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Chapter 23 - Cattle Show

The children were not the only ones who had learned something at Pebbly Beach. Mrs. Minot had talked a good deal with some very superior persons, and received light upon various subjects which had much interested or perplexed her. While the ladies worked or walked together, they naturally spoke oftenest and most earnestly about their children, and each contributed her experience. Mrs. Hammond, who had been a physician for many years, was wise in the care of healthy little bodies, and the cure of sick ones. Mrs. Channing, who had read, travelled, and observed much in the cause of education, had many useful hints about the training of young minds and hearts. Several teachers reported their trials, and all the mothers were eager to know how to bring up their boys and girls to be healthy, happy, useful men and women.

As young people do not care for such discussions, we will not describe them, but as the impression they made upon one of the mammas affected our hero and heroine, we must mention the changes which took place in their life when they all got home again.

"School begins to-morrow. Oh, dear!" sighed Jack, as he looked up his books in the Bird Room, a day or two after their return.

"Don't you want to go? I long to, but don't believe I shall. I saw our mothers talking to the doctor last night, but I haven't dared to ask what they decided," said Jill, affectionately eying the long-unused books in her little library.

"I've had such a jolly good time, that I hate to be shut up all day worse than ever. Don't you, Frank?" asked Jack, with a vengeful slap at the arithmetic which was the torment of his life.

"Well, I confess I don't hanker for school as much as I expected. I'd rather take a spin on the old bicycle. Our roads are so good, it is a great temptation to hire a machine, and astonish the natives. That's what comes of idleness. So brace up, my boy, and go to work, for vacation is over," answered Frank, gravely regarding the tall pile of books before him, as if trying to welcome his old friends, or tyrants, rather, for they ruled him with a rod of iron when he once gave himself up to them.

"Ah, but vacation is not over, my dears," said Mrs. Minot, hearing the last words as she came in prepared to surprise her family.

"Glad of it. How much longer is it to be?" asked Jack, hoping for a week at least.

"Two or three years for some of you."

"What?" cried all three, in utter astonishment, as they stared at Mamma, who could not help smiling, though she was very much in earnest.

"For the next two or three years I intend to cultivate my boys' bodies, and let their minds rest a good deal, from books at least. There is plenty to learn outside of school-houses, and I don't mean to shut you up just when you most need all the air and exercise you can get. Good health, good principles, and a good education are the three blessings I ask for you, and I am going to make sure of the first, as a firm foundation for the other two."

"But, mother, what becomes of college?" asked Frank, rather disturbed at this change of base.

"Put it off for a year, and see if you are not better fitted for it then than now."

"But I am already fitted: I've worked like a tiger all this year, and I'm sure I shall pass."

"Ready in one way, but not in another. That hard work is no preparation for four years of still harder study. It has cost you these round shoulders, many a headache, and consumed hours when you had far better have been on the river or in the fields. I cannot have you break down, as so many boys do, or pull through at the cost of ill-health afterward. Eighteen is young enough to begin the steady grind, if you have a strong constitution to keep pace with the eager mind. Sixteen is too young to send even my good boy out into the world, just when he most needs his mother's care to help him be the man she hopes to see him."

Mrs. Minot laid her hand on his shoulder as she spoke, looking so fond and proud that it was impossible to rebel, though some of his most cherished plans were spoilt.

"Other fellows go at my age, and I was rather pleased to be ready at sixteen," he began. But she added, quickly, -

"They go, but how do they come out? Many lose health of body, and many what is more precious still, moral strength, because too young and ignorant to withstand temptations of all sorts. The best part of education does not come from books, and the good principles I value more than either of the other things are to be carefully watched over till firmly fixed; then you may face the world, and come to no real harm. Trust me, dear, I do it for your sake; so bear the disappointment bravely, and in the end I think you will say I'm right."

"I'll do my best; but I don't see what is to become of us if we don't go to school. You will get tired of it first," said Frank, trying to set a good example to the others, who were looking much impressed and interested.

"No danger of that, for I never sent my children to school to get rid of them, and now that they are old enough to be companions, I want them at home more than ever. There are to be some lessons, however, for busy minds must be fed, but not crammed; so you boys will go and recite at certain hours such things as seem most important. But there is to be no studying at night, no shutting up all the best hours of the day, no hurry and fret of getting on fast, or skimming over the surface of many studies without learning any thoroughly."

"So I say!" cried Jack, pleased with the new idea, for he never did love books. "I do hate to be driven so I don't half understand, because there is no time to have things explained. School is good fun as far as play goes; but I don't see the sense of making a fellow learn eighty questions in geography one day, and forget them the next."

"What is to become of me, please?" asked Jill, meekly.

"You and Molly are to have lessons here. I was a teacher when I was young, you know, and liked it, so I shall be school-ma'am, and leave my house-keeping in better hands than mine. I always thought that mothers should teach their girls during these years, and vary their studies to suit the growing creatures as only mothers can.

"That will be splendid! Will Molly's father let her come?" cried Jill, feeling quite reconciled to staying at home, if her friend was to be with her.

"He likes the plan very much, for Molly is growing fast, and needs a sort of care that Miss Dawes cannot give her. I am not a hard mistress, and I hope you will find my school a pleasant one."

"I know I shall; and I'm not disappointed, because I was pretty sure I couldn't go to the old school again, when I heard the doctor say I must be very careful for a long time. I thought he meant months; but if it must be years, I can bear it, for I've been happy this last one though I was sick," said Jill, glad to show that it had not been wasted time by being cheerful and patient now.

"That's my good girl!" and Mrs. Minot stroked the curly black head as if it was her own little daughter's. "You have done so well, I want you to go on improving, for care now will save you pain and disappointment by and by. You all have got a capital start during these six weeks, so it is a good time to begin my experiment. If it does not work well, we will go back to school and college next spring."

"Hurrah for Mamma and the long vacation!" cried Jack, catching up two big books and whirling them round like clubs, as if to get his muscles in order at once.

"Now I shall have time to go to the Gymnasium and straighten out my back," said Frank, who was growing so tall he needed more breadth to make his height symmetrical.

"And to ride horseback. I am going to hire old Jane and get out the little phaeton, so we can all enjoy the fine weather while it lasts. Molly and I can drive Jill, and you can take turns in the saddle when you are tired of ball and boating. Exercise of all sorts is one of the lessons we are to learn," said Mrs. Minot, suggesting all the pleasant things she could to sweeten the pill for her pupils, two of whom did love their books, not being old enough to know that even an excellent thing may be overdone.

"Won't that be gay? I'll get down the saddle to-day, so we can begin right off. Lem rides, and we can go together. Hope old Jane will like it as well as I shall," said Jack, who had found a new friend in a pleasant lad lately come to town.

"You must see that she does, for you boys are to take care of her. We will put the barn in order, and you can decide which shall be hostler and which gardener, for I don't intend to hire labor on the place any more. Our estate is not a large one, and it will be excellent work for you, my men."

"All right! I'll see to Jane. I love horses," said Jack, well pleased with the prospect.

"My horse won't need much care. I prefer a bicycle to a beast, so I'll get in the squashes, pick the apples, and cover the strawberry bed when it is time," added Frank, who had enjoyed the free life at Pebbly Beach so much that he was willing to prolong it.

"You may put me in a hen-coop, and keep me there a year, if you like. I won't fret, for I'm sure you know what is best for me," said Jill, gayly, as she looked up at the good friend who had done so much for her.

"I'm not sure that I won't put you in a pretty cage and send you to Cattle Show, as a sample of what we can do in the way of taming a wild bird till it is nearly as meek as a dove," answered Mrs. Minot, much gratified at the amiability of her flock.

"I don't see why there should not be an exhibition of children, and prizes for the good and pretty ones, as well as for fat pigs, fine horses, or handsome fruit and flowers - I don't mean a baby show, but boys and girls, so people can see what the prospect is of a good crop for the next generation," said Frank, glancing toward the tower of the building where the yearly Agricultural Fair was soon to be held.

"Years ago, there was a pretty custom here of collecting all the schools together in the spring, and having a festival at the Town Hall. Each school showed its best pupils, and the parents looked on at the blooming flower show. It was a pity it was ever given up, for the schools have never been so good as then, nor the interest in them so great;" and Mrs. Minot wondered, as many people do, why farmers seem to care more for their cattle and crops than for their children, willingly spending large sums on big barns and costly experiments, while the school-houses are shabby and inconvenient, and the cheapest teachers preferred.

"Ralph is going to send my bust. He asked if he might, and mother said Yes. Mr. German thinks it very good, and I hope other people will," said Jill, nodding toward the little plaster head that smiled down from its bracket with her own merry look.

"I could send my model; it is nearly done. Ralph told me it was a clever piece of work, and he knows," added Frank, quite taken with the idea of exhibiting his skill in mechanics.

"And I could send my star bedquilt! They always have things of that kind at Cattle Show;" and Jill began to rummage in the closet for the pride of her heart, burning to display it to an admiring world.

"I haven't got anything. Can't sew rags together; or make baby engines, and I have no live-stock - yes, I have too! There's old Bun. I'll send him, for the fun of it; he really is a curiosity, for he is the biggest one I ever saw, and hopping into the lime has made his fur such a queer color, he looks like a new sort of rabbit. I'll catch and shut him up before he gets wild again;" and off rushed Jack to lure unsuspecting old Bun, who had grown tame during their absence, into the cage which he detested.

They all laughed at his ardor, but the fancy pleased them; and as Mamma saw no reason why their little works of art should not be sent, Frank fell to work on his model, and Jill resolved to finish her quilt at once, while Mrs. Minot went off to see Mr. Acton about the hours and studies for the boys.

In a week or two, the young people were almost resigned to the loss of school, for they found themselves delightfully fresh for the few lessons they did have, and not weary of play, since it took many useful forms. Old Jane not only carried them all to ride, but gave Jack plenty of work keeping her premises in nice order. Frank mourned privately over the delay of college, but found a solace in his whirligig and the Gymnasium, where he set himself to developing a chest to match the big head above, which head no longer ached with eight or ten hours of study. Harvesting beans and raking up leaves seemed to have a soothing effect upon his nerves, for now he fell asleep at once instead of thumping his pillow with vexation because his brain would go on working at difficult problems and passages when he wanted it to stop.

Jill and Molly drove away in the little phaeton every fair morning over the sunny hills and through the changing woods, filling their hands with asters and golden-rod, their lungs with the pure, invigorating air, and their heads with all manner of sweet and happy fancies and feelings born of the wholesome influences about them. People shook their heads, and said it was wasting time; but the rosy-faced girls were content to trust those wiser than themselves, and found their new school very pleasant. They read aloud a good deal, rapidly acquiring one of the rarest and most beautiful accomplishments; for they could stop and ask questions as they went along, so that they understood what they read, which is half the secret. A thousand things came up as they sewed together in the afternoon, and the eager minds received much general

information in an easy and well-ordered way. Physiology was one of the favorite studies, and Mrs. Hammond came in to give them a little lecture, teaching them to understand the wonders of their own systems, and how to keep them in order - a lesson of far more importance just then than Greek or Latin, for girls are the future mothers, nurses, teachers, of the race, and should feel how much depends on them. Merry could not resist the attractions of the friendly circle, and soon persuaded her mother to let her do as they did; so she got more exercise and less study, which was just what the delicate girl needed.

The first of the new ideas seemed to prosper, and the second, though suggested in joke, was carried out in earnest, for the other young people were seized with a strong desire to send something to the Fair. In fact, all sorts of queer articles were proposed, and much fun prevailed, especially among the boys, who ransacked their gardens for mammoth vegetables, sighed for five-legged calves, blue roses, or any other natural curiosity by means of which they might distinguish themselves. Ralph was the only one who had anything really worth sending; for though Frank's model seemed quite perfect, it obstinately refused to go, and at the last moment blew up with a report like a pop-gun. So it was laid away for repairs, and its disappointed maker devoted his energies to helping Jack keep Bun in order; for that indomitable animal got out of every prison they put him in, and led Jack a dreadful life during that last week. At all hours of the day and night that distracted boy would start up, crying, "There he is again!" and dart out to give chase and capture the villain now grown too fat to run as he once did.

The very night before the Fair, Frank was wakened by a chilly draught, and, getting up to see where it came from, found Jack's door open and bed empty, while the vision of a white ghost flitting about the garden suggested a midnight rush after old Bun. Frank watched laughingly, till poor Jack came toward the house with the gentleman in gray kicking lustily in his arms, and then whispered in a sepulchral tone, -

"Put him in the old refrigerator, he can't get out of that."

Blessing him for the suggestion, the exhausted hunter shut up his victim in the new cell, and found it a safe one, for Bun could not burrow through a sheet of zinc, or climb up the smooth walls.

Jill's quilt was a very elaborate piece of work, being bright blue with little white stars all over it; this she finished nicely, and felt sure no patient old lady could outdo it. Merry decided to send butter, for she had been helping her mother in the dairy that summer, and rather liked the light part of the labor. She knew it would please her very much if she chose that instead of wild flowers, so she practised moulding the yellow pats into pretty shapes, that it might please both eye and taste.

Molly declared she would have a little pen, and put Boo in it, as the prize fat boy - a threat which so alarmed the innocent that he ran away, and was found two or three miles from home, asleep under the wall, with two seed-cakes and a pair of socks done up in a bundle. Being with difficulty convinced that it was a joke, he consented to return to his family, but was evidently suspicious, till Molly decided to send her cats, and set about preparing them for exhibition. The Minots' deserted Bunny-house was rather large; but as cats cannot be packed as closely as much-enduring sheep, Molly borrowed this desirable family mansion, and put her darlings into it, where they soon settled down, and appeared to enjoy their new residence. It had been scrubbed up and painted red, cushions and plates put in, and two American flags adorned the roof. Being barred all round, a fine view of the Happy Family could be had, now twelve in number, as Molasses had lately added three white kits to the varied collection.

The girls thought this would be the most interesting spectacle of all, and Grif proposed to give some of the cats extra tails, to increase their charms, especially poor Mortification, who would appreciate the honor of two, after having none for so long. But Molly declined, and Grif looked about him for some attractive animal to exhibit, so that he too might go in free and come to honor, perhaps.

A young lady in the town owned a donkey, a small, gray beast, who insisted on tripping along the sidewalks and bumping her rider against the walls as she paused to browse at her own sweet will, regardless of blows or cries, till ready to move on. Expressing great admiration for this rare animal, Grif obtained leave to display the charms of Graciosa at the Fair. Little did she guess the dark designs entertained against her dignity, and happily she was not as sensitive to ridicule as a less humble-minded animal, so she went willingly with her new friend, and enjoyed the combing and trimming up which she received at his hands, while he prepared for the great occasion.

When the morning of September 28th arrived, the town was all astir, and the Fair ground a lively scene. The air was full of the lowing of cattle, the tramp of horses, squealing of indignant pigs, and clatter of tongues, as people and animals streamed in at the great gate and found their proper places. Our young folks were in a high state of excitement, as they rumbled away with their treasures in a hay-cart. The Bunny-house might have been a cage of tigers, so rampant were the cats at this new move. Old Bun, in a small box, brooded over the insult of the refrigerator, and looked as fierce as a rabbit could. Gus had a coop of rare fowls, who clucked wildly all the way, while Ralph, with the bust in his arms, stood up in front, and Jill and Molly bore the precious bedquilt, as they sat behind.

These objects of interest were soon arranged, and the girls went to admire Merry's golden butter cups among the green leaves, under which lay the ice that kept the pretty flowers fresh. The boys were down below, where the cackling was very loud, but not loud enough to drown the sonorous bray which suddenly startled them as much as it did the horses outside. A shout of laughter followed, and away went the lads, to see what the fun was, while the girls ran out on the balcony, as someone said, "It's that rogue of a Grif with some new joke."

It certainly was, and, to judge from the peals of merriment, the joke was a good one. In at the gate came a two-headed donkey, ridden by Grif, in great spirits at his success, for the gate-keeper laughed so he never thought to ask for toll. A train of boys followed him across the ground, lost in admiration of the animal and the cleverness of her rider. Among the stage properties of the Dramatic Club was the old ass's head once used in some tableaux from "Midsummer Night's Dream." This Grif had mended up, and fastened by means of straps and a collar to poor Graciosa's neck, hiding his work with a red cloth over her back. One eye was gone, but the other still opened and shut, and the long ears wagged by means of strings, which he slyly managed with the bridle, so the artificial head looked almost as natural as the real one. The funniest thing of all was the innocent air of Graciosa, and the mildly inquiring expression with which she now and then turned to look at or to smell of the new ornament as if she recognized a friend's face, yet was perplexed by its want of animation. She vented her feelings in a bray, which Grif imitated, convulsing all hearers by the sound as well as by the wink the one eye gave, and the droll waggle of one erect ear, while the other pointed straight forward.

The girls laughed so at the ridiculous sight that they nearly fell over the railing, and the boys were in ecstasies, especially when Grif, emboldened by his success, trotted briskly round the race-course, followed by the cheers of the crowd. Excited by the noise, Graciosa did her best, till the false head, loosened by the rapid motion, slipped round under her nose, causing her to stop so suddenly that Grif flew off, alighting on his own head with a violence which would have killed any other boy. Sobered by his downfall, he declined to mount again, but led his steed to repose in a shed, while he rejoined his friends, who were waiting impatiently to congratulate him on his latest and best prank.

The Committee went their rounds soon after, and, when the doors were again opened, every one hurried to see if their articles had received a premium. A card lay on the butter cups, and Mrs. Grant was full of pride because her butter always took a prize, and this proved that Merry was walking in her mother's steps, in this direction at least. Another card swung from the blue quilt, for the kindly judges knew who made it, and were glad to please the little girl, though several others as curious but not so pretty hung near by. The cats were admired, but, as they were not among the animals usually exhibited, there was no prize awarded. Gus hoped his hens would get one; but somebody else outdid him, to the great indignation of Laura and Lotty, who had fed the white biddies faithfully for months. Jack was sure his rabbit was the biggest there, and went eagerly to look for his premium. But neither card nor Bun were to be seen, for the old rascal had escaped for the last time, and was never seen again; which was a great comfort to Jack, who was heartily tired of him.

Ralph's bust was the best of all, for not only did it get a prize, and was much admired, but a lady, who found Jill and Merry rejoicing over it, was so pleased with the truth and grace of the little head, that she asked about the artist, and whether he would do one of her own child, who was so delicate she feared he might not live long.

Merry gladly told the story of her ambitious friend, and went to find him, that he might secure the order. While she was gone, Jill took up the tale, gratefully telling how kind he had been to her, how patiently he worked and waited, and how much he longed to go abroad. Fortunately the lady was rich and generous, as well as fond of art, and being pleased with the bust, and interested in the young sculptor, gave him the order when he came, and filled his soul with joy by adding, that, if it suited her when done, it should be put into marble. She lived in the city, and Ralph soon arranged his work so that he could give up his noon hour, and go to model the child; for every penny he could earn or save now was very precious, as he still hoped to go abroad.

The girls were so delighted with this good fortune, that they did not stay for the races, but went home to tell the happy news, leaving the boys to care for the cats, and enjoy the various matches to come off that day.

"I'm so glad I tried to look pleasant when I was lying on the board while Ralph did my head, for the pleasantness got into the clay face, and that made the lady like it," said Jill, as she lay resting on the sofa.

"I always thought it was a dear, bright little face, but now I love and admire it more than ever," cried Merry, kissing it gratefully, as she remembered the help and pleasure it had given Ralph.