or unkind said of a good woman, a devoted mother, and an almost friendless widow."

Van wasn't a dignified man at all, but as he said that with a sudden flash of his mild eyes, there was something in his face and manner that daunted Aunt Kipp more than the small fist belligerently shaken at her from behind the sofa. The poor old soul was cross, and worried, and ashamed of herself, and being as feeble-minded as Sophy in many respects, she suddenly burst into tears, and, covering her face with the gay handkerchief, cried as if bent on floating the red ship in a sea of salt water without delay.

"I'm a poor, lonely, abused old woman," she moaned, with a green monkey at each eye. "No one loves me, or minds me, or thanks me when I want to help 'em. My money's only a worryment and a burden, and I don't know what to do with it, for people I don't want to leave it to ought to have it, and people I do like won't take it. Oh, deary me, what shall I do! what shall I do!"

"Shall I tell you, ma'am?" asked Van, gently, for, though she was a very provoking old lady, he pitied and wished to help her.

A nod and a gurgle seemed to give consent, and, boldly advancing, Van said, with blush and a stammer, but a very hearty voice,--

"I think, ma'am, if you'd do the right thing with your money you'd be at ease and find it saved a deal of worry all round. Give it to Mrs. Snow; she deserves it, poor lady, for she's had a hard time, and done her duty faithfully. Don't wait till you are--that is, till you--well, till you in point of fact die, ma'am. Give it now, and enjoy the happiness it will make. Give it kindly, let them see you're glad to do it, and I am sure you'll find them grateful; I'm sure you won't be lonely any more, or feel that you are not loved and thanked. Try it, ma'am, just try it," cried Van, getting excited by the picture he drew. "And I give you my word I'll do my best to respect and love you like a son, ma'am."

He knew that he was promising a great deal, but for Polly's sake he felt that he could make even that Herculean effort. Aunt Kipp was surprised and touched; but the contrary old lady couldn't make up her mind to yield so soon, and wouldn't have done it if Toady hadn't taken her by storm. Having a truly masculine horror of tears, a very tender heart under his tailless jacket, and being much "tumbled up and down in his own mind" by the events of the week, the poor little lad felt nerved to attempt any novel enterprise, even that of voluntarily embracing Aunt Kipp. First a grimy little hand came on her shoulder, as she sat sniffing behind the handkerchief; then, peeping out, she saw an apple-cheeked face very near her own, with eyes full of pity, penitence, and affection; and then she heard a choky little voice say earnestly,--

"Don't cry, aunty; I'm sorry I was rude. Please be good to Mother and Polly, and I'll love and take care of you, and stand by you all my life. Yes, I'll--I'll kiss you, I will, by George!" And with one promiscuous plunge the Spartan boy cast himself into her arms.

That finished Aunt Kipp; she hugged him dose, and cried out with a salute that went off like a pistol-shot,--

"Oh, my dear, my dear! this is better than a dozen cherakins!"

When Toady emerged, somewhat flushed and tumbled, Mrs. Snow, Polly, and Van were looking on with faces full of wonder, doubt, and satisfaction. To be an object of interest was agreeable to Aunt Kipp; and, as her old heart was really softened, she met them with a gracious smile, and extended the olive-branch generally.

"Sophy, I shall give my money to you at once and entirely, only asking that you'll let me stay with you when Polly's gone. I'll do my best to be agreeable, and you'll bear with me because I'm a cranky, solitary old woman, and I loved your husband."

Mrs. Snow hugged her on the spot, and gushed, of course, murmuring thanks, welcomes, and promises in one grateful burst.

"Polly, I forgive you; I consent to your marriage, and will provide your wedding finery. Mr. Lamb, you are not a fool, but a very excellent young man. I thank you for saving my life, and I wish you well with all my heart. You needn't say anything. I'm far from strong, and all this agitation is shortening my life."

Polly and Van shook her hand heartily, and beamed upon each other like a pair of infatuated turtle-doves with good prospects.

"Toady, you are as near an angel as a boy can be. Put a name to whatever you most wish for in the world, and it's yours," said Aunt Kipp, dramatically waving the rest away.

With his short legs wide apart, his hands behind him, and his rosy face as round and radiant as a rising sun, Toady stood before the fire surveying the scene with the air of a man who has successfully carried through a difficult and dangerous undertaking, and wasn't proud. His face brightened, then fell, as he heaved a sigh, and answered, with a shake of his curly head,--

"You can't give me what I want most. There are three things, and I've got to wait for them all."

"Gracious me, what are they?" cried the old lady, good-naturedly, for she felt better already.

"A mustache, a beaver, and a sweetheart," answered Toady, with his eyes fixed wistfully on Baa-baa, who possessed all these blessings, and was particularly enjoying the latter at that moment.

How Aunt Kipp did laugh at this early budding of romance in her pet! And all the rest joined her, for Toady's sentimental air was irresistible.

"You precocious chick! I dare say you will have them all before we know where we are. Never mind, deary; you shall have my little watch, and the silver-headed cane with a boar's head on it," answered the old lady, in high good-humor. "You needn't blush, dear; I don't bear malice; so let's forget and forgive. I shall settle things to-morrow, and have a free mind. You are welcome to my money, and I hope I shall live to see you all enjoy it."

So she did; for she lived to see Sophy plump, cheery, and care-free; Polly surrounded by a flock of Lambkins; Van in possession of a generous slice of the Van Bahr fortune; Toady revelling in the objects of his desire; and, best of all, she lived to find that it is never too late to make oneself useful, happy, and beloved.