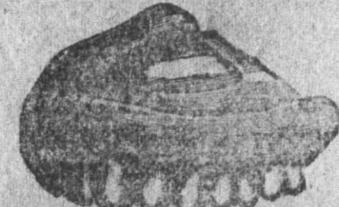


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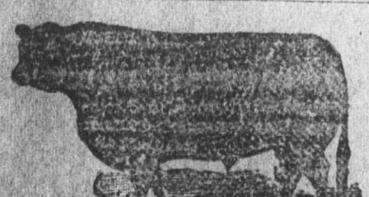
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CORNWALL, 1896. BY THE AUTHOR.

that Ashton was really his home. He had already adopted her in his heart as his sister, and he could not perceive that she rebelled against the relationship, though she gave absolutely no sign of her own feelings.

CHAPTER XVI HE GOES TO THE MOUNTAINS FOR THE CATTLE.

Miss Dora Thistle did not call at the store the next day, and the day after a bright young man from the city arrived and quite absorbed her attention for the rest of the time she spent at Ashton. Aleo was evidently a great puzzle to her, and she felt that it was best to let him alone. Besides, he had grown very stupid, and Mr. Melton, with his white flannel suit, brown slacks and very broad brimmed hat with a red band, was always interesting. Mr. Melton did not know Aleo, and once or twice was rather rude to him, until Miss Thistle whispered in his ear; then he only stared hard at Aleo and shook his head.

But before the summer was past the young men of the village made shy advances to Aleo, and he got on with very friendly terms with those he met every Sunday in his Sabbath school class. One day Aleo decided to confide his personal doubts and difficulties to George Marston, the blacksmith. He was quietly looking about to see if he could find any remunerative employment or occupation, and thought that George might suggest some idea. Mr. Higgins was still giving him only his board and lodging, though he had freely allowed Aleo to take things from the store on credit.

"Ask him for \$5 a week," said George when Aleo mentioned this. "You deserve it, and he will never give it to you unless you ask him."

Aleo asked Mr. Higgins for the addition of \$5 a week, and the request was promptly accorded.

"I thought you was a queer chap to work all summer on nothing a week," said Joe, "but if you wanted to do it I wasn't saying nothing."

The sharp October frosts had turned all the maple leaves scarlet and all the elm and chestnut leaves yellow, and the ivy leaves yellow and scarlet together.

It was time to bring home the young cattle from the mountains, and George Marston and Aleo were deputed to go for them for the neighborhood. George Marston was considered the best hand at coaxing cattle in the village, and he in turn asked Aleo to go with him. Joe Higgins readily let the young man off, for he had cattle of his own to be brought. They were to take George Marston's Concord wagon and bay mare, a first rate roadster. In the wagon were plenty of blankets, so that they might sleep a night on the bottom of it if need be, and oats for the mare and a big lunch basket that Lisbeth prepared. It contained, Aleo knew, a lot of her good things—ginger cookies and cranberry jelly and buckleberry jam, besides more solid nutriment, and there was a big jug of sweet cider.

They would be gone no doubt for three days, if not four or five, for it was 30 miles to the mountains and hunting cattle and driving them home are very slow work. They would start early on Monday morning and reach the pasture by evening. The next day would come the hunt for the stray ones, and there was no telling how long that would take. Then it would require not less than two days to drive the cattle home, even if they traveled more or less steadily during the intervening night.

Aleo liked the idea of taking such a trip with George Marston, for a fondness had grown up between the man and the lad which was clearly recognized by both, though never spoken of. Perhaps Lisbeth was the mutual bond, for she had become like a very sister to Aleo, and he had done all he could to forward the exit of Marston, to whom also he looked for a sort of protecting, brotherly interest which is consoling to think of; even if it does not mean very much practically.

Lisbeth took great pains in getting the two off comfortably. Many a little thing was added for their welfare which they would never have thought of. At 5 o'clock in the morning the old, dirty, rattling wagon, with its rough floor, that had wide cracks in it, stood before the veranda of the store, and on this special occasion the store door was standing open. But though rather ill looking, the wagon had good springs and good wheels, and the bay mare was fresh and sleek in her substantial though scarcely elegant harness. Everything had been put into the wagon the night before except the lunch basket, and Lisbeth had been up for an hour past preparing that. Aleo now appeared at the door bringing it, and George and Lisbeth were close behind him. He put the basket in behind, and George got in to the seat and took up the reins. When all was ready, Aleo jumped up on the low veranda, and, taking Lisbeth's hand, said a hearty goodby and kissed her on the cheek. He blushed slightly, but affected an uncommon ease of manner and unconcernedness as he swung round the wagon and proceeded to climb on the opposite side. Lisbeth looked after him in blank amazement. She was neither offended nor pleased apparently, but simply astonished, and it took her some seconds to grasp the situation. Then she smiled and blushed prettily, and with a knowing look stepped down beside the wagon as if she could for the unevenness of the ground

and the tripping branches and rocks. He had not much difficulty in driving them toward the bars, for they seemed inclined of themselves to go in that direction. But it was near a mile and a half, so the sun stood at full noon when Aleo and George met once more, and having rounded in the cattle they had found they prepared their lunch together. Only three of the herd were lacking, and these they hoped to find in a part of the pasture yet unvisited.

But George seemed very sober indeed, and scarcely spoke. Aleo mused his free, frank, cordial tone, and was vaguely distressed, though he could make out no reason.

As soon as luncheon was finished they started out again. Aleo wandered all the afternoon, finding nothing of the cattle, but plenty else to enjoy. But as the sun sank out of sight away across the valley behind the Green mountains, he heard a long shrill whistle from George, and hurried toward it as rapidly as he could. It was half an hour before he reached the bars, but here he found George and the missing cattle. So at daylight the next morning they would be ready to start for home.

George was taciturn as ever. Aleo was oppressed, but rallied him on being in love, telling him that after that parting his ought to be a happy man. The other's face lightened somewhat at this, but still he did not resume his natural cheerfulness. They ate supper quietly, and as both were tired they soon lay down in their blankets to sleep.

But neither slept. It was clear and cool; the stars shone down steadily; the wind rustled lightly but mournfully in the trees; over in the east the moon was just coming up round and red, casting long shadows among the trees. They lay thus for a long time with no other sounds. Aleo would have gone to sleep long ago had he not been so very tired.

Suddenly George asked, as if he were inquiring what o'clock it were, but half expected to find his bedfellow asleep:

"Did you ever kiss her before?"

"No," said Aleo in the same tone.

"I don't know how I happened to them, only she looked so lonely."

"Do you think she cares for me?"

came the question after a little pause.

"Why, of course. I am sure of it. Didn't you know it? I knew it from the first night I staid there. You know that Saturday evening you came. I saw her cry a little behind the door when you were gone."

There was a very long silence after this. Neither moved nor offered to speak. But at last George said in his old cheery tone:

"You'd better go to sleep, Aleo. It's tough tramping over the mountains for the first time. I'm pretty stiff myself, and we must be off early tomorrow. It's a good thing we've got all the cattle in."

The journey home was a long and tedious one. One of the men had to walk all the way, and they took turns. At the end of the first day they were so fatigued out that George decided to secure a pen if possible in which to keep the cattle for the night, and at last succeeded. The next day one of the steers ran away, and while ten miles from home they were obliged to drive the other cattle into a neighbor's barnyard and go to hunt for the missing one, which they found along near midnight and drove back to the others. They reached Ashton about 10 o'clock in the evening of the third day. The store was still lighted, and George seemed in exceedingly cheerful spirits as they drew near.

They drove the cattle into the great barnyard at the rear, and then George brought the horse around to the front of the store, while Aleo entered the building at the rear. As everything in the kitchen was still and dark, he made his way into the dining room, where supper was spread for himself and George, though no one was there, and then he went on into the store, where Lisbeth was standing at the table.

"I've fastened all the windows," said Aleo, "and the doors are bolted except out this way."

"I'll fasten out here," said Lisbeth, but Aleo followed her, and their hands sometimes met in the dark. A tear or two dropped on his, and then he noticed that she was sobbing and could not stop despite her every effort. When they got to the dining room where there was a light, she lay her head on the table, her arms stretched out before her, and gave way at last to the grief she had so long contained. Aleo stood and watched her till the tears began to run down his face too.

But at last she stopped and they began to talk. They consulted as to what was to be done. In a veiled way they talked over Lisbeth's possible marriage. Lisbeth decided that she and Aleo must get the store to rights and manage things for the winter. In the spring perhaps—but it would be time enough to talk about it then.

"The children don't know," said Lisbeth, "they don't know a thing."

for the night now that George and Aleo had come home. And at last, as George and Aleo were finishing their supper, the four were left alone in the dining room, and Mrs. Higgins and Lisbeth sank into chairs at the table with the young men. Mrs. Higgins by turns wept on the virtues of her deceased husband. All three tried to comfort her, but in vain. She became hysterical, till Lisbeth spoke to her:

"Mother, stop! Stop, mother!"

But Aleo had been watching the face of Lisbeth. Not a tear had escaped her eyes; her face was pale and drawn in tense lines.

Aleo suggested to Mrs. Higgins that she should help her into the parlor, and she would gratefully have accepted his assistance, but Lisbeth jumped up and said:

"I'll go with mother."

"No, you stay with George," said Mrs. Higgins, even as this moment thoughtful of the propriety to her guest.

"George can take care of himself. Aleo can look after him," said Lisbeth curtly.

The two men sat looking at each other for a little while. Then Aleo said:

"I think I'll clear off the table. Lisbeth must be pretty well used up to night."

As he began his work George rose and said he thought he must be going; that he would come over in the morning, and be glad to do anything in the world he could do.

"No; stay a little while. Lisbeth will be back," said Aleo, and went on with his work. So George sat down in a corner of the room and waited.

In ten minutes our dainty city lad had performed the duties of the table girl. Then he went to close up the store. He bolted the front door and put out the lights. Then he went the round of the windows in the tavern, fastening them as Mr. Higgins had been accustomed to do. As he went toward the dining room he heard voices and knew Lisbeth must be there. George was standing in front of her, a hand on each of her shoulders.

"I don't know but this is a bad time to say it," George was saying, "yet I don't know but it's the right time. I meant to say it when I got back. I was thinking about it all the way along. Now that he's gone you'll need somebody to take care of you and the girls, and I don't know that I'm good for anything else if you'll just have me, Lisbeth."

"He spoke in a hesitating, jerky way, but Lisbeth understood.

"But," said she, "I won't tie myself to any man with all my father's family hanging on my skirts. If mother and the children get enough out of the store and things to take care of them properly, perhaps I might."

Then Aleo heard something that sounded like a kiss. A moment later George was stumbling blindly out into the dark. He stumbled into Aleo, who shook hands with him and bade him a hearty good night, which quite brought him to his normal senses. Aleo fastened the door after him and went into the dining room, where Lisbeth was standing by the table.

"I've fastened all the windows," said Aleo, "and the doors are bolted except out this way."

"I'll fasten out here," said Lisbeth, but Aleo followed her, and their hands sometimes met in the dark. A tear or two dropped on his, and then he noticed that she was sobbing and could not stop despite her every effort. When they got to the dining room where there was a light, she lay her head on the table, her arms stretched out before her, and gave way at last to the grief she had so long contained. Aleo stood and watched her till the tears began to run down his face too.

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"The children don't know," said Lisbeth, "they don't know a thing."

They didn't know about father's not being well even, and I put them to bed. It's strange that with the noise and everything they have not been down to see what the matter is. But they went after leaves today after school and got very tired. I suppose that is the reason. But we shall have to tell them in the morning."

"Let me tell them," said Aleo. "Doesn't even Jim know?"

"Not a word."

Then they put out