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Lisbeth was standing behind the back door evidently, and immediately appeared.

"This young city swell wants some dry crackers to keep him alive. My rheumatism is so bad tonight I couldn't think of climbing 'way down off here just for a pound of crackers."

The loafers guffawed at this, and Alec wanted to get away as soon as he possibly could. He felt himself in a very nest of enemies. Everybody and everything seemed to have changed since morning. The morning seemed ages ago, so long he could hardly remember it. He felt as if he were in an entirely new and disagreeable world.

Lisbeth walked directly toward him, and in her bearing he felt a little bit of sympathy amid all the hardness. But it embarrassed him, and he only felt the more like running away.

"Will you have these round ones," she asked, taking a cover off a large barrel, "or would you like these soft soda crackers?" indicating a box, toward which she immediately walked, followed by Alec, who was vaguely comforted by the soft tone of her voice.

"Makin' a mash on 'Lisbeth!' whistled one of the meanest looking of the loafers. Alec did not look around at all, but the girl gave the offender a quick, threatening look, which she distributed around to the rest of the company as well, and no laughter followed the sally. There was a dead silence while 'Lisbeth' went on in a light, easy tone, "I like these soda crackers ever so much the best, and they cost only a cent a pound more."

"Give me a pound of those," said Alec gloomily, and the girl proceeded to weigh them out.

"I heard you ask for some cheese," she went on as she busied herself with the crackers. "We haven't any cheese, but we have some gooseberry jam mother made herself, and I could give you 5 cents' worth in one of these little wooden dishes. Would you like 5 cents' worth?"

"If you please, I would," responded Alec, touched by the girl's thoughtfulness and kindly interest.

The jam was put up and paid for with the crackers.

"There is nothing else?" asked the girl, with shopkeeper's courtesy and a smile.

The boy thanked her and was gone amid a profound silence from the loafers. He was lighter hearted now, and the world seemed natural again. One human being had been kind to him. He had a profound feeling of gratitude, and stopped short to look back and wonder how he could ever repay her. He felt as if he must thank her in more than the formal words he had used in the store.

Fairly away from the store and the hateful crowd of loafers, he began to think what he should do for the night. He sat down on a stone in the light of a window and ate his crackers and jam.



The jam was put up and paid for with the crackers.

and as he sat eating, and a more and more cheerful feeling about life came over him, he remembered that there was a barn back of the tavern, whose side door he had seen standing invitingly open, revealing a row of old hay beyond. He would go and sleep on the hay. An hour later he was fast asleep in the barn.

**CHAPTER IX.**  
**HE MAKES JOE HIGGINS GIVE HIM A JOB.**  
His waking on the morning was very different from the first waking in Ashton. The birds were singing just as loudly and noisily, but Alec did not seem to hear them. The gray morning light streamed through the cracks of the barn, and the cows and horses could be heard munching their hay or now and then bringing their feet down heavily to shake off some insect intruder.

Alec lay half buried in the hay, looking up into the dark, dusty, cobweb woven roof, trying to put the dull, lonely ache out of his head long enough to think what he must do, could do. The town was against him, now that he had tumbled and failed. He knew that clearly from the atmosphere into which he had stepped at the store the previous evening. Mr. Higgins seemed at first to be his friend, but he, too, had grown cold and gruff. 'Lisbeth seemed kind, but she was only a girl. What could a girl do?

He would have set out on his northward tramp immediately, but there seemed now no more before him than there was behind. His skill at mowing had not been to the point to the east again, and besides this morning he felt so stiff and his back and limbs ached so persist-

ently that it seemed as if he could not even climb down from his bed on the hay. He was hungry, too, for berries for dinner and crackers and jam for supper were small food for a healthy, active young man. Never before in all his life had he faced a prospect so utterly dreary and barren.

He would go to Mr. Higgins and frankly lay his case before him, asking the man to help him to some sort of work, it mattered not what, so that he kept from starving. Perhaps in a case like that 'Lisbeth's friendliness might count for something, and he should not be sorry to have it. Already he thanked her in his heart. Certainly she had seemed to sympathize with him a little, and that thought was the one ray of light in his despondency, and he immediately nursed and cherished it until it seemed almost to make as bright a day within his heart as there was without, into which he soon emerged.

He brushed off the hay from his clothes, washed at the pump, and combed his hair with his pocket comb, using the horse trough for a mirror. Then fearfully he crept around to the front door of the store. It stood wide open and showed a long strip of floor that had just been swept clean. But no sound came from within. No doubt the proprietor and his family were at breakfast.

Alec tiptoed into the vacant store and sat down on the old bench. There on one side were cans of fruit, meat and other groceries piled on the shelves one above the other, and packages of starch, oatmeal, washing powder, bars of soap, boxes of figs, and what not it would be hard to say. In a fly specked glass case on the counter was a variety of brightly colored candies, and at one end some tobacco and a few cigars. Beneath the counter were kegs of various kinds of nails, horseshoes piled on the floor or hung on a long rack, and small farming implements. At the end nearest the door were rakes, scythes and shovels of various kinds for various uses. There were shoeboxes, perhaps half filled with rough boots. And in the middle of the floor, which was not too clean in spite of the center being freshly swept, were barrels of crackers, sugar, salt, flour and meal. And then behind him were shelves piled high with calicoes, thread, jeans, jackets and overalls, brightly colored suspenders, handkerchiefs, and a variety of small articles for ladies' use. In the rear of the room were barrels of molasses, vinegar, kerosene and linseed oil, all lying on their sides in rests black with filth and smoke. There were also barrels upright in which might be oats, corn and cottonseed meal; perhaps also barrels of salt pork and corned beef, and small barrels for fish and a can of oysters.

A sudden hopeful thought came to Alec as he looked from one to another of these articles. Mr. Higgins was alone, with only 'Lisbeth to help him. He was stiff and rheumatic, and 'Lisbeth evidently had more than she could do in caring for the tavern and in housekeeping. Why should not Alec become a clerk in the store? He would offer himself, proposing to work for board and lodging until Mr. Higgins thought him worth more.

Hardly had he decided to do this, with a sort of rush of hope and expectancy, when Mr. Higgins lumbered in, but as soon as he saw Alec he stopped short, and Alec quickly rose and turned to face him.

"Well, sonny, what can I do for you?" asked the old fellow in rather a more kindly tone than he had spoken in the day before.

"I wanted to see if you would let me help you in the store here for my board. You seem to need somebody, and I could make myself useful. I haven't any money, and I am unable to get farm work, and I would do anything to earn my living until I could have a chance to look round a trifle. You seem to have nobody here but your daughter, and you have more than you can do yourself. I am young and spry, and I could learn quickly, if you would let me, I am sure. If you would just give me a trial for a few days, you could tell by that time what I am able to do."

Alec spoke earnestly and eagerly as he went on and advanced nearer and nearer the counter, till he fairly leaned over it, and Mr. Higgins shrank back against the shelves with his hands in his pockets, for a moment taken aback by the fierce onset.

But as soon as Alec paused he recovered himself. He looked at the boy sharply for a moment and seemed satisfied.

"You ain't no city chap up here for a lark, be you?" he asked suddenly.

"No," replied Alec simply, but in a way that apparently satisfied Mr. Higgins.

Then the man looked slowly about the store, and at last remarked, as if it were the conclusion of his thought: "Maybe I do need somebody to help me. I'm getting sort of old and rheumatic. I ain't as spry as I once was. And your vittals wouldn't put me out of pocket so very much, a-seeing's we've got to cook anyway and I get things at wholesale."

Then with a merry twinkle he looked at Alec sharply and said: "Ef you're going to work for your board, I s'pose you want to begin with breakfast. Well, ef you step inside there, I cal'late 'Lisbeth will sort o' fix you up."

Then he lumbered off toward the postoffice department, which was at the end of the counter nearest the door. Alec watched him a moment, and then timidly made his way into the dining room.

'Lisbeth was sitting alone at the end of the table finishing her breakfast, for she had been waiting on the others.

"Good morning," said Alec tentatively.

She nodded a welcome, with a smile.

"I'm going to work for your father for my board, and he said you would give me some breakfast," he went on after a moment's pause for her to speak, of which she did not take advantage.

'Lisbeth immediately rose from her place, and motioning him to another said: "If you'll sit down, I'll get you some breakfast right off." With which she hurried into the kitchen.

**CHAPTER X.**  
**HE SELLS A SPOOL OF THREAD AND MAKES FRIENDS WITH THE CHILDREN.**  
After his breakfast was finished Alec went into the store and began to look about in the light of his position as clerk, and dimly realized that he knew not where to find any particular thing whatever, nor what price to set upon it when he did find it. As soon as he came in Joe Higgins immediately lumbered off, leaving him to mind the store. At first he occupied himself in looking slyly into tempting cubby holes and corners, and gingerly picking up one thing and another, speculating oftentimes upon its possible use.

But he soon abandoned this prying of curiosity, and stood silently behind the counter waiting for his customer. About 8 o'clock he arrived, a small boy of 6, who came into the store in such a way that he seemed to have tumbled into the middle of the floor without Alec knowing exactly how. On reflection Alec concluded that he must have stumbled over the doorstep. But when he had recovered himself, the little fellow stood staring stupidly at Alec, as much as to say, "How in the world did you come here?" Then suddenly he beat a hasty retreat, and a moment later a dozen little faces might have been seen at the door, peering curiously in to see the strange white fellow behind the counter whom everybody had heard of the day before. Fifteen minutes later a woman appeared at the door. She was the mother of the little boy. He had gone home and told her that the white city swell was standing behind the counter at the store and Joe Higgins was nowhere to be seen. So the woman, after scolding her son for not getting the spool of thread she had sent him for, went herself to see what it all meant.

After pausing a moment at the door she went in and stood supporting herself by a hand on either hip, for she was decidedly well favored—the boys said she was fat.

"Joe Higgins ain't about?" she inquired, looking toward Alec, but not approaching him.

"Mr. Higgins is out," replied the young man. "Is there anything I can do for you?"

"I wanted a spool of Burt's 86," she answered without moving, and looking at Alec as if she very much doubted his understanding anything about the matter whatever. By this time the children, little barefooted girls in short dresses and boys with broad brimmed straw hats which had quite lost their shapes from various drenchings, had gathered about the woman and were staring with dumb, vacant faces.

"Thread, did you say?" asked Alec, catching at the word spool, for he did not know what "Burt's 86" meant.

"Burt's 86," she replied glumly, and Alec went to a little case of small drawers which seemed to contain thread. After searching for some time in several of them he found a spool of thread with 86 on it, but it was black, and the woman said it was of a no 'count cheap make, anyway, that Joe Higgins kept just to make money off of; she wanted "Burt's."

At last he found what was wanted, but he didn't know what the price was and spent some time looking over the spool for a mark. The children saw what he was searching for, and when he turned to the woman and asked lightly if she knew the price of it the children cried out in chorus, "Five cents," for they had been aching to tell him. He handed the spool to the woman and took the 5 cents she held in her hand. But as she didn't move he stood politely waiting for her. At last she held the spool out to him, saying: "I s'pose you're not too busy to wrap this up, are you?"

The children tittered, Alec blushed, and the woman walked away.

At 9 the stage driver came lumbering up to the door and threw out the mailbag for the mail to be changed. Mr. Higgins immediately came lumbering into the store and started directly for his place behind the little barrier of glass covered boxes, crying out to Alec as if he had always done it: "Come, hustle that mailbag in here. We ain't got over five hours to change that mail—in fact, we ain't got five minutes if Michael catches the 10:20 train."

Alec brought the mailbag and held it open while the postmaster clumsily and slowly unfastened and fastened again the packets of mail and then tossed them into the open bag. At the last moment 'Lisbeth came hurrying in, and with a few deft movements put everything to rights, looked the mailbag and herself handed it over the counter to the waiting Michael, who caught it, threw it on to the stage and in a moment was driving madly away to catch the train.

By this time half a dozen men were standing about the store, many of whom were among the loafers of the evening before. They stared at Alec, and Alec lowered his eyes, for he knew what they were thinking about, and he was thinking of the same thing. Mr. Higgins was supremely unconscious of everything and seemed indeed to have forgotten that he had put jests at Alec the night

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before. Alec felt his power. He was backed up now, and Joe Higgins for his own selfish interests must take his side. It could not be otherwise. So, in a moment, he glanced, smiling, at the men, and without a word or even look of disparagement they walked out of the store.

During the forenoon there were few visitors at the store, except curious children who looked in to stare at the new clerk. But Alec did not mind them, and soon after the mail was fairly off 'Lisbeth came in where Alec had been left alone and hastily showed him where to find the principal articles and what were the prices of each. He had a ready memory and a quick sense of locality and form, and in two hours had digested an enormous amount of statistical information. Had it not been for 'Lisbeth's kindly thoughtfulness in giving him this lesson, he wondered what in the world he should have done, for Mr. Higgins seemed to assume that he knew it all to start with, or that telling him things was a nuisance, not to be gone into except when a customer was in actual need.

After tea Mr. Higgins liked to go into the store, and, stretching himself at full length upon the uncoccupied portion of the counter, he talked to the men who chanced to drop in after their day's work. So Alec sat down in the little sitting room just back of the tavern parlor, and while 'Lisbeth and Mrs. Higgins cleared away the dishes and washed them he entertained the children. They were shy of him at first, but they had a great respect for his personality. When he went into the sitting room, at 'Lisbeth's suggestion, to read the morning paper, the children all followed him with a certain dignified reserve, and taking their places on upright chairs pretended to be reading, too, though they were constantly casting inquiring glances at Alec.

There were three of them—James, who was 14 and quite a lad and took care of the garden for his mother when not in school; Bessie, who was 10, a romping, affectionate child, and Baby Flo, who was 6 years old. She dearly loved to lounge on somebody's knee. For five minutes she retained her reserved position in the upright chair, reading a book which she held upside down. But at the end of that time she grew weary of this and sidling shyly up to Alec rested her chubby arms on his crossed knees. He said nothing, nor did he even look at her, but he put his arm about her as he went on reading, and thus encouraged she was soon riding on his foot. When Bessie saw what a good time Flo was having, she came and wanted to be taken up in Alec's lap, and Jim stood a little way off, prepared to make some wise remarks on gardening. So Alec was soon obliged to abandon his paper and give his strict attention to the children.

A little later 'Lisbeth came in and sitting down not far from Alec began talking with him in a friendly way about how he liked the country, and where he had lived and what he was planning to do. The unpleasantness of his entry into the village was apparently quite forgotten. He seemed suddenly

to have found a home and affection, even if of a humble kind, and for the first time since he had left the city he felt content. The worry and the work and doubtful struggle had wearied him out, but now he was getting a genuine rest. He had a little vantage ground on which he could stand for a time and reconnoiter the enemy—that most malignant of enemies, fate.

But soon Alec found that he was plunged immediately into another drama than his own, in the thought of which he quite lost sight for the time of his own troubles. There was a sound of stumbling feet in the passage, a hurried rap at the little door, and a somewhat stooped but fine looking man of 80 or more made his entrance. When he saw Alec, he hesitated and seemed disconcerted, but recognizing him in a moment as the young man who had come into the store he gave a quick glance at 'Lisbeth, who immediately introduced him to Alec as George Marston, the blacksmith. He had a clear, open face, blue eyes, and a patient, not altogether happy expression. He had evidently come to see 'Lisbeth, but he talked pleasantly and kindly to Alec instead. He was educated and well read, and had very interesting and common sense notions about most subjects of human thought and endeavor.

From time to time he gave hungry glances at 'Lisbeth, and she sat upright in her chair and scarcely gave him a casual look. In two hours he took his leave, and Alec felt to thinking of him. This was no doubt 'Lisbeth's lover. But clearly she gave him no encouragement, not because she did not like him, but because for some reason she judged it not wise. Perhaps she felt too much the responsibility of her father's family. Alec looked at her and pitied her. She noticed his pitying glance, and turned her head quickly away as if to hide some tear, but in a moment he was gone to bed, and afterward 'Lisbeth gave no sign of having guessed his knowledge of her heart.

**CHAPTER XI.**  
**HE GOES TO CHURCH.**  
When Alec awoke the next morning and found the sun shining warmly in at his window and realized that it must be near 8 o'clock, though he had not yet been called, he remembered that it was Sunday. There came a rap at his door and he heard Jim's voice, and a moment later Jim entered, carrying on one arm what seemed like a pile of fresh linen.

"'Lisbeth sent these up to you, if you'd be kind enough to accept them," said Jim awkwardly, standing on one foot and trying with might and main to deliver correctly the polite message 'Lisbeth had sent. "She thought 'p'raps your Sunday clothes hadn't come yet, and she asked father to send these up to you, if you'd like to wear them to meeting."

"Tell your sister she's a regular trump. It was awfully good of her, awfully good. Tell her she's the queen of hearts, or whatever you think she'd like," he ended, suddenly wondering if cards were approved in this New England family.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

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