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Chapter 20 - Under The Mistletoe

Rose made Phebe promise that she would bring her stocking into the "Bower," as she called her pretty room, on Christmas morning, because that first delicious rummage loses half its charm if two little night-caps at least do not meet over the treasures, and two happy voices Oh and Ah together.

So when Rose opened her eyes that day they fell upon faithful Phebe, rolled up in a shawl, sitting on the rug before a blazing fire, with her untouched stocking laid beside her.

"Merry Christmas!" cried the little mistress smiling gaily.

"Merry Christmas!" answered the little maid, so heartily that it did one good to hear her.

"Bring the stockings right away, Phebe, and let's see what we've got," said Rose, sitting up among the pillows, and looking as eager as a child.

A pair of long knobby hose were laid out upon the coverlet, and their contents examined with delight, though each knew every blessed thing that had been put into the other's stocking.

Never mind what they were; it is evident that they were quite satisfactory, for as Rose leaned back, she said, with a luxurious sigh of satisfaction, "Now, I believe I've got everything in the world that I want," and Phebe answered, smiling over a lapful of treasures, "This is the most splendid Christmas I ever had since I was born." Then she added with an important air

"Do wish for something else, because I happen to know of two more presents outside the door this minute."

"Oh, me, what richness!" cried Rose, much excited. "I used to wish for a pair of glass slippers like Cinderella's, but as I can't have them, I really don't know what to ask for."

Phebe clapped her hands as she skipped off the bed and ran to the door, saying merrily, "One of them is for your feet, anyway. I don't know what you'll say to the other, but I think it's elegant."

So did Rose, when a shining pair of skates and a fine sled appeared.

"Uncle sent those; I know he did; and, now I see them, I remember that I did want to skate and coast. Isn't it a beauty? See! they fit nicely," and, sitting on the new sled, Rose tried a skate on her little bare foot, while Phebe stood by admiring the pretty tableau.

"Now we must hurry and get dressed, for there is a deal to do to-day, and I want to get through in time to try my sled before dinner."

"Gracious me, and I ought to be dusting my parlors this blessed minute!" and mistress and maid separated with such happy faces that anyone would have known what day it was without being told.

"Birnam Wood has come to Dunsinane, Rosy," said Dr. Alec, as he left the breakfast table to open the door for a procession of holly, hemlock, and cedar boughs that came marching up the steps.

Snowballs and "Merry Christmases!" flew about pretty briskly for several minutes; then all fell to work trimming the old house, for the family always dined together there on that day.

"I rode miles and mileses, as Ben says, to get this fine bit, and I'm going to hang it there as the last touch to the rig-a-madooning," said Charlie, as he fastened a dull green branch to the chandelier in the front parlor.

"It isn't very pretty," said Rose, who was trimming the chimney-piece with glossy holly sprays.

"Never mind that, it's mistletoe, and anyone who stands under it will get kissed whether they like it or not. Now's your time, ladies," answered the saucy Prince, keeping his place and looking sentimentally at the girls, who retired precipitately from the dangerous spot.

"You won't catch me," said Rose, with great dignity.

"See if I don't!"

"I've got my eye on Phebe," observed Will, in a patronising tone that made them all laugh.

"Bless the dear; I shan't mind it a bit," answered Phebe, with such a maternal air that Will's budding gallantry was chilled to death.

"Oh, the mistletoe bough," sang Rose.

"Oh, the mistletoe bough!" echoed all the boys, and the teasing ended in the plaintive ballad they all liked so well.

There was plenty of time to try the new skates before dinner, and then Rose took her first lesson on the little bay, which seemed to have frozen over for that express purpose. She found tumbling down and getting up again warm work for a time, but with six boys to teach her, she managed at last to stand alone; and, satisfied with that

success, she refreshed herself with a dozen grand coasts on the Amazon, as her sled was called.

"Ah, that fatal colour! it breaks my heart to see it," croaked Aunt Myra, as Rose came down a little late, with cheeks almost as ruddy as the holly berries on the wall, and every curl as smooth as Phebe's careful hands could make it.

"I'm glad to see that Alec allows the poor child to make herself pretty in spite of his absurd notions," added Aunt Clara, taking infinite satisfaction in the fact that Rose's blue silk dress had three frills on it.

"She's a very intelligent child, and has a nice little manner of her own," observed Aunt Jane, with unusual affability; for Rose had just handed Mac a screen to guard his eyes from the brilliant fire.

"If I had a daughter like that to show my Jem when he gets home, I should be a very proud and happy woman," thought Aunt Jessie, and then reproached herself for not being perfectly satisfied with her four brave lads.

Aunt Plenty was too absorbed in the dinner to have an eye for anything else; if she had not been, she would have seen what an effect her new cap produced upon the boys. The good lady owned that she did "love a dressy cap," and on this occasion her head gear was magnificent; for the towering structure of lace was adorned with buff ribbons to such an extent that it looked as if a flock of yellow butterflies had settled on her dear old head. When she trotted about the rooms the ruches quivered, the little bows all stood erect, and the streamers waved in the breeze so comically that it was absolutely necessary for Archie to smother the Brats in the curtains till they had had their first laugh out.

Uncle Mac had brought Fun See to dinner, and it was a mercy he did, for the elder lads found a vent for their merriment in joking the young Chinaman on his improved appearance. He was in American costume now, with a cropped head, and spoke remarkably good English after six months at school; but, for all that, his yellow face and beady eyes made a curious contrast to the blonde Campbells all about him. Will called him the "Typhoon," meaning Tycoon, and the name stuck to him to his great disgust.

Aunt Peace was brought down and set in the chair of state at table, for she never failed to join the family on this day, and sat smiling at them all, "like an embodiment of Peace on earth," Uncle Alec said, as he took his place beside her, while Uncle Mac supported Aunt Plenty at the other end.

"I ate hardly any breakfast, and I've done everything I know to make myself extra hungry, but I really don't think I can eat straight through, unless I burst my buttons off," whispered Geordie to Will, as he surveyed the bounteous stores before him with a hopeless sigh.

"A fellow never knows what he can do till he tries," answered Will, attacking his heaped-up plate with an evident intention of doing his duty like a man.

Everybody knows what a Christmas dinner is, so we need waste no words in describing this one, but hasten at once to tell what happened at the end of it. The end, by the way, was so long in coming that the gas was lighted before dessert was over, for a snow flurry had come on and the wintry daylight faded fast. But that only made it all the jollier in the warm, bright rooms, full of happy souls. Everyone was very merry, but Archie seemed particularly uplifted so much so, that Charlie confided to Rose that he was afraid the Chief had been at the decanters.

Rose indignantly denied the insinuation, for when healths were drunk in the good old-fashioned way to suit the elders, she had observed that Aunt Jessie's boys filled their glasses with water, and had done the same herself in spite of the Prince's jokes about "the rosy."

But Archie certainly was unusually excited, and when someone remembered that it was the anniversary of Uncle Jem's wedding, and wished he was there to make a speech, his son electrified the family by trying to do it for him. It was rather incoherent and flowery, as maiden speeches are apt to be, but the end was considered superb; for, turning to his mother with a queer little choke in his voice, he said that she "deserved to be blessed with peace and plenty, to be crowned with roses and lads'-love, and to receive the cargo of happiness sailing home to her in spite of wind or tide to add another Jem to the family jewels."

That allusion to the Captain, now on his return trip, made Mrs. Jessie sob in her napkin, and set the boys cheering. Then, as if that was not sensation enough, Archie suddenly dashed out of the room, as if he had lost his wits.

"Too bashful to stay and be praised," began Charlie, excusing the peculiarities of his chief as in duty bound.

"Phebe beckoned to him; I saw her," cried Rose, staring hard at the door.

"Is it more presents coming?" asked Jamie, just as his brother re-appeared, looking more excited than ever.

"Yes; a present for mother, and here it is!" roared Archie, flinging wide the door to let in a tall man, who cried out

"Where's my little woman? The first kiss for her, then the rest may come on as fast as they like."

Before the words were out of his mouth, Mrs. Jessie was half-hidden under his rough great-coat, and four boys were prancing about him clamouring for their turn.

Of course, there was a joyful tumult for a time, during which Rose slipped into the window recess and watched what went on, as if it were a chapter in a Christmas story. It was good to see bluff Uncle Jem look proudly at his tall son, and fondly hug the little ones. It was better still to see him shake his brothers' hands as if he would never leave off, and kiss all the sisters in a way that made even solemn Aunt Myra brighten up for a minute. But it was best of all to see him finally established in grandfather's chair, with his "little woman" beside him, his three youngest boys in his lap, and Archie hovering over him like a large-sized cherub. That really was, as Charlie said, "A landscape to do one's heart good."

"All hearty and all here, thank God!" said Captain Jem in the first pause that came, as he looked about him with a grateful face.

"All but Rose," answered loyal little Jamie, remembering the absent.

"Faith, I forgot the child! Where is George's little girl?" asked the Captain, who had not seen her since she was a baby.

"You'd better say Alec's great girl," said Uncle Mac, who professed to be madly jealous of his brother.

"Here I am, sir," and Rose appeared from behind the curtains, looking as if she had rather have stayed there.

"Saint George Germain, how the mite has grown!" cried Captain Jem, as he tumbled the boys out of his lap, and rose to greet the tall girl, like a gentleman as he was. But, somehow, when he shook her hand it looked so small in his big one, and her face reminded him so strongly of his dead brother, that he was not satisfied with so cold a

welcome, and with a sudden softening of the keen eyes he took her up in his arms, whispering, with a rough cheek against her smooth one

"God bless you, child! forgive me if I forgot you for a minute, and be sure that not one of your kinsfolk is happier to see you here than Uncle Jem."

That made it all right; and when he set her down, Rose's face was so bright it was evident that some spell had been used to banish the feeling of neglect that had kept her moping behind the curtain so long.

That everyone sat round and heard all about the voyage home how the Captain had set his heart on getting there in time to keep Christmas; how everything had conspired to thwart his plan; and how, at the very last minute, he had managed to do it, and had sent a telegram to Archie, bidding him keep the secret, and be ready for his father at any moment, for the ship got into another port, and he might be late.

Then Archie told how that telegram had burnt in his pocket all dinner-time; how he had to take Phebe into his confidence, and how clever she was to keep the Captain back till the speech was over and he could come in with effect.

The elders would have sat and talked all the evening, but the young folks were bent on having their usual Christmas frolic; so, after an hour of pleasant chat, they began to get restless, and having consulted together in dumb show, they devised a way to very effectually break up the family council.

Steve vanished, and, sooner than the boys imagined Dandy could get himself up, the skirl of the bag-pipe was heard in the hall, and the bonny piper came to lead Clan Campbell to the revel.

"Draw it mild, Stenie, my man; ye play unco weel, but ye mak a most infernal din," cried Uncle Jem, with his hands over his ears, for this accomplishment was new to him, and "took him all aback," as he expressed it.

So Steve droned out a Highland reel as softly as he could, and the boys danced it to a circle of admiring relations. Captain Jem was a true sailor, however, and could not stand idle while anything lively was going on; so, when the piper's breath gave out, he cut a splendid pigeon-wing into the middle of the hall, saying, "Who can dance a Fore and After?" and, waiting for no reply, began to whistle the air so invitingly that Mrs Jessie "set" to him laughing like a girl; Rose and Charlie took their places behind, and away went the four with a spirit and skill that inspired all the rest to "cut in" as fast as they could.

That was a grand beginning, and they had many another dance before anyone would own they were tired. Even Fun See distinguished himself with Aunt Plenty, whom he greatly admired as the stoutest lady in the company; plumpness being considered a beauty in his country. The merry old soul professed herself immensely flattered by his admiration, and the boys declared she "set her cap at him," else he would never have dared to catch her under the mistletoe, and, rising on the tips of his own toes, gallantly salute her fat cheek.

How they all laughed at her astonishment, and how Fun's little black eyes twinkled over this exploit! Charlie put him up to it, and Charlie was so bent on catching Rose, that he laid all sorts of pitfalls for her, and bribed the other lads to help him. But Rose was wide-awake, and escaped all his snares, professing great contempt for such foolish customs. Poor Phebe did not fare so well, and Archie was the only one who took a base advantage of her as she stood innocently offering tea to Aunt Myra, whom she happened to meet just under the fatal bough. If his father's arrival had not rather upset him, I doubt if the dignified Chief would have done it, for he apologized at once in the handsomest manner, and caught the tray that nearly dropped from Phebe's hands.

Jamie boldly invited all the ladies to come and salute him; and as for Uncle Jem, he behaved as if the entire room was a grove of mistletoe. Uncle Alec slyly laid a bit of it on Aunt Peace's cap, and then softly kissed her; which little joke seemed to please her very much, for she liked to have part in all the home pastimes, and Alec was her favourite nephew.

Charlie alone failed to catch his shy bird, and the oftener she escaped the more determined he was to ensnare her. When every other wile had been tried in vain, he got Archie to propose a game with forfeits.

"I understand that dodge," thought Rose, and was on her guard so carefully that not one among the pile soon collected belonged to her.

"Now let us redeem them and play something else," said Will, quite unconscious of the deeply-laid plots all about him.

"One more round and then we will," answered the Prince, who had now baited his trap anew.

Just as the question came to Rose, Jamie's voice was heard in the hall, crying distressfully, "Oh, come quick, quick!" Rose started up, missed the question, and was greeted with a general cry of "Forfeit! forfeit!" in which the little traitor came to join.

"Now I've got her," thought the young rascal, exulting in his fun-loving soul.

"Now I'm lost," thought Rose, as she gave up her pin-cushion with a sternly defiant look that would have daunted anyone but the reckless Prince. In fact, it made even him think twice, and resolve to "let Rose off easy," she had been so clever.

"Here's a very pretty pawn, and what shall be done to redeem it?" asked Steve, holding the pin-cushion over Charlie's head, for he had insisted on being judge, and kept that for the last.

"Fine or superfine?"

"Super."

"Hum, well, she shall take old Mac under the mistletoe, and kiss him prettily. Won't he be mad, though?" and this bad boy chuckled over the discomfort he had caused two harmless beings.

There was an impressive pause among the young folks in their corner, for they all knew that Mac would "be mad," since he hated nonsense of this sort, and had gone to talk with the elders when the game began. At this moment he was standing before the fire, listening to a discussion between his uncles and his father, looking as wise as a young owl, and blissfully unconscious of the plots against him.

Charlie expected that Rose would say, "I won't!" therefore he was rather astonished, not to say gratified, when, after a look at the victim, she laughed suddenly, and, going up to the group of gentlemen, drew her uncle Mac under the mistletoe and surprised him with a hearty kiss.

"Thank you, my dear," said the innocent gentleman, looking much pleased at the unexpected honour.

"Oh, come; that's not fair," began Charlie. But Rose cut him short by saying, as she made him a fine courtesy

"You said 'Old Mac,' and though it was very disrespectful, I did it. That was your last chance, sir, and you've lost it."

He certainly had, for, as he spoke, Rose pulled down the mistletoe and threw it into the fire, while the boys jeered at the crestfallen Prince, and exalted quick-witted Rose to the skies.

"What's the joke?" asked young Mac, waked out of a brown study by the laughter, in which the elders joined.

But there was a regular shout when, the matter having been explained to him, Mac took a meditative stare at Rose through his goggles, and said in a philosophical tone, "Well, I don't think I should have minded much if she had done it."

That tickled the lads immensely, and nothing but the appearance of a slight refection would have induced them to stop chaffing the poor Worm, who could not see anything funny in the beautiful resignation he had shown on this trying occasion.

Soon after this, the discovery of Jamie curled up in the sofa corner, as sound asleep as a dormouse, suggested the propriety of going home, and a general move was made.

They were all standing about the hall lingering over the good-nights, when the sound of a voice softly singing "Sweet Home," made them pause and listen. It was Phebe, poor little Phebe, who never had a home, never knew the love of father or mother, brother or sister; who stood all alone in the wide world, yet was not sad nor afraid, but took her bits of happiness gratefully, and sung over her work without a thought of discontent.

I fancy the happy family standing there together remembered this and felt the beauty of it, for when the solitary voice came to the burden of its song, other voices took it up and finished it so sweetly, that the old house seemed to echo the word "Home" in the ears of both the orphan girls, who had just spent their first Christmas under its hospitable roof.