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Chapter 7 - Jill's Mission

The good times began immediately, and very little studying was done that week in spite of the virtuous resolutions made by certain young persons on Christmas Day. But, dear me, how was it possible to settle down to lessons in the delightful Bird Room, with not only its own charms to distract one, but all the new gifts to enjoy, and a dozen calls a day to occupy one's time?

"I guess we'd better wait till the others are at school, and just go in for fun this week," said Jack, who was in great spirits at the prospect of getting up, for the splinters were off, and he hoped to be promoted to crutches very soon.

"I shall keep my Speller by me and take a look at it every day, for that is what I'm most backward in. But I intend to devote myself to you, Jack, and be real kind and useful. I've made a plan to do it, and I mean to carry it out, any way," answered Jill, who had begun to be a missionary, and felt that this was a field of labor where she could distinguish herself.

"Here's a home mission all ready for you, and you can be paying your debts beside doing yourself good," Mrs. Pecq said to her in private, having found plenty to do herself.

Now Jill made one great mistake at the outset - she forgot that she was the one to be converted to good manners and gentleness, and devoted her efforts to looking after Jack, finding it much easier to cure other people's faults than her own. Jack was a most engaging heathen, and needed very little instruction; therefore Jill thought her task would be an easy one. But three or four weeks of petting and play had rather demoralized both children, so Jill's Speller, though tucked under the sofa pillow every day, was seldom looked at, and Jack shirked his Latin shamefully. Both read all the story-books they could get, held daily levees in the Bird Room, and all their spare minutes were spent in teaching Snowdrop, the great Angora cat, to bring the ball when they dropped it in their game. So Saturday came, and both were rather the worse for so much idleness, since daily duties and studies are the wholesome bread which feeds the mind better than the dyspeptic plum-cake of sensational reading, or the unsubstantial bon-bons of frivolous amusement.

It was a stormy day, so they had few callers, and devoted themselves to arranging the album; for these books were all the rage just then, and boys met to compare, discuss, buy, sell, and "swap" stamps with as much interest as men on 'Change gamble in stocks. Jack had a nice little collection, and had been saving up pocket-money to buy a book in which to preserve his treasures. Now, thanks to Jill's timely suggestion, Frank had given him a fine one, and several friends had contributed a number of rare stamps to grace the large, inviting pages. Jill wielded the gum-brush and fitted on the little flaps, as her fingers were skilful at this nice work, and Jack put each stamp in its proper place with great rustling of leaves and comparing of marks. Returning, after a brief absence, Mrs. Minot beheld the countenances of the workers adorned with gay stamps, giving them a very curious appearance.

"My dears! what new play have you got now? Are you wild Indians? or letters that have gone round the world before finding the right address?" she asked, laughing at the ridiculous sight, for both were as sober as judges and deeply absorbed in some doubtful specimen.

"Oh, we just stuck them there to keep them safe; they get lost if we leave them lying round. It's very handy, for I can see in a minute what I want on Jill's face and she on mine, and put our fingers on the right chap at once," answered Jack, adding, with an anxious gaze at his friend's variegated countenance, "Where the dickens is my New Granada? It's rare, and I wouldn't lose it for a dollar."

"Why, there it is on your own nose. Don't you remember you put it there because you said mine was not big enough to hold it?" laughed Jill, tweaking a large orange square off the round nose of her neighbor, causing it to wrinkle up in a droll way, as the gum made the operation slightly painful.

"So I did, and gave you Little Bolivar on yours. Now I'll have Alsace and Lorraine, 1870. There are seven of them, so hold still and see how you like it," returned Jack, picking the large, pale stamps one by one from Jill's forehead, which they crossed like a band.

She bore it without flinching, saying to herself with a secret smile, as she glanced at the hot fire, which scorched her if she kept near enough to Jack to help him, "This really is being like a missionary, with a tattooed savage to look after. I have to suffer a little, as the good folks did who got speared and roasted sometimes; but I won't complain a bit, though my forehead smarts, my arms are tired, and one cheek is as red as fire."

"The Roman States make a handsome page, don't they?" asked Jack, little dreaming of the part he was playing in Jill's mind. "Oh, I say, isn't Corea a beauty? I'm ever so proud of that;" and he gazed fondly on a big blue stamp, the sole ornament of one page.

"I don't see why the Cape of Good Hope has pyramids. They ought to go in Egypt. The Sandwich Islands are all right, with heads of the black kings and queens on them," said Jill, feeling that they were very appropriate to her private play.

"Turkey has crescents, Australia swans, and Spain women's heads, with black bars across them. Frank says it is because they keep women shut up so; but that was only his fun. I'd rather have a good, honest green United States, with Washington on it, or a blue one-center with old Franklin, than all their eagles and lions and kings and queens put together," added the democratic boy, with a disrespectful slap on a crowned head as he settled Heligoland in its place.

"Why does Austria have Mercury on the stamp, I wonder? Do they wear helmets like that?" asked Jill, with the brush-handle in her mouth as she cut a fresh batch of flaps.

"May be he was postman to the gods, so he is put on stamps now. The Prussians wear helmets, but they have spikes like the old Roman fellows. I like Prussians ever so much; they fight splendidly, and always beat. Austrians have a handsome uniform, though."

"Talking of Romans reminds me that I have not heard your Latin for two days. Come, lazybones, brace up, and let us have it now. I've done my compo, and shall have just time before I go out for a tramp with Gus," said Frank, putting by a neat page to dry, for he studied every day like a conscientious lad as he was.

"Don't know it. Not going to try till next week. Grind away over your old Greek as much as you like, but don't bother me," answered Jack, frowning at the mere thought of the detested lesson.

But Frank adored his Xenophon, and would not see his old friend, Caesar, neglected without an effort to defend him; so he confiscated the gum-pot, and effectually stopped the stamp business by whisking away at one fell swoop all that lay on Jill's table.

"Now then, young man, you will quit this sort of nonsense and do your lesson, or you won't see these fellows again in a hurry. You asked me to hear you, and I'm going to do it; here's the book."

Frank's tone was the dictatorial one, which Jack hated and always found hard to obey, especially when he knew he ought to do it. Usually, when his patience was tried, he strode about the room, or ran off for a race round the garden, coming back breathless, but good-tempered. Now both these vents for irritation were denied him, and he had fallen into the way of throwing things about in a pet. He longed to send Caesar to perpetual banishment in the fire blazing close by, but resisted the temptation, and answered honestly, though gruffly: "I know I did, but I don't see any use in pouncing on a fellow when he isn't ready. I haven't got my lesson, and don't mean to worry about it; so you may just give me back my things and go about your business."

"I'll give you back a stamp for every perfect lesson you get, and you won't see them on any other terms;" and, thrusting the treasures into his pocket, Frank caught up his rubber boots, and went off swinging them like a pair of clubs, feeling that he would give a trifle to be able to use them on his lazy brother.

At this high-handed proceeding, and the threat which accompanied it, Jack's patience gave out, and catching up Caesar, as he thought, sent him flying after the retreating tyrant with the defiant declaration, -

"Keep them, then, and your old book, too! I won't look at it till you give all my stamps back and say you are sorry. So now!"

It was all over before Mamma could interfere, or Jill do more than clutch and cling to the gum-brush. Frank vanished unharmed, but the poor book dashed against the wall to fall half open on the floor, its gay cover loosened, and its smooth leaves crushed by the blow.

"It's the album! O Jack, how could you?" cried Jill, dismayed at sight of the precious book so maltreated by the owner.

"Thought it was the other. Guess it isn't hurt much. Didn't mean to hit him, any way. He does provoke me so," muttered Jack, very red and shamefaced as his mother picked up the book and laid it silently on the table before him. He did not know what to do with himself, and was thankful for the stamps still left him, finding great relief in making faces as he plucked them one by one from his mortified countenance. Jill looked on, half glad, half sorry that her savage showed such signs of unconverted ferocity, and Mrs. Minot went on writing letters, wearing the grave look her sons found harder to bear than another person's scolding. No one spoke for a moment, and the silence was becoming awkward when Gus appeared in a rubber suit, bringing a book to Jack from Laura and a note to Jill from Lotty.

"Look here, you just trundle me into my den, please, I'm going to have a nap, it's so dull to-day I don't feel like doing much," said Jack, when Gus had done his errands, trying to look as if he knew nothing about the fracas.

Jack folded his arms and departed like a warrior borne from the battle-field, to be chaffed unmercifully for a "pepper-pot," while Gus made him comfortable in his own room.

"I heard once of a boy who threw a fork at his brother and put his eye out. But he didn't mean to, and the brother forgave him, and he never did so any more," observed Jill, in a pensive tone, wishing to show that she felt all the dangers of impatience, but was sorry for the culprit.

"Did the boy ever forgive himself?" asked Mrs. Minot.

"No, 'm; I suppose not. But Jack didn't hit Frank, and feels real sorry, I know."

"He might have, and hurt him very much. Our actions are in our own hands, but the consequences of them are not. Remember that, my dear, and think twice before you do anything."

"Yes, 'm, I will;" and Jill composed herself to consider what missionaries usually did when the natives hurled tomahawks and boomerangs at one another, and defied the rulers of the land.

Mrs. Minot wrote one page of a new letter, then stopped, pushed her papers about, thought a little, and finally got up, saying, as if she found it impossible to resist the yearning of her heart for the naughty boy, -

"I am going to see if Jack is covered up, he is so helpless, and liable to take cold. Don't stir till I come back."

"No, 'm, I won't."

Away went the tender parent to find her son studying Caesar for dear life, and all the more amiable for the little gust which had blown away the temporary irritability. The brothers were often called "Thunder and Lightning," because Frank lowered and growled and was a good while clearing up, while Jack's temper came and went like a flash, and the air was all the clearer for the escape of dangerous electricity. Of course Mamma had to stop and deliver a little lecture, illustrated by sad tales of petulant boys, and punctuated with kisses which took off the edge of these afflicting narratives.

Jill meantime meditated morally on the superiority of her own good temper over the hasty one of her dear playmate, and just when she was feeling unusually uplifted and secure, alas! like so many of us, she fell, in the most deplorable manner.

Glancing about the room for something to do, she saw a sheet of paper lying exactly out of reach, where it had fluttered from the table unperceived. At first her eye rested on it as carelessly as it did on the stray stamp Frank had dropped; then, as if one thing suggested the other, she took it into her head that the paper was Frank's composition, or, better still, a note to Annette, for the two corresponded when absence or weather prevented the daily meeting at school.

"Wouldn't it be fun to keep it till he gives back Jack's stamps? It would plague him so if it was a note, and I do believe it is, for compo's don't begin with two words on one side. I'll get it, and Jack and I will plan some way to pay him off, cross thing!"

Forgetting her promise not to stir, also how dishonorable it was to read other people's letters, Jill caught up the long-handled hook, often in use now, and tried to pull the paper nearer. It would not come at once, for a seam in the carpet held it, and Jill feared to tear or crumple it if she was not very careful. The hook was rather heavy and long for her to manage, and Jack usually did the fishing, so she was not very skilful; and just as she was giving a particularly quick jerk, she lost her balance, fell off the sofa, and dropped the pole with a bang.

"Oh, my back!" was all she could think or say as she felt the jar all through her little body, and a corresponding fear in her guilty little mind that someone would come and find out the double mischief she had been at. For a moment she lay quite still to recover from the shock, then as the pain passed she began to wonder how she should get back, and looked about her to see if she could do it alone. She thought she could, as the sofa was near and she had improved so much that she could sit up a little if the doctor would have let her. She was gathering herself together for the effort, when, within arm's reach now, she saw the tempting paper, and seized it with glee, for in spite of her predicament she did want to tease Frank. A glance showed that it was not the composition nor a note, but the beginning of a letter from Mrs. Minot to her sister, and Jill was about to lay it down when her own name caught her eye, and she could not resist reading it. Hard words to write of one so young, doubly hard to read, and impossible to forget.

"Dear Lizzie, - Jack continues to do very well, and will soon be up again. But we begin to fear that the little girl is permanently injured in the back. She is here, and we do our best for her; but I never look at her without thinking of Lucinda Snow, who, you remember, was bedridden for twenty years, owing to a fall at fifteen. Poor little Janey does not know yet, and I hope" - There it ended, and "poor little Janey's" punishment for disobedience began that instant. She thought she was getting well because she did not suffer all the time, and every one spoke cheerfully about "by and by." Now she knew the truth, and shut her eyes with a shiver as she said, low, to herself, -

"Twenty years! I couldn't bear it; oh, I couldn't bear it!"

A very miserable Jill lay on the floor, and for a while did not care who came and found her; then the last words of the letter - "I hope" - seemed to shine across the blackness of the dreadful "twenty years" and cheer her up a bit, for despair never lives long in young hearts, and Jill was a brave child.

"That is why Mammy sighs so when she dresses me, and every one is so good to me. Perhaps Mrs. Minot doesn't really know, after all. She was dreadfully scared about Jack, and he is getting well. I'd like to ask Doctor, but he might find out about the letter. Oh, dear, why didn't I keep still and let the horrid thing alone!"

As she thought that, Jill pushed the paper away, pulled herself up, and with much painful effort managed to get back to her sofa, where she laid herself down with a groan, feeling as if the twenty years had already passed over her since she tumbled off.

"I've told a lie, for I said I wouldn't stir. I've hurt my back, I've done a mean thing, and I've got paid for it. A nice missionary I am; I'd better begin at home, as Mammy told me to;" and Jill groaned again, remembering her mother's words. "Now I've got another secret to keep all alone, for I'd be ashamed to tell the girls. I guess I'll turn round and study my spelling; then no one will see my face."

Jill looked the picture of a good, industrious child as she lay with her back to the large table, her book held so that nothing was to be seen but one cheek and a pair of lips moving busily. Fortunately, it is difficult for little sinners to act a part, and, even if the face is hidden, something in the body seems to betray the internal remorse and shame. Usually, Jill lay flat and still; now her back was bent in a peculiar way as she leaned over her book, and one foot wagged nervously, while on the visible cheek was a Spanish stamp with a woman's face looking through the black bars, very suggestively, if she had known it. How long the minutes seemed till some one came, and what a queer little jump her heart gave when Mrs. Minot's voice said, cheerfully, "Jack is all right, and, I declare, so is Jill. I really believe there is a telegraph still working somewhere between you two, and each knows what the other is about without words."

"I didn't have any other book handy, so I thought I'd study awhile," answered Jill, feeling that she deserved no praise for her seeming industry.

She cast a sidelong glance as she spoke, and seeing that Mrs. Minot was looking for the letter, hid her face and lay so still she could hear the rustle of the paper as it was taken from the floor. It was well she did not also see the quick look the lady gave her as she turned the letter and found a red stamp sticking to the under side, for this unlucky little witness told the story.

Mrs. Minot remembered having seen the stamp lying close to the sofa when she left the room, for she had had half a mind to take it to Jack, but did not, thinking Frank's plan had some advantages. She also recollected that a paper flew off the table, but being in haste she had not stopped to see what it was. Now, the stamp and the letter could hardly have come together without hands, for they lay a yard apart, and here, also, on the unwritten portion of the page, was the mark of a small green thumb. Jill had been winding wool for a stripe in her new afghan, and the green ball lay on her sofa. These signs suggested and confirmed what Mrs. Minot did not want to believe; so she did the voice, attitude, and air of Jill, all very unlike her usual open, alert ways.

The kind lady could easily forgive the reading of her letter since the girl had found such sad news there, but the dangers of disobedience were serious in her case, and a glance showed that she was suffering either in mind or body - perhaps both.

"I will wait for her to tell me. She is an honest child, and the truth will soon come out," thought Mrs. Minot, as she took a clean sheet, and Jill tried to study.

"Shall I hear your lesson, dear? Jack means to recite his like a good boy, so suppose you follow his example," she said, presently.

"I don't know as I can say it, but I'll try."

Jill did try, and got on bravely till she came to the word "permanent;" there she hesitated, remembering where she saw it last.

"Do you know what that means?" asked her teacher, thinking to help her on by defining the word.

"Always - for a great while - or something like that; doesn't it?" faltered Jill, with a tight feeling in her throat, and the color coming up, as she tried to speak easily, yet felt so shame-stricken she could not.

"Are you in pain, my child? Never mind the lesson; tell me, and I'll do something for you."

The kind words, the soft hand on her hot cheek, and the pity in the eyes that looked at her, were too much for Jill. A sob came first, and then the truth, told with hidden face and tears that washed the blush away, and set free the honest little soul that could not hide its fault from such a friend.

"I knew it all before, and was sure you would tell me, else you would not be the child I love and like to help so well."

Then, while she soothed Jill's trouble, Mrs. Minot told her story and showed the letter, wishing to lessen, if possible, some part of the pain it had given.

"Sly old stamp! To go and tell on me when I meant to own up, and get some credit if I could, after being so mean and bad," said Jill, smiling through her tears when she saw the tell-tale witnesses against her.

"You had better stick it in your book to remind you of the bad consequences of disobedience, then perhaps this lesson will leave a 'permanent' impression on your mind and memory," answered Mrs. Minot, glad to see her natural gayety coming back, and hoping that she had forgotten the contents of the unfortunate letter. But she had not; and presently, when the sad affair had been talked over and forgiven, Jill asked, slowly, as she tried to put on a brave look, -

"Please tell me about Lucinda Snow. If I am to be like her, I might as well know how she managed to bear it so long."

"I'm sorry you ever heard of her, and yet perhaps it may help you to bear your trial, dear, which I hope will never be as heavy a one as hers. This Lucinda I knew for years, and though at first I thought her fate the saddest that could be, I came at last to see how happy she was in spite of her affliction, how good and useful and beloved."

"Why, how could she be? What did she do?" cried Jill, forgetting her own troubles to look up with an open, eager face again.

"She was so patient, other people were ashamed to complain of their small worries; so cheerful, that her own great one grew lighter; so industrious, that she made both money and friends by pretty things she worked and sold to her many visitors. And, best of all, so wise and sweet that she seemed to get good out of everything, and made her poor room a sort of chapel where people went for comfort, counsel, and an example of a pious life. So, you see, Lucinda was not so very miserable after all."

"Well, if I could not be as I was, I'd like to be a woman like that. Only, I hope I shall not!" answered Jill, thoughtfully at first, then coming out so decidedly with the last words that it was evident the life of a bedridden saint was not at all to her mind.

"So do I; and I mean to believe that you will not. Meantime, we can try to make the waiting as useful and pleasant as possible. This painful little back will be a sort of conscience to remind you of what you ought to do and leave undone, and so you can be learning obedience. Then, when the body is strong, it will have formed a good habit to make duty easier; and my Lucinda can be a sweet example, even while lying here, if she chooses."

"Can I?" and Jill's eyes were full of softer tears as the comfortable, cheering words sank into her heart, to blossom slowly by and by into her life, for this was to be a long lesson, hard to learn, but very useful in the years to come.

When the boys returned, after the Latin was recited and peace restored, Jack showed her a recovered stamp promptly paid by Frank, who was as just as he was severe, and Jill asked for the old red one, though she did not tell why she wanted it, nor show it put away in the spelling-book, a little seal upon a promise made to be kept.