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CHAPTER I

ALEC HOWE LEAVES HOME.

Alexander Howe, Sr., had come to New York from the country 26 years before. He brought with him later a wife and two little boys, of whom the younger was named father and familiarly called Alec. Mr. Howe had prospered and was now 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 discomfiture 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 unnaturally 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 disconcerting.

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, tautly.

"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 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 a tramp, though he was 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 plans.

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 cart around, now and then pitching on a forkful of hay, or dragging the big rake for the scatterings 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 he was fascinated by it, 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 pocketknife besides the smaller penknife he always carried, a teaspoon, some 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 good-bye, 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," "If you get out of money, send to me," 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 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 care. 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 blight 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 oppressing 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 between his teeth that he would indeed starve before he would do that. He thought of getting work on a farm, vaguely realized his own incompetence and physical weakness. He was an athlete in college, but athlete 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 pluming 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.

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