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[Jack And Jill](#)

[Louisa May Alcott](#)

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Chapter 5 - Secrets

There were a great many clubs in Harmony Village, but as we intend to interest ourselves with the affairs of the young folks only, we need not dwell upon the intellectual amusements of the elders. In summer, the boys devoted themselves to baseball, the girls to boating, and all got rosy, stout, and strong, in these healthful exercises. In winter, the lads had their debating club, the lasses a dramatic ditto. At the former, astonishing bursts of oratory were heard; at the latter, everything was boldly attempted, from Romeo and Juliet to Mother Goose's immortal melodies. The two clubs frequently met and mingled their attractions in a really entertaining manner, for the speakers made good actors, and the young actresses were most appreciative listeners to the eloquence of each budding Demosthenes.

Great plans had been afoot for Christmas or New Year, but when the grand catastrophe put an end to the career of one of the best "spouters," and caused the retirement of the favorite "singing chambermaid," the affair was postponed till February, when Washington's birthday was always celebrated by the patriotic town, where the father of his country once put on his nightcap, or took off his boots, as that ubiquitous hero appears to have done in every part of the United States.

Meantime the boys were studying Revolutionary characters, and the girls rehearsing such dramatic scenes as they thought most appropriate and effective for the 22d. In both of these attempts they were much helped by the sense and spirit of Ralph Evans, a youth of nineteen, who was a great favorite with the young folks, not only because he was a good, industrious fellow, who supported his grandmother, but also full of talent, fun, and ingenuity. It was no wonder every one who really knew him liked him, for he could turn his hand to anything, and loved to do it. If the girls were in despair about a fire-place when acting "The Cricket on the Hearth," he painted one, and put a gas-log in it that made the kettle really boil, to their great delight. If the boys found the interest of their club flagging, Ralph would convulse them by imitations of the "Member from Cranberry Centre," or fire them with speeches of famous statesmen. Charity fairs could not get on without him, and in the store where he worked he did many an ingenious job, which made him valued for his mechanical skill, as well as for his energy and integrity.

Mrs. Minot liked to have him with her sons, because they also were to paddle their own canoes by and by, and she believed that, rich or poor, boys make better men for learning to use the talents they possess, not merely as ornaments, but tools with which to carve their own fortunes; and the best help toward this end is an example of faithful work, high aims, and honest living. So Ralph came often, and in times of trouble was a real rainy-day friend. Jack grew very fond of him during his imprisonment, for the good youth ran in every evening to get commissions, amuse the boy with droll accounts of the day's adventures, or invent lifts, bed-tables, and foot-rests for the impatient invalid. Frank found him a sure guide through the mechanical mysteries which he loved, and spent many a useful half-hour discussing cylinders, pistons, valves, and balance-wheels. Jill also came in for her share of care and comfort; the poor little back lay all the easier for the air-cushion Ralph got her, and the weary headaches found relief from the spray atomizer, which softly distilled its scented dew on the hot forehead till she fell asleep.

Round the beds of Jack and Jill met and mingled the schoolmates of whom our story treats. Never, probably, did invalids have gayer times than our two, after a week of solitary confinement; for school gossip crept in, games could not be prevented, and Christmas secrets were concocted in those rooms till they were regular conspirators' dens, when they were not little Bedlams.

After the horn and bead labors were over, the stringing of pop-corn on red, and cranberries on white, threads, came next, and Jack and Jill often looked like a new kind of spider in the pretty webs hung about them, till reeled off to bide their time in the Christmas closet. Paper flowers followed, and gay garlands and bouquets blossomed, regardless of the snow and frost without. Then there was a great scribbling of names, verses, and notes to accompany the steadily increasing store of odd parcels which were collected at the Minots', for gifts from every one were to ornament the tree, and contributions poured in as the day drew near.

But the secret which most excited the young people was the deep mystery of certain proceedings at the Minot house. No one but Frank, Ralph, and Mamma knew what it was, and the two boys nearly drove the others distracted by the tantalizing way in which they hinted at joys to come, talked strangely about birds, went measuring round with foot-rules, and shut themselves up in the Boys' Den, as a certain large room was called. This seemed to be the centre of operations, but beyond the fact of the promised tree no ray of light was permitted to pass the jealously guarded doors. Strange men with paste-pots and ladders went in, furniture was dragged about, and all sorts of boyish lumber was sent up garret and down cellar. Mrs. Minot was seen pondering over heaps of green stuff, hammering was heard, singular bundles were smuggled upstairs, flowering plants betrayed their presence by whiffs of fragrance when the door was opened, and Mrs. Pecq was caught smiling all by herself in a back bedroom, which usually was shut up in winter.

"They are going to have a play, after all, and that green stuff was the curtain," said Molly Loo, as the girls talked it over one day, when they sat with their backs turned to one another, putting last stitches in certain bits of work which had to be concealed from all eyes, though it was found convenient to ask one another's taste as to the color, materials, and sizes of these mysterious articles.

"I think it is going to be a dance. I heard the boys doing their steps when I went in last evening to find out whether Jack liked blue or yellow best, so I could put the bow on his pen-wiper," declared Merry, knitting briskly away at the last of the pair of pretty white bed-socks she was making for Jill right under her inquisitive little nose.

"They wouldn't have a party of that kind without Jack and me. It is only an extra nice tree, you see if it isn't," answered Jill from behind the pillows which made a temporary screen to hide the toilet mats she was preparing for all her friends.

"Every one of you is wrong, and you'd better rest easy, for you won't find out the best part of it, try as you may." And Mrs. Pecq actually chuckled as she, too, worked away at some bits of muslin, with her back turned to the very unsocial-looking group.

"Well, I don't care, we've got a secret all our own, and won't ever tell, will we?" cried Jill, falling back on the Home Missionary Society, though it was not yet begun.

"Never!" answered the girls, and all took great comfort in the idea that one mystery would not be cleared up, even at Christmas.

Jack gave up guessing, in despair, after he had suggested a new dining-room where he could eat with the family, a private school in which his lessons might go on with a tutor, or a theatre for the production of the farces in which he delighted.

"It is going to be used to keep something in that you are very fond of," said Mamma, taking pity on him at last.

"Ducks?" asked Jack, with a half pleased, half puzzled air, not quite seeing where the water was to come from.

Frank exploded at the idea, and added to the mystification by saying, -

"There will be one little duck and one great donkey in it." Then, fearing he had told the secret, he ran off, quacking and braying derisively.

"It is to be used for creatures that I, too, am fond of, and you know neither donkeys nor ducks are favorites of mine," said Mamma, with a demure expression, as she sat turning over old clothes for the bundles that always went to poor neighbors, with a little store of goodies, at this time of the year.

"I know! I know! It is to be a new ward for more sick folks, isn't it, now?" cried Jack, with what he thought a great proof of shrewdness.

"I don't see how I could attend to many more patients till this one is off my hands," answered Mamma, with a queer smile, adding quickly, as if she too was afraid of letting the cat out of the bag: "That reminds me of a Christmas I once spent among the hospitals and poor-houses of a great city with a good lady who, for thirty years, had made it her mission to see that these poor little souls had one merry day. We gave away two hundred dolls, several great boxes of candy and toys, besides gay pictures, and new clothes to orphan children, sick babies, and half-grown innocents. Ah, my boy, that was a day to remember all my life, to make me doubly grateful for my blessings, and very glad to serve the helpless and afflicted, as that dear woman did."

The look and tone with which the last words were uttered effectually turned Jack's thoughts from the great secret, and started another small one, for he fell to planning what he would buy with his pocket-money to surprise the little Pats and Biddies who were to have no Christmas tree.