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## Chapter 16 - Up At Merry's

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"Now fly round, child, and get your sweeping done up smart and early."

"Yes, mother."

"I shall want you to help me about the baking, by and by."

"Yes, mother."

"Roxy is cleaning the cellar-closets, so you'll have to get the vegetables ready for dinner. Father wants a boiled dish, and I shall be so busy I can't see to it."

"Yes, mother."

A cheerful voice gave the three answers, but it cost Merry an effort to keep it so, for she had certain little plans of her own which made the work before her unusually distasteful. Saturday always was a trying day, for, though she liked to see rooms in order, she hated to sweep, as no speck escaped Mrs. Grant's eye, and only the good old-fashioned broom, wielded by a pair of strong arms, was allowed. Baking was another trial: she loved good bread and delicate pastry, but did not enjoy burning her face over a hot stove, daubing her hands with dough, or spending hours rolling out cookies for the boys; while a "boiled dinner" was her especial horror, as it was not elegant, and the washing of vegetables was a job she always shirked when she could.

However, having made up her mind to do her work without complaint, she ran upstairs to put on her dust-cap, trying to look as if sweeping was the joy of her life.

"It is such a lovely day, I did want to rake my garden, and have a walk with Molly, and finish my book so I can get another," she said with a sigh, as she leaned out of the open window for a breath of the unusually mild air.

Down in the ten-acre lot the boys were carting and spreading loam; out in the barn her father was getting his plows ready; over the hill rose the smoke of the distant factory, and the river that turned the wheels was gliding through the meadows, where soon the blackbirds would be singing. Old Bess pawed the ground, eager to be off; the gray hens were scratching busily all about the yard; even the green things in the garden were pushing through the brown earth, softened by April rains, and there was a shimmer of sunshine over the wide landscape that made every familiar object beautiful with hints of spring, and the activity it brings.

Something made the old nursery hymn come into Merry's head, and humming to herself,

"In works of labor or of skill  
I would be busy too,"

she tied on her cap, shouldered her broom, and fell to work so energetically that she soon swept her way through the chambers, down the front stairs to the parlor door, leaving freshness and order behind her as she went.

She always groaned when she entered that apartment, and got out of it again as soon as possible, for it was, like most country parlors, a prim and chilly place, with little beauty and no comfort. Black horse-hair furniture, very slippery and hard, stood against the wall; the table had its gift books, albums, worsted mat and ugly lamp; the mantel-piece its china vases, pink shells, and clock that never went; the gay carpet was kept distressingly bright by closed shutters six days out of the seven, and a general air of go-to-meeting solemnity pervaded the room. Merry longed to make it pretty and pleasant, but her mother would allow of no change there, so the girl gave up her dreams of rugs and hangings, fine pictures and tasteful ornaments, and dutifully aired, dusted, and shut up this awful apartment once a week, privately resolving that, if she ever had a parlor of her own, it should not be as dismal as a tomb.

The dining-room was a very different place, for here Merry had been allowed to do as she liked, yet so gradual had been the change, that she would have found it difficult to tell how it came about. It seemed to begin with the flowers, for her father kept his word about the "posy pots," and got enough to make quite a little conservatory in the bay-window, which was sufficiently large for three rows all round, and hanging-baskets overhead. Being discouraged by her first failure, Merry gave up trying to have things nice everywhere, and contented herself with making that one nook so pretty that the boys called it her "bower." Even busy Mrs. Grant owned that plants were not so messy as she expected, and the farmer was never tired of watching "little daughter" as she sat at work there, with her low chair and table full of books.

The lamp helped, also, for Merry set up her own, and kept it so well trimmed that it burned clear and bright, shining on the green arch of ivy overhead, and on the nasturtium vines framing the old glass, and peeping at their gay little faces, and at the pretty young girl, so pleasantly that first her father came to read his paper by it, then her mother slipped in to rest on the lounge in the corner, and finally the boys hovered about the door as if the "settin'-room" had grown more attractive than the kitchen.

But the open fire did more than anything else to win and hold them all, as it seldom fails to do when the black demon of an airtight stove is banished from the hearth. After the room was cleaned till it shone, Merry begged to have the brass andirons put in, and offered to keep them as bright as gold if her mother would consent. So the great logs were kindled, and the flames went dancing up the chimney as if glad to be set free from their prison. It changed the whole room like magic, and no one could resist the desire to enjoy its cheery comfort. The farmer's three-cornered leathern chair soon stood on one side, and mother's rocker on the other, as they toasted their feet and dozed or chatted in the pleasant warmth.

The boys' slippers were always ready on the hearth; and when the big boots were once off, they naturally settled down about the table, where the tall lamp, with its pretty shade of pressed autumn leaves, burned brightly, and the books and papers lay ready to their hands instead of being tucked out of sight in the closet. They were beginning to see that "Merry's notions" had some sense in them, since they were made comfortable, and good-naturedly took some pains to please her in various ways. Tom brushed his hair and washed his hands nicely before he came to table. Dick tried to lower his boisterous laughter, and Harry never smoked in the sitting-room. Even Roxy expressed her pleasure in seeing "things kind of spruced up," and Merry's gentle treatment of the hard-working drudge won her heart entirely.

The girl was thinking of these changes as she watered her flowers, dusted the furniture, and laid the fire ready for kindling; and, when all was done, she stood a minute to enjoy the pleasant room, full of spring sunshine, fresh air, and exquisite order. It seemed to give her heart for more distasteful labors, and she fell to work at the pies as cheerfully as if she liked it.

Mrs. Grant was flying about the kitchen, getting the loaves of brown and white bread ready for the big oven. Roxy's voice came up from the cellar singing "Bounding Billows," with a swashing and scrubbing accompaniment which suggested that she was actually enjoying a "life on the ocean wave." Merry, in her neat cap and apron, stood smiling over her work as she deftly rolled and clipped, filled and covered, finding a certain sort of pleasure in doing it well, and adding interest to it by crimping the crust, making pretty devices with strips of paste and star-shaped prickings of the fork.

"Good-will giveth skill," says the proverb, and even particular Mrs. Grant was satisfied when she paused to examine the pastry with her experienced eye.

"You are a handy child and a credit to your bringing up, though I do say it. Those are as pretty pies as I'd wish to eat, if they bake well, and there's no reason why they shouldn't."

"May I make some tarts or rabbits of these bits? The boys like them, and I enjoy modelling this sort of thing," said Merry, who was trying to mould a bird, as she had seen Ralph do with clay to amuse Jill while the bust was going on.

"No, dear; there's no time for knick-knacks to-day. The beets ought to be on this minute. Run and get 'em, and be sure you scrape the carrots well."

Poor Merry put away the delicate task she was just beginning to like, and taking a pan went down cellar, wishing vegetables could be grown without earth, for she hated to put her hands in dirty water. A word of praise to Roxy made that grateful scrubber leave her work to poke about in the root-cellar, choosing "sech as was pretty much of a muchness, else they wouldn't bile even;" so Merry was spared that part of the job, and went up to scrape and wash without complaint, since it was for father. She was repaid at noon by the relish with which he enjoyed his dinner, for Merry tried to make even a boiled dish pretty by arranging the beets, carrots, turnips, and potatoes in contrasting colors, with the beef hidden under the cabbage leaves.

"Now, I'll rest and read for an hour, then I'll rake my garden, or run down town to see Molly and get some seeds," she thought to herself, as she put away the spoons and glasses, which she liked to wash, that they might always be clear and bright.

"If you've done all your own mending, there's a heap of socks to be looked over. Then I'll show you about darning the tablecloths. I do hate to have a stitch of work left over till Monday," said Mrs. Grant, who never took naps, and prided herself on sitting down to her needle at 3 P.M. every day.

"Yes, mother;" and Merry went slowly upstairs, feeling that a part of Saturday ought to be a holiday after books and work all the week. As she braided up her hair, her eyes fell upon the reflection of her own face in the glass. Not a happy nor a pretty one just then, and Merry was so unaccustomed to seeing any other, that involuntarily the frown smoothed itself out, the eyes lost their weary look, the drooping lips curved into a smile, and, leaning her elbows on the bureau, she shook her head at herself, saying, half aloud, as she glanced at Ivanhoe lying near, -

"You needn't look so cross and ugly just because you can't have what you want. Sweeping, baking, and darning are not so bad as being plagued with lovers and carried off and burnt at the stake, so I won't envy poor Rebecca her jewels and curls and romantic times, but make the best of my own."

Then she laughed, and the bright face came back into the mirror, looking like an old friend, and Merry went on dressing with care, for she took pleasure in her own little charms, and felt a sense of comfort in knowing that she could always have one pretty thing to look at if she kept her own face serene and sweet. It certainly looked so as it bent over the pile of big socks half an hour later, and brightened with each that was laid aside. Her mother saw it, and, guessing why such wistful glances went from clock to window, kindly shortened the task of table-cloth darning by doing a good bit herself, before putting it into Merry's hands.

She was a good and loving mother in spite of her strict ways, and knew that it was better for her romantic daughter to be learning all the housewifery lessons she could teach her, than to be reading novels, writing verses, or philandering about with her head full of girlish fancies, quite innocent in themselves, but not the stuff to live on. So she wisely taught the hands that preferred to pick flowers, trim up rooms and mould birds, to work well with needle, broom, and rolling-pin; put a receipt-book before the eyes that loved to laugh and weep over tender tales, and kept the young head and heart safe and happy with wholesome duties, useful studies, and such harmless pleasures as girls should love, instead of letting them waste their freshness in vague longings, idle dreams, and frivolous pastimes.

But it was often hard to thwart the docile child, and lately she had seemed to be growing up so fast that her mother began to feel a new sort of tenderness for this sweet daughter, who was almost ready to take upon herself the cares, as well as triumphs and delights, of maidenhood. Something in the droop of the brown head, and the quick motion of the busy hand with a little burn on it, made it difficult for Mrs. Grant to keep Merry at work that day, and her eye watched the clock almost as impatiently as the girl's, for she liked to see the young face brighten when the hour of release came.

"What next?" asked Merry, as the last stitch was set, and she stifled a sigh on hearing the clock strike four, for the sun was getting low, and the lovely afternoon going fast.

"One more job, if you are not too tired for it. I want the receipt for diet drink Miss Dawes promised me; would you like to run down and get it for me, dear?"

"Yes, mother!" and that answer was as blithe as a robin's chirp, for that was just where Merry wanted to go.

Away went thimble and scissors, and in five minutes away went Merry, skipping down the hill without a care in the world, for a happy heart sat singing within, and everything seemed full of beauty.

She had a capital time with Molly, called on Jill, did her shopping in the village, and had just turned to walk up the hill, when Ralph Evans came tramping along behind her, looking so pleased and proud about something that she could not help asking what it was, for they were great friends, and Merry thought that to be an artist was the most glorious career a man could choose.

"I know you've got some good news," she said, looking up at him as he touched his hat and fell into step with her, seeming more contented than before.

"I have, and was just coming up to tell you, for I was sure you would be glad. It is only a hope, a chance, but it is so splendid I feel as if I must shout and dance, or fly over a fence or two, to let off steam."

"Do tell me, quick; have you got an order?" asked Merry, full of interest at once, for artistic vicissitudes were very romantic, and she liked to hear about them.

"I may go abroad in the autumn."

"Oh, how lovely!"

"Isn't it? David German is going to spend a year in Rome, to finish a statue, and wants me to go along. Grandma is willing, as cousin Maria wants her for a long visit, so everything looks promising and I really think I may go."

"Won't it cost a great deal?" asked Merry, who, in spite of her little elegancies, had a good deal of her thrifty mother's common sense.

"Yes; and I've got to earn it. But I can - I know I can, for I've saved some, and I shall work like ten beavers all summer. I won't borrow if I can help it, but I know someone who would lend me five hundred if I wanted it;" and Ralph looked as eager and secure as if the earning of twice that sum was a mere trifle when all the longing of his life was put into his daily tasks.

"I wish I had it to give you. It must be so splendid to feel that you can do great things if you only have the chance. And to travel, and see all the lovely pictures and statues, and people and places in Italy. How happy you must be!" and Merry's eyes had the wistful look they always wore when she dreamed dreams of the world she loved to live in.

"I am - so happy that I'm afraid it never will happen. If I do go, I'll write and tell you all about the fine sights, and how I get on. Would you like me to?" asked Ralph, beginning enthusiastically and ending rather bashfully, for he admired Merry very much, and was not quite sure how this proposal would be received.

"Indeed I should! I'd feel so grand to have letters from Paris and Rome, and you'd have so much to tell it would be almost as good as going myself," she said, looking off into the daffodil sky, as they paused a minute on the hill-top to get breath, for both had walked as fast as they talked.

"And will you answer the letters?" asked Ralph, watching the innocent face, which looked unusually kind and beautiful to him in that soft light.

"Why, yes; I'd love to, only I shall not have anything interesting to say. What can I write about?" and Merry smiled as she thought how dull her letters would sound after the exciting details his would doubtless give.

"Write about yourself, and all the rest of the people I know. Grandma will be gone, and I shall want to hear how you get on." Ralph looked very anxious indeed to hear, and Merry promised she would tell all about the other people, adding, as she turned from the evening peace and loveliness to the house, whence came the clatter of milk-pans and the smell of cooking, -

"I never should have anything very nice to tell about myself, for I don't do interesting things as you do, and you wouldn't care to hear about school, and sewing, and mending round at home."

Merry gave a disdainful little sniff at the savory perfume of ham which saluted them, and paused with her hand on the gate, as if she found it pleasanter out there than in the house. Ralph seemed to agree with her, for, leaning on the gate, he lingered to say, with real sympathy in his tone and something else in his face, "Yes, I should; so you write and tell me all about it. I didn't know you had any worries, for you always seemed like one of the happiest people in the world, with so many to pet and care for you, and plenty of money, and nothing very hard or hateful to do. You'd think you were well off if you knew as much about poverty and work and never getting what you want, as I do."

"You bear your worries so well that nobody knows you have them. I ought not to complain, and I won't, for I do have all I need. I'm so glad you are going to get what you want at last;" and Merry held out her hand to say good-night, with so much pleasure in her face that Ralph could not make up his mind to go just yet.

"I shall have to scratch round in a lively way before I do get it, for David says a fellow can't live on less than four or five hundred a year, even living as poor artists have to, in garrets and on crusts. I don't mind as long as Grandma is all right. She is away to-night, or I should not be here," he added, as if some excuse was necessary. Merry needed no hint, for her tender heart was touched by the vision of her friend in a garret, and she suddenly rejoiced that there was ham and eggs for supper, so that he might be well fed once, at least, before he went away to feed on artistic crusts.

"Being here, come in and spend the evening. The boys will like to hear the news, and so will father. Do, now."

It was impossible to refuse the invitation he had been longing for, and in they went to the great delight of Roxy, who instantly retired to the pantry, smiling significantly, and brought out the most elaborate pie in honor of the occasion. Merry touched up the table, and put a little vase of flowers in the middle to redeem the vulgarity of doughnuts. Of course the boys upset it, but as there was company nothing was said, and Ralph devoured his supper with the appetite of a hungry boy, while watching Merry eat bread and cream out of an old-fashioned silver porringer, and thinking it the sweetest sight he ever beheld.

Then the young people gathered about the table, full of the new plans, and the elders listened as they rested after the week's work. A pleasant evening, for they all liked Ralph, but as the parents watched Merry sitting among the great lads like a little queen among her subjects, half unconscious as yet of the power in her hands, they nodded to one another, and then shook their heads as if they said, -

"I'm afraid the time is coming, mother."

"No danger as long as she don't know it, father."

At nine the boys went off to the barn, the farmer to wind up the eight-day clock, and the housewife to see how the baked beans and Indian pudding for to-morrow were getting on in the oven. Ralph took up his hat to go, saying as he looked at the shade on the tall student lamp, -

"What a good light that gives! I can see it as I go home every night, and it burns up here like a beacon. I always look for it, and it hardly ever fails to be burning. Sort of cheers up the way, you know, when I'm tired or low in my mind."

"Then I'm very glad I got it. I liked the shape, but the boys laughed at it as they did at my bulrushes in a ginger-jar over there. I'd been reading about 'household art,' and I thought I'd try a little," answered Merry, laughing at her own whims.

"You've got a better sort of household art, I think, for you make people happy and places pretty, without fussing over it. This room is ever so much improved every time it comes, though I hardly see what it is except the flowers," said Ralph, looking from the girl to the tall calla that bent its white cup above her as if to pour its dew upon her head.

"Isn't that lovely? I tried to draw it - the shape was so graceful I wanted to keep it. But I couldn't. Isn't it a pity such beautiful things won't last forever?" and Merry looked regretfully at the half-faded one that grew beside the fresh blossom.

"I can keep it for you. It would look well in plaster. May I?" asked Ralph.

"Thank you, I should like that very much. Take the real one as a model - please do; there are more coming, and this will brighten up your room for a day or two."

As she spoke, Merry cut the stem, and, adding two or three of the great green leaves, put the handsome flower in his hand with so much good-will that he felt as if he had received a very precious gift. Then he said good-night so gratefully that Merry's hand quite tingled with the grasp of his, and went away, often looking backward through the darkness to where the light burned brightly on the hill-top - the beacon kindled by an unconscious Hero for a young Leander swimming gallantly against wind and tide toward the goal of his ambition.

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