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DECEMBER, 1896. BY THE AUTHOR.

It did not take him long to put on his new clothes. They made him laugh at himself in spite of all good intentions. But that did not matter. The clothes answered very well, and he hurried down to the dining room to find the family all at the table. On seeing him 'Lisbeth blushed and Mr. Higgins roared out a great haw-haw of compliment and fun, and the children and Mrs. Higgins admired and complimented, till Alec blushed decidedly more than 'Lisbeth. He expressed his thanks as well as he could to Mr. Higgins and 'Lisbeth.

At 10 o'clock Alec saw the old sexton with his shiny head come across from his house, and, opening the church with a big key, proceed to ring the bell. It was not just the kind of bell ringing Alec was used to in the city, but it was done with a method just the same. The rope hung down into the vestibule of the church, and Alec could see the old sexton tugging away at it directly in front of the open door. He gave a great pull, and then seemed nearly carried off his feet at the return. The sweat poured down his face, and Alec thought with a laugh that his collar must be pretty well wilted. But on looking again he saw the old sexton's collar and necktie on the floor beside him, a somewhat incongruous picture for a church door on Sunday morning.

Soon the people began to come. First a hulking young man, uncomfortable in his stiff Sunday suit, his white collar rapidly melting, slouched up apologetically and stood waiting on the corner. The service began with a hymn, and when the choir rose Alec observed that 'Lisbeth and George Marston stood side by side. Doubtless in the silent communion of many Sundays thus so near each other had grown up that attachment which 'Lisbeth sternly but silently repressed, but which the blacksmith as persistently but silently urged. When at the second hymn the whole congregation rose and turned to face the choir in the rear, Alec spent his curiosity and attention in watching those two singers and felt sure that, however intense their affection, no word of love had yet passed between them. 'Lisbeth sang in a clear, full soprano, her voice rising merrily and almost unconsciously above the rest, while the blacksmith, with his frank blue eyes and honest, open face, looked up to heaven and poured one his voice with her in a clear baritone that blended perfectly.

When the service was finished and the congregation broke up for the Sunday school, Alec again felt the cold, stony stare of the little crowd into which he was wedged, on one side Mrs. Higgins gossiping with a neighbor, on the other several other substantial matrons gossiping with other neighbors as if it were the only opportunity during the week they had to speak to each other. But soon Alec saw George Marston making his way through the crowd toward him, and giving Alec's hand a hearty grip and speaking a still more hearty welcome, he invited Alec to join his Sunday school class, and when they had made their way to the door the blacksmith introduced the young man to half a dozen lads who stood about, some older, some younger, but none with anything to say. Alec felt awkward, and was glad when the superintendent rang his little silver bell to call the school to order. They took their places in groups about the church, here a big group of uneasy children, there a group of young ladies, or half a dozen old men and women. George Marston's class had a retired nook in the choir gallery, from which Alec had an excellent opportunity to survey the little gathering without himself being much seen.

It was not at all an unpleasant hour that Alec spent there. He found Marston keenly intelligent, sympathetic and well read for a countryman, and before he left foresaw that he should find in him a genuine and true friend. Already in these few days what deep ties of intimacy he had formed with this strange people!

As soon as the service was over, he slipped away as quickly as possible to the kitchen of the tavern for a good drink of cold water, but he found 'Lisbeth before him busily getting dinner, for which he confessed himself quite ready.

CHAPTER XII.

HE TAKES A WALK IN THE WOODS AND HEARS SOMETHING ABOUT HIGGINS.

Late in the afternoon, when the sun was sinking rapidly into its golden bed and the air was somewhat cooler, Alec went for a ramble. Down the hill to the west the road is a sort of shelving ledge on an embankment, and the passer may look for miles and miles over the valley dotted with lakes and streams and flashing bits of stream and groves and farmhouses. Then it enters a thick forest, where the cool pines and hemlocks and elms and maples and oaks meet above one's head like an arched bower.

At last he came to a place where a brook ran through a little stone arched channel under the road, and beyond it spread out into a clear round pool in the midst of an open meadow grown rank with thick swordgrass. He stepped down from the road to glance into the dark, cool tunnel of the stream, where it ran so smoothly and quietly as if it lingered to rest under the mossy stones beaded with moisture. As he stood up he noticed a little path running off around the edge of the water covered meadow, and he immediately decided to follow it. It skirted the bank of the meadow and pool until it came to an old rail fence, with its rotten logs piled crosswise upon each other. Alec climbed clumsily over and found the path starting off suddenly into the wood.

They found a thick crowd in the entry before the inner door, and Alec was obliged to elbow himself in rather roughly, while everybody stared coldly at him. That stony stare made him most uncomfortable, but the Higgins seemed to take it as natural enough, and gave him what relief they could by hurrying to their pew, though most of the audience were still crowded about the door.

But soon the preacher came, a bent, but dignified old man, with a sadly solemn face, in which, however, goodness shone, and as he made his way to the pulpit the company about the door dispersed to their seats, and soon all was quiet and solemn for a few minutes before the little organ in the loft at the rear, back of the choir, wheezed forth the voluntary.

Alec felt that it was the most solemn assemblage he had ever seen. Though it was so hot a day, there was no flutter of fans, though fans indeed (of the large palm leaf variety chiefly) were in use, there was no rustle of silk garments as in a fashionable audience in the city, no subdued buzz of final whispers. Instead there was a little rustle of the leaves that came with the light breeze through

these tall pines were his humble subjects, never uttering a word of insubordination. What was poverty now, with such a free heritage?

But suddenly a sharp, cool breeze came along, pushing the sultry air before it, and Alec gazed up through the trees to see black scudding clouds. The sun was covered, and it was growing darker, but in this dark forest he had not noticed it. Then came a long, low rumble of thunder, and Alec slipped quickly down from his granite throne and began to look for the right way home.

He could not find it and began to be more than distressed the seat as he hurried here and there, looking and wondering, when suddenly he saw something that changed the whole current of his thoughts. There, not two rods away, wholly unconscious of his presence, sat 'Lisbeth on a low stone, her chin buried in her hands, which in turn were supported by her elbows resting on her knees. She seemed looking vaguely into space. Alec thought she had been crying. Her chin had fallen off beside her, and her whole attitude was that of abandon—a huddled bunch. She was by no means graceful, but most touching. His heart went out to her as a bound, and he would have liked to go to her immediately and have comforted her. But he dare not. He was almost afraid to make his presence known, and began to think of slipping off without her observing him, when he recollecting that he did not know the way; that it was about to rain, and that at any rate he ought not to leave her here to get wet because of her melancholy, however sacred it might be.

He had taken but a few steps toward her when she heard the breaking of the small branches under his feet and turned and saw him. She smiled sadly at him and he remarked prosaically:

"It looks as if it were going to rain. If we don't hurry home, we shall be drenched."

"I don't think it will rain," said 'Lisbeth in a harsh, monotonous tone as she glanced up at the scudding clouds which would be seen through the trees. "The shower is going round."

A few big drops came bouncing down upon them before she had finished, but she assured Alec they meant nothing.

"She has been thinking of the blacksmith," said Alec to himself, and, as for 'Lisbeth, she seemed to feel that he had read her through and through.

She rose rather unlovelily to her feet, however, and started off, bidding Alec come on. He followed her, sorry, sympathizing, wishing he could comfort her, help her, at least show his feeling. But she was silent and forbidding. It was impossible to speak. They tried to talk of indifferent things, but conversation failed, and as they walked through the avenue of trees which formed the road they both lapsed into utter silence.

That evening about 8 o'clock, as Alec was thinking of going to bed, he stumbled into the parlor from the piazza where he had been sitting on a nail keg. At first the room seemed to him deserted, but soon he heard a half stifled sob, and at the farther side of the room made out the form of a girl lying on the old sofa. It must be 'Lisbeth, and she was crying. This time Alec could not restrain his sympathies, and he walked directly across the room to her side, where he let his hand rest on her arm in the dark.

"Is it you, 'Lisbeth?" he asked as cheerily as he could.

She immediately sat upright, but made no answer.

"Tell me what's the matter," he said kindly. "Perhaps I can help you. I'm so sorry for you. You've been awfully good to me, 'Lisbeth," he blurted out and put his hand out to her in the dark, but she repelled it.

"You don't know anything about it," she answered in a broken voice, "and it wouldn't do any good if you did. You can do nothing for me but go away and let me alone. You've got plenty of things to think about for yourself. You've got a job to earn your board and bed for a little while, and you think you are as independent as a landlord. But you don't know how long your job's going to last nor where you're going to get the money to pay for them very clothes you have on. There I didn't mean to say that, but it's the gospel truth, and you better understand it now as well as any time. I like you, and I've tried to help you, but I'm only a girl, and I can't do much."

Alec was completely undone by this sudden turning of the tables. He mumbled something, felt the tears coming into his own eyes and began stumbling back out of the room. 'Lisbeth sat quietly on the sofa and made no sound of movement.

At the door Alec unwittingly plunged squarely into a mountain of humanity, which turned out to be Mrs. Higgins. She had been standing at the door and had heard the colloquy—at least the last part of it.

"Oh, Mr. Howe, don't mind 'Lisbeth!" she said when they had recovered themselves. She shut the door and led the way out to the piazza, where she had just placed a chair, into which she presently sank, while Alec took his old place on the nail keg, with the side of the building for a back.

"You see, Mr. Howe, 'Lisbeth worries a sight over her pa. That was part of what she meant when she talked to you that way. Three years ago her pa had a sort of fit or something, which they say's heart failure or something. He was out in the store one evening with a lot of men there smoking and that sort, and a little girl, Mrs. Janey's little Nancy that died, came in and wanted some sugar, and he was reaching into the barrel that stood out in the middle of the store, you know, and all of a sudden they saw he was kind of limp and just a-hanging on the side of the barrel, so to speak, and near toppling off suddenly into the wood."

The immensity of the place filled him, made him wish to kneel and worship God, sending his prayers up through those tall, smooth, brown trunks and the little space that opened to the sky. A pine wood is like a great cathedral, with its gigantic pillars springing up on every side. Its domes and arches and massive frescoes and cool, calming space about one.

At last Alec climbed up on a high, gray boulder and sat down, like Robin Crusoe in the midst of his lonely island over which he was sole ruler and king. The boulder was his throne. All

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breathing, for all I could see. They said he did breathe, though. I thought shore he was dead. But he wasn't. He got up next morning and went and changed his clothes and set off to Conway to see the doctor. I made Jim go 'long with him, for I said he shouldn't go alone, and 'Lisbeth, she would have gone, too, only she had to take care of the store. She cried terribly and wanted to go, but her father made her give in. She sets turp

turp store by her father.

But Also went bravely to work, and between dealing 3 cents' worth of sugar to one little girl and a 25 cent shoe sole to another and serving divers other stray customers he managed by noon to have moved everything on one side of the store and swept.

Joe Higgins kept out of the way as much as possible while Alec was cleaning. He never took any part in cleaning anything, though he said he was glad to have it done, because it made 'Lisbeth feel better. Women had queer notions, and 'Lisbeth was always fussing about how dirty the store looked. For him, he didn't see but it was all right so long as he kept the sugar and flour and things tightly covered up. Nothing ever went dirty out of his store—unless it were things like lamp chimneys