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[Authors](#)
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[Eight Cousins](#)

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This Book:
[Contents](#)
[Previous Chapter](#)
[Next Chapter](#)

Chapter 3 - Uncles

When Rose woke next morning, she was not sure whether she had dreamed what occurred the night before, or it had actually happened. So she hopped up and dressed, although it was an hour earlier than she usually rose, for she could not sleep any more, being possessed with a strong desire to slip down and see if the big portmanteau and packing cases were really in the hall. She seemed to remember tumbling over them when she went to bed, for the aunts had sent her off very punctually, because they wanted their pet nephew all to themselves.

The sun was shining, and Rose opened her window to let in the soft May air fresh from the sea. As she leaned over her little balcony, watching an early bird get the worm, and wondering how she should like Uncle Alec, she saw a man leap the garden wall and come whistling up the path. At first she thought it was some trespasser, but a second look showed her that it was her uncle returning from an early dip into the sea. She had hardly dared to look at him the night before, because whenever she tried to do so she always found a pair of keen blue eyes looking at her. Now she could take a good stare at him as he lingered along, looking about him as if glad to see the old place again.

A brown, breezy man, in a blue jacket, with no hat on the curly head, which he shook now and then like a water dog; broad-shouldered, alert in his motions, and with a general air of strength and stability about him which pleased Rose, though she could not explain the feeling of comfort it gave her. She had just said to herself, with a sense of relief, "I guess I shall like him, though he looks as if he made people mind," when he lifted his eyes to examine the budding horse-chestnut overhead, and saw the eager face peering down at him. He waved his hand to her, nodded, and called out in a bluff, cheery voice

"You are on deck early, little niece."

"I got up to see if you had really come, uncle."

"Did you? Well, come down here and make sure of it."

"I'm not allowed to go out before breakfast, sir."

"Oh, indeed!" with a shrug. "Then I'll come aboard and salute," he added; and, to Rose's great amazement, Uncle Alec went up one of the pillars of the back piazza hand over hand, stepped across the roof, and swung himself into her balcony, saying, as he landed on the wide balustrade: "Have you any doubts about me now, ma'am?"

Rose was so taken aback, she could only answer with a smile as she went to meet him.

"How does my girl do this morning?" he asked, taking the little cold hand she gave him in both his big warm ones.

"Pretty well, thank you, sir."

"Ah, but it should be very well. Why isn't it?"

"I always wake up with a headache, and feel tired."

"Don't you sleep well?"

"I lie awake a long time, and then I dream, and my sleep does not seem to rest me much."

"What do you do all day?"

"Oh, I read, and sew a little, and take naps, and sit with auntie."

"No running about out of doors, or house-work, or riding, hey?"

"Aunt Plenty says I'm not strong enough for much exercise. I drive out with her sometimes, but I don't care for it."

"I'm not surprised at that," said Uncle Alec, half to himself, adding, in his quick way: "Who have you had to play with?"

"No one but Ariadne Blish, and she was such a goose I couldn't bear her. The boys came yesterday, and seemed rather nice; but, of course, I couldn't play with them."

"Why not?"

"I'm too old to play with boys."

"Not a bit of it; that's just what you need, for you've been molly-coddled too much. They are good lads, and you'll be mixed up with them more or less for years to come, so you may as well be friends and playmates at once. I will look you up some girls also, if I can find a sensible one who is not spoiled by her nonsensical education."

"Phebe is sensible, I'm sure, and I like her, though I only saw her yesterday," cried Rose, waking up suddenly.

"And who is Phebe, if you please?"

Rose eagerly told all she knew, and Uncle Alec listened, with an odd smile lurking about his mouth, though his eyes were quite sober as he watched the face before him.

"I'm glad to see that you are not aristocratic in your tastes, but I don't quite make out why you like this young lady from the poor-house."

"You may laugh at me, but I do. I can't tell why, only she seems so happy and busy, and sings so beautifully, and is strong enough to scrub and sweep, and hasn't any troubles to plague her," said Rose, making a funny jumble of reasons in her efforts to explain.

"How do you know that?"

"Oh, I was telling her about mine, and asked if she had any, and she said, 'No, only I'd like to go to school, and I mean to some day.'"

"So she doesn't call desertion, poverty, and hard work, troubles? She's a brave little girl, and I shall be proud to know her." And Uncle Alec gave an approving nod, that made Rose wish she had been the one to earn it.

"But what are these troubles of yours, child?" he asked, after a minute of silence.

"Please don't ask me, uncle."

"Can't you tell them to me as well as to Phebe?"

Something in his tone made Rose feel that it would be better to speak out and be done with it, so she answered, with sudden colour and averted eyes

"The greatest one was losing dear papa."

As she said that, Uncle Alec's arm came gently round her, and he drew her to him, saying, in the voice so like papa's

"That is a trouble which I cannot cure, my child; but I shall try to make you feel it less. What else, dear?"

"I am so tired and poorly all the time, I can't do anything I want to, and it makes me cross," sighed Rose, rubbing the aching head like a fretful child.

"That we can cure and we will," said her uncle, with a decided nod that made the curls bob on his head, to that Rose saw the gray ones underneath the brown.

"Aunt Myra says I have no constitution, and never shall be strong," observed Rose, in a pensive tone, as if it was rather a nice thing to be an invalid.

"Aunt Myra is a ahem! an excellent woman, but it is her hobby to believe that everyone is tottering on the brink of the grave; and, upon my life, I believe she is offended if people don't fall into it! We will show her how to make constitutions and turn pale-faced little ghosts into rosy, hearty girls. That's my business, you know," he added, more quietly, for his sudden outburst had rather startled Rose.

"I had forgotten you were a doctor. I'm glad of it, for I do want to be well, only I hope you won't give me much medicine, for I've taken quarts already, and it does me no good."

As she spoke, Rose pointed to a little table just inside the window, on which appeared a regiment of bottles.

"Ah, ha! Now we'll see what mischief these blessed women have been at." And, making a long arm, Dr. Alec set the bottles on the wide railing before him, examined each carefully, smiled over some, frowned over others, and said, as he put down the last: "Now I'll show you the best way to take these messes." And, as quick as a flash, he sent one after another smashing down into the posy-beds below.

"But Aunt Plenty won't like it; and Aunt Myra will be angry, for she sent most of them!" cried Rose, half frightened and half pleased at such energetic measures.

"You are my patient now, and I'll take the responsibility. My way of giving physic is evidently the best, for you look better already," he said, laughing so infectiously that Rose followed suit, saying saucily

"If I don't like your medicines any better than those, I shall throw them into the garden, and then what will you do?"

"When I prescribe such rubbish, I'll give you leave to pitch it overboard as soon as you like. Now what is the next trouble?"

"I hoped you would forget to ask."

"But how can I help you if I don't know them? Come, let us have No. 3."

"It is very wrong, I suppose, but I do sometimes wish I had not quite so many aunts. They are all very good to me, and I want to please them; but they are so different, I feel sort of pulled to pieces among them," said Rose, trying to express the emotions of a stray chicken with six hens all clucking over it at once.

Uncle Alec threw back his head and laughed like a boy, for he could entirely understand how the good ladies had each put in her oar and tried to paddle her own way, to the great disturbance of the waters and the entire bewilderment of poor Rose.

"I intend to try a course of uncles now, and see how that suits your constitution. I'm going to have you all to myself, and no one is to give a word of advice unless I ask it. There is no other way to keep order aboard, and I am captain of this little craft, for a time at least. What comes next?"

But Rose stuck there, and grew so red, her uncle guessed what that trouble was.

"I don't think I can tell this one. It wouldn't be polite, and I feel pretty sure that it isn't going to be a trouble any more."

As she blushed and stammered over these words, Dr. Alec turned his eyes away to the distant sea, and said so seriously, so tenderly, that she felt every word and long remembered them

"My child, I don't expect you to love and trust me all at once, but I do want you to believe that I shall give my whole heart to this new duty; and if I make mistakes, as I probably shall, no one will grieve over them more bitterly than I. It is my fault that I am a stranger to you, when I want to be your best friend. That is one of my mistakes,

and I never repented it more deeply than I do now. Your father and I had a trouble, and I thought I could never forgive him; so I kept away for years. Thank God, we made it all up the last time I saw him, and he told me then, that if he was forced to leave her he should bequeath his little girl to me as a token of his love. I can't fill his place, but I shall try to be a father to her; and if she learns to love me half as well as she did the good one she has lost, I shall be a proud and happy man. Will she believe this and try?"

Something in Uncle Alec's face touched Rose to the heart, and when he held out his hand with that anxious troubled look in his eyes, she was moved to put up her innocent lips and seal the contract with a confiding kiss. The strong arm held her close a minute, and she felt the broad chest heave once as if with a great sigh of relief; but not a word was spoken till a tap at the door made both start.

Rose popped her head through the window to say "come in," while Dr. Alec hastily rubbed the sleeve of his jacket across his eyes and began to whistle again.

Phebe appeared with a cup of coffee.

"Debby told me to bring this and help you get up," she said, opening her black eyes wide, as if she wondered how on earth "the sailor man" got there.

"I'm all dressed, so I don't need any help. I hope that is good and strong," added Rose, eyeing the steaming cup with an eager look.

But she did not get it, for a brown hand took possession of it as her uncle said quickly

"Hold hard, my lass, and let me overhaul that dose before you take it. Do you drink all this strong coffee every morning, Rose?"

"Yes, sir, and I like it. Auntie says it 'tones' me up, and I always feel better after it."

"This accounts for the sleepless nights, the flutter your heart gets into at the least start, and this is why that cheek of yours is pale yellow instead of rosy red. No more coffee for you, my dear, and by and by you'll see that I am right. Any new milk downstairs, Phebe?"

"Yes, sir, plenty right in from the barn."

"That's the drink for my patient. Go bring me a pitcherful, and another cup; I want a draught myself. This won't hurt the honeysuckles, for they have no nerves to speak of. And, to Rose's great discomfort, the coffee went after the medicine.

Dr. Alec saw the injured look she put on, but took no notice, and presently banished it by saying pleasantly

"I've got a capital little cup among my traps, and I'll give it to you to drink your milk in, as it is made of wood that is supposed to improve whatever is put into it something like a quassia cup. That reminds me; one of the boxes Phebe wanted to lug upstairs last night is for you. Knowing that I was coming home to find a ready-made daughter, I picked up all sorts of odd and pretty trifles along the way, hoping she would be able to find something she liked among them all. Early to-morrow we'll have a grand rummage. Here's our milk! I propose the health of Miss Rose Campbell and drink it with all my heart."

It was impossible for Rose to pout with the prospect of a delightful boxful of gifts dancing before her eyes; so, in spite of herself, she smiled as she drank her own health, and found that fresh milk was not a hard dose to take.

"Now I must be off, before I am caught again with my wig in a toss," said Dr. Alec, preparing to descend the way he came.

"Do you always go in and out like a cat, uncle?" asked Rose, much amused at his odd ways.

"I used to sneak out of my window when I was a boy, so I need not disturb the aunts, and now I rather like it, for it's the shortest road, and it keeps me limber when I have no rigging to climb. Good-bye till breakfast." And away he went down the water-spout, over the roof, and vanished among the budding honey-suckles below.

"Ain't he a funny guarddeen?" exclaimed Phebe, as she went off with the cups.

"He is a very kind one, I think," answered Rose, following, to prowls round the big boxes and try to guess which was hers.

When her uncle appeared at sound of the bell, he found her surveying with an anxious face a new dish that smoked upon the table.

"Got a fresh trouble, Rosy?" he asked, stroking her smooth head.

"Uncle, are you going to make me eat oatmeal?" asked Rose, in a tragic tone.

"Don't you like it?"

"I de-test it!" answered Rose, with all the emphasis which a turned-up nose, a shudder, and a groan could give to the three words.

"You are not a true Scotswoman, if you don't like the 'parritch.' It's a pity, for I made it myself, and thought we'd have such a good time with all that cream to float it in. Well, never mind." And he sat down with a disappointed air.

Rose had made up her mind to be obstinate about it, because she did heartily "detest" the dish; but as Uncle Alec did not attempt to make her obey, she suddenly changed her mind and thought she would.

"I'll try to eat it to please you, uncle; but people are always saying how wholesome it is, and that makes me hate it," she said, half-ashamed at her silly excuse.

"I do want you to like it, because I wish my girl to be as well and strong as Jessie's boys, who are brought up on this in the good old fashion. No hot bread and fried stuff for them, and they are the biggest and bonniest lads of the lot. Bless you, auntie, and good morning!"

Dr. Alec turned to greet the old lady, and, with a firm resolve to eat or die in the attempt, Rose sat down.

In five minutes she forgot what she was eating, so interested was she in the chat that went on. It amused her very much to hear Aunt Plenty call her forty-year-old nephew "my dear boy"; and Uncle Alec was so full of lively gossip about all creation in general, and the Aunt-hill in particular, that the detested porridge vanished without a murmur.

"You will go to church with us, I hope, Alec, if you are not too tired," said the old lady, when breakfast was over.

"I came all the way from Calcutta for that express purpose, ma'am. Only I must send the sisters word of my arrival, for they don't expect me till to-morrow, you know, and there will be a row in church if those boys see me without warning."

"I'll send Ben up the hill, and you can step over to Myra's yourself; it will please her, and you will have plenty of time."

Dr. Alec was off at once, and they saw no more of him till the old barouche was at the door, and Aunt Plenty just rustling downstairs in her Sunday best, with Rose like a little black shadow behind her.

Away they drove in state, and all the way Uncle Alec's hat was more off his head than on, for everyone they met smiled and bowed, and gave him as blithe a greeting as the day permitted.

It was evident that the warning had been a wise one, for, in spite of time and place, the lads were in such a ferment that their elders sat in momentary dread of an unseemly outbreak somewhere. It was simply impossible to keep those fourteen eyes off Uncle Alec, and the dreadful things that were done during sermon-time will hardly be believed.

Rose dared not look up after a while, for these bad boys vented their emotions upon her till she was ready to laugh and cry with mingled amusement and vexation. Charlie winked rapturously at her behind his mother's fan; Mac openly pointed to the tall figure beside her; Jamie stared fixedly over the back of his pew, till Rose thought his round eyes would drop out of his head; George fell over a stool and dropped three books in his excitement; Will drew sailors and Chinamen on his clean cuffs, and displayed them, to Rose's great tribulation; Steve nearly upset the whole party by burning his nose with salts, as he pretended to be overcome by his joy; even dignified Archie disgraced himself by writing in his hymn book, "Isn't he blue and brown?" and passing it politely to Rose.

Her only salvation was trying to fix her attention upon Uncle Mac a portly, placid gentleman, who seemed entirely unconscious of the iniquities of the Clan, and dozed peacefully in his pew corner. This was the only uncle Rose had met for years, for Uncle Jem and Uncle Steve, the husbands of Aunt Jessie and Aunt Clara, were at sea, and Aunt Myra was a widow. Uncle Mac was a merchant, very rich and busy, and as quiet as a mouse at home, for he was in such a minority among the women folk he dared not open his lips, and let his wife rule undisturbed.

Rose liked the big, kindly, silent man who came to her when papa died, was always sending her splendid boxes of goodies at school, and often invited her into his great warehouse, full of teas and spices, wines and all sorts of foreign fruits, there to eat and carry away whatever she liked. She had secretly regretted that he was not to be her guardian; but since she had seen Uncle Alec she felt better about it, for she did not particularly admire Aunt Jane.

When church was over, Dr. Alec got into the porch as quickly as possible, and there the young bears had a hug all round, while the sisters shook hands and welcomed him with bright faces and glad hearts. Rose was nearly crushed flat behind a door in that dangerous passage from pew to porch; but Uncle Mac rescued her, and put her into the carriage for safe keeping.

"Now, girls, I want you to come and dine with Alec; Mac also, of course. But I cannot ask the boys, for we did not expect this dear fellow till tomorrow, you know, so I made no preparations. Send the lads home, and let them wait till Monday, for really I was shocked at their behaviour in church," said Aunt Plenty, as she followed Rose.

In any other place the defrauded boys would have set up a howl; as it was, they growled and protested till Dr. Alec settled the matter by saying

"Never mind, old chaps, I'll make it up to you to-morrow, if you sheer off quietly; if you don't, not a blessed thing shall you have out of my big boxes."