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[Jack And Jill](#)

[Louisa May Alcott](#)

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## Chapter 24 - Down The River

A fortnight later, the boys were picking apples one golden October afternoon, and the girls were hurrying to finish their work, that they might go and help the harvesters. It was six weeks now since the new school began, and they had learned to like it very much, though they found that it was not all play, by any means. But lessons, exercise, and various sorts of housework made an agreeable change, and they felt that they were learning things which would be useful to them all their lives. They had been making underclothes for themselves, and each had several neatly finished garments cut, fitted, and sewed by herself, and trimmed with the pretty tatting Jill made in such quantities while she lay on her sofa.

Now they were completing new dressing sacks, and had enjoyed this job very much, as each chose her own material, and suited her own taste in the making. Jill's was white, with tiny scarlet leaves all over it, trimmed with red braid and buttons so like checkerberries she was tempted to eat them. Molly's was gay, with bouquets of every sort of flower, scalloped all round, and adorned with six buttons, each of a different color, which she thought the last touch of elegance. Merry's, though the simplest, was the daintiest of the three, being pale blue, trimmed with delicate edging, and beautifully made.

Mrs. Minot had been reading from Miss Strickland's "Queens of England" while the girls worked, and an illustrated Shakspeare lay open on the table, as well as several fine photographs of historical places for them to look at as they went along. The hour was over now, the teacher gone, and the pupils setting the last stitches as they talked over the lesson, which had interested them exceedingly.

"I really believe I have got Henry's six wives into my head right at last. Two Annes, three Katherines, and one Jane. Now I've seen where they lived and heard their stories, I quite feel as if I knew them," said Merry, shaking the threads off her work before she folded it up to carry home.

"King Henry the Eighth to six spouses was wedded,  
 One died, one survived, two divorced, two beheaded."

was all I knew about them before. Poor things, what a bad time they did have," added Jill, patting down the red braid, which would pucker a bit at the corners.

"Katherine Parr had the best of it, because she outlived the old tyrant and so kept her head on," said Molly, winding the thread round her last button, as if bound to fasten it on so firmly that nothing should decapitate that.

"I used to think I'd like to be a queen or a great lady, and wear velvet and jewels, and live in a palace, but now I don't care much for that sort of splendor. I like to make things pretty at home, and know that they all depend on me, and love me very much. Queens are not happy, and I am," said Merry, pausing to look at Anne Hathaway's cottage as she put up the picture, and to wonder if it was very pleasant to have a famous man for one's husband.

"I guess your missionarying has done you good; mine has, and I'm getting to have things my own way more and more every day. Miss Bat is so amiable, I hardly know her, and father tells her to ask Miss Molly when she goes to him for orders. Isn't that fun?" laughed Molly, in high glee, at the agreeable change. "I like it ever so much, but I don't want to stay so all my days. I mean to travel, and just as soon as I can I shall take Boo and go all round the world, and see everything," she added, waving her gay sack, as if it were the flag she was about to nail to the masthead of her ship.

"Well, I should like to be famous in some way, and have people admire me very much. I'd like to act, or dance, or sing, or be what I heard the ladies at Pebbly Beach call a 'queen of society.' But I don't expect to be anything, and I'm not going to worry I shall not be a Lucinda, so I ought to be contented and happy all my life," said Jill, who was very ambitious in spite of the newly acquired meekness, which was all the more becoming because her natural liveliness often broke out like sunshine through a veil of light clouds.

If the three girls could have looked forward ten years they would have been surprised to see how different a fate was theirs from the one each had chosen, and how happy each was in the place she was called to fill. Merry was not making the old farmhouse pretty, but living in Italy, with a young sculptor for her husband, and beauty such as she never dreamed of all about her. Molly was not travelling round the world, but contentedly keeping house for her father and still watching over Boo, who was becoming her pride and joy as well as care. Neither was Jill a famous woman, but a very happy and useful one, with the two mothers leaning on her as they grew old, the young men better for her influence over them, many friends to love and honor her, and a charming home, where she was queen by right of her cheery spirit, grateful heart, and unflinching devotion to those who had made her what she was.

If any curious reader, not content with this peep into futurity, asks, "Did Molly and Jill ever marry?" we must reply, for the sake of peace - Molly remained a merry spinster all her days, one of the independent, brave, and busy creatures of whom there is such need in the world to help take care of other peoples' wives and children, and do the many useful jobs that the married folk have no time for. Jill certainly did wear a white veil on the day she was twenty-five and called her husband Jack. Further than that we cannot go, except to say that this leap did not end in a catastrophe, like the first one they took together.

That day, however, they never dreamed of what was in store for them, but chattered away as they cleared up the room, and then ran off ready for play, feeling that they had earned it by work well done. They found the lads just finishing, with Boo to help by picking up the windfalls for the cider-heap, after he had amused himself by putting about a bushel down the various holes old Bun had left behind him. Jack was risking his neck climbing in the most dangerous places, while Frank, with a long-handled apple-picker, nipped off the finest fruit with care, both enjoying the pleasant task and feeling proud of the handsome red and yellow piles all about the little orchard. Merry and Molly caught up baskets and fell to work with all their might, leaving Jill to sit upon a stool and sort the early apples ready to use at once, looking up now and then to nod and smile at her mother who watched her from the window, rejoicing to see her lass so well and happy.

It was such a lovely day, they all felt its cheerful influence; for the sun shone bright and warm, the air was full of an invigorating freshness which soon made the girls' faces look like rosy apples, and their spirits as gay as if they had been stealing sips of new cider through a straw. Jack whistled like a blackbird as he swung and bumped about, Frank orated and joked, Merry and Molly ran races to see who would fill and empty fastest, and Jill sung to Boo, who reposed in a barrel, exhausted with his labors.

"These are the last of the pleasant days, and we ought to make the most of them. Let's have one more picnic before the frost spoils the leaves," said Merry, resting a minute at the gate to look down the street, which was a glorified sort of avenue, with brilliant maples lining the way and carpeting the ground with crimson and gold.

"Oh, yes! Go down the river once more and have supper on the Island. I couldn't go to some of your picnics, and I do long for a last good time before winter shuts me up again," cried Jill, eager to harvest all the sunshine she could, for she was not yet quite her old self again.

"I'm your man, if the other fellows agree. We can't barrel these up for a while, so to-morrow will be a holiday for us. Better make sure of the day while you can, this weather can't last long;" and Frank shook his head like one on intimate terms with Old Prob.

"Don't worry about those high ones, Jack. Give a shake and come down and plan about the party," called Molly, throwing up a big Baldwin with what seemed a remarkably good aim, for a shower of apples followed, and a boy came tumbling earthward to catch on the lowest bough and swing down like a caterpillar, exclaiming, as he landed, -

"I'm glad that job is done! I've rasped every knuckle I've got and worn out the knees of my pants. Nice little crop though, isn't it?"

"It will be nicer if this young man does not bite every apple he touches. Hi there! Stop it, Boo," commanded Frank, as he caught his young assistant putting his small teeth into the best ones, to see if they were sweet or sour.

Molly set the barrel up on end, and that took the boy out of the reach of mischief, so he retired from view and peeped through a crack as he ate his fifth pearmain, regardless of consequences.

"Gus will be at home to-morrow. He always comes up early on Saturday, you know. We can't get on without him," said Frank, who missed his mate very much, for Gus had entered college, and so far did not like it as much as he had expected.

"Or Ralph; he is very busy every spare minute on the little boy's bust, which is getting on nicely, he says; but he will be able to come home in time for supper, I think," added Merry, remembering the absent, as usual.

"I'll ask the girls on my way home, and all meet at two o'clock for a good row while it's warm. What shall I bring?" asked Molly, wondering if Miss Bat's amiability would extend to making goodies in the midst of her usual Saturday's baking.

"You bring coffee and the big pot and some buttered crackers. I'll see to the pie and cake, and the other girls can have anything else they like," answered Merry, glad and proud that she could provide the party with her own inviting handiwork.

"I'll take my zither, so we can have music as we sail, and Grif will bring his violin, and Ralph can imitate a banjo so that you'd be sure he had one. I do hope it will be fine, it is so splendid to go round like other folks and enjoy myself," cried Jill, with a little bounce of satisfaction at the prospect of a row and ramble.

"Come along, then, and make sure of the girls," said Merry, catching up her roll of work, for the harvesting was done.

Molly put her sack on as the easiest way of carrying it, and, extricating Boo, they went off, accompanied by the boys, "to make sure of the fellows" also, leaving Jill to sit among the apples, singing and sorting like a thrifty little housewife.

Next day eleven young people met at the appointed place, basket in hand. Ralph could not come till later, for he was working now as he never worked before. They were a merry flock, for the mellow autumn day was even brighter and clearer than yesterday, and the river looked its loveliest, winding away under the sombre hemlocks, or through the fairyland the gay woods made on either side. Two large boats and two small ones held them all, and away they went, first up through the three bridges and round the bend, then, turning, they floated down to the green island, where a grove of oaks rustled their sere leaves and the squirrels were still gathering acorns. Here they often met to keep their summer revels, and here they now spread their feast on the flat rock which needed no cloth beside its own gray lichens. The girls trimmed each dish with bright leaves, and made the supper look like a banquet for the elves, while the boys built a fire in the nook where ashes and blackened stones told of many a rustic meal. The big tin coffee-pot was not so romantic, but more successful than a kettle slung on three sticks, gypsy fashion; so they did not risk a downfall, but set the water boiling, and soon filled the air with the agreeable perfume associated in their minds with picnics, as most of them never tasted the fascinating stuff at any other time, being the worst children can drink.

Frank was cook, Gus helped cut bread and cake, Jack and Grif brought wood, while Bob Walker took Joe's place and made himself generally useful, as the other gentlemen never did, and so was quite out of favor lately.

All was ready at last, and they were just deciding to sit down without Ralph, when a shout told them he was coming, and down the river skimmed a wherry at such a rate the boys wondered whom he had been racing with.

"Something has happened, and he is coming to tell us," said Jill, who sat where she could see his eager face.

"Nothing bad, or he wouldn't smile so. He is glad of a good row and a little fun after working so hard all the week;" and Merry shook a red napkin as a welcoming signal.

Something certainly had happened, and a very happy something it must be, they all thought, as Ralph came on with flashing oars, and leaping out as the boat touched the shore, ran up the slope, waving his hat, and calling in a glad voice, sure of sympathy in his delight, -

"Good news! good news! Hurrah for Rome, next month!"

The young folks forgot their supper for a moment, to congratulate him on his happy prospect, and hear all about it, while the leaves rustled as if echoing the kind words, and the squirrels sat up aloft, wondering what all the pleasant clamor was about.

"Yes, I'm really going in November. German asked me to go with him to-day, and if there is any little hitch in my getting off, he'll lend a hand, and I - I'll black his boots, wet his clay, and run his errands the rest of my life to pay for this!" cried Ralph, in a burst of gratitude; for, independent as he was, the kindness of this successful friend to a deserving comrade touched and won his heart.

"I call that a handsome thing to do!" said Frank, warmly, for noble actions always pleased him. "I heard my mother say that making good or useful men was the best sort of sculpture, so I think David German may be proud of this piece of work, whether the big statue succeeds or not."

"I'm very glad, old fellow. When I run over for my trip four years from now, I'll look you up, and see how you are getting on," said Gus, with a hearty shake of the hand; and the younger lads grinned cheerfully, even while they wondered where the fun was in shaping clay and chipping marble.

"Shall you stay four years?" asked Merry's soft voice, while a wistful look came into her happy eyes.

"Ten, if I can," answered Ralph, decidedly, feeling as if a long lifetime would be all too short for the immortal work he meant to do. "I've got so much to learn, that I shall

whatever David thinks best for me at first, and when I can go alone, I shall just shut myself up and forget that there is any world outside my den."

"Do write and tell us how you get on now and then; I like to hear about other people's good times while I'm waiting for my own," said Molly, too much interested to observe that Grif was sticking burrs up and down her braids.

"Of course I shall write to some of you, but you mustn't expect any great things for years yet. People don't grow famous in a hurry, and it takes a deal of hard work even to earn your bread and butter, as you'll find if you ever try it," answered Ralph, sobering down a little as he remembered the long and steady effort it had taken to get even so far.

"Speaking of bread and butter reminds me that we'd better eat ours before the coffee gets quite cold," said Annette, for Merry seemed to have forgotten that she had been chosen to play matron, as she was the oldest.

The boys seconded the motion, and for a few minutes supper was the all-absorbing topic, as the cups went round and the goodies vanished rapidly, accompanied by the usual mishaps which make picnic meals such fun. Ralph's health was drunk with all sorts of good wishes; and such splendid prophecies were made, that he would have far surpassed Michael Angelo, if they could have come true. Grif gave him an order on the spot for a full-length statue of himself, and stood up to show the imposing attitude in which he wished to be taken, but unfortunately slipped and fell forward with one hand in the custard pie, the other clutching wildly at the coffee-pot, which inhospitably burnt his fingers.

"I think I grasp the idea, and will be sure to remember not to make your hair blow one way and the tails of your coat another, as a certain sculptor made those of a famous man," laughed Ralph, as the fallen hero scrambled up, amidst general merriment.

"Will the little bust be done before you go?" asked Jill, anxiously, feeling a personal interest in the success of that order.

"Yes: I've been hard at it every spare minute I could get, and have a fortnight more. It suits Mrs. Lennox, and she will pay well for it, so I shall have something to start with, though I haven't been able to save much. I'm to thank you for that, and I shall send you the first pretty thing I get hold of," answered Ralph, looking gratefully at the bright face, which grew still brighter as Jill exclaimed, -

"I do feel so proud to know a real artist, and have my bust done by him. I only wish I could pay for it as Mrs. Lennox does; but I haven't any money, and you don't need the sort of things I can make," she added, shaking her head, as she thought over knit slippers, wall-pockets, and crochet in all its forms, as offerings to her departing friend.

"You can write often, and tell me all about everybody, for I shall want to know, and people will soon forget me when I'm gone," said Ralph, looking at Merry, who was making a garland of yellow leaves for Juliet's black hair.

Jill promised, and kept her word; but the longest letters went from the farm-house on the hill, though no one knew the fact till long afterward. Merry said nothing now, but she smiled, with a pretty color in her cheeks, and was very much absorbed in her work, while the talk went on.

"I wish I was twenty, and going to seek my fortune, as you are," said Jack; and the other boys agreed with him, for something in Ralph's new plans and purposes roused the manly spirit in all of them, reminding them that playtime would soon be over, and the great world before them, where to choose.

"It is easy enough to say what you'd like; but the trouble is, you have to take what you can get, and make the best of it," said Gus, whose own views were rather vague as yet.

"No you don't, always; you can make things go as you want them, if you only try hard enough, and walk right over whatever stands in the way. I don't mean to give up my plans for any man; but, if I live, I'll carry them out - you see if I don't;" and Frank gave the rock where he lay a blow with his fist, that sent the acorns flying all about.

One of them hit Jack, and he said, sorrowfully, as he held it in his hand so carefully it was evident he had some association with it, -

"Ed used to say that, and he had some splendid plans, but they didn't come to anything."

"Perhaps they did; who can tell? Do your best while you live, and I don't believe anything good is lost, whether we have it a long or a short time," said Ralph, who knew what a help and comfort high hopes were, and how they led to better things, if worthily cherished.

"A great many acorns are wasted, I suppose; but some of them sprout and grow, and make splendid trees," added Merry, feeling more than she knew how to express, as she looked up at the oaks overhead.

Only seven of the party were sitting on the knoll now, for the rest had gone to wash the dishes and pack the baskets down by the boats. Jack and Jill, with the three elder boys, were in a little group, and as Merry spoke, Gus said to Frank, -

"Did you plant yours?"

"Yes, on the lawn, and I mean it shall come up if I can make it," answered Frank, gravely.

"I put mine where I can see it from the window, and not forget to water and take care of it," added Jack, still turning the pretty brown acorn to and fro as if he loved it.

"What do they mean?" whispered Merry to Jill, who was leaning against her knee to rest.

"The boys were walking in the Cemetery last Sunday, as they often do, and when they came to Ed's grave, the place was all covered with little acorns from the tree that grows on the bank. They each took up some as they stood talking, and Jack said he should plant his, for he loved Ed very much, you know. The others said they would, too; and I hope the trees will grow, though we don't need anything to remember him by," answered Jill, in a low tone, thinking of the pressed flowers the girls kept for his sake.

The boys heard her, but no one spoke for a moment as they sat looking across the river toward the hill where the pines whispered their lullabies and pointed heavenward, steadfast and green, all the year round. None of them could express the thought that was in their minds as Jill told the little story; but the act and the feeling that prompted it were perhaps as beautiful an assurance as could have been given that the dear dead boy's example had not been wasted, for the planting of the acorns was a symbol of the desire budding in those young hearts to be what he might have been, and to make their lives nobler for the knowledge and the love of him.

"It seems as if a great deal had happened this year," said Merry, in a pensive tone, for this quiet talk just suited her mood.

"So I say, for there's been a Declaration of Independence and a Revolution in our house, and I'm commander-in-chief now; and don't I like it!" cried Molly, complacently.

surveying the neat new uniform she wore of her own choosing.

"I feel as if I never learned so much in my life as I have since last December, and yet I never did so little," added Jill, wondering why the months of weariness and pain did not seem more dreadful to her.

"Well, pitching on my head seems to have given me a good shaking up, somehow, and I mean to do great things next year in better ways than breaking my bones coasting," said Jack, with a manly air.

"I feel like a Siamese twin without his mate now you are gone, but I'm under orders for a while, and mean to do my best. Guess it won't be lost time;" and Frank nodded at Gus, who nodded back with the slightly superior expression all Freshmen wear.

"Hope you won't find it so. My work is all cut out for me, and I intend to go in and win, though it is more of a grind than you fellows know."

"I'm sure I have everything to be grateful for. It won't be plain sailing - I don't expect it; but, if I live, I'll do something to be proud of," said Ralph, squaring his shoulders as if to meet and conquer all obstacles as he looked into the glowing west, which was not fairer than his ambitious dreams.

Here we will say good-by to these girls and boys of ours as they sit together in the sunshine talking over a year that was to be for ever memorable to them, not because of any very remarkable events, but because they were just beginning to look about them as they stepped out of childhood into youth, and some of the experiences of the past months had set them to thinking, taught them to see the use and beauty of the small duties, joys, and sorrows which make up our lives, and inspired them to resolve that the coming year should be braver and brighter than the last.

There are many such boys and girls, full of high hopes, lovely possibilities, and earnest plans, pausing a moment before they push their little boats from the safe shore. Let those who launch them see to it that they have good health to man the oars, good education for ballast, and good principles as pilots to guide them as they voyage down an ever-widening river to the sea.