



CHAPTER I.

ALEX HOWE LEAVES HOME.

Alexander Howe, Sr., had come to New York from the country 26 years before. He brought with him later a son, who was named after him, and whom the younger was called Alec. Mr. Howe had prospered and was now a successful and well-to-do merchant. After ten years his wife had died, and he had taken another, a lady of some social pretensions, through whom in time he hoped to gain admission to the upper circles. By her he had another son, who was in a fair way to be spoiled by the doting attentions that were lavished upon him.

Alec had been sent to college, and now for a whole year he had been a bachelor of arts, wondering what in the world he should do with the inheritance. His father had offered him a place in his business, with an ultimate partnership, but the confinement of the office did not agree with him. Besides, he did not altogether like his stepmother. She was a good woman in her way, but she said his manners were vulgar; she tried to impose upon him habits which were uncomfortable, and, worst of all, she did not give him the affection he longed for. For love's sake he would have done anything she desired of him, but she did not love him, and her only refuge was the authority of her superior position. She used it as gently as she could, for she meant to be kind and considerate, but the friction became greater and greater until Alec felt he could no longer bear the sheer discomfort of his position.

The elder brother had not gone to college, but had entered business early and now was a partner in his father's establishment, with a wife and family of his own. Mr. Howe was proud of him and wished Alec to follow in his footsteps. But Mrs. Howe was a standing subject for disagreement. Mr. Howe liked her well enough, though he had not the passionate love for her he had cherished for his first wife, but he was ambitious to establish his family in the upper ranks of society, and she was the one means of doing it. Through her lay his ambition, and she, who had been poor, shared his ambition with him. At first the plan had been to make Alec the social representative of the family, the proud and shining star, and for that purpose he had been given a good education. But he was disappointing expectations, and not unreasonably Mrs. Howe was thinking more and more of the prospects of her own child. But Mr. Howe still clung to Alec.

"Father," said Alec one evening, when they had come home from business, "I'm going to study law. I'm tired of business. I lead a dog's life, and I'm tired of it. I've stood it as long as I can."

Mr. Howe was silent. "I can have chambers with Forbes—my class in college, you know. Things will go better at home when I'm away, I fancy."

Still there was silence where Mr. Howe sat, and Alec ventured to look at him. He saw a dark cloud on his father's face and began to tremble. But he took courage, and with sudden determination and impetuosity sprang to his feet, and turning his back cried:

"I've made up my mind. I'm of age and mean to do as I like."

Mr. Howe rose also and began walking about the room. At last he spoke: "If you leave the business and your home, you need not expect that I shall foot your bills."

The old gentleman walked uneasily up and down. He was not hard hearted or obstinate, but he didn't know what to do, and Alec's manner was highly disrespectful.

Mrs. Howe entered. After staring at the two for a moment she exclaimed: "What in the world has Alec been doing now?"

"I shall not trouble you much longer. I have decided to go away," said Alec, turning.

"Go away? Where will you go? Do you intend to lead an idle life at your father's expense?"

"I had intended to study law," said Alec calmly.

"I should think your father had spent enough money on your education already," sneered Mrs. Howe, taking a seat on the corner of a sofa. "Do you approve of this move, Alexander?" she inquired of her husband.

"If he leaves my business and my home, I've told him that he must look out for himself hereafter." The old man's voice wavered, and he would have been glad of the slightest excuse to recall his words, but in a moment Alec had made that impossible.

"Very well," he cried, turning to face both his parents. "I will leave this house, and it shall be on Monday morning. I hate it. My life has been perfect misery here, and I'll stand it no more. Ever since I came home from college she has nagged me and nagged me till I've come to hate this whole institution. I shall not put either of you under the painful necessity of turning me out. I'll go myself, and ask no favors or consideration of anybody."

With that he turned on his heel and left the room. Then his father and stepmother looked at each other. She disliked the boy, and exulted at the idea of being rid of him. But she sneered: "Let him go. A little of that sort of

thing will do him good and may bring him to his senses."

So Mr. Howe suppressed his paternal yearning, and Alec's fate was decided. He would never eat his own words, nor would he come back begging and cringing. He would make his living as he could. Physically he was a weakling, thin and pale, but he had a mighty determination and a vein of buoyant hope that usually carried him through difficulties.

Once in his own room he began to reflect on his position. Without money, the law must evidently be given up. He had something less than \$10 in his pocket. From that he must make his fortune. But how? Where? His determination had been taken suddenly, and he had no plan.

The following week he was to have taken his summer vacation among the New Hampshire hills. He loved them perhaps better than any other place he knew, and had gone to one or another part of them for four successive summers. At first he thought that his vacation must be postponed. But then he thought, Why not go and work in the hayfield for the summer and take time to think matters over? He remembered what fun it had been to follow the hay rake for the scatters to help on the men a little. Of course till now it had always been in fun, but why not do it for money, getting a delightful summer in the country and earning something besides?

There arose doubts about the summer being so delightful under such laborious conditions, but the more he thought of it the more the idea fascinated him, and he immediately set to work to collect a tramping outfit. A rough, strong suit of clothes was selected, one which he had formerly bought in the country, and he found an old felt hat that had come from the country too. He had a knapsack, which he had used for tramping in times past, and this he filled with such necessities as he had heard that genuine tramps carried, such as a tin dipper, a tin plate, a fork, a big pocket-knife besides the smaller penknife he always carried, a teaspoon, gong pepper and salt and a few other things. With the little money he had he would purchase a ticket to the Rushes, and then he would have a little over \$2 left to provide for living necessities till he could find work, which he thought would not be a difficult matter, as it was just about time for haying to begin, and he knew that extra hands were always in demand for haying.

It was Saturday night when all these things happened, and Sunday was spent quietly in making preparations. He came to his meals either before or after his father and mother ate theirs, and so they did not see him once all day. They did not believe he would go on Monday, as he had said he would, and hourly looked to see his penitent face. They knew he was dogged in his determination, but this was so extraordinary a proceeding that they could not believe it. Mrs. Howe feared that he would change his mind, and, as was his habit, Mr. Howe put the matter out of his thoughts to await developments. But he had been much disturbed by the scene of Saturday evening.

Monday morning Alec breakfasted with his parents, and when the meal was finished bade them a cheerful goodbye, saying that as he intended to take his vacation in New Hampshire he had decided to try his fortune in those parts first. He was filled with excitement and a strange, feverish expectation. His manner was somewhat mysterious, and not in the least confidential. Mrs. Howe treated him with great coldness, and his father remained neutral. Alec shook hands with each of his parents and hastily took his leave. There was no such word as "Write to us," or "If you get out of money, send me to," or "I hope you won't regret this step." Silence, only silence! Perhaps it was because Alec was known to be quite able to take care of himself. Certainly neither Mr. nor Mrs. Howe had any fear that he would come to starvation, though perhaps they might have had had either known how very small a sum of money the lad was starting out on. But Alec thought to himself that he was glad he had no more, for now he must work his way or starve, since he would have no money to come back on. He was burning the bridges behind him, and was happy in the thought. It added piquancy to the adventure, and his courage and determination laughed at the danger.

CHAPTER II.

HE FINDS MARTHA, JOHN, LITTLE JOHN AND GRANDPA.

Alec arrived at the Rushes not long after noon, thoroughly tired out with the hard ride on the cars. He had brought some biscuit and cold meat, on which he lunched, and he still had a few pieces remaining in his bag, which he thought he would eat at the first convenient point after leaving the train. There was a great crowd at the railway station, and they stared at him curiously. It was a strange sight to see a young man with white, delicate hands and pale face dressed as a tramp, with an old slouch hat on his head. So Alec hurried off along the road that seemed to lead northward, for he had determined to direct his course toward the

White mountains. The rough board cafes and cottages and the general paraphernalia of a camping ground seemed a blemish on the beauty of the surrounding forests and of the broad, smooth lake stretching away between the hills and islands as far as the eye could reach. But he soon left them behind, and though the road was hot and dusty it was a great relief from the jolting of the cars and the obnoxious crowd. Alec was fond of walking, and he swung along in an easy stride, perhaps trying to get away from the oppressive sense of loneliness which he felt coming over him.

He felt much like a man who has put out to sea in a rowboat. He had left the world behind, and had only a \$2 bill between him and starvation. To be sure he might send to his father, but he thought of his teeth that he would indeed starve before he would do that. He thought of getting work on a farm, but vaguely realized his own incompetence and physical weakness. He was an athlete in college, but athletic strength does not seem to help a farmer much. Still if it were work or starve, no doubt he would manage in some way to work.

When he had walked about five miles along a road now shut in by tall pines and elms and chestnuts, now open to the pouring heat of the sun, and with only occasional refreshing glimpses of the lake whose western border he was skirting, Alec suddenly came with delight upon a cool looking little spring beside the road, that came out in a small cold pool at the foot of a big pine tree, and then fell about 18 inches in a miniature cascade over a projecting stone, and ran off down the side of the road to a little brook beyond. He threw himself on the soft, thick bed of pine needles, thoroughly tired out, and held his cup under the cascade till it was filled with water, which he drank at a single draft. It was cool and sweet and so refreshing. After waiting a few minutes to rest he took out his remaining biscuit and cold meat and ate them, and winding his blanket about him lay down for a nap on the pine needles.

Pretty soon a robin came down and stood by the spring as if it were contemplating the possibility of taking a drink. It stood solemnly upright for a few moments, as if listening profoundly for any possible danger, and seemed to eye Alec with a questioning look. Then he took a quick little sip of the water just where it fell over the edge of the stone, and suddenly hopped quite into the pool and splashed himself all over with the water, shaking his feathers and fluttering his wings, and rolled around in the little earthy basin till it was all muddy. Then the bird hopped out and shook himself and stood for some time plucking his feathers.

A striped squirrel came out on a branch directly above his head, and, sitting upright on its swaying seat so that Alec could barely see its breast and fore feet and nose, it began to crack a nut and drop down pieces of the shell. It was a butternut from last year, and was rather a tough nut to crack apparently, and finally the squirrel lost its grip and the nut came tumbling down almost on to Alec's face.

He did not know how tired he was until he had stopped thinking about his difficulties and had lost himself in the baby playings of the things in the woods. But now he discovered that his back ached, his feet were sore, and his brain too weary even to try to think any more.

The sun was going down and he did not know where he would sleep that night or where he could get anything more to eat. He was hungry, for biscuit and cold meat are not altogether satisfying to one who has lived under so good a cook as Mr. Howe employed. Alec hastily folded up his blanket and put it in his bag, and after taking a little drink of water from the spring set out hurriedly along the road.

In the course of a mile he passed several houses, but they all seemed extremely desolate to his eyes. They were very low and without any eaves to speak of, all on the plain, square model, with a long shed reaching out behind to a barn that was usually bigger and more modern and indeed less desolate looking.



So Alec hurried off.

There was no attempt at grading about the house, nor any lawn. A dump cart usually stood next the back door, and against the barn was piled a heap of useless old boards, which might once have served for a pigeon. Sometimes there was a wooden pump a rod or two from the house in the middle of the yard, which was shut in on one side by the house and rambling shed behind it and on the back by the barn. Once he saw a tin dipper hanging in a conspicuous place, and took the liberty of helping himself to a drink. As he did so a woman came to the door and stared at him through the fly screen, and Alec wondered grimly if a dog would presently be let out upon him. But when he looked again the face of the woman

seemed quite benevolent and rather curious. Alec was glad to get away, however. He didn't like the hardness of everything. Perhaps the next house would have a more comfortable appearance.

But they were all alike. There wasn't a sign of softness or comfort anywhere. The people seemed not to have imagined the word. Even the bigger houses which had been fitted up for summer boarders and seemed to make certain pretensions to elegance had the same stiff, uncomfortable air, which settled down over the poor fellow like a vast discouragement.

But suddenly he came on a farmhouse that seemed more inviting, or he was so tired now that he saw what he wanted to see. There was a wide yard, and back of it a big barn with wide open doors. On the left was the long, low house, and in the kitchen doorway stood a very fat, presumably benevolent looking woman, who seemed to be waiting supper for the men who were washing in the log trough before the pump or in washbasins on a low bench beside the kitchen door. There were three men, or rather two men and a boy. It was the boy who was washing in the log trough. One of the men was white haired and much bent. The other was perhaps 40 and had a long, ragged, sandy beard. But he was very rugged and upright and talked as if he were the head of the house.

As Alec approached the woman in the doorway she stood silently staring at him, but the men went on washing, though they stared out of the corners of their eyes, and as they wiped the water off on the single long towel they held between them they all looked critically at the strange lad. But none of them spoke.

"I wanted to inquire," Alec said, "if I could perhaps get a night's lodging—I mean some work here. I've come from New York, and I thought you might need some help, or I could be allowed to stay here tonight—if I paid a little something for it." This Yankee bargaining did not come at all natural to him, but he added the sentence about pay when he saw no sign of interest or response on the faces of the four people—or rather the three, for the boy was behind him.

"Come from New York, have you?" inquired the woman at last in a tone that was meant to be friendly.

Alec made no answer, for none seemed to be demanded. But he quaked inwardly as he wondered what they were going to do.

"You didn't walk all the way?" inquired the man.

"I came on the cars to the Rushes, and this afternoon I have walked from there," said Alec quietly.

"A good bit of a walk from the Rushes," remarked the old man. "Where be you going? Home?"

The suggestion of going home seemed to Alec a very good one, and he promptly responded:

"Yes, I'm going home. I've got to go up across Vermont to Lake Champlain, and I expect to walk most of the way."

"Well, you are a plucky one," remarked the old man, turning away, while Alec smiled in his sleeve at his own simple mendacity. "Take the lad in, Martha, and give him a bite to eat," the old man went on. "He looks pale, like all these city lads."

"How long you been in the city?" he inquired, turning again to Alec.

"Pretty nearly all my life," was the answer.

Martha stopped to ask more questions, and the man with the long beard asked some, finally inviting Alec to sit down on the bench and get rested. He inquired his name, and Alec gave it.

"If you want supper as well as a bed, it will be 10 cents extra," said Martha, coming to the door. "I suppose you expect to pay a quarter for the bed. Ten cents is rather low for supper, but seeing you are going home and have to walk all the way I thought I'd make it kind of reasonable."

Alec grunted a weary assent, but his heart sank within him that none of them had said anything about the work he had spoken of.

They seemed not to have any interest in him after they had satisfied their curiosity, and when he sat down to the table with the others nobody addressed him except to urge him to "have some more" of the hash or the stewed prunes or the rhubarb pie or the corn bread. They said that if he didn't eat more he would die of starvation before he got home and piled food on his plate until he sickened at the sight.

"You aren't sick, are you?" said Martha. "You don't seem to have any appetite at all. I never saw the like in a boy of your size. But you do look awfully pale."

"Perhaps, mother, you'd better fix up some ginger tea for him," suggested the sandy bearded man, whom they called John. But Alec protested so vigorously that Martha reluctantly gave up the idea and soon after tea showed Alec to his room, saying he had better go to bed and get rested, and maybe that would do him good, but these city boys were always white looking.

The room was in the attic and only about six feet high, though tolerably wide and long. The door was perfectly bare and had been painted once, though the paint was now nearly worn off. There was one window in the room, with small panes of glass, and the lower sash was held up by a button. The bedstead, which stood in the middle of the room, was old fashioned, with four round posts that stood straight up at each corner, but with no pieces across at head or foot. The side pieces were round and did not support the slats, which were laid on wires strung on each side from head to foot. There was a big, stuffy, straw filled mattress, which lay so high Alec wondered how in the world he could climb on to it. Over all was an old fashioned patchwork quilt.

In the room there were an old fashioned painted wooden chair and a little washstand, with a round hole in the top for a bowl, but no bowl. The only adornment the room could be said to have was the bright paper, which showed

dimly in the candlelight the infinite repetition of a picture of a lad and a maid by a rustic bridge, with a castle in the distance.

This room seemed a cold, desolate place, though in the daytime at this season it must be hot and stuffy. But Alec was so tired and so anxious to be alone after his company at tea that he hastily assured his hostess that everything was exceedingly comfortable. Everything was certainly clean and as neat as wax. With some reluctance Martha backed out, leaving the candle on a corner of the washstand, and Alec crawled into bed as soon as he could undress.

CHAPTER III.

HE GETS A CHANCE TO EARN HIS BOARD HOING POTATOES.

Alec was awakened next morning by a loud knock on his door and the announcement in the voice of Martha that if he wanted some breakfast he would have to come down right away.

He hurriedly dressed and went down stairs, where he followed the example of little John (as he discovered the young man was called) and washed in the horse trough. He wondered if the man with the sandy beard (he didn't dare to call him John even in his own thoughts) would invite him to go to work at good wages.

In about ten minutes Martha announced that all was ready, and John invited the young man to "move up," which he did. They did not have much to say to him, but they paid him a certain silent respect which flattered his vanity a little, and they watched his plate most closely to see that he had enough to eat and seemed greatly troubled that he didn't eat more—at least Martha was. Instead of oatmeal or eggs there were fried bacon, potatoes with their skins on, rye rolls and green apple sauce. Little John, speaking for the first time to Alec, explained that they had one particularly early variety of apple tree somewhere in the hollow back of the house which bore these apples. Alec was also offered another piece of the rhubarb pie he had for supper the night before and which he liked very much.

After breakfast the men went directly to the barn without a word to him about work or on any other subject except a remark that it was a fine morning. Alec stood around the dining room awkwardly for a time as Martha cleared off the table, hoping that something would be said, for he had distinctly spoken of work the night before and felt that they could not have misunderstood his desires. But Martha only said:

"You'll find this a right smart morning for your walk. If I was in your place, I'd get started early and then rest in the shade somewhere along about noon. It's awfully tiring to walk in the hot sun, I think."

"But I didn't know but Mr. — or — or might want somebody to work for him a little," stammered Alec at this speech, which seemed to him much like an invitation to be going along.

"Well, you see," explained Martha, "little John is about as good as a man now, and gran'pa is right smart in spite of his white hair. So John manages to get along without hiring very much help regular. If you had come along in a fortnight, now, when he had the upper field all out and a shower was coming up and he wanted to get the hay in, I presume he might give you half a day. But he ain't going to cut any hay till after the Fourth. Folks up here don't begin to hay much before the Fourth."

Alec decided in his own mind as he patiently listened to this speech that he would better pay for his lodging and start on his way. So he offered Martha his \$2 bill, secretly hoping she would take out of it only 85 cents. That was all she had spoken of the night before, and he hoped breakfast might be thrown in. Martha took the bill, and explaining that she didn't know but she had the change in her rag carpet money, which she kept in her sitting room bureau drawer, left him alone for a few minutes. In about five minutes she returned.

"I said last night I would let you have supper for 10 cents, seeing you was a poor boy and having to walk all the way home, and I won't charge you no more than that for breakfast, either, though by good rights I ought to have 25 cents for each meal and 25 cents for the bed, which will all have to be washed unless I put little John up there for one week instead of putting clean sheets on his bed."

"Ten cents for supper and 10 for breakfast and 25 for the bed makes 45 cents, and there is \$1, and there is 50 cents, and I declare if I've got but 4 cents more to my name, so I guess I'll have to charge you a cent extra for making change," she said, with a laugh that was almost merry. Alec thought Martha might have been induced to let him stay and work for his board for a time, if nothing more. But he did not venture to mention that. He took his \$1.54, said goodby, put on his old slouch hat and went on his way.

Alec felt less lonely and less worried this morning and less repelled by the farmhouses. They did not seem so desolate now, and he no longer dreaded them. He did think with a pang that 46 cents of his \$3 was already gone, and this realization made him resolve that he would inquire for work at every house he came to. Surely somebody would employ him at something.

The road was smooth enough, but on either side there were stretches and stretches of stones upon stones, in places heaped up apparently as a wall, in others heaped up for no purpose, but because of their abundance, and scattered all about, even over a grassy plot that seemed to be a hayfield.

As he approached the next house, which seemed more substantial and larger, he saw a number of men in a field hoeing potatoes, and they seemed to be working very steadily. There was a great field on one side of them that seemed quite grown up to weeds, while on the other could be seen rows of potatoes they had hoed out. Alec had a mind to go over and speak to them, and

he stood in the road a few minutes looking at them, undecided. But at last he went to the house to inquire.

A rather pretty but shy and awkward girl in a very short, faded calico dress answered his knock at the kitchen door. He was so astonished to see her that he stammered for a minute and nearly asked if he could have something to eat before he managed to say:

"I saw some men down in the field there, and I wondered if they didn't want some one to help them a little. I've come up from New York city, and I have walked up from the Rushes, and I haven't very much money and would like to earn a little if I could to help me get home."

She looked at him with a very blank expression that seemed to doubt his veracity even. But she said:

"I think my father has all the help he wants. He hires my two half brothers regularly, and he's got Mr. Condon to help him hoe, and I don't think he needs anybody more. But you might go and ask him. He's the old man with the smooth face with those men you saw hoeing down there. You ask for Mr. Bennett, and they will any of them tell you who he is. He is the oldest, except Mr. Condon, who has a beard."

Alec thanked her and went to find Mr. Bennett. His heart quaked a bit, but he didn't mind that and boldly made his wishes known. Milo Bennett was a very short man with a very big, flat, fleshy face, but with rather good natured blue eyes. He threw himself back on his hoe the minute he saw Alec coming, evidently glad of an opportunity to rest, even so early in the morning. "Well, sir, what can I do for you?" he inquired briskly, but not disagreeably.

"I wanted to see if you wanted anybody to help you a few days," answered Alec promptly.

"What can you do?" the man inquired, with a light sneer, sizing the slim, young figure up from top to toe. "Your hands don't look as if they had been right in hoeing up to the present time. Where do you come from, anyway?"

"From New York," answered Alec in some fright, looking at his white



John manages to get along without hiring very much help.

hands and realizing his physical incapacity to do anything very heavy. But he thought he could hoe. He immediately stated this belief.

"You'll blister those pretty hands of yours inside of an hour," sneered the man, but as before not unpleasantly.

"I might try," suggested Alec.

"Well, maybe you can earn your board," said Milo, turning to work again, for the others had stopped the moment he did. "I wouldn't pay you a cent for what you would do the first day. You can find a hoe inside the barn up there."

Alec stood undecided for a moment, but no one was paying the slightest attention to him, so he walked silently back to the house, and at last, with the help of the pretty girl, found the hoe. He rebelled at the idea of working merely for his board, but the fear of having to draw again so heavily on his very small amount of cash decided him to work one day at least. If he only earned his board, they certainly would not expect him to work very hard.

Mr. Bennett, or Milo, as they called him, even the boys, took some pains to show him how to manage his hoe, how to pull the weeds out from among the potatoes without pulling up the potato vines, too, and then how to fill the dirt up and make it compact all around. It was more of a trick than he had imagined, and he took some interest in learning how to do it neatly and quickly. But as his employer had prophesied, his hands were blistered inside of an hour, and he had to wind his handkerchief about the right one in order to keep it from becoming torturingly sore. Besides, his back began to ache pretty soon, and before very long it ached so that it seemed as if he couldn't keep at work. But he was determined not to give up for any such thing as that.

Of course Alec did not try to keep up with the others, whose hands were apparently as tough as iron and whose backs never ached, for they walked straight along, down one row, back another, the four of them abreast and seeming to have a sort of pride in keeping even, though now and then one would drop behind for some reason or other. When at last he heard a great bell ring up at the house, and looking up saw the pretty girl in the kitchen doorway ringing it, he knew it must be dinner time. But he kept on working, not noticing that the four men had dropped their hoes as suddenly at the sound of the bell as if they had been automatons. But Milo called out good naturedly:

"Better come along to dinner now. I guess you've earned it. How are your hands?"

The others said nothing, but laughed together, and as they walked slowly up toward the house they glanced at Alec every now and then in such a way that he felt uncomfortable. Only his pride made him affect an indifference that became him very well.

No one paid any particular attention to him, and as dinner was not quite ready he was glad enough to sit down and rest. He saw coming and going