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Chapter 18 - May Baskets

Spring was late that year, but to Jill it seemed the loveliest she had ever known, for hope was growing green and strong in her own little heart, and all the world looked beautiful. With the help of the brace she could sit up for a short time every day, and when the air was mild enough she was warmly wrapped and allowed to look out at the open window into the garden, where the gold and purple crocuses were coming bravely up, and the snowdrops nodded their delicate heads as if calling to her, -

"Good day, little sister, come out and play with us, for winter is over and spring is here."

"I wish I could!" thought Jill, as the soft wind kissed a tinge of color into her pale cheeks. "Never mind, they have been shut up in a darker place than I for months, and had no fun at all; I won't fret, but think about July and the seashore while I work."

The job now in hand was May baskets, for it was the custom of the children to hang them on the doors of their friends the night before May-day; and the girls had agreed to supply baskets if the boys would hunt for flowers, much the harder task of the two. Jill had more leisure as well as taste and skill than the other girls, so she amused herself with making a goodly store of pretty baskets of all shapes, sizes, and colors, quite confident that they would be filled, though not a flower had shown its head except a few hardy dandelions, and here and there a small cluster of saxifrage.

The violets would not open their blue eyes till the sunshine was warmer, the columbines refused to dance with the boisterous east wind, the ferns kept themselves rolled up in their brown flannel jackets, and little Hepatica, with many another spring beauty, hid away in the woods, afraid to venture out, in spite of the eager welcome awaiting them. But the birds had come, punctual as ever, and the bluejays were screaming in the orchard, robins were perking up their heads and tails as they went house-hunting, purple finches in their little red hoods were feasting on the spruce buds, and the faithful chip birds chirped gayly on the grapevine trellis where they had lived all winter, warming their little gray breasts against the southern side of the house when the sun shone, and hiding under the evergreen boughs when the snow fell.

"That tree is a sort of bird's hotel," said Jill, looking out at the tall spruce before her window, every spray now tipped with a soft green. "They all go there to sleep and eat, and it has room for every one. It is green when other trees die, the wind can't break it, and the snow only makes it look prettier. It sings to me, and nods as if it knew I loved it."

"We might call it 'The Holly Tree Inn,' as some of the cheap eating-houses for poor people are called in the city, as my holly bush grows at its foot for a sign. You can be the landlady, and feed your feathery customers every day, till the hard times are over," said Mrs. Minot, glad to see the child's enjoyment of the outer world from which she had been shut so long.

Jill liked the fancy, and gladly strewed crumbs on the window ledge for the chippies, who came confidently to eat almost from her hand. She threw out grain for the handsome jays, the jaunty robins, and the neighbors' doves, who came with soft flight to trip about on their pink feet, arching their shining necks as they cooed and pecked. Carrots and cabbage-leaves also flew out of the window for the marauding gray rabbit, last of all Jack's half-dozen, who led him a weary life of it because they would not stay in the Bunny-house, but undermined the garden with their burrows, ate the neighbors' plants, and refused to be caught till all but one ran away, to Jack's great relief. This old fellow camped out for the winter, and seemed to get on very well among the cats and the hens, who shared their stores with him, and he might be seen at all hours of the day and night scampering about the place, or kicking up his heels by moonlight, for he was a desperate poacher.

Jill took great delight in her pretty pensioners, who soon learned to love "The Holly Tree Inn," and to feel that the Bird Room held a caged comrade; for, when it was too cold or wet to open the windows, the doves came and tapped at the pane, the chippies sat on the ledge in plump little bunches as if she were their sunshine, the jays called her in their shrill voices to ring the dinner-bell, and the robins tilted on the spruce boughs where lunch was always to be had.

The first of May came on Sunday, so all the celebrating must be done on Saturday, which happily proved fair, though too chilly for muslin gowns, paper garlands, and picnics on damp grass. Being a holiday, the boys decided to devote the morning to ball and the afternoon to the flower hunt, while the girls finished the baskets; and in the evening our particular seven were to meet at the Minots to fill them, ready for the closing frolic of hanging on door-handles, ringing bells, and running away.

"Now I must do my Maying, for there will be no more sunshine, and I want to pick my flowers before it is dark. Come, Mammy, you go too," said Jill, as the last sunbeams shone in at the western window where her hyacinths stood that no fostering ray might be lost.

It was rather pathetic to see the once merry girl who used to be the life of the wood-parties now carefully lifting herself from the couch, and, leaning on her mother's strong arm, slowly take the half-dozen steps that made up her little expedition. But she was happy, and stood smiling out at old Bun skipping down the walk, the gold-edged clouds that drew apart so that a sunbeam might give her a good-night kiss as she gathered her long-cherished daisies, primroses, and hyacinths to fill the pretty basket in her hand.

"Who is it for, my dearie?" asked her mother, standing behind her as a prop, while the thin fingers did their work so willingly that not a flower was left.

"For My Lady, of course. Who else would I give my posies to, when I love them so well?" answered Jill, who thought no name too fine for their best friend.

"I fancied it would be for Master Jack," said her mother, wishing the excursion to be a cheerful one.

"I've another for him, but she must have the prettiest. He is going to hang it for me, and ring and run away, and she won't know who it's from till she sees this. She will remember it, for I've been turning and tending it ever so long, to make it bloom to-day. Isn't it a beauty?" and Jill held up her finest hyacinth, which seemed to ring its pale pink bells as if glad to carry its sweet message from a grateful little heart.

"Indeed it is; and you are right to give your best to her. Come away now, you must not stand any longer. Come and rest while I fetch a dish to put the flowers in till you want them;" and Mrs. Pecq turned her round with her small Maying safely done.

"I didn't think I'd ever be able to do even so much, and here I am walking and sitting up, and going to drive some day. Isn't it nice that I'm not to be a poor Lucinda after all?"

and Jill drew a long sigh of relief that six months instead of twenty years would probably be the end of her captivity.

"Yes, thank Heaven! I don't think I could have borne that;" and the mother took Jill in her arms as if she were a baby, holding her close for a minute, and laying her down with a tender kiss that made the arms cling about her neck as her little girl returned it heartily, for all sorts of new, sweet feelings seemed to be budding in both, born of great joy and thankfulness.

Then Mrs. Pecq hurried away to see about tea for the hungry boys, and Jill watched the pleasant twilight deepen as she lay singing to herself one of the songs her friend taught her because it fitted her so well.

"A little bird I am,
Shut from the fields of air,
And in my cage I sit and sing
To Him who placed me there:
Well pleased a prisoner to be,
Because, my God, it pleases Thee!

"Naught have I else to do:
I sing the whole day long;
And He whom most I love to please
Doth listen to my song,
He caught and bound my wandering wing,
But still He bends to hear me sing."

"Now we are ready for you, so bring on your flowers," said Molly to the boys, as she and Merry added their store of baskets to the gay show Jill had set forth on the long table ready for the evening's work.

"They wouldn't let me see one, but I guess they have had good luck, they look so jolly," answered Jill, looking at Gus, Frank, and Jack, who stood laughing, each with a large basket in his hands.

"Fair to middling. Just look in and see;" with which cheerful remark Gus tipped up his basket and displayed a few bits of green at the bottom.

"I did better. Now, don't all scream at once over these beauties;" and Frank shook out some evergreen sprigs, half a dozen saxifrages, and two or three forlorn violets with hardly any stems.

"I don't brag, but here's the best of all the three," chuckled Jack, producing a bunch of feathery carrot-tops, with a few half-shut dandelions trying to look brave and gay.

"Oh, boys, is that all?"

"What shall we do?"

"We've only a few house-flowers, and all those baskets to fill," cried the girls, in despair; for Merry's contribution had been small, and Molly had only a handful of artificial flowers "to fill up," she said.

"It isn't our fault: it is the late spring. We can't make flowers, can we?" asked Frank, in a tone of calm resignation.

"Couldn't you buy some, then?" said Molly, smoothing her crumpled morning-glories, with a sigh.

"Who ever heard of a fellow having any money left the last day of the month?" demanded Gus, severely.

"Or girls either. I spent all mine in ribbon and paper for my baskets, and now they are of no use. It's a shame!" lamented Jill, while Merry began to thin out her full baskets to fill the empty ones.

"Hold on!" cried Frank, relenting. "Now, Jack, make their minds easy before they begin to weep and wail."

"Left the box outside. You tell while I go for it;" and Jack bolted, as if afraid the young ladies might be too demonstrative when the tale was told.

"Tell away," said Frank, modestly passing the story along to Gus, who made short work of it.

"We rampaged all over the country, and got only that small mess of greens. Knew you'd be disgusted, and sat down to see what we could do. Then Jack piped up, and said he'd show us a place where we could get a plenty. 'Come on,' said we, and after leading us a nice tramp, he brought us out at Morse's greenhouse. So we got a few on tick, as we had but four cents among us, and there you are. Pretty clever of the little chap, wasn't it?"

A chorus of delight greeted Jack as he popped his head in, was promptly seized by his elders and walked up to the table, where the box was opened, displaying gay posies enough to fill most of the baskets if distributed with great economy and much green.

"You are the dearest boy that ever was!" began Jill, with her nose luxuriously buried in the box, though the flowers were more remarkable for color than perfume.

"No, I'm not; there's a much dearer one coming upstairs now, and he's got something that will make you howl for joy," said Jack, ignoring his own prowess as Ed came in with a bigger box, looking as if he had done nothing but go a Maying all his days.

"Don't believe it!" cried Jill, hugging her own treasure jealously. "It's only another joke. I won't look," said Molly, still struggling to make her cambric roses bloom again.

"I know what it is! Oh, how sweet!" added Merry, sniffing, as Ed set the box before her, saying pleasantly, -

"You shall see first, because you had faith."

Up went the cover, and a whiff of the freshest fragrance regaled the seven eager noses bent to inhale it, as a general murmur of pleasure greeted the nest of great, rosy mayflowers that lay before them.

"The dear things, how lovely they are!" and Merry looked as if greeting her cousins, so blooming and sweet was her own face.

Molly pushed her dingy garlands away, ashamed of such poor attempts beside these perfect works of nature, and Jill stretched out her hand involuntarily, as she said, forgetting her exotics, "Give me just one to smell of, it is so woody and delicious."

"Here you are, plenty for all. Real Pilgrim Fathers, right from Plymouth. One of our fellows lives there, and I told him to bring me a good lot; so he did, and you can do what you like with them," explained Ed, passing round bunches and shaking the rest in a mossy pile upon the table.

"Ed always gets ahead of us in doing the right thing at the right time. Hope you've got some first-class baskets ready for him," said Gus, refreshing the Washingtonian nose with a pink blossom or two.

"Not much danger of his being forgotten," answered Molly; and every one laughed, for Ed was much beloved by all the girls, and his door-steps always bloomed like a flower-bed on May eve.

"Now we must fly round and fill up. Come, boys, sort out the green and hand us the flowers as we want them. Then we must direct them, and, by the time that is done, you can go and leave them," said Jill, setting all to work.

"Ed must choose his baskets first. These are ours; but any of those you can have;" and Molly pointed to a detachment of gay baskets, set apart from those already partly filled.

Ed chose a blue one, and Merry filled it with the rosiest may-flowers, knowing that it was to hang on Mabel's door-handle.

The others did the same, and the pretty work went on, with much fun, till all were filled, and ready for the names or notes.

"Let us have poetry, as we can't get wild flowers. That will be rather fine," proposed Jill, who liked jingles.

All had had some practice at the game parties, and pencils went briskly for a few minutes, while silence reigned, as the poets racked their brains for rhymes, and stared at the blooming array before them for inspiration.

"Oh, dear! I can't find a word to rhyme to 'geranium,'" sighed Molly, pulling her braid, as if to pump the well of her fancy dry.

"Cranium," said Frank, who was getting on bravely with "Annette" and "violet."

"That is elegant!" and Molly scribbled away in great glee, for her poems were always funny ones.

"How do you spell anemoly - the wild flower, I mean?" asked Jill, who was trying to compose a very appropriate piece for her best basket, and found it easier to feel love and gratitude than to put them into verse.

"Anemone; do spell it properly, or you'll get laughed at," answered Gus, wildly struggling to make his lines express great ardor, without being "too spoony," as he expressed it.

"No, I shouldn't. This person never laughs at other persons' mistakes, as some persons do," replied Jill, with dignity.

Jack was desperately chewing his pencil, for he could not get on at all; but Ed had evidently prepared his poem, for his paper was half full already, and Merry was smiling as she wrote a friendly line or two for Ralph's basket, as she feared he would be forgotten, and knew he loved kindness even more than he did beauty.

"Now let's read them," proposed Molly, who loved to laugh even at herself.

The boys politely declined, and scrambled their notes into the chosen baskets in great haste; but the girls were less bashful. Jill was invited to begin, and gave her little piece, with the pink hyacinth basket before her, to illustrate her poem.

"TO MY LADY

"There are no flowers in the fields,
No green leaves on the tree,
No columbines, no violets,
No sweet anemone.
So I have gathered from my pots
All that I have to fill
The basket that I hang to-night,
With heaps of love from Jill."

"That's perfectly sweet! Mine isn't; but I meant it to be funny," said Molly, as if there could be any doubt about the following ditty: -

"Dear Grif,
Here is a whiff
Of beautiful spring flowers;
The big red rose
Is for your nose,
As toward the sky it towers.

"Oh, do not frown
Upon this crown
Of green pinks and blue geranium
But think of me
When this you see,
And put it on your cranium."

"O Molly, you will never hear the last of that if Grif gets it," said Jill, as the applause subsided, for the boys pronounced it "tip-top."

"Don't care, he gets the worst of it any way, for there is a pin in that rose, and if he goes to smell the mayflowers underneath he will find a thorn to pay for the tack he put in my rubber boot. I know he will play me some joke to-night, and I mean to be first if I can," answered Molly, settling the artificial wreath round the orange-colored canoe which held her effusion.

"Now, Merry, read yours: you always have sweet poems;" and Jill folded her hands to listen with pleasure to something sentimental.

"I can't read the poems in some of mine, because they are for you; but this little verse you can hear, if you like: I'm going to give that basket to Ralph. He said he should hang one for his grandmother, and I thought that was so nice of him, I'd love to surprise him with one all to himself. He's always so good to us;" and Merry looked so innocently earnest that no one smiled at her kind thought or the unconscious paraphrase she had made of a famous stanza in her own "little verse."

"To one who teaches me
The sweetness and the beauty
Of doing faithfully
And cheerfully my duty."

"He will like that, and know who sent it, for none of us have pretty pink paper but you, or write such an elegant hand," said Molly, admiring the delicate white basket shaped like a lily, with the flowers inside and the note hidden among them, all daintily tied up with the palest blush-colored ribbon.

"Well, that's no harm. He likes pretty things as much as I do, and I made my basket like a flower because I gave him one of my callas, he admired the shape so much;" and Merry smiled as she remembered how pleased Ralph looked as he went away carrying the lovely thing.

"I think it would be a good plan to hang some baskets on the doors of other people who don't expect or often have any. I'll do it if you can spare some of these, we have so many. Give me only one, and let the others go to old Mrs. Tucker, and the little Irish girl who has been sick so long, and lame Neddy, and Daddy Munson. It would please and surprise them so. Will we?" asked Ed, in that persuasive voice of his.

All agreed at once, and several people were made very happy by a bit of spring left at their doors by the May elves who haunted the town that night playing all sorts of pranks. Such a twanging of bells and rapping of knockers; such a scampering of feet in the dark; such droll collisions as boys came racing round corners, or girls ran into one another's arms as they crept up and down steps on the sly; such laughing, whistling, flying about of flowers and friendly feeling - it was almost a pity that May-day did not come oftener.

Molly got home late, and found that Grif had been before her, after all; for she stumbled over a market-basket at her door, and on taking it in found a mammoth nosegay of purple and white cabbages, her favorite vegetable. Even Miss Bat laughed at the funny sight, and Molly resolved to get Ralph to carve her a bouquet out of carrots, beets, and turnips for next time, as Grif would never think of that.

Merry ran up the garden-walk alone, for Frank left her at the gate, and was fumbling for the latch when she felt something hanging there. Opening the door carefully, she found it gay with offerings from her mates; and among them was one long quiver-shaped basket of birch bark, with something heavy under the green leaves that lay at the top. Lifting these, a slender bas-relief of a calla lily in plaster appeared, with this couplet slipped into the blue cord by which it was to hang: -

"That mercy you to others show
That Mercy Grant to me."

"How lovely! and this one will never fade, but always be a pleasure hanging there. Now, I really have something beautiful all my own," said Merry to herself as she ran up to hang the pretty thing on the dark wainscot of her room, where the graceful curve of its pointed leaves and the depth of its white cup would be a joy to her eyes as long as they lasted.

"I wonder what that means," and Merry read over the lines again, while a soft color came into her cheeks and a little smile of girlish pleasure began to dimple round her lips; for she was so romantic, this touch of sentiment showed her that her friendship was more valued than she dreamed. But she only said, "How glad I am I remembered him, and how surprised he will be to see mayflowers in return for the lily."

He was, and worked away more happily and bravely for the thought of the little friend whose eyes would daily fall on the white flower which always reminded him of her.