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Chapter 21 - A Scare

"Brother Alec, you surely don't mean to allow that child to go out such a bitter cold day as this," said Mrs. Myra, looking into the study, where the Doctor sat reading his paper, one February morning.

"Why not? If a delicate invalid like yourself can bear it, surely my hearty girl can, especially as she is dressed for cold weather," answered Dr. Alec with provoking confidence.

"But you have no idea how sharp the wind is. I am chilled to the very marrow of my bones," answered Aunt Myra, chafing the end of her purple nose with her sombre glove.

"I don't doubt it, ma'am, if you will wear crape and silk instead of fur and flannel. Rosy goes out in all weathers, and will be none the worse for an hour's brisk skating."

"Well, I warn you that you are trifling with the child's health, and depending too much on the seeming improvement she has made this year. She is a delicate creature for all that, and will drop away suddenly at the first serious attack, as her poor mother did," croaked Aunt Myra, with a despondent wag of the big bonnet.

"I'll risk it," answered Dr. Alec, knitting his brows, as he always did when any allusion was made to that other Rose.

"Mark my words, you will repent it," and with that awful prophecy, Aunt Myra departed like a black shadow.

Now it must be confessed that among the Doctor's failings and he had his share was a very masculine dislike of advice which was thrust upon him unasked. He always listened with respect to the great-aunts, and often consulted Mrs. Jessie; but the other three ladies tried his patience sorely, by constant warnings, complaints and counsels. Aunt Myra was an especial trial, and he always turned contrary the moment she began to talk. He could not help it, and often laughed about it with comical frankness. Here now was a sample of it, for he had just been thinking that Rose had better defer her run till the wind went down and the sun was warmer. But Aunt Myra spoke, and he could not resist the temptation to make light of her advice, and let Rose brave the cold. He had no fear of its harming her, for she went out every day, and it was a great satisfaction to him to see her run down the avenue a minute afterward, with her skates on her arm, looking like a rosy-faced Esquimaux in her seal-skin suit, as she smiled at Aunt Myra stalking along as solemnly as a crow.

"I hope the child won't stay out long, for this wind is enough to chill the marrow in younger bones than Myra's," thought Dr. Alec, half an hour later, as he drove toward the city to see the few patients he had consented to take for old acquaintance' sake.

The thought returned several times that morning, for it was truly a bitter day, and, in spite of his bear-skin coat, the Doctor shivered. But he had great faith in Rose's good sense, and it never occurred to him that she was making a little Casabianca of herself, with the difference of freezing instead of burning at her post.

You see, Mac had made an appointment to meet her at a certain spot, and have a grand skating bout as soon as the few lessons he was allowed were over. She had promised to wait for him, and did so with a faithfulness that cost her dear, because Mac forgot his appointment when the lessons were done, and became absorbed in a chemical experiment, till a general combustion of gases drove him out of his laboratory. Then he suddenly remembered Rose, and would gladly have hurried away to her, but his mother forbade his going out, for the sharp wind would hurt his eyes.

"She will wait and wait, mother, for she always keeps her word, and I told her to hold on till I came," explained Mac, with visions of a shivering little figure watching on the windy hill-top.

"Of course, your uncle won't let her go out such a day as this. If he does, she will have the sense to come here for you, or to go home again when you don't appear," said Aunt Jane, returning to her "Watts on the Mind."

"I wish Steve would just cut up and see if she's there, since I can't go," began Mac, anxiously.

"Steve won't stir a peg, thank you. He's got his own toes to thaw out, and wants his dinner," answered Dandy, just in from school, and wrestling impatiently with his boots.

So Mac resigned himself, and Rose waited dutifully till dinner-time assured her that her waiting was in vain. She had done her best to keep warm, had skated till she was tired and hot, then stood watching others till she was chilled; tried to get up a glow again by trotting up and down the road, but failed to do so, and finally cuddled disconsolately under a pine-tree to wait and watch. When she at length started for home, she was benumbed with cold, and could hardly make her way against the wind that buffeted the frost-bitten rose most unmercifully.

Dr. Alec was basking in the warmth of the study fire, after his drive, when the sound of a stifled sob made him hurry to the door and look anxiously into the hall. Rose lay in a shivering bunch near the register, with her things half off, wringing her hands, and trying not to cry with the pain returning warmth brought to her half-frozen fingers.

"My darling, what is it?" and Uncle Alec had her in his arms in a minute.

"Mac didn't come I can't get warm the fire makes me ache!" and with a long shiver Rose burst out crying, while her teeth chattered, and her poor little nose was so blue, it made one's heart ache to see it.

In less time than it takes to tell it, Dr. Alec had her on the sofa rolled up in the bear-skin coat, with Phebe rubbing her cold feet while he rubbed the aching hands, and Aunt Plenty made a comfortable hot drink, and Aunt Peace sent down her own foot-warmer and embroidered blanket "for the dear."

Full of remorseful tenderness, Uncle Alec worked over his new patient till she declared she was all right again. He would not let her get up to dinner, but fed her himself, and then forgot his own while he sat watching her fall into a drowse, for Aunt Plenty's cordial made her sleepy.

She lay so several hours for the drowse deepened into a heavy sleep, and Uncle Alec, still at his post, saw with growing anxiety that a feverish colour began to burn in her cheeks, that her breathing was quick and uneven, and now and then she gave a little moan, as if in pain. Suddenly she woke up with a start, and seeing Aunt Plenty bending over her, put out her arms like a sick child, saying wearily

"Please, could I go to bed?"

"The best place for you, deary. Take her right up, Alec; I've got the hot water ready, and after a nice bath, she shall have a cup of my sage tea, and be rolled up in blankets to sleep off her cold," answered the old lady, cheerily, as she bustled away to give orders.

"Are you in pain, darling?" asked Uncle Alec, as he carried her up.

"My side aches when I breathe, and I feel stiff and queer; but it isn't bad, so don't be troubled, uncle," whispered Rose, with a little hot hand against his cheek.

But the poor doctor did look troubled, and had cause to do so, for just then Rose tried to laugh at Dolly charging into the room with a warming-pan, but could not, for the sharp pain took her breath away and made her cry out.

"Pleurisy," sighed Aunt Plenty, from the depths of the bath-tub.

"Pewmonia!" groaned Dolly, burrowing among the bedclothes with the long-handled pan, as if bent on fishing up that treacherous disease.

"Oh, is it bad?" asked Phebe, nearly dropping a pail of hot water in her dismay, for she knew nothing of sickness, and Dolly's suggestion had a peculiarly dreadful sound to her.

"Hush!" ordered the Doctor, in a tone that silenced all further predictions, and made everyone work with a will.

"Make her as comfortable as you can, and when she is in her little bed I'll come and say good-night," he added, when the bath was ready and the blankets browning nicely before the fire.

Then he went away to talk quite cheerfully to Aunt Peace about its being "only a chill"; after which he tramped up and down the hall, pulling his beard and knitting his brows, sure signs of great inward perturbation.

"I thought it would be too good luck to get through the year without a downfall. Confound my perversity! Why couldn't I take Myra's advice and keep Rose at home. It's not fair that the poor child should suffer for my sinful over-confidence. She shall not suffer for it! Pneumonia, indeed! I defy it," and he shook his fist in the ugly face of an Indian idol that happened to be before him, as if that particularly hideous god had some spite against his own little goddess.

In spite of his defiance his heart sunk when he saw Rose again, for the pain was worse, and the bath and blankets, the warming-pan and piping-hot sage tea, were all in vain. For several hours there was no rest for the poor child, and all manner of gloomy forebodings haunted the minds of those who hovered about her with faces full of the tenderest anxiety.

In the midst of the worst paroxysm Charlie came to leave a message from his mother, and was met by Phebe coming despondently downstairs with a mustard plaster that had brought no relief.

"What the dickens is the matter? You look as dismal as a tombstone," he said, as she held up her hand to stop his lively whistling.

"Miss Rose is dreadful sick."

"The deuce she is!"

"Don't swear, Mr. Charlie; she really is, and it's Mr. Mac's fault," and Phebe told the sad tale in a few sharp words, for she felt at war with the entire race of boys at that moment.

"I'll give it to him, make your mind easy about that," said Charlie, with an ominous doubling up of his fist. "But Rose isn't dangerously ill, is she?" he added anxiously, as Aunt Plenty was seen to trot across the upper hall, shaking a bottle violently as she went.

"Oh, but she is though. The Doctor don't say much, but he don't call it a 'chill' any more. It's 'pleurisy' now, and I'm so afraid it will be pewmonia to-morrow," answered Phebe, with a despairing glance at the plaster.

Charlie exploded into a stifled laugh at the new pronunciation of pneumonia, to Phebe's great indignation.

"How can you have the heart to do it, and she in such horrid pain? Hark to that, and then laugh if you darst," she said with a tragic gesture, and her black eyes full of fire.

Charlie listened and heard little moans that went to his heart and made his face as sober as Phebe's. "O uncle, please stop the pain, and let me rest a minute! Don't tell the boys I wasn't brave. I try to bear it, but it's so sharp I can't help crying."

Neither could Charlie, when he heard the broken voice say that; but, boy-like, he wouldn't own it, and said pettishly, as he rubbed his sleeve across his eyes

"Don't hold that confounded thing right under my nose; the mustard makes my eyes smart."

"Don't see how it can, when it hasn't any more strength in it than meal. The Doctor said so, and I'm going to get some better," began Phebe, not a bit ashamed of the great tears that were bedewing the condemned plaster.

"I'll go!" and Charlie was off like a shot, glad of an excuse to get out of sight for a few minutes.

When he came back all inconvenient emotion had been disposed of, and, having delivered a box of the hottest mustard procurable for money, he departed to "blow up" Mr. Mac, that being his next duty in his opinion. He did it so energetically and thoroughly that the poor Worm was cast into the depths of remorseful despair, and went to bed that evening feeling that he was an outcast from among men, and bore the mark of Cain upon his brow.

Thanks to the skill of the Doctor, and the devotion of his helpers, Rose grew easier about midnight, and all hoped that the worst was over. Phebe was making tea by the

study fire, for the Doctor had forgotten to eat and drink since Rose was ill, and Aunt Plenty insisted on his having a "good cordial dish of tea" after his exertions. A tap on the window startled Phebe, and, looking up, she saw a face peering in. She was not afraid, for a second look showed her that it was neither ghost nor burglar, but Mac, looking pale and wild in the wintry moonlight.

"Come and let a fellow in," he said in a low tone, and when he stood in the hall he clutched Phebe's arm, whispering gruffly, "How is Rose?"

"Thanks be to goodness, she's better," answered Phebe, with a smile that was like broad sunshine to the poor lad's anxious heart.

"And she will be all right again to-morrow?"

"Oh, dear no! Dolly says she's sure to have rheumatic fever, if she don't have noo-monial!" answered Phebe, careful to pronounce the word rightly this time.

Down went Mac's face, and remorse began to gnaw at him again as he gave a great sigh and said doubtfully

"I suppose I couldn't see her?"

"Of course not at this time of night, when we want her to go to sleep!"

Mac opened his mouth to say something more, when a sneeze came upon him unawares, and a loud "Ah rash hoo!" awoke the echoes of the quiet house.

"Why didn't you stop it?" said Phebe reproachfully. "I dare say you've waked her up."

"Didn't know it was coming. Just my luck!" groaned Mac, turning to go before his unfortunate presence did more harm.

But a voice from the stair-head called softly, "Mac, come up; Rose wants to see you."

Up he went, and found his uncle waiting for him.

"What brings you here at this hour, my boy?" asked the Doctor in a whisper.

"Charlie said it was all my fault, and if she died I'd killed her. I couldn't sleep, so I came to see how she was, and no one knows it but Steve," he said with such a troubled face and voice that the Doctor had not the heart to blame him.

Before he could say anything more a feeble voice called "Mac!" and with a hasty "Stay a minute just to please her, and then slip away, for I want her to sleep," the Doctor led him into the room.

The face on the pillow looked very pale and childish, and the smile that welcomed Mac was very faint, for Rose was spent with pain, yet could not rest till she had said a word of comfort to her cousin.

"I knew your funny sneeze, and I guessed that you came to see how I did, though it is very late. Don't be worried, I'm better now, and it is my fault I was ill, not yours; for I needn't have been so silly as to wait in the cold just because I said I would."

Mac hastened to explain, to load himself with reproaches, and to beg her not to die on any account, for Charlie's lecture had made a deep impression on the poor boy's mind.

"I didn't know there was any danger of my dying," and Rose looked up at him with a solemn expression in her great eyes.

"Oh, I hope not; but people do sometimes go suddenly, you know, and I couldn't rest till I'd asked you to forgive me," faltered Mac, thinking that Rose looked very like an angel already, with the golden hair loose on the pillow, and the meekness of suffering on her little white face.

"I don't think I shall die; uncle won't let me; but if I do, remember I forgave you."

She looked at him with a tender light in her eyes, and, seeing how pathetic his dumb grief was, she added softly, drawing his head down, "I wouldn't kiss you under the mistletoe, but I will now, for I want you to be sure I do forgive and love you just the same."

That quite upset poor Mac; he could only murmur his thanks and get out of the room as fast as possible, to grope his way to the couch at the far end of the hall, and lie there till he fell asleep, worn out with trying not to "make a baby" of himself.