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Chapter 4 - Ward No. 2

Things were not so gay in Ward No. 2, for Mrs. Pecq was very busy, and Jill had nothing to amuse her but flying visits from the girls, and such little plays as she could invent for herself in bed. Fortunately, she had a lively fancy, and so got on pretty well, till keeping still grew unbearable, and the active child ached in every limb to be up and out. That, however, was impossible, for the least attempt to sit or stand brought on the pain that took her breath away and made her glad to lie flat again. The doctor spoke cheerfully, but looked sober, and Mrs. Pecq began to fear that Janey was to be a cripple for life. She said nothing, but Jill's quick eyes saw an added trouble in the always anxious face, and it depressed her spirits, though she never guessed half the mischief the fall had done.

The telegraph was a great comfort, and the two invalids kept up a lively correspondence, not to say traffic in light articles, for the Great International was the only aerial express in existence. But even this amusement flagged after a time; neither had much to tell, and when the daily health bulletins had been exchanged, messages gave out, and the basket's travels grew more and more infrequent. Neither could read all the time, games were soon used up, their mates were at school most of the day, and after a week or two the poor children began to get pale and fractious with the confinement, always so irksome to young people.

"I do believe the child will fret herself into a fever, mem, and I'm clean distraught to know what to do for her. She never used to mind trifles, but now she frets about the oddest things, and I can't change them. This wall-paper is well enough, but she has taken a fancy that the spots on it look like spiders, and it makes her nervous. I've no other warm place to put her, and no money for a new paper. Poor lass! There are hard times before her, I'm fearing."

Mrs. Pecq said this in a low voice to Mrs. Minot, who came in as often as she could, to see what her neighbor needed; for both mothers were anxious, and sympathy drew them to one another. While one woman talked, the other looked about the little room, not wondering in the least that Jill found it hard to be contented there. It was very neat, but so plain that there was not even a picture on the walls, nor an ornament upon the mantel, except the necessary clock, lamp, and match-box. The paper was ugly, being a deep buff with a brown figure that did look very like spiders sprawling over it, and might well make one nervous to look at day after day.

Jill was asleep in the folding chair Dr. Whiting had sent, with a mattress to make it soft. The back could be raised or lowered at will; but only a few inches had been gained as yet, and the thin hair pillow was all she could bear. She looked very pretty as she lay, with dark lashes against the feverish cheeks, lips apart, and a cloud of curly black locks all about the face pillowed on one arm. She seemed like a brilliant little flower in that dull place, - for the French blood in her veins gave her a color, warmth, and grace which were very charming. Her natural love of beauty showed itself in many ways: a red ribbon had tied up her hair, a gay but faded shawl was thrown over the bed, and the gifts sent her were arranged with care upon the table by her side among her own few toys and treasures. There was something pathetic in this childish attempt to beautify the poor place, and Mrs. Minot's eyes were full as she looked at the tired woman, whose one joy and comfort lay there in such sad plight.

"My dear soul, cheer up, and we will help one another through the hard times," she said, with a soft hand on the rough one, and a look that promised much.

"Please God, we will, mem! With such good friends, I never should complain. I try not to do it, but it breaks my heart to see my little lass spoiled for life, most like;" and Mrs. Pecq pressed the kind hand with a despondent sigh.

"We won't say, or even think, that, yet. Everything is possible to youth and health like Janey's. We must keep her happy, and time will do the rest, I'm sure. Let us begin at once, and have a surprise for her when she wakes."

As she spoke, Mrs. Minot moved quietly about the room, pinning the pages of several illustrated papers against the wall at the foot of the bed, and placing to the best advantage the other comforts she had brought.

"Keep up your heart, neighbor. I have an idea in my head which I think will help us all, if I can carry it out," she said, cheerily, as she went, leaving Mrs. Pecq to sew on Jack's new night-gowns, with swift fingers, and the grateful wish that she might work for these good friends forever.

As if the whispering and rustling had disturbed her, Jill soon began to stir, and slowly opened the eyes which had closed so wearily on the dull December afternoon. The bare wall with its brown spiders no longer confronted her, but the colored print of a little girl dancing to the tune her father was playing on a guitar, while a stately lady, with satin dress, ruff, and powder, stood looking on, well pleased. The quaint figure, in its belaced frock, quilted petticoat, and red-heeled shoes, seemed to come tripping toward her in such a life-like way, that she almost saw the curls blow back, heard the rustle of the rich brocade, and caught the sparkle of the little maid's bright eyes.

"Oh, how pretty! Who sent them?" asked Jill, eagerly, as her eye glanced along the wall, seeing other new and interesting things beyond: an elephant-hunt, a ship in full sail, a horse-race, and a ball-room.

"The good fairy who never comes empty-handed. Look round a bit and you will see more pretties all for you, my dearie;" and her mother pointed to a bunch of purple grapes in a green leaf plate, a knot of bright flowers pinned on the white curtain, and a gay little double gown across the foot of the bed.

Jill clapped her hands, and was enjoying her new pleasures, when in came Merry and Molly Loo, with Boo, of course, trotting after her like a fat and amiable puppy. Then the good times began; the gown was put on, the fruit tasted, and the pictures were studied like famous works of art.

"It's a splendid plan to cover up that hateful wall. I'd stick pictures all round and have a gallery. That reminds me! Up in the garret at our house is a box full of old-fashioned books my aunt left. I often look at them on rainy days, and they are very funny. I'll go this minute and get every one. We can pin them up, or make paper dolls;" and away rushed Molly Loo, with the small brother waddling behind, for, when he lost sight of her, he was desolate indeed.

The girls had fits of laughter over the queer costumes of years gone by, and put up a splendid procession of ladies in full skirts, towering hats, pointed slippers, powdered hair, simpering faces, and impossible waists.

"I do think this bride is perfectly splendid, the long train and veil are so sweet," said Jill, revelling in fine clothes as she turned from one plate to another.

"I like the elephants best, and I'd give anything to go on a hunt like that!" cried Molly Loo, who rode cows, drove any horse she could get, had nine cats, and was not afraid

of the biggest dog that ever barked.

"I fancy 'The Dancing Lesson;' it is so sort of splendid, with the great windows, gold chairs, and fine folks. Oh, I would like to live in a castle with a father and mother like that," said Merry, who was romantic, and found the old farmhouse on the hill a sad trial to her high-flown ideas of elegance.

"Now, that ship, setting out for some far-away place, is more to my mind. I weary for home now and then, and mean to see it again some day;" and Mrs. Pecq looked longingly at the English ship, though it was evidently outward bound. Then, as if reproaching herself for discontent, she added: "It looks like those I used to see going off to India with a load of missionaries. I came near going myself once, with a lady bound for Siam; but I went to Canada with her sister, and here I am."

"I'd like to be a missionary and go where folks throw their babies to the crocodiles. I'd watch and fish them out, and have a school, and bring them up, and convert all the people till they knew better," said warm-hearted Molly Loo, who befriended every abused animal and forlorn child she met.

"We needn't go to Africa to be missionaries; they have 'em nearer home and need 'em, too. In all the big cities there are a many, and they have their hands full with the poor, the wicked, and the helpless. One can find that sort of work anywhere, if one has a mind," said Mrs. Pecq.

"I wish we had some to do here. I'd so like to go round with baskets of tea and rice, and give out tracts and talk to people. Wouldn't you, girls?" asked Molly, much taken with the new idea.

"It would be rather nice to have a society all to ourselves, and have meetings and resolutions and things," answered Merry, who was fond of little ceremonies, and always went to the sewing circle with her mother.

"We wouldn't let the boys come in. We'd have it a secret society, as they do their temperance lodge, and we'd have badges and pass-words and grips. It would be fun if we can only get some heathen to work at!" cried Jill, ready for fresh enterprises of every sort.

"I can tell you someone to begin on right away," said her mother, nodding at her. "As wild a little savage as I'd wish to see. Take her in hand, and make a pretty-mannered lady of her. Begin at home, my lass, and you'll find missionary work enough for a while."

"Now, Mammy, you mean me! Well, I will begin; and I'll be so good, folks won't know me. Being sick makes naughty children behave in story-books, I'll see if live ones can't; and Jill put on such a sanctified face that the girls laughed and asked for their missions also, thinking they would be the same.

"You, Merry, might do a deal at home helping mother, and setting the big brothers a good example. One little girl in a house can do pretty much as she will, especially if she has a mind to make plain things nice and comfortable, and not long for castles before she knows how to do her own tasks well," was the first unexpected reply.

Merry colored, but took the reproof sweetly, resolving to do what she could, and surprised to find how many ways seemed open to her after a few minutes' thought.

"Where shall I begin? I'm not afraid of a dozen crocodiles after Miss Bat;" and Molly Loo looked about her with a fierce air, having had practice in battles with the old lady who kept her father's house.

"Well, dear, you haven't far to look for as nice a little heathen as you'd wish;" and Mrs. Pecq glanced at Boo, who sat on the floor staring hard at them, attracted by the dread word "crocodile." He had a cold and no handkerchief, his little hands were red with chilblains, his clothes shabby, he had untidy darns in the knees of his stockings, and a head of tight curls that evidently had not been combed for some time.

"Yes, I know he is, and I try to keep him decent, but I forget, and he hates to be fixed, and Miss Bat doesn't care, and father laughs when I talk about it."

Poor Molly Loo looked much ashamed as she made excuses, trying at the same time to mend matters by seizing Boo and dusting him all over with her handkerchief, giving a pull at his hair as if ringing bells, and then dumping him down again with the despairing exclamation: "Yes, we're a pair of heathens, and there's no one to save us if I don't."

That was true enough; for Molly's father was a busy man, careless of everything but his mills, Miss Bat was old and lazy, and felt as if she might take life easy after serving the motherless children for many years as well as she knew how. Molly was beginning to see how much amiss things were at home, and old enough to feel mortified, though, as yet, she had done nothing to mend the matter except be kind to the little boy.

"You will, my dear," answered Mrs. Pecq, encouragingly, for she knew all about it. "Now you've each got a mission, let us see how well you will get on. Keep it secret, if you like, and report once a week. I'll be a member, and we'll do great things yet."

"We won't begin till after Christmas; there is so much to do, we never shall have time for any more. Don't tell, and we'll start fair at New Year's, if not before," said Jill, taking the lead as usual. Then they went on with the gay ladies, who certainly were heathen enough in dress to be in sad need of conversion, - to common-sense at least.

"I feel as if I was at a party," said Jill, after a pause occupied in surveying her gallery with great satisfaction, for dress was her delight, and here she had every conceivable style and color.

"Talking of parties, isn't it too bad that we must give up our Christmas fun? Can't get on without you and Jack, so we are not going to do a thing, but just have our presents," said Merry, sadly, as they began to fit different heads and bodies together, to try droll effects.

"I shall be all well in a fortnight, I know; but Jack won't, for it will take more than a month to mend his poor leg. May be they will have a dance in the boys' big room, and he can look on," suggested Jill, with a glance at the dancing damsel on the wall, for she dearly loved it, and never guessed how long it would be before her light feet would keep time to music again.

"You'd better give Jack a hint about the party. Send over some smart ladies, and say they have come to his Christmas ball," proposed audacious Molly Loo, always ready for fun.

So they put a preposterous green bonnet, top-heavy with plumes, on a little lady in yellow, who sat in a carriage; the lady beside her, in winter costume of velvet pelisse and ermine boa, was fitted to a bride's head with its orange flowers and veil, and these works of art were sent over to Jack, labelled "Miss Laura and Lotty Burton going to the Minots' Christmas ball," - a piece of naughtiness on Jill's part, for she knew Jack liked the pretty sisters, whose gentle manners made her own wild ways seem all the more blamable.

No answer came for a long time, and the girls had almost forgotten their joke in a game of Letters, when "Tingle, tangle!" went the bell, and the basket came in heavily laden. A roll of colored papers was tied outside, and within was a box that rattled, a green and silver horn, a roll of narrow ribbons, a spool of strong thread, some large needles, and a note from Mrs. Minot: -

"Dear Jill, - I think of having a Christmas tree so that our invalids can enjoy it, and all your elegant friends are cordially invited. Knowing that you would like to help, I send some paper for sugar-plum horns and some beads for necklaces. They will brighten the tree and please the girls for themselves or their dolls. Jack sends you a horn for a pattern, and will you make a ladder-necklace to show him how? Let me know if you need anything.

"Yours in haste,

"Anna Minot"

"She knew what the child would like, bless her kind heart," said Mrs. Pecq to herself, and something brighter than the most silvery bead shone on Jack's shirt-sleeve, as she saw the rapture of Jill over the new work and the promised pleasure.

Joyful cries greeted the opening of the box, for bunches of splendid large bugles appeared in all colors, and a lively discussion went on as to the best contrasts. Jill could not refuse to let her friends share the pretty work, and soon three necklaces glittered on three necks, as each admired her own choice.

"I'd be willing to hurt my back dreadfully, if I could lie and do such lovely things all day," said Merry, as she reluctantly put down her needle at last, for home duties waited to be done, and looked more than ever distasteful after this new pleasure.

"So would I! Oh, do you think Mrs. Minot will let you fill the horns when they are done? I'd love to help you then. Be sure you send for me!" cried Molly Loo, arching her neck like a proud pigeon to watch the glitter of her purple and gold necklace on her brown gown.

"I'm afraid you couldn't be trusted, you love sweeties so, and I'm sure Boo couldn't. But I'll see about it," replied Jill, with a responsible air.

The mention of the boy recalled him to their minds, and looking round they found him peacefully absorbed in polishing up the floor with Molly's pocket-handkerchief and oil from the little machine-can. Being torn from this congenial labor, he was carried off shining with grease and roaring lustily.

But Jill did not mind her loneliness now, and sang like a happy canary while she threaded her sparkling beads, or hung the gay horns to dry, ready for their cargoes of sweets. So Mrs. Minot's recipe for sunshine proved successful, and mother-wit made the wintry day a bright and happy one for both the little prisoners.