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Chapter 7 - The Lion And The Lamb

When the boys were gone a lull fell upon Plumfield, and the family scattered to various places for brief outings, as August had come and all felt the need of change. The Professor took Mrs Jo to the mountains. The Laurences were at the seashore, and there Meg's family and the Bhaer boys took turns to visit, as someone must always be at home to keep things in order.

Mrs Meg, with Daisy, was in office when the events occurred which we are about to relate. Rob and Ted were just up from Rocky Nook, and Nan was passing a week with her friend as the only relaxation she allowed herself. Demi was off on a run with Tom, so Rob was man of the house, with old Silas as general overseer. The sea air seemed to have gone to Ted's head, for he was unusually freakish, and led his gentle aunt and poor Rob a life of it with his pranks. Octoo was worn out with the wild rides he took, and Don openly rebelled when ordered to leap and show off his accomplishments; while the girls at college were both amused and worried by the ghosts who haunted the grounds at night, the unearthly melodies that disturbed their studious hours, and the hairbreadth escapes of this restless boy by flood and field and fire. Something happened at length which effectually sobered Ted and made a lasting impression on both the boys; for sudden danger and a haunting fear turned the Lion into a lamb and the Lamb into a lion, as far as courage went.

On the first of September - the boys never forgot the date - after a pleasant tramp and good luck with their fishing, the brothers were lounging in the barn; for Daisy had company, and the lads kept out of the way.

'I tell you what it is, Bobby, that dog is sick. He won't play, nor eat, nor drink, and acts queerly. Dan will kill us if anything happens to him,' said Ted, looking at Don, who lay near his kennel resting a moment after one of the restless wanderings which kept him vibrating between the door of Dan's room and the shady corner of the yard, where his master had settled him with an old cap to guard till he came back.

'It's the hot weather, perhaps. But I sometimes think he's pining for Dan. Dogs do, you know, and the poor fellow has been low in his mind ever since the boys went. Maybe something has happened to Dan. Don howled last night and can't rest. I've heard of such things,' answered Rob thoughtfully.

'Pooh! he can't know. He's cross. I'll stir him up and take him for a run. Always makes me feel better. Hi, boy! wake up and be jolly'; and Ted snapped his fingers at the dog, who only looked at him with grim indifference.

'Better let him alone. If he isn't right tomorrow, we'll take him to Dr Watkins and see what he says.' And Rob went on watching the swallows as he lay in the hay polishing up some Latin verses he had made.

The spirit of perversity entered into Ted, and merely because he was told not to tease Don he went on doing it, pretending that it was for the dog's good. Don took no heed of his pats, commands, reproaches, or insults, till Ted's patience gave out; and seeing a convenient switch near by he could not resist the temptation to conquer the great hound by force, since gentleness failed to win obedience. He had the wisdom to chain Don up first; for a blow from any hand but his master's made him savage, and Ted had more than once tried the experiment, as the dog remembered. This indignity roused Don and he sat up with a growl. Rob heard it, and seeing Ted raise the switch, ran to interfere, exclaiming:

'Don't touch him! Dan forbade it! Leave the poor thing in peace; I won't allow it.'

Rob seldom commanded, but when he did Master Ted had to give in. His temper was up, and Rob's masterful tone made it impossible to resist one cut at the rebellious dog before he submitted. Only a single blow, but it was a costly one; for as it fell, the dog sprang at Ted with a snarl, and Rob, rushing between the two, felt the sharp teeth pierce his leg. A word made Don let go and drop remorsefully at Rob's feet, for he loved him and was evidently sorry to have hurt his friend by mistake. With a forgiving pat Rob left him, to limp to the barn followed by Ted, whose wrath was changed to shame and sorrow when he saw the red drops on Rob's sock and the little wounds in his leg.

'I'm awfully sorry. Why did you get in the way? Here, wash it up, and I'll get a rag to tie on it,' he said quickly filling a sponge with water and pulling out a very demoralized handkerchief. Rob usually made light of his own mishaps and was over ready to forgive if others were to blame; but now he sat quite still, looking at the purple marks with such a strange expression on his white face that Ted was troubled, though he added with a laugh: 'Why, you're not afraid of a little dig like that, are you, Bobby?'

'I am afraid of hydrophobia. But if Don is mad I'd rather be the one to have it,' answered Rob, with a smile and a shiver.

At that dreadful word Ted turned whiter than his brother, and, dropping sponge and handkerchief, stared at him with a frightened face, whispering in a tone of despair:

'Oh, Rob, don't say it! What shall we do, what shall we do?'

'Call Nan; she will know. Don't scare Aunty, or tell a soul but Nan; she's on the back piazza; get her out here as quick as you can. I'll wash it till she comes. Maybe it's nothing; don't look so staggered, Ted. I only thought it might be, as Don is queer.'

Rob tried to speak bravely; but Ted's long legs felt strangely weak as he hurried away, and it was lucky he met no one, for his face would have betrayed him. Nan was swinging luxuriously in a hammock, amusing herself with a lively treatise on croup, when an agitated boy suddenly clutched her, whispering, as he nearly pulled her overboard:

'Come to Rob in the barn! Don's mad and he's bitten him, and we don't know what to do; it's all my fault; no one must know. Oh, do be quick!'

Nan was on her feet at once, startled, but with her wits about her, and both were off without more words as they dodged round the house where unconscious Daisy chatted with her friends in the parlour and Aunt Meg peacefully took her afternoon nap upstairs.

Rob was braced up, and was as calm and steady as ever when they found him in the harness-room, whither he had wisely retired, to escape observation. The story was soon told, and after a look at Don, now in his kennel, sad and surly, Nan said slowly, with her eye on the full water-pan:

'Rob, there is one thing to do for the sake of safety, and it must be done at once. We can't wait to see if Don is - sick - or to go for a doctor. I can do it, and I will; but it is very painful, and I hate to hurt you, dear.'

A most unprofessional quiver got into Nan's voice as she spoke, and her keen eyes dimmed as she looked at the two anxious young faces turned so confidently to her for help.

'I know, burn it; well, do it, please; I can bear it. But Ted better go away,' said Rob, with a firm setting of his lips, and a nod at his afflicted brother.

'I won't stir; I can stand it if he can, only it ought to be me!' cried Ted, with a desperate effort not to cry, so full of grief and fear and shame was he that it seemed as if he couldn't bear it like a man.

'He'd better stay and help; do him good,' answered

Nan sternly, because, her heart was faint within her, knowing as she did all that might be in store for both poor boys. 'Keep quiet; I'll be back in a minute,' she added, going towards the house, while her quick mind hastily planned what was best to be done.

It was ironing day, and a hot fire still burned in the empty kitchen, for the maids were upstairs resting. Nan put a slender poker to heat, and as she sat waiting for it, covered her face with her hands, asking help in this sudden need for strength, courage, and wisdom; for there was no one else to call upon, and young as she was, she knew what was to be done if she only had the nerve to do it. Any other patient would have been calmly interesting, but dear, good Robin, his father's pride, his mother's comfort, everyone's favourite and friend, that he should be in danger was very terrible; and a few hot tears dropped on the well-scoured table as Nan tried to calm her trouble by remembering how very likely it was to be all a mistake, a natural but vain alarm.

'I must make light of it, or the boys will break down, and then there will be a panic. Why afflict and frighten everyone when all is in doubt? I won't. I'll take Rob to Dr Morrison at once, and have the dog man see Don. Then, having done all we can, we will either laugh at our scare - if it is one - or be ready for whatever comes. Now for my poor boy.'

Armed with the red-hot poker, a pitcher of ice-water, and several handkerchiefs from the clotheshorse, Nan went back to the barn ready to do her best in this her most serious 'emergency case'. The boys sat like statues, one of despair, the other of resignation; and it took all Nan's boasted nerve to do her work quickly and well.

'Now, Rob, only a minute, then we are safe. Stand by, Ted; he may be a bit faintish.'

Rob shut his eyes, clinched his hands, and sat like a hero. Ted knelt beside him, white as a sheet, and as weak as a girl; for the pangs of remorse were rending him, and his heart failed at the thought of all this pain because of his wilfulness. It was all over in a moment, with only one little groan; but when Nan looked to her assistant to hand the water, poor Ted needed it the most, for he had fainted away, and lay on the floor in a pathetic heap of arms and legs.

Rob laughed, and, cheered by that unexpected sound, Nan bound up the wound with hands that never trembled, though great drops stood on her forehead; and she shared the water with patient number one before she turned to patient number two. Ted was much ashamed, and quite broken in spirit, when he found how he had failed at the critical moment, and begged them not to tell, as he really could not help it; then by way of finishing his utter humiliation, a burst of hysterical tears disgraced his manly soul, and did him a world of good.

'Never mind, never mind, we are all right now, and no one need be the wiser,' said Nan briskly, as poor Ted hiccupped on Rob's shoulder, laughing and crying in the most tempestuous manner, while his brother soothed him, and the young doctor fanned both with Silas's old straw hat.

'Now, boys, listen to me and remember what I say. We won't alarm anyone yet, for I've made up my mind our scare is all nonsense. Don was out lapping the water as I came by, and I don't believe he's mad any more than I am. Still, to ease our minds and compose our spirits, and get our guilty faces out of sight for a while, I think we had better drive into town to my old friend Dr Morrison, and let him just take a look at my work, and give us some quieting little dose; for we are all rather shaken by this flurry. Sit still, Rob; and Ted, you harness up while I run and get my hat and tell Aunty to excuse me to Daisy. I don't know those Penniman girls, and she will be glad of our room at tea, and we'll have a cosy bite at my house, and come home as gay as larks.'

Nan talked on as a vent for the hidden emotions which professional pride would not allow her to show, and the boys approved her plan at once; for action is always easier than quiet waiting. Ted went staggering away to wash his face at the pump, and rub some colour into his cheeks before he harnessed the horse. Rob lay tranquilly on the hay, looking up at the swallows again as he lived through some very memorable moments. Boy as he was, the thought of death coming suddenly to him, and in this way, might well make him sober; for it is a very solemn thing to be arrested in the midst of busy life by the possibility of the great change. There were no sins to be repented of, few faults, and many happy, dutiful years to remember with infinite comfort. So Rob had no fears to daunt him, no regrets to sadden, and best of all, a very strong and simple piety to sustain and cheer him.

'Mein Vater,' was his first thought; for Rob was very near the Professor's heart, and the loss of his eldest would have been a bitter blow. These words, whispered with a tremble of the lips that had been so firm when the hot iron burned, recalled that other Father who is always near, always tender and helpful; and, folding his hands, Rob said the heartiest little prayer he ever prayed, there on the hay, to the soft twitter of the brooding birds. It did him good; and wisely laying all his fear and doubt and trouble in God's hand, the boy felt ready for whatever was to come, and from that hour kept steadily before him the one duty that was plain - to be brave and cheerful, keep silent, and hope for the best.

Nan stole her hat, and left a note on Daisy's pincushion, saying she had taken the boys to drive, and all would be out of the way till after tea. Then she hurried back and found her patients much better, the one for work, the other for rest. In they got, and, putting Rob on the back seat with his leg up drove away, looking as gay and care-free as if nothing had happened.

Dr Morrison made light of the affair, but told Nan she had done right; and as the much-relieved lads went downstairs, he added in a whisper: 'Send the dog off for a while, and keep your eye on the boy. Don't let him know it, and report to me if anything seems wrong. One never knows in these cases. No harm to be careful.'

Nan nodded, and feeling much relieved now that the responsibility was off her shoulders, took the lads to Dr Watkins, who promised to come out later and examine Don. A merry tea at Nan's house, which was kept open for her all summer, did them good, and by the time they got home in the cool of the evening no sign of the panic remained but Ted's heavy eyes, and a slight limp when Rob walked. As the guests were still chattering on the front piazza they retired to the back, and Ted soothed his remorseful soul by swinging Rob in the hammock, while Nan told stories till the dog man arrived.

He said Don was a little under the weather, but no more mad than the grey kitten that purred round his legs while the examination went on.

'He wants his master, and feels the heat. Fed too well, perhaps. I'll keep him a few weeks and send him home all right,' said Dr Watkins, as Don laid his great head in his

hand, and kept his intelligent eyes on his face, evidently feeling that this man understood his trials, and knew what to do for him.

So Don departed without a murmur, and our three conspirators took counsel together how to spare the family all anxiety, and give Rob the rest his leg demanded. Fortunately, he always spent many hours in his little study, so he could lie on the sofa with a book in his hand as long as he liked, without exciting any remark. Being of a quiet temperament, he did not worry himself or Nan with useless fears, but believed what was told him, and dismissing all dark possibilities, went cheerfully on his way, soon recovering from the shock of what he called 'our scare'.

But excitable Ted was harder to manage, and it took all Nan's wit and wisdom to keep him from betraying the secret; for it was best to say nothing and spare all discussion of the subject for Rob's sake. Ted's remorse preyed upon him, and having no 'Mum' to confide in, he was very miserable. By day he devoted himself to Rob, waiting on him, talking to him, gazing anxiously at him, and worrying the good fellow very much; though he wouldn't own it, since Ted found comfort in it. But at night, when all was quiet, Ted's lively imagination and heavy heart got the better of him, and kept him awake, or set him walking in his sleep. Nan had her eye on him, and more than once administered a little dose to give him a rest, read to him, scolded him, and when she caught him haunting the house in the watches of the night, threatened to lock him up if he did not stay in his bed. This wore off after a while; but a change came over the freakish boy, and everyone observed it, even before his mother returned to ask what they had done to quench the Lion's spirits. He was gay, but not so heedless; and often when the old wilfulness beset him, he would check it sharply, look at Rob, and give up, or stalk away to have his sulk out alone. He no longer made fun of his brother's old-fashioned ways and bookish tastes, but treated him with a new and very marked respect, which touched and pleased modest Rob, and much amazed all observers. It seemed as if he felt that he owed him reparation for the foolish act that might have cost him his life; and love being stronger than will, Ted forgot his pride, and paid his debt like an honest boy.

'I don't understand it,' said Mrs Jo, after a week of home life, the much impressed by the good behaviour of her younger son. 'Ted is such a saint, I'm afraid we are going to lose him. Is it Meg's sweet influence, or Daisy's fine cooking, or the pellets I catch Nan giving him on the sly? Some witchcraft has been at work during my absence, and this will-o'-the-wisp is so amiable, quiet, and obedient, I don't know him.'

'He is growing up, heart's-dearest, and being a precocious plant, he begins to bloom early. I also see a change in my Robchen. He is more manly and serious than ever, and is seldom far from me, as if his love for the old papa was growing with his growth. Our boys will often surprise us in this way, Jo, and we can only rejoice over them and leave them to become what Gott pleases.'

As the Professor spoke, his eyes rested proudly on the brothers, who came walking up the steps together, Ted's arm over Rob's shoulder as he listened attentively to some geological remarks Rob was making on a stone he held. Usually, Ted made fun of such tastes, and loved to lay boulders in the student's path, put brickbats under his pillow, gravel in his shoes, or send parcels of dirt by express to 'Prof. R. M. Bhaer'. Lately, he had treated Rob's hobbies respectfully, and had begun to appreciate the good qualities of this quiet brother whom he had always loved but rather undervalued, till his courage under fire won Ted's admiration, and made it impossible to forget a fault, the consequences of which might have been so terrible. The leg was still lame, though doing well, and Ted was always offering an arm as support, gazing anxiously at his brother, and trying to guess his wants; for regret was still keen in Ted's soul, and Rob's forgiveness only made it deeper. A fortunate slip on the stairs gave Rob an excuse for limping, and no one but Nan and Ted saw the wound; so the secret was safe up to this time.

'We are talking about you, my lads. Come in and tell us what good fairy has been at work while we were gone. Or is it because absence sharpens our eyes, that we find such pleasant changes when we come back?' said Mrs Jo, patting the sofa on either side, while the Professor forgot his piles of letters to admire the pleasing prospect of his wife in a bower of arms, as the boys sat down beside her, smiling affectionately, but feeling a little guilty; for till now 'Mum' and 'Vater' knew every event in their boyish lives.

'Oh, it's only because Bobby and I have been alone so much; we are sort of twins. I stir him up a bit, and he steadies me a great deal. You and father do the same, you know. Nice plan. I like it'; and Ted felt that he had settled the matter capitally.

'Mother won't thank you for comparing yourself to her, Ted. I'm flattered at being like father in any way. I try to be,' answered Rob, as they laughed at Ted's compliment.

'I do thank him, for it's true; and if you, Robin, do half as much for your brother as Papa has for me, your life won't be a failure,' said Mrs Jo heartily. 'I'm very glad to see you helping one another. It's the right way, and we can't begin too soon to try to understand the needs, virtues, and failings of those nearest us. Love should not make us blind to faults, nor familiarity make us too ready to blame the shortcomings we see. So work away, my sonnies, and give us more surprises of this sort as often as you like.'

'The liebe Mutter has said all. I too am well pleased at the friendly brother-warmth I find. It is good for everyone; long may it last!' and Professor Bhaer nodded at the boys, who looked gratified, but rather at a loss how to respond to these flattering remarks.

Rob wisely kept silent, fearing to say too much; but Ted burst out, finding it impossible to help telling something:

'The fact is I've been finding out what a brave good chap Bobby is, and I'm trying to make up for all the bother I've been to him. I knew he was awfully wise, but I thought him rather soft, because he liked books better than larks, and was always fussing about his conscience. But I begin to see that it isn't the fellows who talk the loudest and show off best that are the manliest. No, sir! quiet old Bob is a hero and a trump, and I'm proud of him; so would you be if you knew all about it.'

Here a look from Rob brought Ted up with a round turn; he stopped short, grew red, and clapped his hand on his mouth in dismay.

'Well, are we not to "know all about it"?' asked Mrs Jo quickly; for her sharp eye saw signs of danger and her maternal heart felt that something had come between her and her sons. 'Boys,' she went on solemnly, 'I suspect that the change we talk about is not altogether the effect of growing up, as we say. It strikes me that Ted has been in mischief and Rob has got him out of some scrape; hence the lovely mood of my bad boy and the sober one of my conscientious son, who never hides anything from his mother.'

Rob was as red as Ted now, but after a moment's hesitation he looked up and answered with an air of relief:

'Yes, mother, that's it; but it's all over and no harm done, and I think we'd better let it be, for a while at least. I did feel guilty to keep anything from you, but now you know so much I shall not worry and you needn't either. Ted's sorry, I don't mind, and it has done us both good.'

Mrs Jo looked at Ted, who winked hard but bore the look like a man; then she turned to Rob, who smiled at her so cheerfully that she felt reassured; but something in his face struck her, and she saw what it was that made him seem older, graver, yet more lovable than ever. It was the look pain of mind, as well as body, brings, and the patience of a sweet submission to some inevitable trial. Like a flash she guessed that some danger had been near her boy, and the glances she had caught between the two lads and Nan confirmed her fears.

'Rob, dear, you have been ill, hurt, or seriously troubled by Ted? Tell me at once; I will not have any secrets now. Boys sometimes suffer all their lives from neglected accidents or carelessness. Fritz, make them speak out!'

Mr Bhaer put down his papers and came to stand before them, saying in a tone that quieted Mrs Jo, and gave the boys courage:

'My sons, give us the truth. We can bear it; do not hold it back to spare us. Ted knows we forgive much because we love him, so be frank, all two.'

Ted instantly dived among the sofa pillows and kept there, with only a pair of scarlet ears visible, while Rob in a few words told the little story, truthfully, but as gently as he could, hastening to add the comfortable assurance that Don was not mad, the wound nearly well, and no danger would ever come of it.

But Mrs Jo grew so pale he had to put his arms about her, and his father turned and walked away, exclaiming: 'Ach Himmel!' in a tone of such mingled pain, relief, and gratitude, that Ted pulled an extra pillow over his head to smother the sound. They were all right in a minute; but such news is always a shock, even if the peril is past, and Mrs Jo hugged her boy close till his father came and took him away, saying with a strong shake of both hands and a quiver in his voice:

'To be in danger of one's life tries a man's mettle, and you bear it well; but I cannot spare my good boy yet; thank Gott, we keep him safe!'

A smothered sound, between a choke and a groan, came from under the pillows, and the writhing of Ted's long legs so plainly expressed despair that his mother relented towards him, and burrowing till she found a tousled yellow head, pulled it out and smoothed it, exclaiming with an irrepressible laugh, though her cheeks were wet with tears:

'Come and be forgiven, poor sinner! I know you have suffered enough, and I won't say a word; only if harm had come to Rob you would have made me more miserable than yourself. Oh, Teddy, Teddy, do try to cure that wilful spirit of yours before it is too late!'

'Oh, Mum, I do try! I never can forget this - I hope it's cured me; if it hasn't, I am afraid I ain't worth saving,' answered Ted, pulling his own hair as the only way of expressing his deep remorse.

'Yes, you are, my dear; I felt just so at fifteen when Amy was nearly drowned, and Marmee helped me as I'll help you. Come to me, Teddy, when the evil one gets hold of you, and together we'll rout him. Ah, me! I've had many a tussle with that old Apollyon, and often got worsted, but not always. Come under my shield, and we'll fight till we win.'

No one spoke for a minute as Ted and his mother laughed and cried in one handkerchief, and Rob stood with his father's arm round him so happy that all was told and forgiven, though never to be forgotten; for such experiences do one good, and knit hearts that love more closely together.

Presently Ted rose straight up and going to his father, said bravely and humbly:

'I ought to be punished. Please do it; but first say you forgive me, as Rob does.'

'Always that, mein Sohn, seventy time seven, if needs be, else I am not worthy the name you give me. The punishment has come; I can give no greater. Let it not be in vain. It will not with the help of the mother and the All Father. Room here for both, always!'

The good Professor opened his arms and embraced his boys like a true German, not ashamed to express by gesture or by word the fatherly emotions an American would have compressed into a slap on the shoulder and a brief 'All right'.

Mrs Jo sat and enjoyed the prospect like a romantic soul as she was, and then they had a quiet talk together, saying freely all that was in their hearts, and finding much comfort in the confidence which comes when love casts out fear. It was agreed that nothing be said except to Nan, who was to be thanked and rewarded for her courage, discretion, and fidelity.

'I always knew that girl had the making of a fine woman in her, and this proves it. No panics and shrieks and faintings and fuss, but calm sense and energetic skill. Dear child, what can I give or do to show my gratitude?' said Mrs Jo enthusiastically.

'Make Tom clear out and leave her in peace,' suggested Ted, almost himself again, though a pensive haze still partially obscured his native gaiety.

'Yes, do! he frets her like a mosquito. She forbade him to come out here while she stayed, and packed him off with Demi. I like old Tom, but he is a regular noodle about Nan,' added Rob, as he went away to help his father with the accumulated letters.

'I'll do it!' said Mrs Jo decidedly. 'That girl's career shall not be hampered by a foolish boy's fancy. In a moment of weariness she may give in, and then it's all over. Wiser women have done so and regretted it all their lives. Nan shall earn her place first, and prove that she can fill it; then she may marry if she likes, and can find a man worthy of her.'

But Mrs Jo's help was not needed; for love and gratitude can work miracles, and when youth, beauty, accident, and photography are added, success is sure; as was proved in the case of the unsuspecting but too susceptible Thomas.