

Alcott Louisa May

Mountain-Laurel and Maidenhair



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MOUNTAIN-LAUREL AND MAIDENHAIR

"Here's your breakfast, miss. I hope it's right. Your mother showed me how to fix it, and said I'd find a cup up here."

"Take that blue one. I have not much appetite, and can't eat if things are not nice and pretty. I like the flowers. I've been longing for some ever since I saw them last night."

The first speaker was a red-haired, freckled-faced girl, in a brown calico dress and white apron, with a tray in her hands and an air of timid hospitality in her manner; the second a pale, pretty creature, in a white wrapper and blue net, sitting in a large chair, looking about her with the languid interest of an invalid in a new place. Her eyes brightened as they fell upon a glass of rosy laurel and delicate maidenhair fern that stood among the toast and eggs, strawberries and cream, on the tray.

"Our laurel is jest in blow, and I'm real glad you come in time to see it. I'll bring you a lot, as soon's ever I get time to go for it."

As she spoke, the plain girl replaced the ugly crockery cup and saucer with the pretty china ones pointed out to her, arranged the dishes, and waited to see if anything else was needed.

"What is your name, please?" asked the pretty girl, refreshing herself with a draught of new milk.

"Rebecca. Mother thought I'd better wait on you; the little girls are so noisy and apt to forget. Wouldn't you like a piller to your back? you look so kind of feeble seems as if you wanted to be propped up a mite."

There was so much compassion and good-will in the face and voice, that Emily accepted the offer, and let Rebecca arrange a cushion behind her; then, while the one ate daintily, and the other stirred about an inner room, the talk went on, – for two girls are seldom long silent when together.

"I think the air is going to suit me, for I slept all night and never woke till Mamma had been up ever so long and got things all nicely settled," said Emily, graciously, when the fresh strawberries had been enjoyed, and the bread and butter began to vanish.

"I'm real glad you like it: most folks do, if they don't mind it being plain and quiet up here. It's gayer down at the hotel, but the air ain't half so good, and delicate folks generally like our old place best," answered Becky, as she tossed over a mattress and shook out the sheets with a brisk, capable air pleasant to see.

"I wanted to go to the hotel, but the doctor said it would be too noisy for me, so Mamma was glad to find rooms here.

I didn't think a farm-house *could* be so pleasant. That view is perfectly splendid!" and Emily sat up to gaze delightedly out of the window, below which spread the wide interval, through which the river ran with hay-fields on either side, while along the green slopes of the hills lay farm-houses with garden plots, and big barns waiting for the harvest; and beyond, the rocky, wooded pastures dotted with cattle and musical with cow-bells, brooks, and birds.

A balmy wind kissed a little color into the pale cheeks, the listless eyes brightened as they looked, and the fretful lines vanished from lips that smiled involuntarily at the sweet welcome Nature gave the city child come to rest and play and grow gay and rosy in her green lap.

Becky watched her with interest, and was glad to see how soon the new-comer felt the charm of the place, for the girl loved her mountain home, and thought the old farm-house the loveliest spot in the world.

"When you get stronger I can show you lots of nice views round here. There's a woodsy place behind the house that's just lovely. Down by the laurel bushes is *my* favorite spot, and among the rocks is a cave where I keep things handy when I get a resting-spell now and then, and want to be quiet. Can't get much at home, when there's boarders and five children round in vacation time."

Becky laughed as she spoke, and there was a sweet motherly look in her plain face, as she glanced at the three little red heads bobbing about the door-yard below, where hens cackled, a pet

lamb fed, and the old white dog lay blinking in the sun.

"I like children; we have none at home, and Mamma makes such a baby of me I'm almost ashamed sometimes. I want her to have a good rest now, for she has taken care of me all winter and needs it. You shall be my nurse, if I need one; but I hope to be so well soon that I can see to myself. It's so tiresome to be ill!" and Emily sighed as she leaned back among her pillows, with a glance at the little glass which showed her a thin face and shorn head.

"It must be! I never was sick, but I have taken care of sick folks, and have a sight of sympathy for 'em. Mother says I make a pretty good nurse, being strong and quiet," answered Becky, plumping up pillows and folding towels with a gentle despatch which was very grateful to the invalid, who had dreaded a noisy, awkward serving-maid.

"Never ill! how nice that must be! I'm always having colds and headaches, and fusses of some kind. What do you do to keep well, Rebecca?" asked Emily, watching her with interest, as she came in to remove the tray.

"Nothing but work; I haven't time to be sick, and when I'm tuckered out, I go and rest over yonder. Then I'm all right, and buckle to again, as smart as ever;" and every freckle in Becky's rosy face seemed to shine with cheerful strength and courage.

"I'm 'tuckered out' doing nothing," said Emily, amused with the new expression, and eager to try a remedy which showed such fine results in this case. "I shall visit your pet places and do a little work as soon as I am able, and see if it won't set me up.

Now I can only dawdle, doze, and read a little. Will you please put those books here on the table? I shall want them by-and-by."

Emily pointed to a pile of blue and gold volumes lying on a trunk, and Becky dusted her hands as she took them up with an air of reverence, for she read on the backs of the volumes names which made her eyes sparkle.

"Do you care for poetry?" asked Emily, surprised at the girl's look and manner.

"Guess I do! don't get much except the pieces I cut out of papers, but I love 'em, and stick 'em in an old ledger, and keep it down in my cubby among the rocks. I do love *that* man's pieces. They seem to go right to the spot somehow;" and Becky smiled at the name of Whittier as if the sweetest of our poets was a dear old friend of hers.

"I like Tennyson better. Do you know him?" asked Emily, with a superior air, for the idea of this farmer's daughter knowing anything about poetry amused her.

"Oh yes, I've got a number of his pieces in my book, and I'm fond of 'em. But this man makes things so kind of true and natural I feel at home with *him*. And this one I've longed to read, though I guess I can't understand much of it. His 'Bumble Bee' was just lovely; with the grass and columbines and the yellow breeches of the bee. I'm never tired of that;" and Becky's face woke up into something like beauty as she glanced hungrily at the Emerson while she dusted the delicate cover that hid the treasures she coveted.

"I don't care much for him, but Mamma does. I like romantic poems, and ballads, and songs; don't like descriptions of clouds, and fields, and bees, and farmers," said Emily, showing plainly that even Emerson's simplest poems were far above her comprehension as yet, because she loved sentiment more than Nature.

"I do, because I know 'em better than love and the romantic stuff most poetry tells about. But I don't pretend to judge, I'm glad of anything I can get. Now if you don't want me I'll pick up my dishes and go to work."

With that Becky went away, leaving Emily to rest and dream with her eyes on the landscape which was giving her better poetry than any her books held. She told her mother about the odd girl, and was sure she would be amusing if she did not forget her place and try to be friends.

"She is a good creature, my dear, her mother's main stay, and works beyond her strength, I am sure. Be kind to the poor girl, and put a little pleasure into her life if you can," answered Mrs. Spenser, as she moved about, settling comforts and luxuries for her invalid.

"I shall *have* to talk to her, as there is no other person of my age in the house. How are the school marms? shall you get on with them, Mamma? It will be so lonely here for us both, if we don't make friends with some one."

"Most intelligent and amiable women all three, and we shall have pleasant times together, I am sure. You may safely cultivate

Becky; Mrs. Taylor told me she was a remarkably bright girl, though she may not look it."

"Well, I'll see. But I do hate freckles and big red hands, and round shoulders. She can't help it, I suppose, but ugly things fret me."

"Remember that she has no time to be pretty, and be glad she is so neat and willing. Shall we read, dear? I'm ready now."

Emily consented, and listened for an hour or two while the pleasant voice beside her conjured away all her vapors with some of Mrs. Ewing's charming tales.

"The grass is dry now, and I want to stroll on that green lawn before lunch. You rest, Mamma dear, and let me make discoveries all alone," proposed Emily, when the sun shone warmly, and the instinct of all young creatures for air and motion called her out.

So, with her hat and wrap, and book and parasol, she set forth to explore the new land in which she found herself.

Down the wide, creaking stairs and out upon the door-stone she went, pausing there for a moment to decide where first to go. The sound of some one singing in the rear of the house led her in that direction, and turning the corner she made her first pleasant discovery. A hill rose steeply behind the farm-house, and leaning from the bank was an old apple-tree, shading a spring that trickled out from the rocks and dropped into a mossy trough below. Up the tree had grown a wild grape-vine, making a green canopy over the great log which served as a seat, and some

one had planted maidenhair ferns about both seat and spring to flourish beautifully in the damp, shady spot.

"Oh, how pretty! I'll go and sit there. It looks clean, and I can see what is going on in that big kitchen, and hear the singing. I suppose it's Becky's little sisters by the racket."

Emily established herself on the lichen-covered log with her feet upon a stone, and sat enjoying the musical tinkle of the water, with her eyes on the delicate ferns stirring in the wind, and the lively jingle of the multiplication-table chanted by childish voices in her ear.

Presently two little girls with a great pan of beans came to do their work on the back door-step, a third was seen washing dishes at a window, and Becky's brown-spotted gown flew about the kitchen as if a very energetic girl wore it. A woman's voice was heard giving directions, as the speaker was evidently picking chickens somewhere out of sight.

A little of the talk reached Emily and both amused and annoyed her, for it proved that the country people were not as stupid as they looked.

"Oh, well, we mustn't mind if she *is* notional and kind of wearing; she's been sick, and it will take time to get rid of her fretty ways. Jest be pleasant, and take no notice, and that nice mother of hers will make it all right," said the woman's voice.

"How anybody with every mortal thing to be happy with *can* be out-of-sorts passes me. She fussed about every pillar, chair, trunk, and mite of food last night, and kept that poor tired lady

trotting till I was provoked. She's right pleasant this morning though, and as pretty as a picture in her ruffled gown and that blue thing on her head," answered Becky from the pantry, as she rattled out the pie-board, little dreaming who sat hidden behind the grape-vine festoons that veiled the corner by the spring.

"Well, she's got redder hair 'n' we have, so she needn't be so grand and try to hide it with blue nets," added one little voice.

"Yes, and it's ever so much shorter 'n' ours, and curls all over her head like Daisy's wool. I should think such a big girl would feel real ashamed without no braids," said the other child, proudly surveying the tawny mane that hung over her shoulders, – for like most red-haired people all the children were blessed with luxuriant crops of every shade from golden auburn to regular carrots.

"I think it's lovely. Suppose it had to be cut off when she had the fever. Wish I could get rid of my mop, it's such a bother;" and Becky was seen tying a clean towel over the great knot that made her head look very like a copper kettle.

"Now fly round, deary, and get them pies ready. I'll have these fowls in a minute, and then go to my butter. You run off and see if you can't find some wild strawberries for the poor girl, soon's ever you are through with them beans, children. We must kind of pamper her up for a spell till her appetite comes back," said the mother.

Here the chat ended, and soon the little girls were gone, leaving Becky alone rolling out pie-crust before the pantry

window. As she worked her lips moved, and Emily, still peeping through the leaves, wondered what she was saying, for a low murmur rose and fell, emphasized now and then with a thump of the rolling-pin.

"I mean to go and find out. If I stand on that wash-bench I can look in and see her work. I'll show them all that *I'm not* 'fussy,' and can be 'right pleasant' if I like."

With this wise resolution Emily went down the little path, and after pausing to examine the churn set out to dry, and the row of pans shining on a neighboring shelf, made her way to the window, mounted the bench while Becky's back was turned, and pushing away the morning-glory vines and scarlet beans that ran up on either side peeped in with such a smiling face that the crossdest cook could not have frowned on her as an intruder.

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