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[Jack And Jill](#)

[Louisa May Alcott](#)

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Chapter 6 - Surprises

"Is it pleasant?" was the question Jill asked before she was fairly awake on Christmas morning.

"Yes, dear; as bright as heart could wish. Now eat a bit, and then I'll make you nice for the day's pleasure. I only hope it won't be too much for you," answered Mrs. Pecq, bustling about, happy, yet anxious, for Jill was to be carried over to Mrs. Minot's, and it was her first attempt at going out since the accident.

It seemed as if nine o'clock would never come, and Jill, with wraps all ready, lay waiting in a fever of impatience for the doctor's visit, as he wished to superintend the moving. At last he came, found all promising, and having bundled up his small patient, carried her, with Frank's help, in her chair-bed to the ox-sled, which was drawn to the next door, and Miss Jill landed in the Boys' Den before she had time to get either cold or tired. Mrs. Minot took her things off with a cordial welcome, but Jill never said a word, for, after one exclamation, she lay staring about her, dumb with surprise and delight at what she saw.

The great room was entirely changed; for now it looked like a garden, or one of the fairy scenes children love, where in-doors and out-of-doors are pleasantly combined. The ceiling was pale blue, like the sky; the walls were covered with a paper like a rustic trellis, up which climbed morning-glories so naturally that the many-colored bells seemed dancing in the wind. Birds and butterflies flew among them, and here and there, through arches in the trellis, one seemed to look into a sunny summer world, contrasting curiously with the wintry landscape lying beyond the real windows, festooned with evergreen garlands, and curtained only by stands of living flowers. A green drugget covered the floor like grass, rustic chairs from the garden stood about, and in the middle of the room a handsome hemlock waited for its pretty burden. A Yule-log blazed on the wide hearth, and over the chimney-piece, framed in holly, shone the words that set all hearts to dancing, "Merry Christmas!"

"Do you like it, dear? This is our surprise for you and Jack, and here we mean to have good times together," said Mrs. Minot, who had stood quietly enjoying the effect of her work.

"Oh, it is so lovely I don't know what to say!" and Jill put up both arms, as words failed her, and grateful kisses were all she had to offer.

"Can you suggest anything more to add to the pleasantness?" asked the gentle lady, holding the small hands in her own, and feeling well repaid by the child's delight.

"Only Jack;" and Jill's laugh was good to hear, as she glanced up with merry, yet wistful eyes.

"You are right. We'll have him in at once, or he will come hopping on one leg;" and away hurried his mother, laughing, too, for whistles, shouts, thumps, and violent demonstrations of all kinds had been heard from the room where Jack was raging with impatience, while he waited for his share of the surprise.

Jill could hardly lie still when she heard the roll of another chair-bed coming down the hall, its passage enlivened with cries of "Starboard! Port! Easy now! Pull away!" from Ralph and Frank, as they steered the recumbent Columbus on his first voyage of discovery.

"Well, I call that handsome!" was Jack's exclamation, when the full beauty of the scene burst upon his view. Then he forgot all about it and gave a whoop of pleasure, for there beside the fire was an eager face, two hands beckoning, and Jill's voice crying, joyfully, -

"I'm here! I'm here! Oh, do come, quick!" Down the long room rattled the chair, Jack cheering all the way, and brought up beside the other one, as the long-parted friends exclaimed, with one accord, -

"Isn't this jolly!"

It certainly did look so, for Ralph and Frank danced a wild sort of fandango round the tree, Dr. Whiting stood and laughed, while the two mothers beamed from the doorway, and the children, not knowing whether to laugh or to cry, compromised the matter by clapping their hands and shouting, "Merry Christmas to everybody!" like a pair of little maniacs.

Then they all sobered down, and the busy ones went off to the various duties of the day, leaving the young invalids to repose and enjoy themselves together.

"How nice you look," said Jill, when they had duly admired the pretty room.

"So do you," gallantly returned Jack, as he surveyed her with unusual interest.

They did look very nice, though happiness was the principal beautifier. Jill wore a red wrapper, with the most brilliant of all the necklaces sparkling at her throat, over a nicely crimped frill her mother had made in honor of the day. All the curly black hair was gathered into a red net, and a pair of smart little moccasins covered the feet that had not stepped for many a weary day. Jack was not so gay, but had made himself as fine as circumstances would permit. A gray dressing-gown, with blue cuffs and collar, was very becoming to the blonde youth; an immaculate shirt, best studs, sleeve-buttons, blue tie, and handkerchief wet with cologne sticking out of the breast-pocket, gave an air of elegance in spite of the afghan spread over the lower portions of his manly form. The yellow hair was brushed till it shone, and being parted in the middle, to hide the black patch, made two engaging little "quirls" on his forehead. The summer tan had faded from his cheeks, but his eyes were as blue as the wintry sky, and nearly every white tooth was visible as he smiled on his partner in misfortune, saying cheerily, -

"I'm ever so glad to see you again; guess we are over the worst of it now, and can have good times. Won't it be fun to stay here all the while, and amuse one another?"

"Yes, indeed; but one day is so short! It will be stupider than ever when I go home to-night," answered Jill, looking about her with longing eyes.

"But you are not going home to-night; you are to stay ever so long. Didn't Mamma tell you?"

"No. Oh, how splendid! Am I really? Where will I sleep? What will Mammy do without me?" and Jill almost sat up, she was so delighted with the new surprise.

"That room in there is all fixed for you. I made Frank tell me so much. Mamma said I might tell you, but I didn't think she would be able to hold in if she saw you first. Your mother is coming, too, and we are all going to have larks together till we are well."

The splendor of this arrangement took Jill's breath away, and before she got it again, in came Frank and Ralph with two clothes-baskets of treasures to be hung upon the tree. While they wired on the candles the children asked questions, and found out all they wanted to know about the new plans and pleasures.

"Who fixed all this?"

"Mamma thought of it, and Ralph and I did it. He's the man for this sort of thing, you know. He proposed cutting out the arches and sticking on birds and butterflies just where they looked best. I put those canaries over there, they looked so well against the blue;" and Frank proudly pointed out some queer orange-colored fowls, looking as if they were having fits in the air, but very effective, nevertheless.

"Your mother said you might call this the Bird Room. We caught a scarlet-tanager for you to begin with, didn't we, Jack?" and Ralph threw a bon-bon at Jill, who looked very like a bright little bird in a warm nest.

"Good for you! Yes, and we are going to keep her in this pretty cage till we can both fly off together. I say, Jill, where shall we be in our classes when we do get back?" and Jack's merry face fell at the thought.

"At the foot, if we don't study and keep up. Doctor said I might study sometimes, if I'd lie still as long as he thought best, and Molly brought home my books, and Merry says she will come in every day and tell me where the lessons are. I don't mean to fall behind, if my backbone is cracked," said Jill, with a decided nod that made several black rings fly out of the net to dance on her forehead.

"Frank said he'd pull me along in my Latin, but I've been lazy and haven't done a thing. Let's go at it and start fair for New Year," proposed Jack, who did not love study as the bright girl did, but was ashamed to fall behind her in anything.

"All right. They've been reviewing, so we can keep up when they begin, if we work next week, while the rest have a holiday. Oh, dear, I do miss school dreadfully;" and Jill sighed for the old desk, every blot and notch of which was dear to her.

"There come our things, and pretty nice they look, too," said Jack; and his mother began to dress the tree, hanging up the gay horns, the gilded nuts, red and yellow apples and oranges, and festooning long strings of pop-corn and scarlet cranberries from bough to bough, with the glittering necklaces hung where the light would show their colors best.

"I never saw such a splendid tree before. I'm glad we could help, though we were ill. Is it all done now?" asked Jill, when the last parcel was tied on and everybody stood back to admire the pretty sight.

"One thing more. Hand me that box, Frank, and be very careful that you fasten this up firmly, Ralph," answered Mrs. Minot, as she took from its wrappings the waxen figure of a little child. The rosy limbs were very life-like, so was the smiling face under the locks of shining hair. Both plump arms were outspread as if to scatter blessings over all, and downy wings seemed to flutter from the dimpled shoulders, making an angel of the baby.

"Is it St. Nicholas?" asked Jill, who had never seen that famous personage, and knew but little of Christmas festivities.

"It is the Christ-child, whose birthday we are celebrating. I got the best I could find, for I like the idea better than old Santa Claus; though we may have him, too," said Mamma, holding the little image so that both could see it well.

"It looks like a real baby;" and Jack touched the rosy foot with the tip of his finger, as if expecting a crow from the half-open lips.

"It reminds me of the saints in the chapel of the Sacred Heart in Montreal. One little St. John looked like this, only he had a lamb instead of wings," said Jill, stroking the flaxen hair, and wishing she dared ask for it to play with.

"He is the children's saint to pray to, love, and imitate, for he never forgot them, but blessed and healed and taught them all his life. This is only a poor image of the holiest baby ever born, but I hope it will keep his memory in your minds all day, because this is the day for good resolutions, happy thoughts, and humble prayers, as well as play and gifts and feasting."

While she spoke, Mrs. Minot, touching the little figure as tenderly as if it were alive, had tied a broad white ribbon round it, and, handing it to Ralph, bade him fasten it to the hook above the tree-top, where it seemed to float as if the downy wings supported it.

Jack and Jill lay silently watching, with a sweet sort of soberness in their young faces, and for a moment the room was very still as all eyes looked up at the Blessed Child. The sunshine seemed to grow more golden as it flickered on the little head, the flames glanced about the glittering tree as if trying to climb and kiss the baby feet, and, without, a chime of bells rang sweetly, calling people to hear again the lovely story of the life begun on Christmas Day.

Only a minute, but it did them good, and presently, when the pleasant work was over, and the workers gone, the boys to church, and Mamma to see about lunch for the invalids, Jack said, gravely, to Jill, -

"I think we ought to be extra good, every one is so kind to us, and we are getting well, and going to have such capital times. Don't see how we can do anything else to show we are grateful."

"It isn't easy to be good when one is sick," said Jill, thoughtfully. "I fret dreadfully, I get so tired of being still. I want to scream sometimes, but I don't, because it would scare Mammy, so I cry. Do you cry, Jack?"

"Men never do. I want to tramp round when things bother me; but I can't, so I kick and say, 'Hang it!' and when I get very bad I pitch into Frank, and he lets me. I tell you, Jill, he's a good brother!" and Jack privately resolved then and there to invite Frank to take it out of him in any form he pleased as soon as health would permit.

"I rather think we shall grow good in this pretty place, for I don't see how we can be bad if we want to, it is all so nice and sort of pious here," said Jill, with her eyes on the angel over the tree.

"A fellow can be awfully hungry, I know that. I didn't half eat breakfast, I was in such a hurry to see you, and know all about the secrets. Frank kept saying I couldn't guess, that you had come, and I never would be ready, till finally I got mad and fired an egg at him, and made no end of a mess."

Jack and Jill went off into a gale of laughter at the idea of dignified Frank dodging the egg that smashed on the wall, leaving an indelible mark of Jack's besetting sin, impatience.

Just then Mrs. Minot came in, well pleased to hear such pleasant sounds, and to see two merry faces, where usually one listless one met her anxious eyes.

"The new medicine works well, neighbor," she said to Mrs. Pecq, who followed with the lunch tray.

"Indeed it does, mem. I feel as if I'd taken a sup myself, I'm that easy in my mind."

And she looked so, too, for she seemed to have left all her cares in the little house when she locked the door behind her, and now stood smiling with a clean apron on, so fresh and cheerful, that Jill hardly knew her own mother.

"Things taste better when you have someone to eat with you," observed Jack, as they devoured sandwiches, and drank milk out of little mugs with rosebuds on them.

"Don't eat too much, or you won't be ready for the next surprise," said his mother, when the plates were empty, and the last drop gone down throats dry with much chatter.

"More surprises! Oh, what fun!" cried Jill. And all the rest of the morning, in the intervals of talk and play, they tried to guess what it could be.

At two o'clock they found out, for dinner was served in the Bird Room, and the children revelled in the simple feast prepared for them. The two mothers kept the little bed-tables well supplied, and fed their nurslings like maternal birds, while Frank presided over the feast with great dignity, and ate a dinner which would have astonished Mamma, if she had not been too busy to observe how fast the mince pie vanished.

"The girls said Christmas was spoiled because of us; but I don't think so, and they won't either, when they see this splendid place and know all about our nice plans," said Jill, luxuriously eating the nut-meats Jack picked out for her, as they lay in Eastern style at the festive board.

"I call this broken bones made easy. I never had a better Christmas. Have a raisin? Here's a good fat one." And Jack made a long arm to Jill's mouth, which began to sing "Little Jack Horner" as an appropriate return.

"It would have been a lonesome one to all of us, I'm thinking, but for your mother, boys. My duty and hearty thanks to you, mem," put in grateful Mrs. Pecq, bowing over her coffee-cup as she had seen ladies bow over their wine-glasses at dinner parties in Old England.

"I rise to propose a health, Our Mothers." And Frank stood up with a goblet of water, for not even at Christmas time was wine seen on that table.

"Hip, hip, hurrah!" called Jack, baptizing himself with a good sprinkle, as he waved his glass and drank the toast with a look that made his mother's eyes fill with happy tears.

Jill threw her mother a kiss, feeling very grown up and elegant to be dining out in such style. Then they drank every one's health with much merriment, till Frank declared that Jack would float off on the deluge of water he splashed about in his enthusiasm, and Mamma proposed a rest after the merry-making.

"Now the best fun is coming, and we have not long to wait," said the boy, when naps and rides about the room had whiled away the brief interval between dinner and dusk, for the evening entertainment was to be an early one, to suit the invalids' bedtime.

"I hope the girls will like their things. I helped to choose them, and each has a nice present. I don't know mine, though, and I'm in a twitter to see it," said Jill, as they lay waiting for the fun to begin.

"I do; I chose it, so I know you will like one of them, any way."

"Have I got more than one?"

"I guess you'll think so when they are handed down. The bell was going all day yesterday, and the girls kept bringing in bundles for you; I see seven now," and Jack rolled his eyes from one mysterious parcel to another hanging on the laden boughs.

"I know something, too. That square bundle is what you want ever so much. I told Frank, and he got it for his present. It is all red and gold outside, and every sort of color inside; you'll hurrah when you see it. That roundish one is yours too; I made them," cried Jill, pointing to a flat package tied to the stem of the tree, and a neat little roll in which were the blue mittens that she had knit for him.

"I can wait;" but the boy's eyes shone with eagerness, and he could not resist firing two or three pop-corns at it to see whether it was hard or soft.

"That barking dog is for Boo, and the little yellow sled, so Molly can drag him to school, he always tumbles down so when it is slippery," continued Jill, proud of her superior knowledge, as she showed a small spotted animal hanging by its tail, with a red tongue displayed as if about to taste the sweeties in the horn below.

"Don't talk about sleds, for mercy's sake! I never want to see another, and you wouldn't, either, if you had to lie with a flat-iron tied to your ankle, as I do," said Jack, with a kick of the well leg and an ireful glance at the weight attached to the other that it might not contract while healing.

"Well, I think plasters, and liniment, and rubbing, as bad as flat-irons any day. I don't believe you have ached half so much as I have, though it sounds worse to break legs than to sprain your back," protested Jill, eager to prove herself the greater sufferer, as invalids are apt to be.

"I guess you wouldn't think so if you'd been pulled round as I was when they set my leg. Caesar, how it did hurt!" and Jack squirmed at the recollection of it.

"You didn't faint away as I did when the doctor was finding out if my vertebrums were hurt, so now!" cried Jill, bound to carry her point, though not at all clear what vertebrae were.

"Pooh! Girls always faint. Men are braver, and I didn't faint a bit in spite of all that horrid agony."

"You howled; Frank told me so. Doctor said I was a brave girl, so you needn't brag, for you'll have to go on a crutch for a while. I know that."

"You may have to use two of them for years, may be. I heard the doctor tell my mother so. I shall be up and about long before you will. Now then!"

Both children were getting excited, for the various pleasures of the day had been rather too much for them, and there is no knowing but they would have added the sad surprise of a quarrel to the pleasant ones of the day, if a cheerful whistle had not been heard, as Ralph came in to light the candles and give the last artistic touches to the room.

"Well, young folks, how goes it? Had a merry time so far?" he asked, as he fixed the steps and ran up with a lighted match in his hand.

"Very nice, thank you," answered a prim little voice from the dusk below, for only the glow of the fire filled the room just then.

Jack said nothing, and two red sulky faces were hidden in the dark, watching candle after candle sputter, brighten, and twinkle, till the trembling shadows began to flit away like imps afraid of the light.

"Now he will see my face, and I know it is cross," thought Jill, as Ralph went round the last circle, leaving another line of sparks among the hemlock boughs.

Jack thought the same, and had just got the frown smoothed out of his forehead, when Frank brought a fresh log, and a glorious blaze sprung up, filling every corner of the room, and dancing over the figures in the long chairs till they had to brighten whether they liked it or not. Presently the bell began to ring and gay voices to sound below; then Jill smiled in spite of herself as Molly Loo's usual cry of "Oh, dear, where is that child?" reached her, and Jack could not help keeping time to the march Ed played, while Frank and Gus marshalled the procession.

"Ready!" cried Mrs. Minot, at last, and up came the troop of eager lads and lasses, brave in holiday suits, with faces to match. A unanimous "O, o, o!" burst from twenty tongues, as the full splendor of the tree, the room, and its inmates, dawned upon them; for not only did the pretty Christ-child hover above, but Santa Claus himself stood below, fur-clad, white-bearded, and powdered with snow from the dredging-box.

Ralph was a good actor, and, when the first raptures were over he distributed the presents with such droll speeches, jokes, and gambols, that the room rang with merriment, and passers-by paused to listen, sure that here, at least, Christmas was merry. It would be impossible to tell about all the gifts or the joy of the receivers, but every one was satisfied, and the king and queen of the revels so overwhelmed with little tokens of good-will, that their beds looked like booths at a fair. Jack beamed over the handsome postage-stamp book which had long been the desire of his heart, and Jill felt like a millionaire, with a silver fruit-knife, a pretty work-basket, and oh! - coals of fire on her head! - a ring from Jack.

A simple little thing enough, with one tiny turquoise forget-me-not, but something like a dew-drop fell on it when no one was looking, and she longed to say, "I'm sorry I was cross; forgive me, Jack." But it could not be done then, so she turned to admire Merry's bed-shoes, the pots of pansies, hyacinths, and geranium which Gus and his sisters sent for her window garden, Molly's queer Christmas pie, and the zither Ed promised to teach her how to play upon.

The tree was soon stripped, and pop-corns strewed the floor as the children stood about picking them off the red threads when candy gave out, with an occasional cranberry by way of relish. Boo insisted on trying the new sled at once, and enlivened the trip by the squeaking of the spotted dog, the toot of a tin trumpet, and shouts of joy at the splendor of the turn-out.

The girls all put on their necklaces, and danced about like fine ladies at a ball. The boys fell to comparing skates, balls, and cuff-buttons on the spot, while the little ones devoted all their energies to eating everything eatable they could lay their hands on.

Games were played till nine o'clock, and then the party broke up, after they had taken hands round the tree and sung a song written by one whom you all know, - so faithfully and beautifully does she love and labor for children the world over.

THE BLESSED DAY

"What shall little children bring
On Christmas Day, on Christmas Day?
What shall little children bring
On Christmas Day in the morning?
This shall little children bring
On Christmas Day, on Christmas Day:
Love and joy to Christ their king,
On Christmas Day in the morning!

"What shall little children sing
On Christmas Day, on Christmas Day?
What shall little children sing
On Christmas Day in the morning?
The grand old carols shall they sing
On Christmas Day, on Christmas Day:
With all their hearts, their offerings bring
On Christmas Day in the morning."

Jack was carried off to bed in such haste that he had only time to call out, "Good-night!" before he was rolled away, gaping as he went. Jill soon found herself tucked up in the great white bed she was to share with her mother, and lay looking about the pleasant chamber, while Mrs. Pecq ran home for a minute to see that all was safe there for the night.

After the merry din the house seemed very still, with only a light step now and then, the murmur of voices not far away, or the jingle of sleigh-bells from without, and the little girl rested easily among the pillows, thinking over the pleasures of the day, too wide-awake for sleep. There was no lamp in the chamber, but she could look into the pretty Bird Room, where the fire-light still shone on flowery walls, deserted tree, and Christ-child floating above the green. Jill's eyes wandered there and lingered till they were full of regretful tears, because the sight of the little angel recalled the words spoken when it was hung up, the good resolution she had taken then, and how soon it was broken.

"I said I couldn't be bad in that lovely place, and I was a cross, ungrateful girl after all they've done for Mammy and me. Poor Jack was hurt the worst, and he was brave, though he did scream. I wish I could go and tell him so, and hear him say, 'All right.' Oh, me, I've spoiled the day!"

A great sob choked more words, and Jill was about to have a comfortable cry, when someone entered the other room, and she saw Frank doing something with a long cord and a thing that looked like a tiny drum. Quiet as a bright-eyed mouse, Jill peeped out wondering what it was, and suspecting mischief, for the boy was laughing to himself as he stretched the cord, and now and then bent over the little object in his hand, touching it with great care.

"May be it's a torpedo to blow up and scare me; Jack likes to play tricks. Well, I'll scream loud when it goes off, so he will be satisfied that I'm dreadfully frightened,"

thought Jill, little dreaming what the last surprise of the day was to be.

Presently a voice whispered, -

"I say! Are you awake?"

"Yes."

"Any one there but you?"

"No."

"Catch this, then. Hold it to your ear and see what you'll get."

The little drum came flying in, and, catching it, Jill, with some hesitation, obeyed Frank's order. Judge of her amazement when she caught in broken whispers these touching words: -

"Sorry I was cross. Forgive and forget. Start fair to-morrow. All right. Jack."

Jill was so delighted with this handsome apology, that she could not reply for a moment, then steadied her voice, and answered back in her sweetest tone, -

"I'm sorry, too. Never, never, will again. Feel much better now. Good-night, you dear old thing."

Satisfied with the success of his telephone, Frank twitched back the drum and vanished, leaving Jill to lay her cheek upon the hand that wore the little ring and fall asleep, saying to herself, with a farewell glance at the children's saint, dimly seen in the soft gloom, "I will not forget. I will be good!"