

Ruth's Ornaments

by Hattie Kyle

It was some months after Aunt Bolls had come to live with the Maynards in their village home. Aunt Bolls was a wealthy man's widow, and was expected to leave her niece, Ruth Maynard, a handsome legacy. Ruth was arranging this lady's dressing-room, when her mother entered with a look of importance on her face, and Aunt Bolls' pompous form loomed close behind.

"I have an invitation for you, Ruth," cried Mrs. Maynard, trying her best not to appear too elated before Aunt Bolls, who regarded all their little affairs as something quite inferior to the fashionable doings to which she was accustomed, yet not beneath her notice, for her opinion was the law of the household, "An invitation from Mrs. Gledhill, who lives in New York now, and wants you to pay her daughter a visit."

"I can't go, you know I can't, mamma; I an't fit."

"I've promised your mamma, Ruth," struck in Aunt Bolls, "to give you a new silk; a black one will be most serviceable; and it is extremely desirable that you should go. Your mamma can get you anything else you need."

Ruth made a little grimace to herself over the serviceable black silk. She would much rather have had something light and pretty, and she was well aware that her mother's purse would not cover much in the way of finery. But her mother's anxious countenance reminded her to thank Aunt Bolls for her generous gift.

"But, mother," urged Ruth, "they are so fashionable there, and if I have one or two nice dresses I shall not be dressed like Agatha. I shall not have any—"

"Any what?" asked Mrs. Maynard and her sister-in-law in concert.

"Any jewelry, or—anything—"

Ruth hesitated, for she knew it sounded like a very strong hint. Her mind had wandered into Aunt Bolls' boxes, which contained treasures of laces and jewelry, and dainty fans and parasols, slightly old-fashioned perhaps, but all extremely beautiful; and she was greatly in hopes that her aunt would be moved to lend her some of these things.

"Jewelry for a child of sixteen!" cried Aunt Bolls, turning to Mrs. Maynard; and then adding, "Nonsense! She would be sure to lose or break it; besides, Ruth is so careless. And then young Mr. Gledhill is a minister, quite above such vanities, I am told, and he will admire her for being plain. Now, child, your mamma and I are going out to choose your dress."

“Stingy thing!” said Ruth to herself, when her aunt had duly robed herself for a shopping excursion, and sailed off with Ruth’s small mamma in tow.

“The things are all locked away,” soliloquized Ruth, after they had gone. “She never looks at them. She might have lent me something out of her piles and piles of pretty things.”

And when Ruth had set the room in order, placed all the dainty little toilet articles in their places, and adjusted everything according to her aunt’s rigid ideas, she searched that lady’s pockets for her keys, just to take a peep at the much envied treasures.

This was not the first time she had seen them. It was a favorite pastime with Ruth.

She ransacked box after box; took up one article after another, and laid it down with a sigh; lifted the beautiful ear-drops, holding each pair to the pink tips of her little ears, and stood before the glass wondering which became her best, opals or pearls, amethysts or diamonds. She had one pair in her ears, plain gold and jet. She had thought them very handsome when her father presented them to her on her fifteenth birthday, but they were quite eclipsed before the splendor of her aunt’s gems.

There was one set of lovely emeralds which sent her off into ecstasies till she found herself screaming ohs! and ahs! of admiration straight into the mirror, which reflected a considerable distance down her throat, and moderated her transports.

Then her mouth went down at the corners, and she stood fingering the pretty things with infinite solemnity on her countenance, as though reluctant to lay them away in their graves.

Suppose she were to keep them out, would Aunt Bolls be any the wiser? The corners of her mouth relaxed just a little here, and she meditated.

To her certain knowledge, the owner of all these glories seldom, if ever, opened them to the light. If she were to borrow just this one set, and take them with her; she would only be gone for a fortnight or so, and it was not likely they would be missed.

The girl’s cheeks flushed with excitement. This was a daring thing to do; for in her eyes Aunt Bolls was a terrible woman, whose anger, if she discovered the deception, would fall hot and heavy on the offender.

She laid them back, and reflected; then took them into her palm again and thought; then laid them back, and looked as cross as it was possible for such a little straight-featured face as hers to look. Then she took them out for the third and last time, shut the ebony chest, locked it with a frightened click, restored the keys to their accustomed place, and hurried out of the room as if a legion of accusing spirits were at her heels.

She hid the purloined treasures in her own apartment, and they weighed on her conscience all that week. Whenever Aunt Bolls came into the room with a quicker step than usual, Ruth expected to hear her cry out that her emerald set was stolen. Whenever Ruth's mother called her aside to consult her in whispers as to whether mutton and turnips would do for dinner—which meant for Aunt Bolls' dinner—she thought that the secret of the theft had been imparted to Mrs. Maynard, who was now about to enlighten her.

She sometimes wished that she had tried coaxing by proxy with her mother's aid, but she felt sure that would have had no effect, for when her respected aunt said a thing she meant it. This was the strong point of her character on which she prided herself.

At last, after much dress-making, the day came for Ruth's departure; and by this time she had so far forgotten her fears as to steal into her aunt's room and secrete one more article quite necessary to her personal adornment, a beautiful cobwebby lace handkerchief, one of many. Ruth felt better satisfied with her outfit than she had ever been before, for her mother had stretched a point under her sister-in-law's protection, and bought her daughter more than papa and she could really afford, and Aunt Bolls had added to the black silk sundry ribbons and collars, not like those adapted to her own use, but very pretty and neat.

As Ruth set off, after bidding an affectionate adieu to the family and a respectful one to her aunt, Mrs. Maynard caught her outside the street door and whispered a message to Mrs. Gledhill.

That lady was in need of a servant, she had informed Mrs. Maynard casually, and Hannah, who had suited them so many years, had somehow offended the autocrat of the mansion.

"It won't do to keep her," said Mrs. Maynard; "your aunt's prejudices are so strong. But I would not like to turn her quite adrift; so try to get her a place at Mrs. Gledhill's and send me word as soon as possible. Don't say anything unpleasant about your aunt, Ruth."

These were Mrs. Maynard's parting words.

It was late Saturday night when Ruth arrived at New York, for there had been some delay on the road. No one was awake but the mistress of the house, and she received her and accompanied her to her sleeping apartment, where Ruth slept soundly till she was aroused by the ringing of the Sunday-school bells.

Mrs. Gledhill and Miss Gledhill entertained her at her solitary breakfast, and the elder lady inquired anxiously if she should feel able to attend service that morning, for she was proud of her son's ability as a preacher, and very desirous that Ruth should hear him.

Ruth attired herself elaborately before the glass, and started for church, attended by the minister's mother and sister. She sat in the minister's pew, feeling as if all eyes were upon her, and comparing her dress with those of Miss Gledhill and the other young ladies present.

Altogether the result was satisfactory. When the organ commenced its strains, however, she did bend her head and try to compose her thoughts to graver themes.

The Rev. Mr. Gledhill arrived and ascended the pulpit, and Ruth thought she had never seen such a beautiful young man in all her life. Good too, as a minister should be, she was sure. When he read the accustomed chapter and gave out the hymn, his voice was so sweet and soft; and when he delivered the text, his big gray eyes rested on her face just a moment, and a strange expression came into his face. It wasn't possible that a young minister could smile quizzically in the pulpit, but certainly it did look like that. This was the text:

“Whose adorning let it not be that outward adorning of plaiting the hair, and of wearing of gold, or of putting on of apparel.”

This, with those long pendants at her ears, for which she had bartered her finer sense of honor. Ruth could forget the pin and the bracelets, but she couldn't forget these for a moment, for they were long and heavy, much more so than her own, and they kept on bobbing against her neck in a most distressing manner.

At dinner, young Mr. Gledhill addressed Ruth with a laugh. He was very complacent and self-possessed. His manners, Ruth thought, were charming.

“I'm afraid you did not like my sermon, Miss Maynard. You are, excuse me, rather a showy young lady yourself, but we ministers must be emphatic, if we wish to do any good. Dress is good in its way, but ladies are inclined to let it monopolize too much of their attention. Are they not?”

Ruth assented.

“I admire ornaments myself,” he went on. “Now those pretty ear-rings you wear have been exciting my admiration for some time, in spite of my text.”

“Rather old-fashioned,” said Mrs. Gledhill. “Are they your own, Ruth?”

Ruth blushed. It would have been easy to say that she had borrowed them, but there was Agatha Gledhill listening for her answer—Agatha, who had a dozen sets of her own—and “Yes” slipped out before she was aware.

“Ah,” said Mrs. Gledhill, “I thought they might be your aunt's—Mrs. Bolls'. She has such a quantity of old-fashioned jewelry. They might be reset to look very handsome.”

Then they were examined and talked over, till their wearer wished them back at the bottom of the ebony box again.

Ruth turned the subject at last by mentioning her mother's parting message.

Mrs. Gledhill was very happy to receive a servant so well recommended, and a few days later, Hannah was installed as chamber-maid.

Ruth had a pleasant visit. There were calls to pay and receive, and shopping to do, and various other recreations, but the charm of it all was the young minister's attentions. Ruth was quite decided in her mind that he had taken a fancy to her, and she was quite sure she should never find any one she could like so much. He did lecture a good deal in private conversation; but Ruth liked that, and everything else about him.

After a fortnight's stay, it was agreed between the young ladies that Ruth should be spared one day to make some calls on friends of her mother, with whom Agatha was not acquainted. Ruth had, besides, a little plain shopping, which she preferred to do alone.

She set off early in the morning, in the highest spirits, and dressed in her best.

As she started from the door, she noticed a man conversing with her mother's discarded domestic at the area gate—a very rough looking fellow, in a slouched hat and ragged coat, and with a great shaggy black beard.

This man followed her all day like a shadow, and just as Ruth had made up her mind that he was a robber, intent on her money or her life, he stepped up to her and said:

"I'm an officer—a detective, Miss, and I've got a warrant to arrest you."

Ruth drew a freer breath.

"They're my aunt's," she said. "She lent them to me. I mean—I borrowed them."

"Now it's no use trying that game. It was Mrs. Bolls that sent me. I came out after other game. She was sure it was the gal, but I've fetched up with the young lady. I've been watching you all day, Miss, as you know. I saw you make some appointment with a young gentleman. I saw you go into the pawnbroker's, and come out because you caught sight of me. You're not so innocent as you seem."

The tears sprang to Ruth's eyes.

"What shall I do?" she cried; "so far from home! Won't you go and tell my aunt that I've got them?"

"No, I won't do that, Miss; but I'll go with you to the lady's house where you're staying, and you can get some one to come and go bail for you."

Ruth thought for a moment; she was cool enough, now her great terror was over, to think, even in her distress. What, go to the house and disgrace herself in her friend's eyes! What would young Mr. Gledhill think of her? He was more particular than any one else. He despised white fibs above all things, and she remembered well the one she had told about her Aunt Bolls' emeralds.

"What will happen to me if I go with you?" she asked the officer tremulously.

"You'll be took to jail, young lady, and in the morning your aunt, if she is your aunt, will appear agin you. She said she shouldn't show no mercy."

"Well, I'll go with you right away. I don't care what happens to me now."

And Ruth was carried to the jail in her own village. It was midnight when she arrived, and though carefully waited on, it may be supposed that she did not pass an agreeable night.

Mr. Maynard and Aunt Bolls arrived at daylight to release the culprit.

"You brute!" cried Ruth's aunt to the indignant detective, "to drag a young lady to jail! Such an odd mistake!" And she kissed Ruth on the forehead in most affectionate style.

Ruth was quite touched by her aunt's kindness at first, but that lady well knew how to preserve the proprieties. This was for strangers.

At home she showered vials of wrath upon her niece's head, and heaped upon her such epithets of scorn that [the patient] little Mrs. Maynard was driven [to interfere] between them; whereupon, [bothered] by the trouble and expense that Ruth had occasioned her, she packed her trunks and departed from the Maynard mansion forever, and with her all visions of Ruth's prospective legacy.

As for the Gledhills, Aunt Bolls indited the note of apology and explanation due to them for the unceremonious disappearance of their visitor, and our heroine never saw them again.

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This story was accompanied by a single in-text illustration that spanned two columns.