LOUISA ALCOTT

LITTLE MEN. LIFE AT PLUMFIELD WITH JO'S BOYS

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Содержание

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CHAPTER I
NAT

"Please, sir, is this Plumfield?" asked a ragged boy of the man who opened the great gate at which the omnibus left him.

"Yes; who sent you?"

"Mr. Laurence. I have got a letter for the lady."

"All right; go up to the house, and give it to her; she'll see to you, little chap."

The man spoke pleasantly, and the boy went on, feeling much cheered by the words. Through the soft spring rain that fell on sprouting grass and budding trees, Nat saw a large square house before him, – a hospitable-looking house, with an old-fashioned porch, wide steps, and lights shining in many windows. Neither curtains nor shutters hid the cheerful glimmer; and, pausing a moment before he rang, Nat saw many little shadows dancing on the walls, heard the pleasant hum of young voices, and felt that it was hardly possible that the light and warmth and comfort within

could be for a homeless "little chap" like him.

"I hope the lady *will* see to me," he thought; and gave a timid rap with the great bronze knocker, which was a jovial griffin's head.

A rosy-faced servant-maid opened the door, and smiled as she took the letter which he silently offered. She seemed used to receiving strange boys, for she pointed to a seat in the hall, and said, with a nod, —

"Sit there and drip on the mat a bit, while I take this in to missis."

Nat found plenty to amuse him while he waited, and stared about him curiously, enjoying the view, yet glad to do so unobserved in the dusky recess by the door.

The house seemed swarming with boys, who were beguiling the rainy twilight with all sorts of amusements. There were boys everywhere, "up-stairs and down-stairs and in the lady's chamber," apparently, for various open doors showed pleasant groups of big boys, little boys, and middle-sized boys in all stages of evening relaxation, not to say effervescence. Two large rooms on the right were evidently school-rooms, for desks, maps, blackboards, and books were scattered about. An open fire burned on the hearth, and several indolent lads lay on their backs before it, discussing a new cricket-ground, with such animation that their boots waved in the air. A tall youth was practising on the flute in one corner, quite undisturbed by the racket all about him. Two or three others were jumping over the desks, pausing,

now and then, to get their breath, and laugh at the droll sketches of a little wag who was caricaturing the whole household on a blackboard.

In the room on the left a long supper-table was seen, set forth with great pitchers of new milk, piles of brown and white bread, and perfect stacks of the shiny gingerbread so dear to boyish souls. A flavor of toast was in the air, also suggestions of baked apples, very tantalizing to one hungry little nose and stomach.

The hall, however, presented the most inviting prospect of all, for a brisk game of tag was going on in the upper entry. One landing was devoted to marbles, the other to checkers, while the stairs were occupied by a boy reading, a girl singing lullaby to her doll, two puppies, a kitten, and a constant succession of small boys sliding down the banisters, to the great detriment of their clothes, and danger to their limbs.

So absorbed did Nat become in this exciting race, that he ventured farther and farther out of his corner; and when one very lively boy came down so swiftly that he could not stop himself, but fell off the banisters, with a crash that would have broken any head but one rendered nearly as hard as a cannon-ball by eleven years of constant bumping, Nat forgot himself, and ran up to the fallen rider, expecting to find him half-dead. The boy, however, only winked rapidly for a second, then lay calmly looking up at the new face with a surprised "Hullo!"

"Hullo!" returned Nat, not knowing what else to say, and thinking that form of reply both brief and easy.

"Are you a new boy?" asked the recumbent youth, without stirring.

"Don't know yet."

"What's your name?"

"Nat Blake."

"Mine's Tommy Bangs; come up and have a go, will you?" and Tommy got upon his legs like one suddenly remembering the duties of hospitality.

"Guess I won't, till I see whether I'm going to stay or not," returned Nat, feeling the desire to stay increase every moment.

"I say, Demi, here's a new one. Come and see to him;" and the lively Thomas returned to his sport with unabated relish.

At his call, the boy reading on the stairs looked up with a pair of big brown eyes, and after an instant's pause, as if a little shy, he put the book under his arm, and came soberly down to greet the new-comer, who found something very attractive in the pleasant face of this slender, mild-eyed boy.

"Have you seen Aunt Jo?" he asked, as if that was some sort of important ceremony.

"I haven't seen anybody yet but you boys; I'm waiting," answered Nat.

"Did Uncle Laurie send you?" proceeded Demi, politely, but gravely.

"Mr. Laurence did."

"He is Uncle Laurie; and he always sends nice boys."

Nat looked gratified at the remark, and smiled, in a way that

made his thin face very pleasant. He did not know what to say next, so the two stood staring at one another in friendly silence, till the little girl came up with her doll in her arms. She was very like Demi, only not so tall, and had a rounder, rosier face, and blue eyes.

"This is my sister Daisy," announced Demi, as if presenting a rare and precious creature.

The children nodded to one another; and the little girl's face dimpled with pleasure, as she said, affably, —

"I hope you'll stay. We have such good times here; don't we, Demi?"

"Of course, we do; that's what Aunt Jo has Plumfield for."

"It seems a very nice place indeed," observed Nat, feeling that he must respond to these amiable young persons.

"It's the nicest place in the world; isn't it, Demi?" said Daisy, who evidently regarded her brother as authority on all subjects.

"No; I think Greenland, where the icebergs and seals are, is more interesting. But I'm fond of Plumfield, and it is a very nice place to be in," returned Demi, who was interested just now in a book on Greenland. He was about to offer to show Nat the pictures and explain them, when the servant returned, saying, with a nod toward the parlor-door, —

"All right; you are to stop."

"I'm glad; now come to Aunt Jo." And Daisy took him by the hand with a pretty protecting air, which made Nat feel at home at once.

Demi returned to his beloved book, while his sister led the new-comer into a back room, where a stout gentleman was frolicking with two little boys on the sofa, and a thin lady was just finishing the letter which she seemed to have been re-reading.

"Here he is, Aunty!" cried Daisy.

"So this is my new boy? I am glad to see you, my dear, and hope you'll be happy here," said the lady, drawing him to her, and stroking back the hair from his forehead with a kind hand and a motherly look, which made Nat's lonely little heart yearn toward her.

She was not at all handsome, but she had a merry sort of face, that never seemed to have forgotten certain childish ways and looks, any more than her voice and manner had; and these things, hard to describe but very plain to see and feel, made her a genial, comfortable kind of person, easy to get on with, and generally "jolly," as boys would say. She saw the little tremble of Nat's lips as she smoothed his hair, and her keen eyes grew softer, but she only drew the shabby figure nearer and said, laughing, —

"I am Mother Bhaer, that gentleman is Father Bhaer, and these are the two little Bhaers. – Come here, boys, and see Nat."

The three wrestlers obeyed at once; and the stout man, with a chubby child on each shoulder, came up to welcome the new boy. Rob and Teddy merely grinned at him, but Mr. Bhaer shook hands, and pointing to a low chair near the fire, said, in a cordial voice, —

"There is a place all ready for thee, my son; sit down and dry

thy wet feet at once."

"Wet? so they are! My dear, off with your shoes this minute, and I'll have some dry things ready for you in a jiffy," cried Mrs. Bhaer, bustling about so energetically, that Nat found himself in the cosy little chair, with dry socks and warm slippers on his feet, before he would have had time to say Jack Robinson, if he had wanted to try. He said "Thank you, ma'am," instead; and said it so gratefully, that Mrs. Bhaer's eyes grew soft again, and she said something merry, because she felt so tender, which was a way she had.

"These are Tommy Bangs' slippers; but he never will remember to put them on in the house; so he shall not have them. They are too big; but that's all the better; you can't run away from us so fast as if they fitted."

"I don't want to run away, ma'am." And Nat spread his grimy little hands before the comfortable blaze, with a long sigh of satisfaction.

"That's good! Now I am going to toast you well, and try to get rid of that ugly cough. How long have you had it, dear?" asked Mrs. Bhaer, as she rummaged in her big basket for a strip of flannel.

"All winter. I got cold, and it wouldn't get better, somehow."

"No wonder, living in that damp cellar with hardly a rag to his poor dear back!" said Mrs. Bhaer, in a low tone to her husband, who was looking at the boy with a skilful pair of eyes, that marked the thin temples and feverish lips, as well as the hoarse

voice and frequent fits of coughing that shook the bent shoulders under the patched jacket.

"Robin, my man, trot up to Nursey, and tell her to give thee the cough-bottle and the liniment," said Mr. Bhaer, after his eyes had exchanged telegrams with his wife's.

Nat looked a little anxious at the preparations, but forgot his fears, in a hearty laugh, when Mrs. Bhaer whispered to him, with a droll look, —

"Hear my rogue Teddy try to cough. The syrup I'm going to give you has honey in it; and he wants some."

Little Ted was red in the face with his exertions by the time the bottle came, and was allowed to suck the spoon, after Nat had manfully taken a dose, and had the bit of flannel put about his throat.

These first steps toward a cure were hardly completed, when a great bell rang, and a loud tramping through the hall announced supper. Bashful Nat quaked at the thought of meeting many strange boys, but Mrs. Bhaer held out her hand to him, and Rob said, patronizingly, "Don't be 'fraid; I'll take care of you."

Twelve boys, six on a side, stood behind their chairs, prancing with impatience to begin, while the tall flute-playing youth was trying to curb their ardor. But no one sat down, till Mrs. Bhaer was in her place behind the teapot, with Teddy on her left, and Nat on her right.

"This is our new boy, Nat Blake. After supper you can say, How do you do? Gently, boys, gently."

As she spoke every one stared at Nat, and then whisked into their seats, trying to be orderly, and failing utterly. The Bhaers did their best to have the lads behave well at meal times, and generally succeeded pretty well, for their rules were few and sensible, and the boys, knowing that they tried to make things easy and happy, did their best to obey. But there *are* times when hungry boys cannot be repressed without real cruelty, and Saturday evening, after a half-holiday, was one of those times.

"Dear little souls, do let them have one day in which they can howl and racket and frolic, to their hearts' content. A holiday isn't a holiday, without plenty of freedom and fun; and they shall have full swing once a week," Mrs. Bhaer used to say, when prim people wondered why banister-sliding, pillow-fights, and all manner of jovial games were allowed under the once decorous roof of Plumfield.

It did seem at times as if the aforesaid roof was in danger of flying off; but it never did, for a word from Father Bhaer could at any time produce a lull, and the lads had learned that liberty must not be abused. So, in spite of many dark predictions, the school flourished, and manners and morals were insinuated, without the pupils exactly knowing how it was done.

Nat found himself very well off behind the tall pitchers, with Tommy Bangs just round the corner, and Mrs. Bhaer close by, to fill up plate and mug as fast as he could empty them.

"Who is that boy next the girl down at the other end?" whispered Nat to his young neighbor under cover of a general

laugh.

"That's Demi Brooke. Mr. Bhaer is his uncle."

"What a queer name!"

"His real name is John, but they call him Demi-John, because his father is John too. That's a joke, don't you see?" said Tommy, kindly explaining. Nat did not see, but politely smiled, and asked, with interest, —

"Isn't he a very nice boy?"

"I bet you he is; knows lots and reads like any thing."

"Who is the fat one next him?"

"Oh, that's Stuffy Cole. His name is George, but we call him Stuffy 'cause he eats so much. The little fellow next Father Bhaer is his boy Rob, and then there's big Franz his nephew; he teaches some, and kind of sees to us."

"He plays the flute, doesn't he?" asked Nat as Tommy rendered himself speechless by putting a whole baked apple into his mouth at one blow.

Tommy nodded, and said, sooner than one would have imagined possible under the circumstances, "Oh, don't he, though? and we dance sometimes, and do gymnastics to music. I like a drum myself, and mean to learn as soon as ever I can."

"I like a fiddle best; I can play one too," said Nat, getting confidential on this attractive subject.

"Can you?" and Tommy stared over the rim of his mug with round eyes, full of interest. "Mr. Bhaer's got an old fiddle, and he'll let you play on it if you want to."

"Could I? Oh, I would like it ever so much. You see I used to go round fiddling with my father, and another man, till he died."

"Wasn't that fun?" cried Tommy, much impressed.

"No, it was horrid; so cold in winter, and hot in summer. And I got tired; and they were cross sometimes; and I didn't have enough to eat." Nat paused to take a generous bite of gingerbread, as if to assure himself that the hard times were over; and then he added regretfully, – "But I did love my little fiddle, and I miss it. Nicolo took it away when father died, and wouldn't have me any longer, 'cause I was sick."

"You'll belong to the band if you play good. See if you don't."

"Do you have a band here?" And Nat's eyes sparkled.

"Guess we do; a jolly band, all boys; and they have concerts and things. You just see what happens to-morrow night."

After this pleasantly exciting remark, Tommy returned to his supper, and Nat sank into a blissful reverie over his full plate.

Mrs. Bhaer had heard all they said, while apparently absorbed in filling mugs, and overseeing little Ted, who was so sleepy that he put his spoon in his eye, nodded like a rosy poppy, and finally fell fast asleep, with his cheek pillowed on a soft bun. Mrs. Bhaer had put Nat next to Tommy, because that roly-poly boy had a frank and social way with him, very attractive to shy persons. Nat felt this, and had made several small confidences during supper, which gave Mrs. Bhaer the key to the new boy's character, better than if she had talked to him herself.

In the letter which Mr. Laurence had sent with Nat, he had

said —

> "Dear Jo, – Here is a case after your own heart. This poor lad is an orphan now, sick and friendless. He has been a street-musician; and I found him in a cellar, mourning for his dead father, and his lost violin. I think there is something in him, and have a fancy that between us we may give this little man a lift. You cure his over-tasked body, Fritz help his neglected mind, and when he is ready I'll see if he is a genius or only a boy with a talent which may earn his bread for him. Give him a trial, for the sake of your own boy,
> *"Teddy."*

"Of course we will!" cried Mrs. Bhaer, as she read the letter; and when she saw Nat, she felt at once that whether he was a genius or not, here was a lonely, sick boy, who needed just what she loved to give, a home, and motherly care. Both she and Mr. Bhaer observed him quietly; and in spite of ragged clothes, awkward manners, and a dirty face, they saw much about Nat that pleased them. He was a thin, pale boy, of twelve, with blue eyes, and a good forehead under the rough, neglected hair; an anxious, scared face, at times, as if he expected hard words, or blows; and a sensitive mouth, that trembled when a kind glance fell on him; while a gentle speech called up a look of gratitude, very sweet to see. "Bless the poor dear, he shall fiddle all day long if he likes," said Mrs. Bhaer to herself, as she saw the eager, happy expression on his face when Tommy talked of the band.

So, after supper, when the lads flocked into the school-room

for more "high jinks," Mrs. Jo appeared with a violin in her hand, and after a word with her husband, went to Nat, who sat in a corner watching the scene with intense interest.

"Now, my lad, give us a little tune. We want a violin in our band, and I think you will do it nicely."

She expected that he would hesitate; but he seized the old fiddle at once, and handled it with such loving care, it was plain to see that music was his passion.

"I'll do the best I can, ma'am," was all he said; and then drew the bow across the strings, as if eager to hear the dear notes again.

There was a great clatter in the room, but as if deaf to any sounds but those he made, Nat played softly to himself, forgetting every thing in his delight. It was only a simple negro melody, such as street-musicians play, but it caught the ears of the boys at once, and silenced them, till they stood listening with surprise and pleasure. Gradually they got nearer and nearer, and Mr. Bhaer came up to watch the boy; for, as if he was in his element now, Nat played away and never minded any one, while his eyes shone, his cheeks reddened, and his thin fingers flew, as he hugged the old fiddle and made it speak to all their hearts the language that he loved.

A hearty round of applause rewarded him better than a shower of pennies, when he stopped and glanced about him, as if to say —

"I've done my best; please like it."

"I say, you do that first rate," cried Tommy, who considered

Nat his *protégé*.

"You shall be first fiddle in my band," added Franz, with an approving smile.

Mrs. Bhaer whispered to her husband —

"Teddy is right: there's something in the child." And Mr. Bhaer nodded his head emphatically, as he clapped Nat on the shoulder, saying, heartily —

"You play well, my son. Come now and play something which we can sing."

It was the proudest, happiest minute of the poor boy's life when he was led to the place of honor by the piano, and the lads gathered round, never heeding his poor clothes, but eying him respectfully, and waiting eagerly to hear him play again.

They chose a song he knew; and after one or two false starts they got going, and violin, flute, and piano led a chorus of boyish voices that made the old roof ring again. It was too much for Nat, more feeble than he knew; and as the final shout died away, his face began to work, he dropped the fiddle, and turning to the wall, sobbed like a little child.

"My dear, what is it?" asked Mrs. Bhaer, who had been singing with all her might, and trying to keep little Rob from beating time with his boots.

"You are all so kind – and it's so beautiful – I can't help it," sobbed Nat, coughing till he was breathless.

"Come with me, dear; you must go to bed and rest; you are worn out, and this is too noisy a place for you," whispered Mrs.

Bhaer; and took him away to her own parlor, where she let him cry himself quiet.

Then she won him to tell her all his troubles, and listened to the little story with tears in her own eyes, though it was not a new one to her.

"My child, you *have* got a father and a mother now, and this is home. Don't think of those sad times any more, but get well and happy; and be sure you shall never suffer again, if we can help it. This place is made for all sorts of boys to have a good time in, and to learn how to help themselves and be useful men, I hope. You shall have as much music as you want, only you must get strong first. Now come up to Nursey and have a bath, and then go to bed, and to-morrow we will lay some nice little plans together."

Nat held her hand fast in his, but had not a word to say, and let his grateful eyes speak for him, as Mrs. Bhaer led him up to a big room, where they found a stout German woman with a face so round and cheery, that it looked like a sort of sun, with the wide frill of her cap for rays.

"This is Nursey Hummel, and she will give you a nice bath, and cut your hair, and make you all 'comfy,' as Rob says. That's the bath-room in there; and on Saturday nights we scrub all the little lads first, and pack them away in bed before the big ones get through singing. Now then, Rob, in with you."

As she talked, Mrs. Bhaer had whipped off Rob's clothes and popped him into a long bath-tub in the little room opening into the nursery.

There were two tubs, besides foot-baths, basins, douche-pipes, and all manner of contrivances for cleanliness. Nat was soon luxuriating in the other bath; and while simmering there, he watched the performances of the two women, who scrubbed, clean night-gowned, and bundled into bed four or five small boys, who, of course, cut up all sorts of capers during the operation, and kept every one in a gale of merriment till they were extinguished in their beds.

By the time Nat was washed and done up in a blanket by the fire, while Nursey cut his hair, a new detachment of boys arrived and were shut into the bath-room, where they made as much splashing and noise as a school of young whales at play.

"Nat had better sleep here, so that if his cough troubles him in the night you can see that he takes a good draught of flax-seed tea," said Mrs. Bhaer, who was flying about like a distracted hen with a large brood of lively ducklings.

Nursey approved the plan, finished Nat off with a flannel night-gown, a drink of something warm and sweet, and then tucked him into one of the three little beds standing in the room, where he lay looking like a contented mummy, and feeling that nothing more in the way of luxury could be offered him. Cleanliness in itself was a new and delightful sensation; flannel gowns were unknown comforts in his world; sips of "good stuff" soothed his cough as pleasantly as kind words did his lonely heart; and the feeling that somebody cared for him made that plain room seem a sort of heaven to the homeless child. It was like

a cozy dream; and he often shut his eyes to see if it would not vanish when he opened them again. It was too pleasant to let him sleep, and he could not have done so if he had tried, for in a few minutes one of the peculiar institutions of Plumfield was revealed to his astonished but appreciative eyes.

A momentary lull in the aquatic exercises was followed by the sudden appearance of pillows flying in all directions, hurled by white goblins, who came rioting out of their beds. The battle raged in several rooms, all down the upper hall, and even surged at intervals into the nursery, when some hard-pressed warrior took refuge there. No one seemed to mind this explosion in the least; no one forbade it, or even looked surprised. Nursey went on hanging up towels, and Mrs. Bhaer looked out clean clothes, as calmly as if the most perfect order reigned. Nay, she even chased one daring boy out of the room, and fired after him the pillow he had slyly thrown at her.

"Won't they hurt 'em?" asked Nat, who lay laughing with all his might.

"Oh dear, no! we always allow one pillow-fight Saturday night. The cases are changed to-morrow; and it gets up a glow after the boys' baths; so I rather like it myself," said Mrs. Bhaer, busy again among her dozen pairs of socks.

"What a very nice school this is!" observed Nat, in a burst of admiration.

"It's an odd one," laughed Mrs. Bhaer; "but you see we don't believe in making children miserable by too many rules, and too

much study. I forbade night-gown parties at first; but, bless you, it was of no use. I could no more keep those boys in their beds, than so many jacks in the box. So I made an agreement with them: I was to allow a fifteen-minute pillow-fight, every Saturday night; and they promised to go properly to bed, every other night. I tried it, and it worked well. If they don't keep their word, no frolic; if they do, I just turn the glasses round, put the lamps in safe places, and let them rampage as much as they like."

"It's a beautiful plan," said Nat, feeling that he should like to join in the fray, but not venturing to propose it the first night. So he lay enjoying the spectacle, which certainly was a lively one.

Tommy Bangs led the assailing party, and Demi defended his own room with a dogged courage, fine to see, collecting pillows behind him as fast as they were thrown, till the besiegers were out of ammunition, when they would charge upon him in a body, and recover their arms. A few slight accidents occurred, but nobody minded, and gave and took sounding thwacks with perfect good humor, while pillows flew like big snowflakes, till Mrs. Bhaer looked at her watch, and called out —

"Time is up, boys. Into bed, every man Jack, or pay the forfeit!"

"What is the forfeit?" asked Nat, sitting up in his eagerness to know what happened to those wretches who disobeyed this most peculiar, but public-spirited schoolma'am.

"Lose their fun next time," answered Mrs. Bhaer. "I give them five minutes to settle down, then put out the lights, and expect

order. They are honorable lads, and they keep their word."

That was evident, for the battle ended as abruptly as it began – a parting shot or two, a final cheer, as Demi fired the seventh pillow at the retiring foe, a few challenges for next time, then order prevailed; and nothing but an occasional giggle, or a suppressed whisper, broke the quiet which followed the Saturday-night frolic, as Mother Bhaer kissed her new boy, and left him to happy dreams of life at Plumfield.

CHAPTER II
THE BOYS

While Nat takes a good long sleep, I will tell my little readers something about the boys, among whom he found himself when he woke up.

To begin with our old friends. Franz was a tall lad, of sixteen now, a regular German, big, blond, and bookish, also very domestic, amiable, and musical. His uncle was fitting him for college, and his aunt for a happy home of his own hereafter, because she carefully fostered in him gentle manners, love of children, respect for women, old and young, and helpful ways about the house. He was her right-hand man on all occasions, steady, kind, and patient; and he loved his merry aunt like a mother, for such she had tried to be to him.

Emil was quite different, being quick-tempered, restless, and enterprising, bent on going to sea, for the blood of the old vikings stirred in his veins, and could not be tamed. His uncle promised that he should go when he was sixteen, and set him to studying navigation, gave him stories of good and famous admirals and heroes to read, and let him lead the life of a frog in river, pond, and brook, when lessons were done. His room looked like the cabin of a man-of-war, for every thing was nautical, military, and ship shape. Captain Kyd was his delight, and his

favorite amusement was to rig up like that piratical gentleman, and roar out sanguinary sea-songs at the top of his voice. He would dance nothing but sailors' hornpipes, rolled in his gait, and was as nautical in conversation as his uncle would permit. The boys called him "Commodore," and took great pride in his fleet, which whitened the pond and suffered disasters that would have daunted any commander but a sea-struck boy.

Demi was one of the children who show plainly the effect of intelligent love and care, for soul and body worked harmoniously together. The natural refinement which nothing but home influence can teach, gave him sweet and simple manners: his mother had cherished an innocent and loving heart in him; his father had watched over the physical growth of his boy, and kept the little body straight and strong on wholesome food and exercise and sleep, while Grandpa March cultivated the little mind with the tender wisdom of a modern Pythagoras, – not tasking it with long, hard lessons, parrot-learned, but helping it to unfold as naturally and beautifully as sun and dew help roses bloom. He was not a perfect child, by any means, but his faults were of the better sort; and being early taught the secret of self-control, he was not left at the mercy of appetites and passions, as some poor little mortals are, and then punished for yielding to the temptations against which they have no armor. A quiet, quaint boy was Demi, serious, yet cheery, quite unconscious that he was unusually bright and beautiful, yet quick to see and love intelligence or beauty in other children. Very fond of books, and

full of lively fancies, born of a strong imagination and a spiritual nature, these traits made his parents anxious to balance them with useful knowledge and healthful society, lest they should make him one of those pale precocious children who amaze and delight a family sometimes, and fade away like hot-house flowers, because the young soul blooms too soon, and has not a hearty body to root it firmly in the wholesome soil of this world.

So Demi was transplanted to Plumfield, and took so kindly to the life there, that Meg and John and Grandpa felt satisfied that they had done well. Mixing with other boys brought out the practical side of him, roused his spirit, and brushed away the pretty cobwebs he was so fond of spinning in that little brain of his. To be sure, he rather shocked his mother when he came home, by banging doors, saying "by George" emphatically, and demanding tall thick boots "that clumped like papa's." But John rejoiced over him, laughed at his explosive remarks, got the boots, and said contentedly, "He is doing well; so let him clump. I want my son to be a manly boy, and this temporary roughness won't hurt him. We can polish him up by and by; and as for learning, he will pick that up as pigeons do peas. So don't hurry him."

Daisy was as sunshiny and charming as ever, with all sorts of little womanlinesses budding in her, for she was like her gentle mother, and delighted in domestic things. She had a family of dolls, whom she brought up in the most exemplary manner; she could not get on without her little work-basket and bits of sewing,

which she did so nicely, that Demi frequently pulled out his handkerchief to display her neat stitches, and Baby Josy had a flannel petticoat beautifully made by Sister Daisy. She liked to quiddle about the china-closet, prepare the salt-cellars, put the spoons straight on the table; and every day went round the parlor with her brush, dusting chairs and tables. Demi called her a "Betty," but was very glad to have her keep his things in order, lend him her nimble fingers in all sorts of work, and help him with his lessons, for they kept abreast there, and had no thought of rivalry.

The love between them was as strong as ever; and no one could laugh Demi out of his affectionate ways with Daisy. He fought her battles valiantly, and never could understand why boys should be ashamed to say "right out," that they loved their sisters. Daisy adored her twin, thought "my brother" the most remarkable boy in the world, and every morning, in her little wrapper, trotted to tap at his door with a motherly – "Get up, my dear, it's 'most breakfast time; and here's your clean collar."

Rob was an energetic morsel of a boy, who seemed to have discovered the secret of perpetual motion, for he never was still. Fortunately, he was not mischievous, nor very brave; so he kept out of trouble pretty well, and vibrated between father and mother like an affectionate little pendulum with a lively tick, for Rob was a chatterbox.

Teddy was too young to play a very important part in the affairs of Plumfield, yet he had his little sphere, and filled it

beautifully. Every one felt the need of a pet at times, and Baby was always ready to accommodate, for kissing and cuddling suited him excellently. Mrs. Jo seldom stirred without him; so he had his little finger in all the domestic pies, and every one found them all the better for it, for they believed in babies at Plumfield.

Dick Brown, and Adolphus or Dolly Pettingill, were two eight-year-olds. Dolly stuttered badly, but was gradually getting over it, for no one was allowed to mock him and Mr. Bhaer tried to cure it, by making him talk slowly. Dolly was a good little lad, quite uninteresting and ordinary, but he flourished here, and went through his daily duties and pleasures with placid content and propriety.

Dick Brown's affliction was a crooked back, yet he bore his burden so cheerfully, that Demi once asked in his queer way, "Do humps make people good-natured? I'd like one if they do." Dick was always merry, and did his best to be like other boys, for a plucky spirit lived in the feeble little body. When he first came, he was very sensitive about his misfortune, but soon learned to forget it, for no one dared remind him of it, after Mr. Bhaer had punished one boy for laughing at him.

"God don't care; for my soul is straight if my back isn't," sobbed Dick to his tormentor on that occasion; and, by cherishing this idea, the Bhaers soon led him to believe that people also loved his soul, and did not mind his body, except to pity and help him to bear it.

Playing menagerie once with the others, some one said, "What

animal will you be, Dick?"

"Oh, I'm the dromedary; don't you see the hump on my back?" was the laughing answer.

"So you are, my nice little one that don't carry loads, but marches by the elephant first in the procession," said Demi, who was arranging the spectacle.

"I hope others will be as kind to the poor dear as my boys have learned to be," said Mrs. Jo, quite satisfied with the success of her teaching, as Dick ambled past her, looking like a very happy, but a very feeble little dromedary, beside stout Stuffy, who did the elephant with ponderous propriety.

Jack Ford was a sharp, rather a sly lad, who was sent to this school, because it was cheap. Many men would have thought him a smart boy, but Mr. Bhaer did not like his way of illustrating that Yankee word, and thought his unboyish keenness and money-loving as much of an affliction as Dolly's stutter, or Dick's hump.

Ned Barker was like a thousand other boys of fourteen, all legs, blunder, and bluster. Indeed the family called him the "Blunderbuss," and always expected to see him tumble over the chairs, bump against the tables, and knock down any small articles near him. He bragged a good deal about what he could do, but seldom did any thing to prove it, was not brave, and a little given to tale-telling. He was apt to bully the small boys, and flatter the big ones, and without being at all bad, was just the sort of fellow who could very easily be led astray.

George Cole had been spoilt by an over-indulgent mother,

who stuffed him with sweetmeats till he was sick, and then thought him too delicate to study, so that at twelve years old, he was a pale, puffy boy, dull, fretful, and lazy. A friend persuaded her to send him to Plumfield, and there he soon got waked up, for sweet things were seldom allowed, much exercise required, and study made so pleasant, that Stuffy was gently lured along, till he quite amazed his anxious mamma by his improvement, and convinced her that there was really something remarkable in Plumfield air.

Billy Ward was what the Scotch tenderly call an "innocent," for though thirteen years old, he was like a child of six. He had been an unusually intelligent boy, and his father had hurried him on too fast, giving him all sorts of hard lessons, keeping him at his books six hours a day, and expecting him to absorb knowledge as a Strasburg goose does the food crammed down its throat. He thought he was doing his duty, but he nearly killed the boy, for a fever gave the poor child a sad holiday, and when he recovered, the over-tasked brain gave out, and Billy's mind was like a slate over which a sponge has passed, leaving it blank.

It was a terrible lesson to his ambitious father; he could not bear the sight of his promising child, changed to a feeble idiot, and he sent him away to Plumfield, scarcely hoping that he could be helped, but sure that he would be kindly treated. Quite docile and harmless was Billy, and it was pitiful to see how hard he tried to learn, as if groping dimly after the lost knowledge which had cost him so much. Day after day, he pored over the alphabet,

proudly said A and B, and thought he knew them, but on the morrow they were gone, and all the work was to be done over again. Mr. Bhaer had infinite patience with him, and kept on in spite of the apparent hopelessness of the task, not caring for book lessons, but trying gently to clear away the mists from the darkened mind, and give it back intelligence enough to make the boy less a burden and an affliction.

Mrs. Bhaer strengthened his health by every aid she could invent, and the boys all pitied and were kind to him. He did not like their active plays, but would sit for hours watching the doves, would dig holes for Teddy till even that ardent grubber was satisfied, or follow Silas, the man, from place to place seeing him work, for honest Si was very good to him, and though he forgot his letters Billy remembered friendly faces.

Tommy Bangs was the scapegrace of the school, and the most trying little scapegrace that ever lived. As full of mischief as a monkey, yet so good-hearted that one could not help forgiving his tricks; so scatterbrained that words went by him like the wind, yet so penitent for every misdeed, that it was impossible to keep sober when he vowed tremendous vows of reformation, or proposed all sorts of queer punishments to be inflicted upon himself. Mr. and Mrs. Bhaer lived in a state of preparation for any mishap, from the breaking of Tommy's own neck, to the blowing up of the entire family with gunpowder; and Nursey had a particular drawer in which she kept bandages, plasters, and salves for his especial use, for Tommy was always being brought

in half dead; but nothing ever killed him, and he rose from every downfall with redoubled vigor.

The first day he came, he chopped the top off one finger in the hay-cutter, and during the week, fell from the shed roof, was chased by an angry hen who tried to pick his eyes out because he examined her chickens, got run away with, and had his ears boxed violently by Asia, who caught him luxuriously skimming a pan of cream with half a stolen pie. Undaunted, however, by any failures or rebuffs, this indomitable youth went on amusing himself with all sorts of tricks till no one felt safe. If he did not know his lessons, he always had some droll excuse to offer, and as he was usually clever at his books, and as bright as a button in composing answers when he did not know them, he got on pretty well at school. But out of school, – Ye gods and little fishes! how Tommy did carouse!

He wound fat Asia up in her own clothes line against the post, and left her there to fume and scold for half an hour one busy Monday morning. He dropped a hot cent down Mary Ann's back as that pretty maid was waiting at table one day when there were gentlemen to dinner, whereat the poor girl upset the soup and rushed out of the room in dismay, leaving the family to think that she had gone mad. He fixed a pail of water up in a tree, with a bit of ribbon fastened to the handle, and when Daisy, attracted by the gay streamer, tried to pull it down, she got a douche bath that spoiled her clean frock and hurt her little feelings very much. He put rough white pebbles in the sugar-bowl when his grandmother

came to tea, and the poor old lady wondered why they didn't melt in her cup, but was too polite to say anything. He passed round snuff in church so that five of the boys sneezed with such violence they had to go out. He dug paths in winter time, and then privately watered them so that people should tumble down. He drove poor Silas nearly wild by hanging his big boots in conspicuous places, for his feet were enormous, and he was very much ashamed of them. He persuaded confiding little Dolly to tie a thread to one of his loose teeth, and leave the string hanging from his mouth when he went to sleep, so that Tommy could pull it out without his feeling the dreaded operation. But the tooth wouldn't come at the first tweak, and poor Dolly woke up in great anguish of spirit, and lost all faith in Tommy from that day forth. The last prank had been to give the hens bread soaked in rum, which made them tipsy and scandalized all the other fowls, for the respectable old biddies went staggering about, pecking and clucking in the most maudlin manner, while the family were convulsed with laughter at their antics, till Daisy took pity on them and shut them up in the hen-house to sleep off their intoxication.

These were the boys, and they lived together as happily as twelve lads could, studying and playing, working and squabbling, fighting faults and cultivating virtues in the good old-fashioned way. Boys at other schools probably learned more from books, but less of that better wisdom which makes good men. Latin, Greek, and mathematics were all very well, but in Professor Bhaer's opinion, self-knowledge, self-help, and self-control were

more important, and he tried to teach them carefully. People shook their heads sometimes at his ideas, even while they owned that the boys improved wonderfully in manners and morals. But then, as Mrs. Jo said to Nat, it was an “odd school.”

CHAPTER III
SUNDAY

The moment the bell rang next morning Nat flew out of bed, and dressed himself with great satisfaction in the suit of clothes he found on the chair. They were not new, being half-worn garments of one of the well-to-do boys; but Mrs. Bhaer kept all such cast-off feathers for the picked robins who strayed into her nest. They were hardly on when Tommy appeared in a high state of clean collar, and escorted Nat down to breakfast.

The sun was shining into the dining-room on the well-spread table, and the flock of hungry, hearty lads who gathered round it. Nat observed that they were much more orderly than they had been the night before, and every one stood silently behind his chair while little Rob, standing beside his father at the head of the table, folded his hands, reverently bent his curly head, and softly repeated a short grace in the devout German fashion, which Mr. Bhaer loved and taught his little son to honor. Then they all sat down to enjoy the Sunday-morning breakfast of coffee, steak, and baked potatoes, instead of the bread and milk fare with which they usually satisfied their young appetites. There was much pleasant talk while the knives and forks rattled briskly, for certain Sunday lessons were to be learned, the Sunday walk settled, and plans for the week discussed. As he listened, Nat

thought it seemed as if this day must be a very pleasant one, for he loved quiet, and there was a cheerful sort of hush over every thing that pleased him very much; because, in spite of his rough life, the boy possessed the sensitive nerves which belong to a music-loving nature.

"Now, my lads, get your morning jobs done, and let me find you ready for church when the 'bus comes round," said Father Bhaer, and set the example by going into the school-room to get books ready for the morrow.

Every one scattered to his or her task, for each had some little daily duty, and was expected to perform it faithfully. Some brought wood and water, brushed the steps, or ran errands for Mrs. Bhaer. Others fed the pet animals, and did chores about the barn with Franz. Daisy washed the cups, and Demi wiped them, for the twins liked to work together, and Demi had been taught to make himself useful in the little house at home. Even Baby Teddy had his small job to do, and trotted to and fro, putting napkins away, and pushing chairs into their places. For half an hour the lads buzzed about like a hive of bees, then the 'bus drove round, Father Bhaer and Franz with the eight older boys piled in, and away they went for a three mile drive to church in town.

Because of the troublesome cough Nat preferred to stay at home with the four small boys, and spent a happy morning in Mrs. Bhaer's room, listening to the stories she read them, learning the hymn she taught them, and then quietly employing himself pasting pictures into an old ledger.

"This is my Sunday closet," she said, showing him shelves filled with picture-books, paint-boxes, architectural blocks, little diaries, and materials for letter-writing. "I want my boys to love Sunday, to find it a peaceful, pleasant day, when they can rest from common study and play, yet enjoy quiet pleasures, and learn, in simple ways, lessons more important than any taught in school. Do you understand me?" she asked, watching Nat's attentive face.

"You mean to be good?" he said, after hesitating a minute.

"Yes; to be good, and to love to be good. It is hard work sometimes, I know very well; but we all help one another, and so we get on. This is one of the ways in which I try to help my boys," and she took down a thick book, which seemed half-full of writing, and opened at a page on which there was one word at the top.

"Why, that's my name!" cried Nat, looking both surprised and interested.

"Yes; I have a page for each boy. I keep a little account of how he gets on through the week, and Sunday night I show him the record. If it is bad I am sorry and disappointed, if it is good I am glad and proud; but, whichever it is, the boys know I want to help them, and they try to do their best for love of me and Father Bhaer."

"I should think they would," said Nat, catching a glimpse of Tommy's name opposite his own, and wondering what was written under it.

Mrs. Bhaer saw his eye on the words, and shook her head, saying, as she turned a leaf —

"No, I don't show my records to any but the one to whom each belongs. I call this my conscience book; and only you and I will ever know what is to be written on the page below your name. Whether you will be pleased or ashamed to read it next Sunday depends on yourself. I think it will be a good report; at any rate, I shall try to make things easy for you in this new place, and shall be quite contented if you keep our few rules, live happily with the boys, and learn something."

"I'll try, ma'am;" and Nat's thin face flushed up with the earnestness of his desire to make Mrs. Bhaer "glad and proud," not "sorry and disappointed." "It must be a great deal of trouble to write about so many," he added, as she shut her book with an encouraging pat on the shoulder.

"Not for me, for I really don't know which I like best, writing or boys," she said, laughing to see Nat stare with astonishment at the last item. "Yes, I know many people think boys are a nuisance, but that is because they don't understand them. I do; and I never saw the boy yet whom I could not get on capitally with after I had once found the soft spot in his heart. Bless me, I couldn't get on at all without my flock of dear, noisy, naughty, harum-scarum little lads, could I, my Teddy?" and Mrs. Bhaer hugged the young rogue, just in time to save the big inkstand from going into his pocket.

Nat, who had never heard anything like this before, really did

not know whether Mother Bhaer was a trifle crazy, or the most delightful woman he had ever met. He rather inclined to the latter opinion, in spite of her peculiar tastes, for she had a way of filling up a fellow's plate before he asked, of laughing at his jokes, gently tweaking him by the ear, or clapping him on the shoulders, that Nat found very engaging.

"Now, I think you would like to go into the school-room and practise some of the hymns we are to sing to-night," she said, rightly guessing the thing of all others that he wanted to do.

Alone with the beloved violin and the music-book propped up before him in the sunny window, while Spring beauty filled the world outside, and Sabbath silence reigned within, Nat enjoyed an hour or two of genuine happiness, learning the sweet old tunes, and forgetting the hard past in the cheerful present.

When the church-goers came back and dinner was over, every one read, wrote letters home, said their Sunday lessons, or talked quietly to one another, sitting here and there about the house. At three o'clock the entire family turned out to walk, for all the active young bodies must have exercise; and in these walks the active young minds were taught to see and love the providence of God in the beautiful miracles which Nature was working before their eyes. Mr. Bhaer always went with them, and in his simple, fatherly way, found for his flock "Sermons in stones, books in the running brooks, and good in every thing."

Mrs. Bhaer with Daisy and her own two boys drove into town, to pay the weekly visit to Grandma, which was busy Mother

Bhaer's one holiday and greatest pleasure. Nat was not strong enough for the long walk, and asked to stay at home with Tommy, who kindly offered to do the honors of Plumfield. "You've seen the house, so come out and have a look at the garden, and the barn, and the menagerie," said Tommy, when they were left alone with Asia, to see that they didn't get into mischief; for, though Tommy was one of the best-meaning boys who ever adorned knickerbockers, accidents of the most direful nature were always happening to him, no one could exactly tell how.

"What is your menagerie?" asked Nat, as they trotted along the drive that encircled the house.

"We all have pets, you see, and we keep 'em in the corn-barn, and call it the menagerie. Here you are. Isn't my guinea-pig a beauty?" and Tommy proudly presented one of the ugliest specimens of that pleasing animal that Nat ever saw.

"I know a boy with a dozen of 'em, and he said he'd give me one, only I hadn't any place to keep it, so I couldn't have it. It was white, with black spots, a regular rouser, and maybe I could get it for you if you'd like it," said Nat, feeling it would be a delicate return for Tommy's attentions.

"I'd like it ever so much, and I'll give you this one, and they can live together if they don't fight. Those white mice are Rob's, Franz gave 'em to him. The rabbits are Ned's, and the bantams outside are Stuffy's. That box thing is Demi's turtle-tank, only he hasn't begun to get 'em yet. Last year he had sixty-two, whackers some of 'em. He stamped one of 'em with his name and the year,

and let it go; and he says maybe he will find it ever so long after and know it. He read about a turtle being found that had a mark on it that showed it must be hundreds of years old. Demi's such a funny chap."

"What is in this box?" asked Nat, stopping before a large deep one, half-full of earth.

"Oh, that's Jack Ford's worm-shop. He digs heaps of 'em and keeps 'em here, and when we want any to go a fishing with, we buy some of him. It saves lots of trouble, only he charged too much for 'em. Why, last time we traded I had to pay two cents a dozen, and then got little ones. Jack's mean sometimes, and I told him I'd dig for myself if he didn't lower his prices. Now, I own two hens, those gray ones with top knots, first-rate ones they are too, and I sell Mrs. Bhaer the eggs, but I never ask her more than twenty-five cents a dozen, never! I'd be ashamed to do it," cried Tommy, with a glance of scorn at the worm-shop.

"Who owns the dogs?" asked Nat, much interested in these commercial transactions, and feeling that T. Bangs was a man whom it would be a privilege and a pleasure to patronize.

"The big dog is Emil's. His name is Christopher Columbus. Mrs. Bhaer named him because she likes to say Christopher Columbus, and no one minds it if she means the dog," answered Tommy, in the tone of a showman displaying his menagerie. "The white pup is Rob's, and the yellow one is Teddy's. A man was going to drown them in our pond, and Pa Bhaer wouldn't let him. They do well enough for the little chaps, I don't think much

of 'em myself. Their names are Castor and Pollux."

"I'd like Toby the donkey best, if I could have anything, it's so nice to ride, and he's so little and good," said Nat, remembering the weary tramps he had taken on his own tired feet.

"Mr. Laurie sent him out to Mrs. Bhaer, so she shouldn't carry Teddy on her back when we go to walk. We're all fond of Toby, and he's a first-rate donkey, sir. Those pigeons belong to the whole lot of us, we each have our pet one, and go shares in all the little ones as they come along. Squabs are great fun; there ain't any now, but you can go up and take a look at the old fellows, while I see if Cockletop and Granny have laid any eggs."

Nat climbed up a ladder, put his head through a trap door and took a long look at the pretty doves billing and cooing in their spacious loft. Some on their nests, some bustling in and out, and some sitting at their doors, while many went flying from the sunny housetop to the straw-strewn farmyard, where six sleek cows were placidly ruminating.

"Everybody has got something but me. I wish I had a dove, or a hen, or even a turtle, all my own," thought Nat, feeling very poor as he saw the interesting treasures of the other boys. "How do you get these things?" he asked, when he joined Tommy in the barn.

"We find 'em, or buy 'em, or folks give 'em to us. My father sends me mine; but as soon as I get egg money enough, I'm going to buy a pair of ducks. There's a nice little pond for 'em behind the barn, and people pay well for duck-eggs, and the little duckies

are pretty, and it's fun to see 'em swim," said Tommy, with the air of a millionaire.

Nat sighed for he had neither father nor money, nothing in the wide world but an old empty pocket-book, and the skill that lay in his ten finger tips. Tommy seemed to understand the question and the sigh which followed his answer, for after a moment of deep thought, he suddenly broke out, —

"Look here, I'll tell you what I'll do. If you will hunt eggs for me, I hate it, I'll give you one egg out of every dozen. You keep account, and when you've had twelve, Mother Bhaer will give you twenty-five cents for 'em, and then you can buy what you like, don't you see?"

"I'll do it! What a kind feller you are, Tommy!" cried Nat, quite dazzled by this brilliant offer.

"Pooh! that is not anything. You begin now and rummage the barn, and I'll wait here for you. Granny is cackling, so you're sure to find one somewhere," and Tommy threw himself down on the hay with a luxurious sense of having made a good bargain, and done a friendly thing.

Nat joyfully began his search, and went rustling from loft to loft till he found two fine eggs, one hidden under a beam, and the other in an old peck measure, which Mrs. Cockletop had appropriated.

"You may have one and I'll have the other, that will just make up my last dozen, and to-morrow we'll start fresh. Here, you chalk your account up near mine, and then we'll be all straight,"

said Tommy, showing a row of mysterious figures on the smooth side of an old winnowing machine.

With a delightful sense of importance, the proud possessor of one egg opened his account with his friend, who laughingly wrote above the figures these imposing words,

"T. Bangs & Co."

Poor Nat found them so fascinating that he was with difficulty persuaded to go and deposit his first piece of portable property in Asia's store-room. Then they went on again, and having made the acquaintance of the two horses, six cows, three pigs, and one Alderney "Bossy," as calves are called in New England, Tommy took Nat to a certain old willow-tree that overhung a noisy little brook. From the fence it was an easy scramble into a wide niche between the three big branches, which had been cut off to send out from year to year a crowd of slender twigs, till a green canopy rustled overhead. Here little seats had been fixed, and in a hollow place a closet made big enough to hold a book or two, a dismantled boat, and several half-finished whistles.

"This is Demi's and my private place; we made it, and nobody can come up unless we let 'em, except Daisy, we don't mind her," said Tommy, as Nat looked with delight from the babbling brown water below to the green arch above, where bees were making a musical murmur as they feasted on the long yellow blossoms that filled the air with sweetness.

"Oh, it's just beautiful!" cried Nat. "I do hope you'll let me up sometimes. I never saw such a nice place in all my life. I'd like to be a bird, and live here always."

"It is pretty nice. You can come if Demi don't mind, and I guess he won't, because he said last night that he liked you."

"Did he?" and Nat smiled with pleasure, for Demi's regard seemed to be valued by all the boys, partly because he was Father Bhaer's nephew, and partly because he was such a sober, conscientious little fellow.

"Yes; Demi likes quiet chaps, and I guess he and you will get on if you care about reading as he does."

Poor Nat's flush of pleasure deepened to a painful scarlet at those last words, and he stammered out, —

"I can't read very well; I never had any time; I was always fiddling round, you know."

"I don't love it myself, but I can do it well enough when I want to," said Tommy, after a surprised look, which said as plainly as words, "A boy twelve years old and can't read!"

"I can read music, anyway," added Nat, rather ruffled at having to confess his ignorance.

"I can't;" and Tommy spoke in a respectful tone, which emboldened Nat to say firmly, —

"I mean to study real hard and learn every thing I can, for I never had a chance before. Does Mr. Bhaer give hard lessons?"

"No, he isn't a bit cross; he sort of explains and gives you a boost over the hard places. Some folks don't; my other master

didn't. If we missed a word, didn't we get raps on the head!" and Tommy rubbed his own pate as if it tingled yet with the liberal supply of raps, the memory of which was the only thing he brought away after a year with his "other master."

"I think I could read this," said Nat, who had been examining the books.

"Read a bit, then; I'll help you," resumed Tommy, with a patronizing air.

So Nat did his best, and floundered through a page with many friendly "boosts" from Tommy, who told him he would soon "go it" as well as anybody. Then they sat and talked boy-fashion about all sorts of things, among others, gardening; for Nat, looking down from his perch, asked what was planted in the many little patches lying below them on the other side of the brook.

"These are our farms," said Tommy. "We each have our own patch, and raise what we like in it, only we have to choose different things, and can't change till the crop is in, and we must keep it in order all summer."

"What are you going to raise this year?"

"Wal, I *cattle*ated to hev beans, as they are about the easiest crop a-goin'."

Nat could not help laughing, for Tommy had pushed back his hat, put his hands in his pockets, and drawled out his words in unconscious imitation of Silas, the man who managed the place for Mr. Bhaer.

"Come, you needn't laugh; beans *are* ever so much easier than

corn or potatoes. I tried melons last year, but the bugs were a bother, and the old things wouldn't get ripe before the frost, so I didn't have but one good water and two little 'mush mellions,'" said Tommy, relapsing into a "Silasism" with the last word.

"Corn looks pretty growing," said Nat, politely, to atone for his laugh.

"Yes, but you have to hoe it over and over again. Now, six weeks' beans only have to be done once or so, and they get ripe soon. I'm going to try 'em, for I spoke first. Stuffy wanted 'em, but he's got to take peas; they only have to be picked, and he ought to do it, he eats such a lot."

"I wonder if I shall have a garden?" said Nat, thinking that even corn-hoeing must be pleasant work.

"Of course you will," said a voice from below, and there was Mr. Bhaer returned from his walk, and come to find them, for he managed to have a little talk with every one of the lads sometime during the day, and found that these chats gave them a good start for the coming week.

Sympathy is a sweet thing, and it worked wonders here, for each boy knew that Father Bhaer was interested in him, and some were readier to open their hearts to him than to a woman, especially the older ones, who liked to talk over their hopes and plans, man to man. When sick or in trouble they instinctively turned to Mrs. Jo, while the little ones made her their mother-confessor on all occasions.

In descending from their nest, Tommy fell into the brook;

being used to it, he calmly picked himself out and retired to the house to be dried. This left Nat to Mr. Bhaer, which was just what he wished, and, during the stroll they took among the garden plots, he won the lad's heart by giving him a little "farm," and discussing crops with him as gravely as if the food for the family depended on the harvest. From this pleasant topic they went to others, and Nat had many new and helpful thoughts put into a mind that received them as gratefully as the thirsty earth had received the warm spring rain. All supper time he brooded over them, often fixing his eyes on Mr. Bhaer with an inquiring look, that seemed to say, – "I like that, do it again, sir." I don't know whether the man understood the child's mute language or not, but when the boys were all gathered together in Mrs. Bhaer's parlor for the Sunday evening talk, he chose a subject which might have been suggested by the walk in the garden.

As he looked about him Nat thought it seemed more like a great family than a school, for the lads were sitting in a wide half-circle round the fire, some on chairs, some on the rug, Daisy and Demi on the knees of Uncle Fritz, and Rob snugly stowed away in the back of his mother's easy-chair, where he could nod unseen if the talk got beyond his depth. Every one looked quite comfortable, and listened attentively, for the long walk made rest agreeable, and as every boy there knew that he would be called upon for his views, he kept his wits awake to be ready with an answer.

"Once upon a time," began Mr. Bhaer, in the dear old-

fashioned way, “there was a great and wise gardener who had the largest garden ever seen. A wonderful and lovely place it was, and he watched over it with the greatest skill and care, and raised all manner of excellent and useful things. But weeds would grow even in this fine garden; often the ground was bad and the good seeds sown in it would not spring up. He had many under gardeners to help him. Some did their duty and earned the rich wages he gave them; but others neglected their parts and let them run to waste, which displeased him much. But he was very patient, and for thousands and thousands of years he worked and waited for his great harvest.”

“He must have been pretty old,” said Demi, who was looking straight into Uncle Fritz’s face, as if to catch every word.

“Hush, Demi, it’s a fairy story,” whispered Daisy.

“No, I think it’s a arrygory,” said Demi.

“What is a arrygory?” called out Tommy, who was of an inquiring turn.

“Tell him, Demi, if you can, and don’t use words unless you are quite sure you know what they mean,” said Mr. Bhaer.

“I do know, Grandpa told me! A fable is a arrygory; it’s a story that means something. My ‘Story without an end’ is one, because the child in it means a soul; don’t it, Aunty?” cried Demi, eager to prove himself right.

“That’s it, dear; and Uncle’s story is an allegory, I am quite sure; so listen and see what it means,” returned Mrs. Jo, who always took part in whatever was going on, and enjoyed it as

much as any boy among them.

Demi composed himself, and Mr. Bhaer went on in his best English, for he had improved much in the last five years, and said the boys did it.

"This great gardener gave a dozen or so of little plots to one of his servants, and told him to do his best and see what he could raise. Now this servant was not rich, nor wise, nor very good, but he wanted to help because the gardener had been very kind to him in many ways. So he gladly took the little plots and fell to work. They were all sorts of shapes and sizes, and some were very good soil, some rather stony, and all of them needed much care, for in the rich soil the weeds grew fast, and in the poor soil there were many stones."

"What was growing in them besides the weeds, and stones?" asked Nat; so interested, he forgot his shyness and spoke before them all.

"Flowers," said Mr. Bhaer, with a kind look. "Even the roughest, most neglected little bed had a bit of heart's-ease or a sprig of mignonette in it. One had roses, sweet peas, and daisies in it," – here he pinched the plump cheek of the little girl leaning on his arm. "Another had all sorts of curious plants in it, bright pebbles, a vine that went climbing up like Jack's bean-stalk, and many good seeds just beginning to sprout; for, you see, *this* bed had been taken fine care of by a wise old man, who had worked in gardens of this sort all his life."

At this part of the "arrygory," Demi put his head on one side

like an inquisitive bird, and fixed his bright eye on his uncle's face, as if he suspected something and was on the watch. But Mr. Bhaer looked perfectly innocent, and went on glancing from one young face to another, with a grave, wistful look, that said much to his wife, who knew how earnestly he desired to do his duty in these little garden plots.

"As I tell you, some of these beds were easy to cultivate, – that means to take care of, Daisy, – and others were very hard. There was one particularly sunshiny little bed, that might have been full of fruits and vegetables as well as flowers, only it wouldn't take any pains, and when the man sowed, well, we'll say melons in this bed, they came to nothing, because the little bed neglected them. The man was sorry, and kept on trying, though every time the crop failed, all the bed said, was, 'I forgot.'"

Here a general laugh broke out, and every one looked at Tommy, who had pricked up his ears at the word "melons," and hung down his head at the sound of his favorite excuse.

"I knew he meant us!" cried Demi, clapping his hands. "You are the man, and we are the little gardens; aren't we, Uncle Fritz?"

"You have guessed it. Now each of you tell me what crop I shall try to sow in you this spring, so that next autumn I may get a good harvest out of my twelve, no, thirteen, plots," said Mr. Bhaer, nodding at Nat as he corrected himself.

"You can't sow corn and beans and peas in us. Unless you mean we are to eat a great many and get fat," said Stuffy, with a sudden brightening of his round, dull face as the pleasing idea

occurred to him.

"He don't mean that kind of seeds. He means things to make us good; and the weeds are faults," cried Demi, who usually took the lead in these talks, because he was used to this sort of thing, and liked it very much.

"Yes, each of you think what you need most, and tell me, and I will help you to grow it; only, you must do your best, or you will turn out like Tommy's melons, – all leaves and no fruit. I will begin with the oldest, and ask the mother what she will have in her plot, for we are all parts of the beautiful garden, and may have rich harvests for our Master if we love Him enough," said Father Bhaer.

"I shall devote the whole of *my* plot to the largest crop of patience I can get, for that is what I need most," said Mrs. Jo, so soberly that the lads fell to thinking in good earnest what they should say when their turns came, and some among them felt a twinge of remorse, that they had helped to use up Mother Bhaer's stock of patience so fast.

Franz wanted perseverance, Tommy steadiness, Ned went in for good temper, Daisy for industry, Demi for "as much wiseness as Grandpa," and Nat timidly said he wanted so many things he would let Mr. Bhaer choose for him. The others chose much the same things, and patience, good temper, and generosity seemed the favorite crops. One boy wished to like to get up early, but did not know what name to give that sort of seed; and poor Stuffy sighed out, —

"I wish I loved my lessons as much as I do my dinner, but I can't."

"We will plant self-denial, and hoe it and water it, and make it grow so well that next Christmas no one will get ill by eating too much dinner. If you exercise your mind, George, it will get hungry just as your body does, and you will love books almost as much as my philosopher here," said Mr. Bhaer; adding, as he stroked the hair off Demi's fine forehead, "You are greedy also, my son, and you like to stuff your little mind full of fairy tales and fancies, as well as George likes to fill his little stomach with cake and candy. Both are bad, and I want you to try something better. Arithmetic is not half so pleasant as 'Arabian Nights,' I know, but it is a very useful thing, and now is the time to learn it, else you will be ashamed and sorry by and by."

"But, 'Harry and Lucy,' and 'Frank,' are not fairy books, and they are full of barometers, and bricks, and shoeing horses, and useful things, and I'm fond of them; ain't I, Daisy?" said Demi, anxious to defend himself.

"So they are; but I find you reading 'Roland and Maybird' a great deal oftener than 'Harry and Lucy,' and I think you are not half as fond of 'Frank' as you are of 'Sinbad.' Come, I shall make a little bargain with you both, – George shall eat but three times a day, and you shall read but one story-book a week, and I will give you the new cricket-ground; only, you must promise to play in it," said Uncle Fritz in his persuasive way, for Stuffy hated to run about, and Demi was always reading in play hours.

"But we don't like cricket," said Demi.

"Perhaps not *now*, but you will when you know it. Besides, you do like to be generous, and the other boys want to play, and you can give them the new ground if you choose."

This was taking them both on the right side, and they agreed to the bargain, to the great satisfaction of the rest.

There was a little more talk about the gardens, and then they all sang together. The band delighted Nat, for Mrs. Bhaer played the piano, Franz the flute, Mr. Bhaer a bass viol, and he himself the violin. A very simple little concert, but all seemed to enjoy it, and old Asia, sitting in the corner, joined at times with the sweetest voice of any, for in this family, master and servant, old and young, black and white, shared in the Sunday song, which went up to the Father of them all. After this they each shook hands with Father Bhaer; Mother Bhaer kissed them every one from sixteen-year-old Franz to little Rob, who kept the tip of her nose for his own particular kisses, and then they trooped up to bed.

The light of the shaded lamp that burned in the nursery shone softly on a picture hanging at the foot of Nat's bed. There were several others on the walls, but the boy thought there must be something peculiar about this one, for it had a graceful frame of moss and cones about it, and on a little bracket underneath stood a vase of wild flowers freshly gathered from the spring woods. It was the most beautiful picture of them all, and Nat lay looking at it, dimly feeling what it meant, and wishing he knew all about it.

"That's my picture," said a little voice in the room. Nat popped up his head, and there was Demi in his night-gown pausing on his way back from Aunt Jo's chamber, whither he had gone to get a cot for a cut finger.

"What is he doing to the children?" asked Nat.

"That is Christ, the Good Man, and He is blessing the children. Don't you know about Him?" said Demi, wondering.

"Not much, but I'd like to, He looks so kind," answered Nat, whose chief knowledge of the Good Man consisted in hearing His name taken in vain.

"I know all about it, and I like it very much, because it is true," said Demi.

"Who told you?"

"My Grandpa, he knows *every thing*, and tells the best stories in the world. I used to play with his big books, and make bridges, and railroads, and houses, when I was a little boy," began Demi.

"How old are you now?" asked Nat, respectfully.

"'Most ten."

"You know a lot of things, don't you?"

"Yes; you see my head is pretty big, and Grandpa says it will take a good deal to fill it, so I keep putting pieces of wisdom into it as fast as I can," returned Demi, in his quaint way.

Nat laughed, and then said soberly, —

"Tell on, please."

And Demi gladly told on without pause or punctuation. "I found a very pretty book one day and wanted to play with it, but

Grandpa said I mustn't, and showed me the pictures, and told me about them, and I liked the stories very much, all about Joseph and his bad brothers, and the frogs that came up out of the sea, and dear little Moses in the water, and ever so many more lovely ones, but I like about the Good Man best of all, and Grandpa told it to me so many times that I learned it by heart, and he gave me this picture so I shouldn't forget, and it was put up here once when I was sick, and I left it for other sick boys to see."

"What makes Him bless the children?" asked Nat, who found something very attractive in the chief figure of the group.

"Because He loved them."

"Were they poor children?" asked Nat, wistfully.

"Yes, I think so; you see some haven't got hardly any clothes on, and the mothers don't look like rich ladies. He liked poor people, and was very good to them. He made them well, and helped them, and told rich people they must not be cross to them, and they loved Him dearly, dearly," cried Demi, with enthusiasm.

"Was He rich?"

"Oh no! He was born in a barn, and was so poor He hadn't any house to live in when He grew up, and nothing to eat sometimes, but what people gave Him, and He went round preaching to everybody, and trying to make them good, till the bad men killed Him."

"What for?" and Nat sat up in his bed to look and listen, so interested was he in this man who cared for the poor so much.

"I'll tell you all about it; Aunt Jo won't mind;" and Demi settled

himself on the opposite bed, glad to tell his favorite story to so good a listener.

Nursey peeped in to see if Nat was asleep, but when she saw what was going on, she slipped away again, and went to Mrs. Bhaer, saying with her kind face full of motherly emotion, —

"Will the dear lady come and see a pretty sight? It's Nat listening with all his heart to Demi telling the story of the Christ-child, like a little white angel as he is."

Mrs. Bhaer had meant to go and talk with Nat a moment before he slept, for she had found that a serious word spoken at this time often did much good. But when she stole to the nursery door, and saw Nat eagerly drinking in the words of his little friend, while Demi told the sweet and solemn story as it had been taught him, speaking softly as he sat with his beautiful eyes fixed on the tender face above them, her own filled with tears, and she went silently away, thinking to herself, —

"Demi is unconsciously helping the poor boy better than I can; I will not spoil it by a single word."

The murmur of the childish voice went on for a long time, as one innocent heart preached that great sermon to another, and no one hushed it. When it ceased at last, and Mrs. Bhaer went to take away the lamp, Demi was gone and Nat fast asleep, lying with his face toward the picture, as if he had already learned to love the Good Man who loved little children, and was a faithful friend to the poor. The boy's face was very placid, and as she looked at it she felt that if a single day of care and kindness had done so

much, a year of patient cultivation would surely bring a grateful harvest from this neglected garden, which was already sown with the best of all seed by the little missionary in the night-gown.

CHAPTER IV
STEPPING-STONES

When Nat went into school on Monday morning, he quaked inwardly, for now he thought he should have to display his ignorance before them all. But Mr. Bhaer gave him a seat in the deep window, where he could turn his back on the others, and Franz heard him say his lessons there, so no one could hear his blunders or see how he blotted his copy-book. He was truly grateful for this, and toiled away so diligently that Mr. Bhaer said, smiling, when he saw his hot face and inky fingers, —

"Don't work so hard, my boy; you will tire yourself out, and there is time enough."

"But I *must* work hard, or I can't catch up with the others. They know heaps, and I don't know any thing," said Nat, who had been reduced to a state of despair by hearing the boys recite their grammar, history, and geography with what he thought amazing ease and accuracy.

"You know a good many things which they don't," said Mr. Bhaer, sitting down beside him, while Franz led a class of small students through the intricacies of the multiplication table.

"Do I?" and Nat looked utterly incredulous.

"Yes; for one thing, you can keep your temper, and Jack, who is quick at numbers, cannot; that is an excellent lesson, and I think

you have learned it well. Then, you can play the violin, and not one of the lads can, though they want to do it very much. But, best of all, Nat, you really care to learn something, and that is half the battle. It seems hard at first, and you will feel discouraged, but plod away, and things will get easier and easier as you go on."

Nat's face had brightened more and more as he listened, for, small as the list of his learning was, it cheered him immensely to feel that he had any thing to fall back upon. "Yes, I can keep my temper – father's beating taught me that; and I can fiddle, though I don't know where the Bay of Biscay is," he thought, with a sense of comfort impossible to express. Then he said aloud, and so earnestly that Demi heard him, —

"I *do* want to learn, and I *will* try. I never went to school, but I couldn't help it; and if the fellows don't laugh at me, I guess I'll get on first rate – you and the lady are so good to me."

"They shan't laugh at you; if they do, I'll – I'll – tell them not to," cried Demi, quite forgetting where he was.

The class stopped in the middle of 7 times 9, and every one looked up to see what was going on.

Thinking that a lesson in learning to help one another was better than arithmetic just then, Mr. Bhaer told them about Nat, making such an interesting and touching little story out of it that the good-hearted lads all promised to lend him a hand, and felt quite honored to be called upon to impart their stores of wisdom to the chap who fiddled so capitally. This appeal established the right feeling among them, and Nat had few hindrances to struggle

against, for every one was glad to give him a "boost" up the ladder of learning.

Till he was stronger, much study was not good for him, however, and Mrs. Jo found various amusements in the house for him while others were at their books. But his garden was his best medicine, and he worked away like a beaver, preparing his little farm, sowing his beans, watching eagerly to see them grow, and rejoicing over each green leaf and slender stock that shot up and flourished in the warm spring weather. Never was a garden more faithfully hoed; Mr. Bhaer really feared that nothing would find time to grow, Nat kept up such a stirring of the soil; so he gave him easy jobs in the flower garden or among the strawberries, where he worked and hummed as busily as the bees booming all about him.

"This is the crop I like best," Mrs. Bhaer used to say, as she pinched the once thin cheeks now getting plump and ruddy, or stroked the bent shoulders that were slowly straightening up with healthful work, good food, and the absence of that heavy burden, poverty.

Demi was his little friend, Tommy his patron, and Daisy the comforter of all his woes; for, though the children were younger than he, his timid spirit found a pleasure in their innocent society, and rather shrunk from the rough sports of the elder lads. Mr. Laurence did not forget him, but sent clothes and books, music and kind messages, and now and then came out to see how his boy was getting on, or took him into town to a concert; on which

occasions Nat felt himself translated into the seventh heaven of bliss, for he went to Mr. Laurence's great house, saw his pretty wife and little fairy of a daughter, had a good dinner, and was made so comfortable, that he talked and dreamed of it for days and nights afterward.

It takes so little to make a child happy, that it is a pity in a world full of sunshine and pleasant things, that there should be any wistful faces, empty hands, or lonely little hearts. Feeling this, the Bhaers gathered up all the crumbs they could find to feed their flock of hungry sparrows, for they were not rich, except in charity. Many of Mrs. Jo's friends who had nurseries sent her the toys of which their children so soon tired, and in mending these Nat found an employment that just suited him. He was very neat and skilful with those slender fingers of his, and passed many a rainy afternoon with his gum-bottle, paint-box, and knife, repairing furniture, animals, and games, while Daisy was dressmaker to the dilapidated dolls. As fast as the toys were mended, they were put carefully away in a certain drawer which was to furnish forth a Christmas-tree for all the poor children of the neighborhood, that being the way the Plumfield boys celebrated the birthday of Him who loved the poor and blessed the little ones.

Demi was never tired of reading and explaining his favorite books, and many a pleasant hour did they spend in the old willow, revelling over "Robinson Crusoe," "Arabian Nights," "Edgeworth's Tales," and the other dear immortal stories that

will delight children for centuries to come. This opened a new world to Nat, and his eagerness to see what came next in the story helped him on till he could read as well as anybody, and felt so rich and proud with his new accomplishment, that there was danger of his being as much of a bookworm as Demi.

Another helpful thing happened in a most unexpected and agreeable manner. Several of the boys were "in business," as they called it, for most of them were poor, and knowing that they would have their own way to make by and by, the Bhaers encouraged any efforts at independence. Tommy sold his eggs; Jack speculated in live stock; Franz helped in the teaching, and was paid for it; Ned had a taste for carpentry, and a turning-lathe was set up for him in which he turned all sorts of useful or pretty things, and sold them; while Demi constructed water-mills, whirligigs, and unknown machines of an intricate and useless nature, and disposed of them to the boys.

"Let him be a mechanic if he likes," said Mr. Bhaer. "Give a boy a trade, and he is independent. Work is wholesome, and whatever talent these lads possess, be it for poetry or ploughing, it shall be cultivated and made useful to them if possible."

So when Nat came running to him one day to ask with an excited face, —

"Can I go and fiddle for some people who are to have a picnic in our woods? They will pay me, and I'd like to earn some money as the other boys do, and fiddling is the only way I know how to do it," —

Mr. Bhaer answered readily, —

"Go, and welcome. It is an easy and a pleasant way to work, and I am glad it is offered you."

Nat went, and did so well, that when he came home he had two dollars in his pocket, which he displayed with intense satisfaction, as he told how much he had enjoyed the afternoon, how kind the young people were, and how they had praised his dance-music, and promised to have him again.

"It is so much nicer than fiddling in the street, for then I got none of the money, and now I have it all, and a good time besides. I'm in business now as well as Tommy and Jack, and I like it ever so much," said Nat, proudly patting the old pocket-book, and feeling like a millionaire already.

He *was* in business truly, for picnics were plenty as summer opened, and Nat's skill was in great demand. He was always at liberty to go if lessons were not neglected, and if the picnics were respectable young people. For Mr. Bhaer explained to him that a good plain education is necessary for every one, and that no amount of money should hire him to go where he might be tempted to do wrong. Nat quite agreed to this, and it was a pleasant sight to see the innocent-hearted lad go driving away in the gay wagons that stopped at the gate for him, or to hear him come fiddling home tired but happy, with his well-earned money in one pocket, and some "goodies" from the feast for Daisy or little Ted, whom he never forgot.

"I'm going to save up till I get enough to buy a violin for

myself, and then I can earn my own living, can't I?" he used to say, as he brought his dollars to Mr. Bhaer to keep.

"I hope so, Nat; but we must get you strong and hearty first, and put a little more knowledge into this musical head of yours. Then Mr. Laurie will find you a place somewhere, and in a few years we will all come to hear you play in public."

With much congenial work, encouragement, and hope, Nat found life getting easier and happier every day, and made such progress in his music lessons, that his teacher forgave his slowness in some other things, knowing very well that where the heart is the mind works best. The only punishment the boy ever needed for neglect of more important lessons was to hang up the fiddle and the bow for a day. The fear of losing his bosom friend entirely made him go at his books with a will; and having proved that *he could* master the lessons, what was the use of saying "I can't"?

Daisy had a great love of music, and a great reverence for any one who could make it, and she was often found sitting on the stairs outside Nat's door while he was practising. This pleased him very much, and he played his best for that one quiet little listener; for she never would come in, but preferred to sit sewing her gay patchwork, or tending one of her many dolls, with an expression of dreamy pleasure on her face that made Aunt Jo say, with tears in her eyes, —

"So like my Beth," and go softly by, lest even her familiar presence mar the child's sweet satisfaction.

Nat was very fond of Mrs. Bhaer, but found something even more attractive in the good professor, who took fatherly care of the shy feeble boy, who had barely escaped with his life from the rough sea on which his little boat had been tossing rudderless for twelve years. Some good angel must have watched over him, for, though his body had suffered, his soul seemed to have taken little harm, and came ashore as innocent as a shipwrecked baby. Perhaps his love of music kept it sweet in spite of the discord all about him; Mr. Laurie said so, and he ought to know. However that might be, Father Bhaer took real pleasure in fostering poor Nat's virtues, and in curing his faults, finding his new pupil as docile and affectionate as a girl. He often called Nat his "daughter" when speaking of him to Mrs. Jo, and she used to laugh at his fancy, for Madame liked manly boys, and thought Nat amiable but weak, though you never would have guessed it, for she petted him as she did Daisy, and he thought her a very delightful woman.

One fault of Nat's gave the Bhaers much anxiety, although they saw how it had been strengthened by fear and ignorance. I regret to say that Nat sometimes told lies. Not very black ones, seldom getting deeper than gray, and often the mildest of white fibs; but that did not matter, a lie is a lie, and though we all tell many polite untruths in this queer world of ours, it is not right, and everybody knows it.

"You cannot be too careful; watch your tongue, and eyes, and hands, for it is easy to tell, and look, and act untruth," said

Mr. Bhaer, in one of the talks he had with Nat about his chief temptation.

"I know it, and I don't mean to, but it's so much easier to get along if you ain't very fussy about being exactly true. I used to tell 'em because I was afraid of father and Nicolo, and now I do sometimes because the boys laugh at me. I know it's bad, but I forget," and Nat looked much depressed by his sins.

"When I was a little lad I used to tell lies! Ach! what fibs they were, and my old grandmother cured me of it – how, do you think? My parents had talked, and cried, and punished, but still did I forget as you. Then said the dear old grandmother, 'I shall help you to remember, and put a check on this unruly part,' with that she drew out my tongue and snipped the end with her scissors till the blood ran. That was terrible, you may believe, but it did me much good, because it was sore for days, and every word I said came so slowly that I had time to think. After that I was more careful, and got on better, for I feared the big scissors. Yet the dear grandmother was most kind to me in all things, and when she lay dying far away in Nuremberg, she prayed that little Fritz might love God and tell the truth."

"I never had any grandmothers, but if you think it will cure me, I'll let you snip my tongue," said Nat, heroically, for he dreaded pain, yet did wish to stop fibbing.

Mr. Bhaer smiled, but shook his head.

"I have a better way than that, I tried it once before and it worked well. See now, when you tell a lie I will not punish you,

but you shall punish me."

"How?" asked Nat, startled at the idea.

"You shall ferule me in the good old-fashioned way, I seldom do it myself, but it may make you remember better to give me pain than to feel it yourself."

"Strike you? Oh, I couldn't!" cried Nat.

"Then mind that tripping tongue of thine. I have no wish to be hurt, but I would gladly bear much pain to cure this fault."

This suggestion made such an impression on Nat, that for a long time he set a watch upon his lips, and was desperately accurate, for Mr. Bhaer judged rightly, that love of him would be more powerful with Nat than fear for himself. But alas! one sad day Nat was off his guard, and when peppery Emil threatened to thrash him, if it was he who had run over his garden and broken down his best hills of corn, Nat declared he didn't, and then was ashamed to own up that he did do it, when Jack was chasing him the night before.

He thought no one would find it out, but Tommy happened to see him, and when Emil spoke of it a day or two later, Tommy gave his evidence, and Mr. Bhaer heard it. School was over, and they were all standing about in the hall, and Mr. Bhaer had just sat down on the straw settee, to enjoy his frolic with Teddy; but when he heard Tommy, and saw Nat turn scarlet, and look at him with a frightened face, he put the little boy down, saying, "Go to thy mother, bübchen, I will come soon," and taking Nat by the hand led him into the school, and shut the door.

The boys looked at one another in silence for a minute, then Tommy slipped out and peeping in at the half-closed blinds, beheld a sight that quite bewildered him. Mr. Bhaer had just taken down that long rule that hung over his desk, so seldom used that it was covered with dust.

"My eye! he's going to come down heavy on Nat this time. Wish I hadn't told," thought good-natured Tommy, for to be feruled was the deepest disgrace at this school.

"You remember what I told you last time?" said Mr. Bhaer, sorrowfully, not angrily.

"Yes; but please don't make me, I can't bear it," cried Nat, backing up against the door with both hands behind him, and a face full of distress.

"Why don't he up and take it like a man? I would," thought Tommy, though his heart beat fast at the sight.

"I shall keep my word, and you must remember to tell the truth. Obey me, Nat, take this and give me six good strokes."

Tommy was so staggered by this last speech that he nearly tumbled down the bank, but saved himself, and hung on to the window ledge, staring in with eyes as round as the stuffed owl's on the chimney-piece.

Nat took the rule, for when Mr. Bhaer spoke in that tone every one obeyed him, and, looking as scared and guilty as if about to stab his master, he gave two feeble blows on the broad hand held out to him. Then he stopped and looked up half-blind with tears, but Mr. Bhaer said steadily, —

"Go on, and strike harder."

As if seeing that it must be done, and eager to have the hard task soon over, Nat drew his sleeve across his eyes and gave two more quick hard strokes that reddened the hand, yet hurt the giver more.

"Isn't that enough?" he asked in a breathless sort of tone.

"Two more," was all the answer, and he gave them, hardly seeing where they fell, then threw the rule all across the room, and hugging the kind hand in both his own, laid his face down on it sobbing out in a passion of love, and shame, and penitence, —

"I will remember! Oh! I will!"

Then Mr. Bhaer put an arm about him, and said in a tone as compassionate as it had just now been firm, —

"I think you will. Ask the dear God to help you, and try to spare us both another scene like this."

Tommy saw no more, for he crept back to the hall, looking so excited and sober that the boys crowded round him to ask what was being done to Nat.

In a most impressive whisper Tommy told them, and they looked as if the sky was about to fall, for this reversing the order of things almost took their breath away.

"He made me do the same thing once," said Emil, as if confessing a crime of the deepest dye.

"And you hit him? dear old Father Bhaer? By thunder, I'd just like to see you do it now!" said Ned, collaring Emil in a fit of righteous wrath.

"It was ever so long ago. I'd rather have my head cut off than do it now," and Emil mildly laid Ned on his back instead of cuffing him, as he would have felt it his duty to do on any less solemn occasion.

"How could you?" said Demi, appalled at the idea.

"I was hopping mad at the time, and thought I shouldn't mind a bit, rather like it perhaps. But when I'd hit Uncle one good crack, every thing he had ever done for me came into my head all at once somehow, and I couldn't go on. No, sir! if he'd laid me down and walked on me, I wouldn't have minded, I felt so mean;" and Emil gave himself a good thump in the chest to express his sense of remorse for the past.

"Nat's crying like any thing, and feels no end sorry, so don't let's say a word about it; will we?" said tender-hearted Tommy.

"Of course we won't, but it's awful to tell lies," and Demi looked as if he found the awfulness much increased when the punishment fell not upon the sinner, but his best Uncle Fritz.

"Suppose we all clear out, so Nat can cut up-stairs if he wants to," proposed Franz, and led the way to the barn, their refuge in troublous times.

Nat did not come to dinner, but Mrs. Jo took some up to him, and said a tender word, which did him good, though he could not look at her. By and by the lads playing outside heard the violin, and said among themselves: "He's all right now." He was all right, but felt shy about going down, till, opening his door to slip away into the woods, he found Daisy sitting on the stairs with neither

work nor doll, only her little handkerchief in her hand, as if she had been mourning for her captive friend.

"I'm going to walk; want to come?" asked Nat, trying to look as if nothing was the matter, yet feeling very grateful for her silent sympathy, because he fancied every one must look upon him as a wretch.

"Oh, yes!" and Daisy ran for her hat, proud to be chosen as a companion by one of the big boys.

The others saw them go, but no one followed, for boys have a great deal more delicacy than they get credit for, and the lads instinctively felt that, when in disgrace, gentle little Daisy was their most congenial friend.

The walk did Nat good, and he came home quieter than usual, but looking cheerful again, and hung all over with daisy-chains, made by his little playmate while he lay on the grass and told her stories.

No one said a word about the scene of the morning, but its effect was all the more lasting for that reason, perhaps. Nat tried his very best, and found much help, not only from the earnest little prayers he prayed to his Friend in heaven, but also in the patient care of the earthly friend, whose kind hand he never touched without remembering that it had willingly borne pain for his sake.

CHAPTER V
PATTY PANS

"What's the matter, Daisy?"

"The boys won't let me play with them."

"Why not?"

"They say girls can't play football."

"They can, for I've done it!" and Mrs. Bhaer laughed at the remembrance of certain youthful frolics.

"I know I can play; Demi and I used to, and have nice times, but he won't let me now because the other boys laugh at him," and Daisy looked deeply grieved at her brother's hardness of heart.

"On the whole, I think he is right, deary. It's all very well when you two are alone, but it is too rough a game for you with a dozen boys; so I'd find some nice little play for myself."

"I'm tired of playing alone!" and Daisy's tone was very mournful.

"I'll play with you by and by, but just now I must fly about and get things ready for a trip into town. You shall go with me and see mamma, and if you like you can stay with her."

"I should like to go and see her and Baby Josy, but I'd rather come back, please. Demi would miss me, and I love to be here, Aunty."

"You can't get on without your Demi, can you?" and Aunt Jo

looked as if she quite understood the love of the little girl for her only brother.

"'Course I can't; we're twins, and so we love each other more than other people," answered Daisy, with a brightening face, for she considered being a twin one of the highest honors she could ever receive.

"Now, what will you do with your little self while I fly round?" asked Mrs. Bhaer, who was whisking piles of linen into a wardrobe with great rapidity.

"I don't know, I'm tired of dolls and things; I wish you'd make up a new play for me, Aunty Jo," said Daisy, swinging listlessly on the door.

"I shall have to think of a brand new one, and it will take me some time; so suppose you go down and see what Asia has got for your lunch," suggested Mrs. Bhaer, thinking that would be a good way in which to dispose of the little hindrance for a time.

"Yes, I think I'd like that, if she isn't cross," and Daisy slowly departed to the kitchen, where Asia, the black cook, reigned undisturbed.

In five minutes Daisy was back again, with a wide-awake face, a bit of dough in her hand and a dab of flour on her little nose.

"O Aunty! please could I go and make gingersnaps and things? Asia isn't cross, and she says I may, and it would be such fun, please do," cried Daisy, all in one breath.

"Just the thing, go and welcome, make what you like, and stay as long as you please," answered Mrs. Bhaer, much relieved, for

sometimes the one little girl was harder to amuse than the dozen boys.

Daisy ran off, and while she worked, Aunt Jo racked her brain for a new play. All of a sudden she seemed to have an idea, for she smiled to herself, slammed the doors of the wardrobe, and walked briskly away, saying, "I'll do it, if it's a possible thing!"

What it was no one found out that day, but Aunt Jo's eyes twinkled so when she told Daisy she had thought of a new play, and was going to buy it, that Daisy was much excited and asked questions all the way into town, without getting answers that told her anything. She was left at home to play with the new baby and delight her mother's eyes, while Aunt Jo went off shopping. When she came back with all sorts of queer parcels in corners of the carry-all, Daisy was so full of curiosity that she wanted to go back to Plumfield at once. But her aunt would not be hurried, and made a long call in mamma's room, sitting on the floor with baby in her lap, making Mrs. Brooke laugh at the pranks of the boys, and all sorts of droll nonsense.

How her aunt told the secret Daisy could not imagine, but her mother evidently knew it, for she said, as she tied on the little bonnet and kissed the rosy little face inside, "Be a good child, my Daisy, and learn the nice new play Aunty has got for you. It's a most useful and interesting one, and it is very kind of her to play it with you, because she does not like it very well herself."

This last speech made the two ladies laugh heartily, and increased Daisy's bewilderment. As they drove away something

rattled in the back of the carriage.

"What's that?" asked Daisy, pricking up her ears.

"The new play," answered Mrs. Jo, solemnly.

"What is it made of?" cried Daisy.

"Iron, tin, wood, brass, sugar, salt, coal, and a hundred other things."

"How strange! what color is it?"

"All sorts of colors."

"Is it large?"

"Part of it is, and a part isn't."

"Did I ever see one?"

"Ever so many, but never one so nice as this."

"Oh! what can it be? I can't wait. When *shall* I see it?" and Daisy bounced up and down with impatience.

"To-morrow morning, after lessons."

"Is it for the boys too?"

"No, all for you and Bess. The boys will like to see it, and want to play one part of it. But you can do as you like about letting them."

"I'll let Demi, if he wants to."

"No fear that they won't all want to, especially Stuffy," and Mrs. Bhaer's eyes twinkled more than ever, as she patted a queer knobby bundle in her lap.

"Let me feel just once," prayed Daisy.

"Not a feel; you'd guess in a minute and spoil the fun."

Daisy groaned and then smiled all over her face, for through a

little hole in the paper she caught a glimpse of something bright.

"How *can* I wait so long? Couldn't I see it to-day?"

"Oh dear, no! it has got to be arranged, and ever so many parts fixed in their places. I promised Uncle Teddy that you shouldn't see it till it was all in apple-pie order."

"If Uncle knows about it then it *must* be splendid!" cried Daisy, clapping her hands; for this kind, rich, jolly uncle of hers was as good as a fairy godmother to the children, and was always planning merry surprises, pretty gifts, and droll amusements for them.

"Yes; Teddy went and bought it with me, and we had such fun in the shop choosing the different parts. He would have everything fine and large, and my little plan got regularly splendid when he took hold. You must give him your very best kiss when he comes, for he is the kindest uncle that ever went and bought a charming little coo – Bless me! I nearly told you what it was!" and Mrs. Bhaer cut that most interesting word short off in the middle, and began to look over her bills, as if afraid she would let the cat out of the bag if she talked any more. Daisy folded her hands with an air of resignation, and sat quite still trying to think what play had a "coo" in it.

When they got home she eyed every bundle that was taken out, and one large heavy one, which Franz took straight up-stairs and hid in the nursery, filled her with amazement and curiosity. Something very mysterious went on up there that afternoon, for Franz was hammering, and Asia trotting up and down, and

Aunt Jo flying around like a will-o'-the-wisp, with all sorts of things under her apron, while little Ted, who was the only child admitted, because he couldn't talk plain, babbled and laughed, and tried to tell what the "sumpin pitty" was.

All this made Daisy half wild, and her excitement spread among the boys, who quite overwhelmed Mother Bhaer with offers of assistance, which she declined by quoting their own words to Daisy, —

"Girls can't play with boys. This is for Daisy, and Bess, and me, so we don't want you." Whereupon the young gentlemen meekly retired, and invited Daisy to a game of marbles, horse, football, anything she liked, with a sudden warmth and politeness which astonished her innocent little soul.

Thanks to these attentions, she got through the afternoon, went early to bed, and next morning did her lessons with an energy which made Uncle Fritz wish that a new game could be invented every day. Quite a thrill pervaded the school-room when Daisy was dismissed at eleven o'clock, for every one knew that *now* she was going to have the new and mysterious play.

Many eyes followed her as she ran away, and Demi's mind was so distracted by this event that when Franz asked him where the desert of Sahara was, he mournfully replied, "In the nursery," and the whole school laughed at him.

"Aunt Jo, I've done all my lessons, and I can't wait one single minute more!" cried Daisy, flying into Mrs. Bhaer's room.

"It's all ready, come on;" and tucking Ted under one arm, and

her work-basket under the other, Aunt Jo promptly led the way up-stairs.

"I don't see any thing," said Daisy, staring about her as she got inside the nursery door.

"Do you hear any thing?" asked Aunt Jo, catching Ted back by his little frock as he was making straight for one side of the room.

Daisy did hear an odd crackling, and then a purry little sound as of a kettle singing. These noises came from behind a curtain drawn before a deep bay window. Daisy snatched it back, gave one joyful "Oh!" and then stood gazing with delight at – what do you think?

A wide seat ran round the three sides of the window; on one side hung and stood all sorts of little pots and pans, gridirons and skillets; on the other side a small dinner and tea set; and on the middle part a cooking-stove. Not a tin one, that was of no use, but a real iron stove, big enough to cook for a large family of very hungry dolls. But the best of it was that a real fire burned in it, real steam came out of the nose of the little tea-kettle, and the lid of the little boiler actually danced a jig, the water inside bubbled so hard. A pane of glass had been taken out and replaced by a sheet of tin, with a hole for the small funnel, and real smoke went sailing away outside so naturally, that it did one's heart good to see it. The box of wood with a hod of charcoal stood near by; just above hung dustpan, brush, and broom; a little market basket was on the low table at which Daisy used to play, and over

the back of her little chair hung a white apron with a bib, and a droll mob cap. The sun shone in as if he enjoyed the fun, the little stove roared beautifully, the kettle steamed, the new tins sparkled on the walls, the pretty china stood in tempting rows, and it was altogether as cheery and complete a kitchen as any child could desire.

Daisy stood quite still after the first glad "Oh!" but her eyes went quickly from one charming object to another, brightening as they looked, till they came to Aunt Jo's merry face; there they stopped as the happy little girl hugged her, saying gratefully, —

"O Aunty, it's a splendid new play! can I really cook at the dear stove, and have parties and mess, and sweep, and make fires that truly burn? I like it *so* much! What made you think of it?"

"Your liking to make gingersnaps with Asia made me think of it," said Mrs. Bhaer, holding Daisy, who frisked as if she would fly. "I knew Asia wouldn't let you mess in her kitchen very often, and it wouldn't be safe at this fire up here, so I thought I'd see if I could find a little stove for you, and teach you to cook; that would be fun, and useful too. So I travelled round among the toy shops, but every thing large cost too much and I was thinking I should have to give it up, when I met Uncle Teddy. As soon as he knew what I was about, he said he wanted to help, and insisted on buying the biggest toy stove we could find. I scolded, but he only laughed, and teased me about my cooking when we were young, and said I must teach Bess as well as you, and went on buying all sorts of nice little things for my 'cooking class' as he called it."

"I'm so glad you met him!" said Daisy, as Mrs. Jo stopped to laugh at the memory of the funny time she had with Uncle Teddy.

"You must study hard and learn to make all kinds of things, for he says he shall come out to tea very often, and expects something uncommonly nice."

"It's the sweetest, dearest kitchen in the world, and I'd rather study with it than do anything else. Can't I learn pies, and cake, and macaroni, and every thing?" cried Daisy, dancing round the room with a new saucepan in one hand and the tiny poker in the other.

"All in good time. This is to be a useful play, I am to help you, and you are to be my cook, so I shall tell you what to do, and show you how. Then we shall have things fit to eat, and you will be really learning how to cook on a small scale. I'll call you Sally, and say you are a new girl just come," added Mrs. Jo, settling down to work, while Teddy sat on the floor sucking his thumb, and staring at the stove as if it was a live thing, whose appearance deeply interested him.

"That will be *so* lovely! What shall I do first?" asked Sally, with such a happy face and willing air that Aunt Jo wished all new cooks were half as pretty and pleasant.

"First of all, put on this clean cap and apron. I am rather old-fashioned, and I like my cook to be very tidy."

Sally tucked her curly hair into the round cap, and put on the apron without a murmur, though usually she rebelled against bibs.

"Now, you can put things in order, and wash up the new china. The old set needs washing also, for my last girl was apt to leave it in a sad state after a party."

Aunt Jo spoke quite soberly, but Sally laughed, for she knew who the untidy girl was who had left the cups sticky. Then she turned up her cuffs, and with a sigh of satisfaction began to stir about her kitchen, having little raptures now and then over the "sweet rolling pin," the "darling dish-tub," or the "cunning pepper-pot."

"Now, Sally, take your basket and go to market; here is the list of things I want for dinner," said Mrs. Jo, giving her a bit of paper when the dishes were all in order.

"Where is the market?" asked Daisy, thinking that the new play got more and more interesting every minute.

"Asia is the market."

Away went Sally, causing another stir in the school-room as she passed the door in her new costume, and whispered to Demi, with a face full of delight, – "It's a perfectly splendid play!"

Old Asia enjoyed the joke as much as Daisy, and laughed jollily as the little girl came flying into the room with her cap all on one side, the lids of her basket rattling like castanets and looking like a very crazy little cook.

"Mrs. Aunt Jo wants these things, and I must have them right away," said Daisy, importantly.

"Let's see, honey; here's two pounds of steak, potatoes, squash, apples, bread, and butter. The meat ain't come yet; when

it does I'll send it up. The other things are all handy."

Then Asia packed one potato, one apple, a bit of squash, a little pat of butter, and a roll, into the basket, telling Sally to be on the watch for the butcher's boy, because he sometimes played tricks.

"Who is he?" and Daisy hoped it would be Demi.

"You'll see," was all Asia would say; and Sally went off in great spirits, singing a verse from dear Mary Howitt's sweet story in rhyme, —

> "Away went little Mabel,
> With the wheaten cake so fine,
> The new-made pot of butter,
> And the little flask of wine."

"Put every thing but the apple into the store-closet for the present," said Mrs. Jo, when the cook got home.

There was a cupboard under the middle shelf, and on opening the door fresh delights appeared. One half was evidently the cellar, for wood, coal, and kindlings were piled there. The other half was full of little jars, boxes, and all sorts of droll contrivances for holding small quantities of flour, meal, sugar, salt, and other household stores. A pot of jam was there, a little tin box of gingerbread, a cologne bottle full of currant wine, and a tiny canister of tea. But the crowning charm was two doll's pans of new milk, with cream actually rising on it, and a wee skimmer all ready to skim it with. Daisy clasped her hands at this delicious

spectacle, and wanted to skim immediately. But Aunt Jo said, —

"Not yet; you will want the cream to eat on your apple-pie at dinner, and must not disturb it till then."

"Am I going to have pie?" cried Daisy, hardly believing that such bliss could be in store for her.

"Yes; if your oven does well we will have two pies, – one apple and one strawberry," said Mrs. Jo, who was nearly as much interested in the new play as Daisy herself.

"Oh, what next?" asked Sally, all impatience to begin.

"Shut the lower draught of the stove, so that the oven may heat. Then wash your hands and get out the flour, sugar, salt, butter, and cinnamon. See if the pie-board is clean, and pare your apple ready to put in."

Daisy got things together with as little noise and spilling as could be expected, from so young a cook.

"I really don't know how to measure for such tiny pies; I must guess at it, and if these don't succeed, we must try again," said Mrs. Jo, looking rather perplexed, and very much amused with the small concern before her. "Take that little pan full of flour, put in a pinch of salt, and then rub in as much butter as will go on that plate. Always remember to put your dry things together first, and then the wet. It mixes better so."

"I know how; I saw Asia do it. Don't I butter the pie plates too? She did, the first thing," said Daisy, whisking the flour about at a great rate.

"Quite right! I do believe you have a gift for cooking, you take

to it so cleverly," said Aunt Jo, approvingly. "Now a dash of cold water, just enough to wet it; then scatter some flour on the board, work in a little, and roll the paste out; yes, that's the way. Now put dabs of butter all over it, and roll it out again. We won't have our pastry very rich, or the dolls will get dyspeptic."

Daisy laughed at the idea, and scattered the dabs with a liberal hand. Then she rolled and rolled with her delightful little pin, and having got her paste ready, proceeded to cover the plates with it. Next the apple was sliced in, sugar and cinnamon lavishly sprinkled over it, and then the top crust put on with breathless care.

"I always wanted to cut them round, and Asia never would let me. How nice it is to do it all my ownty donty self!" said Daisy, as the little knife went clipping round the doll's plate poised on her hand.

All cooks, even the best, meet with mishaps sometimes, and Sally's first one occurred then, for the knife went so fast that the plate slipped, turned a somersault in the air, and landed the dear little pie upside down on the floor. Sally screamed, Mrs. Jo laughed, Teddy scrambled to get it, and for a moment confusion reigned in the new kitchen.

"It didn't spill or break, because I pinched the edges together so hard; it isn't hurt a bit, so I'll prick holes in it, and then it will be ready," said Sally, picking up the capsized treasure and putting it into shape with a childlike disregard of the dust it had gathered in its fall.

"My new cook has a good temper, I see, and that is such a comfort," said Mrs. Jo. "Now open the jar of strawberry jam, fill the uncovered pie, and put some strips of paste over the top as Asia does."

"I'll make a D in the middle, and have zigzags all round; that will be so interesting when I come to eat it," said Sally, loading her pie with quirls and flourishes that would have driven a real pastry cook wild. "*Now* I put them in!" she exclaimed, when the last grimy knob had been carefully planted in the red field of jam, and with an air of triumph she shut them into the little oven.

"Clear up your things; a good cook never lets her utensils collect. Then pare your squash and potatoes."

"There is only one potato," giggled Sally.

"Cut it in four pieces, so it will go into the little kettle, and put the bits into cold water till it is time to cook them."

"Do I soak the squash too?"

"No, indeed! just pare it and cut it up, and put it into the steamer over the pot. It is drier so, though it takes longer to cook."

Here a scratching at the door caused Sally to run and open it, when Kit appeared with a covered basket in his mouth.

"Here's the butcher's boy!" cried Daisy, much tickled at the idea, as she relieved him of his load, whereat he licked his lips and began to beg, evidently thinking that it was his own dinner, for he often carried it to his master in that way. Being undeceived, he departed in great wrath and barked all the way down-stairs, to ease his wounded feelings.

In the basket were two bits of steak (doll's pounds), a baked pear, a small cake, and paper with them on which Asia had scrawled, "For Missy's lunch, if her cookin' don't turn out well."

"I don't want any of her old pears and things; my cooking *will* turn out well, and I'll have a splendid dinner; see if I don't!" cried Daisy, indignantly.

"We may like them if company should come. It is always well to have something in the store-room," said Aunt Jo, who had been taught this valuable fact by a series of domestic panics.

"Me is hundry," announced Teddy, who began to think what with so much cooking going on it was about time for somebody to eat something. His mother gave him her work-basket to rummage, hoping to keep him quiet till dinner was ready, and returned to her housekeeping.

"Put on your vegetables, set the table, and then have some coals kindling ready for the steak."

What a thing it was to see the potatoes bobbing about in the little pot; to peep at the squash getting soft so fast in the tiny steamer; to whisk open the oven door every five minutes to see how the pies got on, and at last when the coals were red and glowing, to put two real steaks on a finger-long gridiron and proudly turn them with a fork. The potatoes were done first, and no wonder, for they had boiled frantically all the while. They were pounded up with a little pestle, had much butter and no salt put in (cook forgot it in the excitement of the moment), then it was made into a mound in a gay red dish, smoothed over with a

knife dipped in milk, and put in the oven to brown.

So absorbed in these last performances had Sally been, that she forgot her pastry till she opened the door to put in the potato, then a wail arose, for, alas! alas! the little pies were burnt black!

"Oh, my pies! my darling pies! they are all spoilt!" cried poor Sally, wringing her dirty little hands as she surveyed the ruin of her work. The tart was especially pathetic, for the quirls and zigzags stuck up in all directions from the blackened jelly, like the walls and chimney of a house after a fire.

"Dear, dear, I forgot to remind you to take them out; it's just my luck," said Aunt Jo, remorsefully. "Don't cry, darling, it was my fault; we'll try again after dinner," she added, as a great tear dropped from Sally's eyes and sizzled on the hot ruins of the tart.

More would have followed, if the steak had not blazed up just then, and so occupied the attention of cook, that she quickly forgot the lost pastry.

"Put the meat-dish and your own plates down to warm, while you mash the squash with butter, salt, and a little pepper on the top," said Mrs. Jo, devoutly hoping that the dinner would meet with no further disasters.

The "cunning pepper-pot" soothed Sally's feelings, and she dished up her squash in fine style. The dinner was safely put upon the table; the six dolls were seated three on a side; Teddy took the bottom, and Sally the top. When all were settled, it was a most imposing spectacle, for one doll was in full ball costume, another in her night-gown; Jerry, the worsted boy, wore his red winter

suit, while Annabella, the noseless darling, was airily attired in nothing but her own kid skin. Teddy, as father of the family, behaved with great propriety, for he smilingly devoured every thing offered him, and did not find a single fault. Daisy beamed upon her company like the weary, warm, but hospitable hostess, so often to be seen at larger tables than this, and did the honors with an air of innocent satisfaction, which we do *not* often see elsewhere.

The steak was so tough, that the little carving-knife would not cut it; the potato did not go round, and the squash was very lumpy; but the guests appeared politely unconscious of these trifles; and the master and mistress of the house cleared the table with appetites that any one might envy them. The joy of skimming a jug-full of cream mitigated the anguish felt for the loss of the pies, and Asia's despised cake proved a treasure in the way of dessert.

"That is the nicest lunch I ever had; can't I do it every day?" asked Daisy as she scraped up and ate the leavings all round.

"You can cook things every day after lessons, but I prefer that you should eat your dishes at your regular meals, and only have a bit of gingerbread for lunch. To-day, being the first time, I don't mind, but we must keep our rules. This afternoon you can make something for tea if you like," said Mrs. Jo, who had enjoyed the dinner-party very much, though no one had invited her to partake.

"Do let me make flapjacks for Demi, he loves them so, and

it's such fun to turn them and put sugar in between," cried Daisy, tenderly wiping a yellow stain off Annabella's broken nose, for Bella had refused to eat squash when it was pressed upon her as good for "lumatism," a complaint which it is no wonder she suffered from, considering the lightness of her attire.

"But if you give Demi goodies, all the others will expect some also, and then you will have your hands full."

"Couldn't I have Demi come up to tea alone just this one time, and after that I could cook things for the others if they were good," proposed Daisy, with a sudden inspiration.

"That is a capital idea, Posy! We will make your little messes rewards for the good boys, and I don't know one among them who would not like something nice to eat more than almost any thing else. If little men are like big ones, good cooking will touch their hearts and soothe their tempers delightfully," added Aunt Jo, with a merry nod toward the door, where stood Papa Bhaer, surveying the scene with a face full of amusement.

"That last hit was for me, sharp woman. I accept it, for it is true; but if I had married thee for thy cooking, heart's dearest, I should have fared badly all these years," answered the professor, laughing, as he tossed Teddy, who became quite apoplectic in his endeavors to describe the feast he had just enjoyed.

Daisy proudly showed her kitchen, and rashly promised Uncle Fritz as many flapjacks as he could eat. She was just telling about the new rewards when the boys, headed by Demi, burst into the room snuffing the air like a pack of hungry hounds, for school

was out, dinner was not ready, and the fragrance of Daisy's steak led them straight to the spot.

A prouder little damsel was never seen than Sally as she displayed her treasures and told the lads what was in store for them. Several rather scoffed at the idea of her cooking any thing fit to eat, but Stuffy's heart was won at once, Nat and Demi had firm faith in her skill, and the others said they would wait and see. All admired the kitchen, however, and examined the stove with deep interest. Demi offered to buy the boiler on the spot, to be used in a steam-engine which he was constructing; and Ned declared that the best and biggest saucepan was just the thing to melt his lead in when he ran bullets, hatchets, and such trifles.

Daisy looked so alarmed at these proposals, that Mrs. Jo then and there made and proclaimed a law that no boy should touch, use, or even approach the sacred stove without a special permit from the owner thereof. This increased its value immensely in the eyes of the gentlemen, especially as any infringement of the law would be punished by the forfeiture of all right to partake of the delicacies promised to the virtuous.

At this point the bell rang, and the entire population went down to dinner, which meal was enlivened by each of the boys giving Daisy a list of things he would like to have cooked for him as fast as he earned them. Daisy, whose faith in her stove was unlimited, promised every thing, if Aunt Jo would tell her how to make them. This suggestion rather alarmed Mrs. Jo, for some of the dishes were quite beyond her skill, – wedding-cake,

for instance, bull's-eye candy, and cabbage soup with herrings and cherries in it, which Mr. Bhaer proposed as his favorite, and immediately reduced his wife to despair, for German cookery was beyond her.

Daisy wanted to begin again the minute dinner was done, but she was only allowed to clear up, fill the kettle ready for tea, and wash out her apron, which looked as if she had cooked a Christmas feast. She was then sent out to play till five o'clock, for Uncle Fritz said that too much study, even at cooking stoves, was bad for little minds and bodies, and Aunt Jo knew by long experience how soon new toys lose their charm if they are not prudently used.

Every one was very kind to Daisy that afternoon. Tommy promised her the first fruits of his garden, though the only visible crop just then was pig-weed; Nat offered to supply her with wood, free of charge; Stuffy quite worshipped her; Ned immediately fell to work on a little refrigerator for her kitchen; and Demi, with a punctuality beautiful to see in one so young, escorted her to the nursery just as the clock struck five. It was not time for the party to begin, but he begged so hard to come in and help that he was allowed privileges few visitors enjoy, for he kindled the fire, ran errands, and watched the progress of his supper with intense interest. Mrs. Jo directed the affair as she came and went, being very busy putting up clean curtains all over the house.

"Ask Asia for a cup of sour cream, then your cakes will be

light without much soda, which I don't like," was the first order.

Demi tore down-stairs, and returned with the cream, also a puckered-up face, for he had tasted it on his way, and found it so sour that he predicted the cakes would be uneatable. Mrs. Jo took this occasion to deliver a short lecture from the step-ladder on the chemical properties of soda, to which Daisy did not listen, but Demi did, and understood it, as he proved by the brief but comprehensive reply, —

"Yes, I see, soda turns sour things sweet, and the fizzling up makes them light. Let's see you do it, Daisy."

"Fill that bowl nearly full of flour and add a little salt to it," continued Mrs. Jo.

"Oh dear, every thing has to have salt in it, seems to me," said Sally, who was tired of opening the pill-box in which it was kept.

"Salt is like good-humor, and nearly every thing is better for a pinch of it, Posy," and Uncle Fritz stopped as he passed, hammer in hand, to drive up two or three nails for Sally's little pans to hang on.

"You are not invited to tea, but I'll give you some cakes, and I won't be cross," said Daisy, putting up her floury little face to thank him with a kiss.

"Fritz, you must not interrupt my cooking class, or I'll come in and moralize when you are teaching Latin. How would you like that?" said Mrs. Jo, throwing a great chintz curtain down on his head.

"Very much, try it and see," and the amiable Father Bhaer

went singing and tapping about the house like a mammoth woodpecker.

"Put the soda into the cream, and when it 'fizzles' as Demi says, stir it into the flour, and beat it up as hard as ever you can. Have your griddle hot, butter it well, and then fry away till I come back," and Aunt Jo vanished also.

Such a clatter as the little spoon made, and such a beating as the batter got, it quite foamed, I assure you; and when Daisy poured some on to the griddle, it rose like magic into a puffy flapjack, that made Demi's mouth water. To be sure, the first one stuck and scorched, because she forgot the butter, but after that first failure all went well, and six capital little cakes were safely landed in a dish.

"I think I'd like maple-syrup better than sugar," said Demi from his arm-chair, where he had settled himself after setting the table in a new and peculiar manner.

"Then go and ask Asia for some," answered Daisy, going into the bath-room to wash her hands.

While the nursery was empty something dreadful happened. You see, Kit had been feeling hurt all day because he had carried meat safely and yet got none to pay him. He was not a bad dog, but he had his little faults like the rest of us, and could not always resist temptation. Happening to stroll into the nursery at that moment, he smelt the cakes, saw them unguarded on the low table, and never stopping to think of consequences, swallowed all six at one mouthful. I am glad to say that they were very hot,

and burned him so badly that he could not repress a surprised yelp. Daisy heard it, ran in, saw the empty dish, also the end of a yellow tail disappearing under the bed. Without a word she seized that tail, pulled out the thief, and shook him until his ears flapped wildly, then bundled him down-stairs to the shed, where he spent a lonely evening in the coal-bin.

Cheered by the sympathy which Demi gave her, Daisy made another bowlful of batter, and fried a dozen cakes, which were even better than the others. Indeed, Uncle Fritz after eating two sent up word that he had never tasted any so nice, and every boy at the table below envied Demi at the flapjack party above.

It was a truly delightful supper, for the little teapot lid only fell off three times, and the milk jug upset but once; the cakes floated in syrup, and the toast had a delicious beef-steak flavor, owing to cook's using the gridiron to make it on. Demi forgot philosophy, and stuffed like any carnal boy, while Daisy planned sumptuous banquets, and the dolls looked on smiling affably.

"Well, dearies, have you had a good time?" asked Mrs. Jo, coming up with Teddy on her shoulder.

"A *very* good time. I shall come again *soon*," answered Demi, with emphasis.

"I'm afraid you have eaten too much, by the look of that table."

"No, I haven't; I only ate fifteen cakes, and they were very little ones," protested Demi, who had kept his sister busy supplying his plate.

"They won't hurt him, they are so nice," said Daisy, with such

a funny mixture of maternal fondness and housewifely pride that Aunt Jo could only smile and say, —

"Well, on the whole, the new game is a success, then?"

"*I* like it," said Demi, as if his approval was all that was necessary.

"It is the dearest play ever made!" cried Daisy, hugging her little dish-tub as she proposed to wash up the cups. "I just wish everybody had a sweet cooking stove like mine," she added, regarding it with affection.

"This play ought to have a name," said Demi, gravely removing the syrup from his countenance with his tongue.

"It has."

"Oh, what?" asked both children, eagerly.

"Well, I think we will call it Patty pans," and Aunt Jo retired, satisfied with the success of her last trap to catch a sunbeam.

CHAPTER VI
A FIRE BRAND

"Please, ma'am, could I speak to you? It is something *very* important," said Nat, popping his head in at the door of Mrs. Bhaer's room.

It was the fifth head which had popped in during the last half-hour; but Mrs. Jo was used to it, so she looked up, and said briskly, —

"What is it, my lad?"

Nat came in, shut the door carefully behind him, and said in an eager, anxious tone, —

"Dan has come."

"Who is Dan?"

"He's a boy I used to know when I fiddled round the streets. He sold papers, and he was kind to me, and I saw him the other day in town, and told him how nice it was here, and he's come."

"But, my dear boy, that is rather a sudden way to pay a visit."

"Oh, it isn't a visit; he wants to stay if you will let him!" said Nat, innocently.

"Well, but I don't know about that," began Mrs. Bhaer, rather startled by the coolness of the proposition.

"Why, I thought you liked to have poor boys come and live with you, and be kind to 'em as you were to me," said Nat,

looking surprised and alarmed.

"So I do, but I like to know something about them first. I have to choose them, because there are so many. I have not room for all. I wish I had."

"I told him to come because I thought you'd like it, but if there isn't room he can go away again," said Nat, sorrowfully.

The boy's confidence in her hospitality touched Mrs. Bhaer, and she could not find the heart to disappoint his hope, and spoil his kind little plan, so she said, —

"Tell me about this Dan."

"I don't know any thing, only he hasn't got any folks, and he's poor, and he was good to me, so I'd like to be good to him if I could."

"Excellent reasons every one; but really, Nat, the house is full, and I don't know where I could put him," said Mrs. Bhaer, more and more inclined to prove herself the haven of refuge he seemed to think her.

"He could have my bed, and I could sleep in the barn. It isn't cold now, and I don't mind, I used to sleep anywhere with father," said Nat, eagerly.

Something in his speech and face made Mrs. Jo put her hand on his shoulder, and say in her kindest tone:

"Bring in your friend, Nat; I think we must find room for him without giving him your place."

Nat joyfully ran off, and soon returned followed by a most unprepossessing boy, who slouched in and stood looking about

him, with a half bold, half sullen look, which made Mrs. Bhaer say to herself, after one glance, —

"A bad specimen, I am afraid."

"This is Dan," said Nat, presenting him as if sure of his welcome.

"Nat tells me you would like to come and stay with us," began Mrs. Jo, in a friendly tone.

"Yes," was the gruff reply.

"Have you no friends to take care of you?"

"No."

"Say, 'No, ma'am,'" whispered Nat.

"Shan't neither," muttered Dan.

"How old are you?"

"About fourteen."

"You look older. What can you do?"

"'Most any thing."

"If you stay here we shall want you to do as the others do, work and study as well as play. Are you willing to agree to that?"

"Don't mind trying."

"Well, you can stay a few days, and we will see how we get on together. Take him out, Nat, and amuse him till Mr. Bhaer comes home, when we will settle about the matter," said Mrs. Jo, finding it rather difficult to get on with this cool young person, who fixed his big black eyes on her with a hard, suspicious expression, sorrowfully unboyish.

"Come on, Nat," he said, and slouched out again.

"Thank you, ma'am," added Nat, as he followed him, feeling without quite understanding the difference in the welcome given to him and to his ungracious friend.

"The fellows are having a circus out in the barn; don't you want to come and see it?" he asked, as they came down the wide steps on to the lawn.

"Are they big fellows?" said Dan.

"No; the big ones are gone fishing."

"Fire away, then," said Dan.

Nat led him to the great barn and introduced him to his set, who were disporting themselves among the half-empty lofts. A large circle was marked out with hay on the wide floor, and in the middle stood Demi with a long whip, while Tommy, mounted on the much-enduring Toby, pranced about the circle playing being a monkey.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.