POOR DOCUMENT

A Cargo of Coffins.

Being a plain tale of the Sea.

In the year 1801 my grandfather, William Truscott, found himself skipper and owner of the fast-sailin' brig Mary Ann of Marblehead. He warn't more that twenty-four years old at the time, and considered himself mighty-fortunate in bein' so well fixed so early in life. But seems as if he congratulated himself too soon. About the time he got to be skipper, there came a streak of hard times, and nary a vessel sailed from Marblehead for furrin parts for several months. Even after times did begin to get better, none of the merchants of the town seemed to want the Mary Ann to carry their cargoes. My grandfather was down on the wharf one day, sittin' on a pile, lookin' at the brig and wonderin' what made his luck turn bad so, when he see comin' towards him old Ephraim Bagley, the undertaker.

"Brig hain't been doin' much these days, has it?" said Bagley.

'Nop,' said my grandfather.

'I been thinkin' of sendin' a cargo to furrin parts, but I don't s'pose there's any use of askin' the captain of the Mary Ann to carry it. His ship is too busy—he! he! He hain't taken a Marbleh-ad cargo for six months. He is too busy, he is He! he! he! he!

Grandfather was mad enough to choke the old feller; but he couldn't afford to loose a chance to get a cargo, so he looked up respectfully enough and said he warn't busy and asked Bagley what he wanted to carry and where he wanted it carried.

'Never you mind what nor where till I make terms,' said Bagley. 'You're losin' money, young man. You know that it won't do to keep your vessel idle like this, and the longer she stays idle, the less likely it is that people will ever want to use her. She's beginnin' to get a bad name already. People try to find some reason why she hain't used, and say she's cranky, leaky doesn't mind her helm, and other things. Now I offer to pay the wages of the crew, provide all the food and supplies necessary for a v'yage, you to furnish ship and get nothing but your board. You can't stay around here doin' nothin'.'

Grandfather see the old feller was talkin' sense, even if he was driven' a hard bargain, so he said: 'I will take you up. Where do you want to go?'

'Naples,' said Bagley; 'and I want to take a cargo of coffins. They are havin' the plague over there, and I have a lot of coffins on hand. I think there is a chance to make money. Them folks is dyin' faster than they can turn out coffins. I have six hundred coffins on hand—a batch I made up when that yellow-fever from Surinam put in at Boston; but this State was too cold, the fever didn't take holt, and I've got all them coffins on hand. I expect to make a big thing out of them Italians.'

Grandfather knew that the Italians didn't use no coffins, scarcely ever botherin' with graves; bnt he didn't tell old Bagley so. He merly remarked that it would be necessary for 'em to load the cargo nights, for sailors was such superstitious critturs that it would be hard to get a crew to sail a ship loaded with coffins.

Old Bagley see to puttin the coffins aboard—him and grandfather. There was all kinds plain wood-colored ones; red, white and blue ones for Revolutionary veterans, black walnut and mahogany ones; some with leather handles, some with silver handles; and there was seventy-five that was all padded and upholstered inside, with perfumery-bags put around under the paddin'; had patient snap-locks, and little glass windows over the place where the face comes, that could be opened and shut.

Grandfather soon got a crew together and made everything ready to sail. When the day for sailin' come, what did he see but old Marm Bagley aheavin' down the wharf, ciosely followed by her particular friend, the Widder Haskins, both on 'em carryin' baskets, full of knittin' work, and two big bags! He observed something squirmin' round in the bags, and he thought mebby it was eels. He axed Mis' Bagley if it was, and she said no, it was cats; she was goin' on the v'yage, she and Mis' Haskins, and they was goin' to take the cats for company. Great Scott! he was took back. Here they was, a-goin' to make a v'yage with a cargo of coffins and a lot of cats for passengers! Everyone knows that cats are unlucky critters to have on a ship.

'Mis' Bagley,' said grandfather, 'all we have got left to do to make this v'yage a success is to set sail on Friday. Coffins and cats! For land sake, don't let any of the men know them cats are on board, for they will all leave the ship. Coffins and cats! Jerusalem crickets!'

Marm Bagley took the cats down into the cabin, and, thinkin' that the vessel was loaded with sideboards, revolvin' bookcases, and bedsteads, the crew made sale on he, and before long the Massachusetts coast was out of sight. Nothin' happened on the v'yage across, 'cept when Marm Bagley let out her cats, on the fourth day from port, and some of the old sailors took to tellin' yarns about the strange misfortunes what had happened to ships havin' cats on board, especially when they are black cats, with white tips on their tails, like eight of Marm Bagey's twenty-seven.

The ship went across the Atlantic all right, and went through the Straits of Gibraltar. The evenin' after the passage, grandfather was leanin' on the rail lookin' at the sea, and thinkin' what hard luck he was having with his ship, when the mate came alongside and said:

William you have allers been a good friend to me, and I want to tell you something I heard Bagley tellin' his wife last night. He says that when we get to Naples and the crew finds out that them boxes below contain coffins—and he is goin' to be sure and tell 'em—they will all refuse to make the return v'yage, what with coffins and cats both bein' worked up to a high degree. He says you ain't got money to pay for a new crew, he only agreein' to pay this one, and he expects to buy the ship of you dog-cheap, for you would rather sell it cheap than have it rot in Naples Bay.'

Grandfather felt bad when he heard this. He went to bed, wishin' that old Bagley was in one of his own coffins, planted in Marblehead graveyard.

When he came on deck in the mornin', he found the mate lookin, through the long glass at a vessel to windward. He took a squint likewise, and see that it was an Algerine pirate vessel. There was the bank of oars and the red flag, with a white spot on it, floatin' at the mast head. Grandfather's first impulse was to crowd on all sail and try to escape; but then he remembered what the mate had told him the night before, and he thought to himself that he might as well be in the hands of a pirate from Algiers as a pirate from Marblehead, so he sot down and never uttered a word. Pretty soon Bagley came on deck, and when he was told that pirates was chasin' 'em he got frantic. He begun givin' orders to the crew, but as he didn't give none of 'em, correct, no body minded him. The pirate ship kept gettin' a little bit nearer, and grandfather done what I allers considered a very queer thing. Ae decided to turn Mohammedan. He thought to himself that it was pretty likely that the pirates would catch 'em, even if they did try to get away. Then they would be made slaves until their friends ransomed them. As for him, he didn't have no friends or relatives to ransom him. If he would turn Mohammedan, the Algerines would set him free and make a great man of him, like they allers did with Christian slaves who turned. Then he would see that the crew was sent home without ransom—all except Bagley; he would buy him, and make him word all fired hard. If the ship got away, then he would be in old Bagley's hand and would starve at Naples. If the ship got caught then he would be saved from ruin, would get even with Bagley, and the crew would be no worse nor better off than they were before. He had no friends to leave in America. The only thing that troubled him was leavin' his religion; but he said to himself that if such pizen scoundrels as Bagley could be deacons in the church, he didn't care much about leavin' such a concern.

Well, Bagley seed that grandfather didn't take no interest in the question whether the Mary Ann could beat the pirate, so he said: Truscott, what's the matter with you, anyhow?'

Grandfather up and told him what the mate had heard him tellin' his wife, and said this was the reason he didn't take no interest in escapin' the pirate.

'Truscatt,' says Bagley, 'if you will get us out of this scrape, I swear on the Bible that I'll give you the proceeds of this v'yage, and promise not to get the crew to desert at Naples.

Grandfather jumped to his feet and give orders to clap on all sail. He didn't care for the proceeds of the voyage, for he knew there warn't goin' to be any, but he loved his ship, and now that Bagley had promised not to cheat him out of it was ready to try to get away. He made Bagley give him a receipt for all there was on the ship, and the sailors signed it as witnesses, and deposited it with the mate to give back to Bagley if he didn't succeed in gettin' away from the pirates. Under the extra press of sail the Mary Ann leaped forward, and the pirate began to drop behind; but, as luck would have it, the wind died down, and with oars and sails both the pirate rapidly over-hauled the Mary Ann and gettin' within range, fired away at her to make her lie to.

'Better lie to,' said the mate. 'I'd rather go to prizon than be killed.'

'Hold her to it,' said grandfather; don't you see that cat's-paw comin!' The wind will freshen in a minute. If they don't shoot away some of our riggin' we'll escape yet.'

Thev could see the wind darkenin' the water in little spots, comin' nearer and nearer. Speakin' of cat's-paws made grandfather think of something. He had all of Marm Bagley's cats fetched out and put around in the riggin' and conspicuous like on the deck. As soon as he done this the Algerines quit firin'. The cat is a sacred animal to the Mohammedans, and they was afraid they would hit a cat, so they quit. But the breeze didn't come up, and in no time the pirate vessel was alongside and the pirates was gettin' ready to board.

'Go down into the hole with three men,' said grandfather to the mate, and take them seventy-five upholstered mahogany coffins out of their boxes, and get 'em ready to bring on deck.'

The sailors looked astonished when they heard him speak of coffins, but three of 'em went to help the mate. Up over the sides of the vessel swarmed the pirates, and before long fifty of 'em was standin' on the deck.

'What ship is this?' asked an interperter of my grandfather, for all Barbary pirate ships carried interperters, meetin' people of all nations like they did.

'This,' replied grandfather, 'is a ship bearin' presents from the President of the United States to the Sultan of Turkey.'

You see the Sultan of Turkey was kinder looked up to by the Barbary States he bein' a sorter head to all Mohammedan countries.

'We shall have to examine your cargo, and if what you say is true you shall go your way; but if not we shall take you to Algiers. Let us see your presents.'

'We are carryin' some most wonderful things.' says grandfather—'magical dream caskets. You just lie down in one of 'em, and the most beautiful dreams come to you. Some of our magicians got 'em up. They're the greatest thing out.'

The interpreter translated this to old pirate captain, and then he said that the captain wished to try one of the dream caskets to see if grandfather was tellin' the truth about 'em.

'Step into the cabin gentlemen;' and the captain and ten others stepped in.

Eleven mahogany coffins was fetched in. The Algerines looked at the silver handles, the silk and velvet paddin', the little glass window, smelt of the perfumery, and then they believed every word grandfather had said. They had never seed no coffins, for in their country they put folks in stone tombs.

'Get right in gentleman,' said grandfather; and they all got in and, openin' the little glass windows so they could breathe, he shut the covers, the patent locks fastened, and there they was.

'Them chaps is out of my way,' thought grandfather; 'now I must catch the others,'

Then he and the interperter went on deck and axed the rest of the fellers if they didn't want to dream some. They said they was afraid the officers would be mad if they found it out, so he told 'em he would wake 'em arter a little, before the officers came out, and the hull thirtynine crept into the coffins, the patent locks clicked, and there they was. The pirate vessel was a low-lyin' craft, and the Mary Ann stood so high out of water with her light cargo that what was takin' place on her deck could not be seen from the pirate.

'How many men have you on your ship?' said grandfather to the interperter, casual like.

'Sixty, not countin' the rowers, of course—Christian slaves chained to to oars. She ain't manned for a regular cruise. We have been carryin' the annual tribute to the Sultan, and in return we are bringin' presents of gold and silver and one of the Sultan's one hundred and nineteen daughters to marry the Dey of Algiers.'

Then fifty of the sixty Algerines were where they couldn't do no harm. Quicker than a flash, grandfather pulled out a pistol and pointed it at the interpreter's head.

'Tell them other ten men to come aboard here at once. I don't know your lingo, but if I observe that they don't move quick, I'll blow your brains out.'

The interpreter called and the ten men started to come on board. As fast as they stepped on deck, they was knocked down, one by one, and put in some of the red, white and blue coffins made for Revolutionary veterans, and there was the whole passel of the pirates captured as slick as a whistle. Grandfather searched that pirate ship, took all the valuables and divided 'em among his crew. He cut the chains off the rowers, all Spaniards and Italians, and told 'em to take the pirate vessel to the nearest Christian port. Then takin' the Sultan's daughter aboard with him, he 'oout ship and sailed for America. He sold the Algerines at five hundred dollars a head to Americans to exchange for their friends who were captives in Algiers. As the Barbary States was then charin' seven hundred dollars ransom money, this was cheap, nevertheless he made a good thing out of it. The Sultan's daughter, who was a very pretty girl, he sent to school where she got converted and turned out a first-class girl generally. when she got through school, not knowin' what else to do with her, he up and married her. So I expect I am of Turkish descent.

A Two Million Dollar Comma.

"Oh, punctuation marks are not of much account. They're just put in for looks. I don't want to bother about them."

Such are the sentiments of a good many school boys with regard to the branch of letter and composition writing. Others again, appear to think that all that is necessary is to put in a comma here and there at haphazard, to set off the "looks of the thing." How risky this way of doing things is may be learned from the following incident:—

It seems that some twenty years ago, when the United States, by Congress, was making a tariff bill, one of the sections enumerated what articles should be admitted free of duty. Among the articles specified were "all foreign fruit-plants," etc., meaning plants imported for transplanting, propagation or experiment.

The enrolling clerk, in copying the bill, accidentally changed the hyphen in the compound word "fruit plants" to a comma, making it read "all foreign fruit, plants," etc. As a result of this simple mistake, for a year, or until Congress could remedy the blunder—all the oranges, lemons, bananas, grapes and other foreign fruits were admitted free of duty. This little mistake, which anyone would be liable to make, yet could have avoided by a little carefulness, cost the government not less than $2,000,000. A pretty costly comma, that.

Passing of the Alligator.

Besides the golden eagle, the great auk, the dodo, the white whale, and other items of creation which have vanished or are threatening to vanish from the world it is encouraging to hear of the gradual extinction of on really noxious inhabitant—the alligator. Florida hunters claim to have accounted for over 2,500,000 of these pests, and when it is considered how slowly they grow there seems a reasonable chance of their extermination, at any rate in the haunts of men. At 1 year old the infant alligator is twelve inches long. He is 15 before he doubles that length and does not attain his maximum development until the age of 50. His period of life is not fixed, but it is certainly greater than that of man.

The Italian Girl's Revenge.

It was in front of a fruit shop. Among the tempting things exposed for sale in the dorway was a show bunch of grapes trimmed off with leaves of sweet-smelling geranium.

Gazing on the purple bunch of lusciousness was a ragged boy holding by the hand two tiny, dirty children. The youngest of these little ones was a boy, sickly and week-looking; he was stretching out his grimy hands, whining for the high-priced bunch of grapes.

The older boy tried to quiet him. The other child, a girl, said persuasively, "It's only to look at, Bobby. It'll make Bobby sick to eat it."

"Bobby's sick, and he wants the boofle grapes. Bobby wants his mamma too."

The Italian girl leaning against the electric light pole laughed aloud. She twirled her accordeon as though she were about to begin a tune for which the people would give her money to stop, for she played badly and sang worse. But she did not play the tune. This was the time for her revenge, and it was sweet to her. There was a tag on the bunch of grapes, $1. In her pocket, the result of a long day's tramping, playing and singing till feet, hands and throat were all tired, were ninety-eight cents, just two cents less than the price of the grapes. She had only to pull out her accordeon and earn the other two cents; then she might buy the grapes in the face of the enemy.

For this elder boy was the torment of her life. He lived in the same court where she lived, and from the day, now two months ago, when she had landed in America and been taken to the Italian woman who agreed to beat her if she did not bring home a dollar every day, he had mocked her, thrown stones at her, called her names, till sometimes she had felt like falling on him and biting him. Through him all the other boys in the court had been hard to her until lately she was glad to run out in the early morning before they were up, and not go back again until it was night and they could not see her. While she was making her ear-splitting music far away from the court, she would sometimes think of the boy and grind her teeth together, as she recollected how he would even look at her while she ate her macaroni in the Italian woman's room, and thought of her home far across the sea, and all the preetty vine-covered cottages and the light blue sky, and the happy days before her mother and father died and left her. And some days when she could not play and sing, but would wonder around the streets thinking of her old home, only to go to the Italian woman at night, and be beaten and sent supperless to bed for failing to bring home the full dollar, there would be this boy calling his companions to see her whipped, and he would scream out; "Cully, get on to the Dago girl." Oh, yes, she remembered all this and more, and now she would show him what she could do. What did she care if the Italian woman did beat her and starve her; it was worth that to be even with the boy.

A week after her coming to this country she had learned to count the American money so as to know when she had a dollar; after she had the dollar she would not play or sing another note that day; she would take to the Italian woman just as much as she must, but not another cent. And she had ninety-eight cents; she would play a tune, get the other two cents, go in and buy the bunch of grapes that reminded her of some she had seen growing away over Italy, and she would come out of the shop eating them in the face of the boy and his little brother and sister. She pulled out her accordeon to its full length and made such a sound that a man who had stopped to talk politics to a friend tossed her exactly two cents and told her to shut up.

"Gooda! Gooda!" laughed the girl. She had the price of the bunch of grapes. "Me shut-a up. Me no play-a 'Disy Bella' Va!"

She looked over to the boy and his small brother and sister. They had paid no attention to her music. They had not noticed her, though she stood in the full glare of the electric light. For the little boy was regularly crying for the grapes now, refusing to move a step, and the older boy was puzzled what to do. He had not a cent in his pocket, and if he had had a dollar in his pocket he would not have dared to spend it this way. For his mother had died that week, his father had run away, and here he was left to take care of these little ones and sell papers and black boots at the same time, until he found something better to do.

The Italian girl knew all about his sorrows, and she was happy. "I will show-a him what-a I can do. Va" she said. "Then let-a madrone beat-a me. Me geta dollar for play-a 'Disy Bella,' Si!"

She fixed the bright red kerchief on her curly head till it looked like a liberty cap, pulled down her short velvet jacket, put her accordeon under her arm and marched toward the shop door. She saw the elder boy was trying to comfort his brother without effect.

"No, no," cried the little fellow, "Grapes! Grapes!"

The elder boy looked up.

The Italian girl, with her head on one side and humming a tune, went into the shop.

"Wanta the grapes," she said, pointing to the bunch outside.

The clerk in the shop would have put her out, as he put out all peddlers and musicians, but she emptied her pockets before him—one hundred coppers.

"Wanta grapes," she said.

In a sort of wonder, the man went to the door and unhooked the fruit.

He would have wrapped them in fine paper for her.

"No, no," said the girl; "me eata them," and grabbed them out of his hand, geranium leaves and all.

She wept slowly down the shop, out at the door, holding up the beautiful bunch of grapes. There, outside, was the boy, with his little brother and sister. As sight of the grapes held aloft in her hand, the little boy became frantic. The older boy looked at the Italian girl and frowned. The tiny sister tried to comfort the crying child. The Italian girl plucked off a grape, and was putting it in her mouth, when the little boy sobbed out:

"Mamma! mamma!"

The girl knew the meaning of that word. She thought of a far away flowery churchyard, under the softest blue skies, and how she used to go there and wait for her mother to come out and lift her up tight to her breast as she used to do, and now there was only a mound there. And there was this newsboy, her enemy, whose mother had so recently left him, and left him with two children to look after. To spite him she had spent every cent she had made that day, and would go home to the Italian woman and be beaten, and, without any supper, be shoved into a corner of a room to sleep as well as she could. But—

She dashed to the ground the grape she had been about to eat, ran forward, and, putting the whole bunch into the hands of the crying little boy, leaned over and kissed him. "Miss-a mamma moocha?" she said. "Mamma angiol too."

She heard a sob beside her. Looking up, she saw the elder boy, with his face working. "Dago girl," he said, and choked. She laid her finger on his arm. "Me know-a," she nodded. "Dago girl cry-a too. Dago girl pity mocha." And without another word she marched off in the direction of the court where she lived, a happiness in her poor young heart that had not been there since she had come to America, went on to meet the beating and the scolding, but with something very bright around her which she had known long ago under the softest of blue skies before the mound had been made in the far away churchyard.

The Dog Laughed.

The proprietor of a Third Avenue store owns a little black kitten that cultivates a habit of squatting on its haunches, like a bear or kangaroo, and then sparring with its forepaws as if it had taken lessons from a pugilist.

A gentleman took into the store the other evening an enormous black dog, half Newfoundland, half collie, fat, good-natured and intelligent. The tiny black kitten, instead of bolting at once for shelter, retreated a few paces, sat erect on its hind legs and "put its fists" in an attitude of defiance. The contrast in size between the two was intensely amusing. It reminded one of Jack the Giant Killer preparing to demolish a giant.

Slowly and without a sign of excitability the huge dog walked as far as his chain would allow him, and gazed intently at the kitten and its odd posture. Then, as the comicality of the situation struck him, he turned his head and shoulders around to the spectators, and if an animal ever laughed in the world that dog assuredly did so, then and there. He neither barked nor growled, but indulged in a low chuckle, while eyes and mouth beamed with merriment.

Long, Straight Railroad Runs.

The greatest stretch of perfectly straight railway track—more scientifically termed "tangent"—in North America, is to be found on the new "Soo" Line of the Canadian Pacific Railroad, beginning at a point a few miles from Pasqua. It continues for seventy miles and altogether in Canadian territory. The next longest west of St. Thomas, on the Michigan Central, which is about sixty-seven miles. The longest stretch of tangent in the world is to be found in the Argentine Republic and continues for 250 miles. It completely eclipses the model line of the Czar of Russia, from St. Petersburg to Moscow, which—taking a rule and placing it on the map—he ordered to be built perfectly straight. On the survey being made it was found that lakes, hills and rivers would not admit of it, and though as straight as possible, it is anything but a perfect tangent.

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