

A Christmas Convalescent

"CAN'T I have an egg, doctor? Just a soft-boiled egg. I uster 'spise 'em, but now I'd give all the money in my cannon bank for one."

"Too low a bid," declared the doctor, "in a few more days you'd offer your immortal soul. You had better take those flowers out of the room, Miss Vaughn; they're too sweet."

His critical, professional glance rested upon the young mother.

"Don't lose courage now that your boy is doing famously. Good morning."

As his footsteps echoed down the hall the mother said with forced enthusiasm, "We had nearly finished our story, hadn't we. When the glass slipper fitted exactly, she drew the mate from her pocket, and she wore them when she was married to the prince."

"Did they have a weddin' supper?" asked the weak little voice.

"Yes, dear," she hurried it over, "and music and dancing, and Cinderella wore a dress embroidered in silver stars."

"Did they have ice cream at the supper?" persisted the weak little voice.

"Yes, darling, and the Fairy Godmother gave them the pumpkin ponies had a—"

"Was it choc-lit and vaniller?"

The trained nurse looked amused, for she was used to typhoid convalescents, but the mother's eyes filled with tears, for the past few weeks had brought her first experience in racking suspense.

"It was chocolate, but the court cook was so excited that she spilt some salt in it, and the Prince couldn't eat any of it."

"You forgot," he returned with gentle insistence. "'Fore I was sick, when you told it to Bertha and May. The Prince ate one saucer of choc-lit and two of vaniller. That's why I wanted to hear it over. The glass slipper part is silly."

"Shall I get the new catalogue and read over the list of Christmas books so that we can tell what you would like best?" she diverted into new channels.

He did not answer, only looked at her with big, lack-lustre eyes, which six weeks ago would have been joyously responsive.

"We must have a book or two to read while you're in bed, but you'll soon be well, and then a bicycle will be the best thing. Or do you prefer a splendid sled and a pair of ball-bearing skates?"

"I dunno."

"Don't you know what you want, precious? Our Santa Claus is asking."

"Ice cream."

The nurse glanced at the clock and brought half a glass of buttermilk, from which he turned with sick distaste. Then he remembered.

"Next time it'll be predergestid beef, and I hate that worse'n buttermilk," and he gulped it down bravely.

"What did you have for lunch, mother?"

"I hardly remember—steak and potatoes, and sliced tomatoes, I believe, and some honey."

"Honey! Oh, mother, lemme smell your breath!"

She bent and kissed him.

"I didn't eat any of it, little son. That was for Bertha and May, because they couldn't have the dessert. I wasn't hungry; I only had some tea and toast."

She would not say how food choked her, when she thought of the hungry child, up stairs, still condemned to liquid diet.

Boy looked troubled.

"Please don't get sick, mother."

The doctor's injunction came back to her, and she went into her own room and looked in the mirror, for the first time in weeks with any comprehension of what was reflected there. She realized that it must be bad for Boy, now that he was well enough to notice it, to see her look so worn. She took off the dark wrapper she had been wearing while she was nursing, and put on a pretty gray gown, made more becoming by the soft fluffiness of chiffon. After she had pinched her cheeks until the color came, she went back to Boy's room.

His face brightened—and fell.

"You're goin' somewhere other?"

"Of course not, precious. I'm going to sit with you all the afternoon, while Miss Vaughn takes a walk."

He shook his head and smiled faintly, recalling the physician's parting words.

"The doctor won't let you stay in here, mother; you're too sweet."

"You dear little knight!" exclaimed the nurse. "You've been such a good patient that I think you are just as sweet as—as—"

She paused a moment to find the adequate simile.

"As junket?" suggested Boy politely. "That's sorter sweet, about like me. Though, of course mother thinks I'm as good as the best things—apple turnovers, cocoanut cake, and custard pies (only I don't like to eat those at picnics 'cause it musses my ears), and blackberry dumplin', and chewin' gum 'fore you've chewed the taste out, and all the things you get at soda-water fountains—and 'speshly ice-cream."

His voice grew eager over the nomenclature.

"There's heaps of good things that ain't sweet, too. Turkey and rice and gravy and fish and peanuts and sandwiches and hot waffles and pickles. And all the things me and Dick French et outdoors, mos' ripe apples and raw turnips and that rabbit Dick killed with his rifle and we cooked him ourselves. Mos' everything's fine when you're well. And one time Dick—"

"Don't talk quite so much dearie, you will tire yourself. Your mother wants to read to you now."

Boy flared into unexpected rebellion, contrary to his inherent gentleness.

"I don't want to hear any stories. I'm so tired of 'em." A happy thought struck him. "You never have read me any out of your cook book, mother; read me some of that."

Miss Vaughn nodded to the mother to acquiesce, and she brought the book before she left them to take her walk.

Boy selected the recipes and his mother read the directions for making each of his favorite dishes, until at last his eyes grew heavy, his breathing regular, and he slept.

Alone in the quiet room, watching the easy respiration, the moisture on the brow, she rejoiced that the days were past in which the thermometer's verdict made necessary the dreaded cold baths. She tried to say a psalm of thanksgiving, yet she realized a constraining dumbness, even as she had felt during the worst period of her boy's illness. The future, all unknown, through what pain and stress might he have to pass to find again the portals which were then open to the touch of his unsullied hand? So in those days of anguished suspense she had fought with herself not to utter the cry of her soul that he might live, but no other words had seemed to flow from the springs of her heart through her white lips.

Now as she mechanically repeated, "Who redeemeth thy life from destruction, who crowneth thee with loving kindness and tender mercies," she felt shocked to realize that while her lips were framing David's words, her heart was echoing the feeble query:

"'Choc-lit and vaniller?"

Suddenly, passionately, she fell upon her knees.

"Oh, Father, please let him have ice cream Christmas day! He has been so patient, give him this little happiness on Thy Son's birthday! For the sake of the Blessed Christ-Child. Amen."

A rain of healing tears melted the control in which she had armored herself. Never since her own childhood had she felt so near to the love that understands, "knowing our childishness."

The nursery echoed with the laughter and chatter of Bertha and May, with their dolls and bears and bulging stockings. Boy looked with quiet pleasure at the girls' friends and kindred had sent in generous measure, but there was a question in his eyes. He hated to ask it directly, knowing how hard a refusal would be to them both.

"The snow looks mighty pretty, mother; sorter like vaniller ice cream?"

All his fortitude could not keep back the rising inflection.

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"We shall have to wait until the doctor comes, dearest. He has promised to come early to give his directions for the day."

But already she felt sure of his verdict.

"Can you get the cream ready for his 1 o'clock nourishment?" the physician was asking a little later.

"Can I?" she echoed indignantly. "Why, I made it the first thing this morning as every mother would have done."

She brought up the tray, with a doily embroidered in a wreath of holly, and the ice cream in a pretty saucer, decorated with red berries and mistletoe. But this adorning—as much of woman's is—was purely for her own satisfaction, for Boy would not have known whether that delectable white mound was served from a gold platter or a tomato can.

His thin hand reached for the spoon; the first, cool, sweet, adorable bit melted in his mouth.

The future might hold jolly fraternity banquets as college, the keenness of the hunter's appetite over the campfire, the first wonderful meal in his own home when his housekeeping days should begin. Yet his mother knew that this was the supreme gastronomic moment of his life, that never again could anything taste so miraculously delicious.

The saucer so empty that washing seemed a superfluity, Boy turned over on his pillow with a contented sigh.

"This is an orful nice Christmas. I'm glad I'm not Dick. His mother don't make ice cream near as good as you do, mother."

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