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## Chapter 8 - Merry And Molly

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Now let us see how the other missionaries got on with their tasks.

Farmer Grant was a thrifty, well-to-do man, anxious to give his children greater advantages than he had enjoyed, and to improve the fine place of which he was justly proud. Mrs. Grant was a notable housewife, as ambitious and industrious as her husband, but too busy to spend any time on the elegancies of life, though always ready to help the poor and sick like a good neighbor and Christian woman. The three sons - Tom, Dick, and Harry - were big fellows of seventeen, nineteen, and twenty-one; the first two on the farm, and the elder in a store just setting up for himself. Kind-hearted but rough-mannered youths, who loved Merry very much, but teased her sadly about her "fine lady airs," as they called her dainty ways and love of beauty.

Merry was a thoughtful girl, full of innocent fancies, refined tastes, and romantic dreams, in which no one sympathized at home, though she was the pet of the family. It did seem, to an outsider, as if the delicate little creature had got there by mistake, for she looked very like a tea-rose in a field of clover and dandelions, whose highest aim in life was to feed cows and help make root beer.

When the girls talked over the new society, it pleased Merry very much, and she decided not only to try and love work better, but to convert her family to a liking for pretty things, as she called her own more cultivated tastes.

"I will begin at once, and show them that I don't mean to shirk my duty, though I do want to be nice," thought she, as she sat at supper one night and looked about her, planning her first move.

Not a very cheering prospect for a lover of the beautiful, certainly, for the big kitchen, though as neat as wax, had nothing lovely in it, except a red geranium blooming at the window. Nor were the people all that could be desired, in some respects, as they sat about the table shovelling in pork and beans with their knives, drinking tea from their saucers, and laughing out with a hearty "Haw, haw," when anything amused them. Yet the boys were handsome, strong specimens, the farmer a hale, benevolent-looking man, the housewife a pleasant, sharp-eyed matron, who seemed to find comfort in looking often at the bright face at her elbow, with the broad forehead, clear eyes, sweet mouth, and quiet voice that came like music in among the loud masculine ones, or the quick, nervous tones of a woman always in a hurry.

Merry's face was so thoughtful that evening that her father observed it, for, when at home, he watched her as one watches a kitten, glad to see anything so pretty, young, and happy, at its play.

"Little daughter has got something on her mind, I mistrust. Come and tell father all about it," he said, with a sounding slap on his broad knee as he turned his chair from the table to the ugly stove, where three pairs of wet boots steamed underneath, and a great kettle of cider apple-sauce simmered above.

"When I've helped clear up, I'll come and talk. Now, mother, you sit down and rest; Roxy and I can do everything," answered Merry, patting the old rocking-chair so invitingly that the tired woman could not resist, especially as watching the kettle gave her an excuse for obeying.

"Well, I don't care if I do, for I've been on my feet since five o'clock. Be sure you cover things up, and shut the buttry door, and put the cat down cellar, and sift your meal. I'll see to the buckwheats last thing before I go to bed."

Mrs. Grant subsided with her knitting, for her hands were never idle; Tom tilted his chair back against the wall and picked his teeth with his pen-knife; Dick got out a little pot of grease, to make the boots water-tight; and Harry sat down at the small table to look over his accounts, with an important air, - for every one occupied this room, and the work was done in the out-kitchen behind.

Merry hated clearing up, but dutifully did every distasteful task, and kept her eye on careless Roxy till all was in order; then she gladly went to perch on her father's knee, seeing in all the faces about her the silent welcome they always wore for the "little one."

"Yes, I do want something, but I know you will say it is silly," she began, as her father pinched her blooming cheek, with the wish that his peaches would ever look half as well.

"Shouldn't wonder if it was a doll now;" and Mr. Grant stroked her head with an indulgent smile, as if she was about six instead of fifteen.

"Why, father, you know I don't! I haven't played with dollies for years and years. No; I want to fix up my room pretty, like Jill's. I'll do it all myself, and only want a few things, for I don't expect it to look as nice as hers."

Indignation gave Merry courage to state her wishes boldly, though she knew the boys would laugh. They did, and her mother said in a tone of surprise, -

"Why, child, what more can you want? I'm sure your room is always as neat as a new pin, thanks to your bringing up, and I told you to have a fire there whenever you wanted to."

"Let me have some old things out of the garret, and I'll show you what I want. It is neat, but so bare and ugly I hate to be there. I do so love something pretty to look at!" and Merry gave a little shiver of disgust as she turned her eyes away from the large greasy boot Dick was holding up to be sure it was well lubricated all round.

"So do I, and that's a fact. I couldn't get on without my pretty girl here, any way. Why, she touches up the old place better than a dozen flower-pots in full blow," said the farmer, as his eye went from the scarlet geranium to the bright young face so near his own.

"I wish I had a dozen in the sitting-room window. Mother says they are not tidy, but I'd keep them neat, and I know you'd like it," broke in Merry, glad of the chance to get one of the long-desired wishes of her heart fulfilled.

"I'll fetch you some next time I go over to Ballad's. Tell me what you want, and we'll have a posy bed somewhere round, see if we don't," said her father, dimly understanding what she wanted.

"Now, if mother says I may fix my room, I shall be satisfied, and I'll do my chores without a bit of fuss, to show how grateful I am," said the girl, thanking her father with a kiss, and smiling at her mother so wistfully that the good woman could not refuse.

"You may have anything you like out of the blue chest. There's a lot of things there that the moths got at after Grandma died, and I couldn't bear to throw or give 'em away. Trim up your room as you like, and mind you don't forget your part of the bargain," answered Mrs. Grant, seeing profit in the plan.

"I won't; I'll work all the morning to-morrow, and in the afternoon I'll get ready to show you what I call a nice, pretty room," answered Merry, looking so pleased it seemed as if another flower had blossomed in the large bare kitchen.

She kept her word, and the very stormy afternoon when Jill got into trouble, Merry was working busily at her little bower. In the blue chest she found a variety of treasures, and ignoring the moth holes, used them to the best advantage, trying to imitate the simple comfort with a touch of elegance which prevailed in Mrs. Minot's back bedroom.

Three faded red-moreen curtains went up at the windows over the chilly paper shades, giving a pleasant glow to the bare walls. A red quilt with white stars, rather the worse for many washings, covered the bed, and a gay cloth the table, where a judicious arrangement of books and baskets concealed the spots. The little air-tight stove was banished, and a pair of ancient andirons shone in the fire-light. Grandma's last and largest braided rug lay on the hearth, and her brass candlesticks adorned the bureau, over the mirror of which was festooned a white muslin skirt, tied up with Merry's red sash. This piece of elegance gave the last touch to her room, she thought, and she was very proud of it, setting forth all her small store of trinkets in a large shell, with an empty scent bottle, and a clean tidy over the pincushion. On the walls she hung three old-fashioned pictures, which she ventured to borrow from the garret till better could be found. One a mourning piece, with a very tall lady weeping on an urn in a grove of willows, and two small boys in knee breeches and funny little square tails to their coats, looking like cherubs in large frills. The other was as good as a bonfire, being an eruption of Vesuvius, and very lurid indeed, for the Bay of Naples was boiling like a pot, the red sky raining rocks, and a few distracted people lying flat upon the shore. The third was a really pretty scene of children dancing round a May-pole, for though nearly a hundred years old, the little maids smiled and the boys pranced as gayly as if the flowers they carried were still alive and sweet.

"Now I'll call them all to see, and say that it is pretty. Then I'll enjoy it, and come here when things look dismal and bare everywhere else," said Merry, when at last it was done. She had worked all the afternoon, and only finished at supper time, so the candles had to be lighted that the toilette might look its best, and impress the beholders with an idea of true elegance. Unfortunately, the fire smoked a little, and a window was set ajar to clear the room; an evil-disposed gust blew in, wafting the thin drapery within reach of the light, and when Merry threw open the door proudly thinking to display her success, she was horrified to find the room in a blaze, and half her labor all in vain.

The conflagration was over in a minute, however, for the boys tore down the muslin and stamped out the fire with much laughter, while Mrs. Grant bewailed the damage to her carpet, and poor Merry took refuge in her father's arms, refusing to be comforted in spite of his kind commendation of "Grandma's fixins."

The third little missionary had the hardest time of all, and her first efforts were not much more satisfactory nor successful than the others. Her father was away from morning till night, and then had his paper to read, books to keep, or "a man to see down town," so that, after a hasty word at tea, he saw no more of the children till another evening, as they were seldom up at his early breakfast. He thought they were well taken care of, for Miss Bathsheba Dawes was an energetic, middle-aged spinster when she came into the family, and had been there fifteen years, so he did not observe, what a woman would have seen at once, that Miss Bat was getting old and careless, and everything about the house was at sixes and sevens. She took good care of him, and thought she had done her duty if she got three comfortable meals, nursed the children when they were ill, and saw that the house did not burn up. So Maria Louisa and Napoleon Bonaparte got on as they could, without the tender cares of a mother. Molly had been a happy-go-lucky child, contented with her pets, her freedom, and little Boo to love; but now she was just beginning to see that they were not like other children, and to feel ashamed of it.

"Papa is busy, but Miss Bat ought to see to us; she is paid for it, and goodness knows she has an easy time now, for if I ask her to do anything, she groans over her bones, and tells me young folks should wait on themselves. I take all the care of Boo off her hands, but I can't wash my own things, and he hasn't a decent trouser to his blessed little legs. I'd tell papa, but it wouldn't do any good; he'd only say, 'Yes, child, yes, I'll attend to it,' and never do a thing."

This used to be Molly's lament, when some especially trying event occurred, and if the girls were not there to condole with her, she would retire to the shed-chamber, call her nine cats about her, and, sitting in the old bushel basket, pull her hair about her ears, and scold all alone. The cats learned to understand this habit, and nobly did their best to dispel the gloom which now and then obscured the sunshine of their little mistress. Some of them would creep into her lap and purr till the comfortable sound soothed her irritation; the sedate elders sat at her feet blinking with such wise and sympathetic faces, that she felt as if half a dozen Solomons were giving her the sagest advice; while the kittens frisked about, cutting up their drollest capers till she laughed in spite of herself. When the laugh came, the worst of the fit was over, and she soon cheered up, dismissing the consolers with a pat all round, a feast of good things from Miss Bat's larder, and the usual speech: -

"Well, dears, it's of no use to worry. I guess we shall get along somehow, if we don't fret."

With which wise resolution, Molly would leave her retreat and freshen up her spirits by a row on the river or a romp with Boo, which always finished the case. Now, however, she was bound to try the new plan and do something toward reforming not only the boy's condition, but the disorder and discomfort of home.

"I'll play it is Siam, and this the house of a native, and I'm come to show the folks how to live nicely. Miss Bat won't know what to make of it, and I can't tell her, so I shall get some fun out of it, any way," thought Molly, as she surveyed the dining-room the day her mission began.

The prospect was not cheering; and, if the natives of Siam live in such confusion, it is high time they were attended to. The breakfast-table still stood as it was left, with slops of coffee on the cloth; bits of bread, egg-shells, and potato-skins lay about, and one lonely sausage was cast away in the middle of a large platter. The furniture was dusty, stove untidy, and the carpet looked as if crumbs had been scattered to chickens who declined their breakfast. Boo was sitting on the sofa, with his arm through a hole in the cover, hunting for some lost treasure put away there for safe keeping, like a little magpie as he was. Molly fancied she washed and dressed him well enough; but to-day she seemed to see more clearly, and sighed as she thought of the hard job in store for her if she gave him the thorough washing he needed, and combed out that curly mop of hair.

"I'll clear up first and do that by and by. I ought to have a nice little tub and good towels, like Mrs. Minot, and I will, too, if I buy them myself," she said, piling up cups with an energy that threatened destruction to handles.

Miss Bat, who was trailing about the kitchen, with her head pinned up in a little plaid shawl, was so surprised by the demand for a pan of hot water and four clean towels, that she nearly dropped her snuff-box, chief comfort of her lazy soul.

"What new whimsey now? Generally, the dishes stand round till I have time to pick 'em up, and you are off coasting or careering somewhere. Well, this tidy fit won't last

long, so I may as well make the most of it," said Miss Bat, as she pushed from the tip of her sharp nose to her sharper black eyes for a good look at the girl who stood primly before her, with a clean apron on and her hair braided up instead of flying wildly about her shoulders.

"Umph!" was all the comment that Miss Bat made on this unusual neatness, and she went on scraping her saucepans, while Molly returned to her work, very well pleased with the effect of her first step, for she felt that the bewilderment of Miss Bat would be a constant inspiration to fresh efforts.

An hour of hard work produced an agreeable change in the abode of the native, for the table was cleared, room swept and dusted, fire brightened, and the holes in the sofa-covering were pinned up till time could be found to mend them. To be sure, rolls of lint lay in corners, smears of ashes were on the stove hearth, and dust still lurked on chair rounds and table legs. But too much must not be expected of a new convert, so the young missionary sat down to rest, well pleased and ready for another attempt as soon as she could decide in what direction it should be made. She quailed before Boo as she looked at the unconscious innocent peacefully playing with the spotted dog, now bereft of his tail, and the lone sausage with which he was attempting to feed the hungry animal, whose red mouth always gaped for more.

"It will be an awful job, and he is so happy I won't plague him yet. Guess I'll go and put my room to rights first, and pick up some clean clothes to put on him, if he is alive after I get through with him," thought Molly, foreseeing a stormy passage for the boy, who hated a bath as much as some people hate a trip across the Atlantic.

Up she went, and finding the fire out felt discouraged, thought she would rest a little more, so retired under the blankets to read one of the Christmas books. The dinner-bell rang while she was still wandering happily in "Nelly's Silver Mine," and she ran down to find that Boo had laid out a railroad all across her neat room, using bits of coal for sleepers and books for rails, over which he was dragging the yellow sled laden with a dismayed kitten, the tailless dog, and the remains of the sausage, evidently on its way to the tomb, for Boo took bites at it now and then, no other lunch being offered him.

"Oh dear! why can't boys play without making such a mess," sighed Molly, picking up the feathers from the duster with which Boo had been trying to make a "cocky-doo" of the hapless dog. "I'll wash him right after dinner, and that will keep him out of mischief for a while," she thought, as the young engineer unsuspectingly proceeded to ornament his already crocky countenance with squash, cranberry sauce, and gravy, till he looked more like a Fiji chief in full war-paint than a Christian boy.

"I want two pails of hot water, please, Miss Bat, and the big tub," said Molly, as the ancient handmaid emptied her fourth cup of tea, for she dined with the family, and enjoyed her own good cooking in its prime.

"What are you going to wash now?"

"Boo - I'm sure he needs it enough;" and Molly could not help laughing as the victim added to his brilliant appearance by smearing the colors all together with a rub of two grimy hands, making a fine "Turner" of himself.

"Now, Maria Louisa Bemis, you ain't going to cut up no capers with that child! The idea of a hot bath in the middle of the day, and him full of dinner, and croupy into the bargain! Wet a corner of a towel at the kettle-spout and polish him off if you like, but you won't risk his life in no bath-tubs this cold day."

Miss Bat's word was law in some things, so Molly had to submit, and took Boo away, saying, loftily, as she left the room, -

"I shall ask father, and do it to-night, for I will not have my brother look like a pig."

"My patience! how the Siamese do leave their things round," she exclaimed, as she surveyed her room after making up the fire and polishing off Boo. "I'll put things in order, and then mend up my rags, if I can find my thimble. Now, let me see;" and she went to exploring her closet, bureau, and table, finding such disorder everywhere that her courage nearly gave out.

She had clothes enough, but all needed care; even her best dress had two buttons off, and her Sunday hat but one string. Shoes, skirts, books, and toys lay about, and her drawers were a perfect chaos of soiled ruffles, odd gloves, old ribbons, boot lacings, and bits of paper.

"Oh, my heart, what a muddle! Mrs. Minot wouldn't think much of me if she could see that," said Molly, recalling how that lady once said she could judge a good deal of a little girl's character and habits by a peep at her top drawer, and went on, with great success, to guess how each of the school-mates kept her drawer.

"Come, missionary, clear up, and don't let me find such a glory-hole again, or I'll report you to the society," said Molly, tipping the whole drawer-full out upon the bed, and beguiling the tiresome job by keeping up the new play.

Twilight came before it was done, and a great pile of things loomed up on her table, with no visible means of repair, - for Molly's work-basket was full of nuts, and her thimble down a hole in the shed-floor, where the cats had dropped it in their play.

"I'll ask Bat for hooks and tape, and papa for some money to buy scissors and things, for I don't know where mine are. Glad I can't do any more now! Being neat is such hard work!" and Molly threw herself down on the rug beside the old wooden cradle in which Boo was blissfully rocking, with a cargo of toys aboard.

She watched her time, and as soon as her father had done supper, she hastened to say, before he got to his desk, -

"Please, papa, I want a dollar to get some brass buttons and things to fix Boo's clothes with. He wore a hole in his new trousers coasting down the Kembles' steps. And can't I wash him? He needs it, and Miss Bat won't let me have a tub."

"Certainly, child, certainly; do what you like, only don't keep me. I must be off, or I shall miss Jackson, and he's the man I want;" and, throwing down two dollars instead of one, Mr. Bemis hurried away, with a vague impression that Boo had swallowed a dozen brass buttons, and Miss Bat had been coasting somewhere in a bath-pan; but catching Jackson was important, so he did not stop to investigate.

Armed with the paternal permission, Molly carried her point, and oh, what a dreadful evening poor Boo spent! First, he was decoyed upstairs an hour too soon, then put in a tub by main force and sternly scrubbed, in spite of shrieks that brought Miss Bat to the locked door to condole with the sufferer, scold the scrubber, and depart, darkly prophesying croup before morning.

"He always howls when he is washed; but I shall do it, since you won't, and he must get used to it. I will not have people tell me he's neglected, if I can help it," cried Molly, working away with tears in her eyes - for it was as hard for her as for Boo; but she meant to be thorough for once in her life, no matter what happened.

When the worst was over, she coaxed him with candy and stories till the long task of combing out the curls was safely done; then, in the clean night-gown with a blue button newly sewed on, she laid him in bed, worn out, but sweet as a rose.

"Now, say your prayers, darling, and go to sleep with the nice red blanket all tucked round so you won't get cold," said Molly, rather doubtful of the effect of the wet

head.

"No, I won't! Going to sleep now!" and Boo shut his eyes wearily, feeling that his late trials had not left him in a prayerful mood.

"Then you'll be a real little heathen, as Mrs. Pecq called you, and I don't know what I shall do with you," said Molly, longing to cuddle rather than scold the little fellow, whose soul needed looking after as well as his body.

"No, no; I won't be a heevin! I don't want to be frowed to the trockindiles. I will say my prayers! oh, I will!" and, rising in his bed, Boo did so, with the devotion of an infant Samuel, for he remembered the talk when the society was formed.

Molly thought her labors were over for that night, and soon went to bed, tired with her first attempts. But toward morning she was wakened by the hoarse breathing of the boy, and was forced to patter away to Miss Bat's room, humbly asking for the squills, and confessing that the prophecy had come to pass.

"I knew it! Bring the child to me, and don't fret. I'll see to him, and next time you do as I say," was the consoling welcome she received as the old lady popped up a sleepy but anxious face in a large flannel cap, and shook the bottle with the air of a general who had routed the foe before and meant to do it again.

Leaving her little responsibility in Miss Bat's arms, Molly retired to wet her pillow with a few remorseful tears, and to fall asleep, wondering if real missionaries ever killed their pupils in the process of conversion.

So the girls all failed in the beginning; but they did not give up, and succeeded better next time, as we shall see.

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