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George Marston stood near 'Lisbeth's corner, smiling in astonishment wonder at Alec's idea and in pleasure at the inevitable result in helping on 'Lisbeth's business, which in one sense was his own as well. The older men crowded about him and talked grain and crops and the milk market and an arrangement which Alec had made for selling their butter.

There was also a great counter of toys and knickknacks, as toothbrushes, bootjacks, kitchen utensils and so forth, of which he had nominal charge. But he usually referred questioners to 'Lisbeth, who stood near, and she with energetic activity attended to both, disregarding him apparently on the ground that he was a useless incubus. But he looked on with pleased admiration at her industry.

The young men crowded about Maud's corner, and Alec looked in her direction very often with envious eyes. She had a fine color this evening, and in dress certainly was a beauty. Every one noticed her, the girls came and spoke to her, and she sold a large amount of confectionery. Many of the young men tried to joke with her familiarly, but she became so cold and silent that they soon stopped that.

Just before 10 o'clock Alec glanced hastily over the crowd, thinking it was about time to bring in the collation. 'Lisbeth had proposed, but his eye was arrested by a strange figure near the door. It was no other than Mr. Bennett, Maud's father. He had just come in and was looking about in bewilderment, but just as Alec saw him he turned to Maud, and she saw him. Slowly he made his way toward her.

"Well, Maud, a fine place this!" Alec heard him say. He saw Maud's lips move. "Yes," but he thought she was very white.

"Your mother sent me to fetch you home," Mr. Bennett went on after a pause to look about, in which his eyes met Alec's, though it was hastily withdrawn.

"I am 18; I am of age. You can't take me away against my will," said Maud in hurried tones, drawing back a little behind the counter as if she feared her father might try to reach over after her and take her away by force.

"I don't want to take you back," said Mr. Bennett hurriedly. "Do you say you won't go?"

"Yes," said she, the color coming warmly in her cheeks again.

There was a little silence, and then Mr. Bennett motioned with his head toward Alec.

"He is going to marry you?"

"He's been a good friend to me," said Maud hastily, as if in answer to an accusing tone in Mr. Bennett's voice.

Also heard and turned away. His heart thumped ominously as he realized the perfect faith she had in him. But he said to himself over and over:

"I am only her friend. She understands it."

A little later he went up to Mr. Bennett and shook hands with him. He spoke about Maud as if she had come in the ordinary way, and before they parted Mr. Bennett seemed to brighten considerably.

The collation was soon brought in and eaten with hearty relish. When it was finished, one of the young men stood up on a chair and amid many awkward jests moved that a vote of thanks be extended to Mr. Howe for his very fine display and fine collation.

The motion was carried with loud applause, when his place was immediately taken, as had been arranged beforehand, by a young woman, who moved a vote of thanks to Miss 'Lisbeth Higgins and Mrs. Higgins, which was carried with as much earnestness.

The undertaking had proved an immense success. Nearly \$800 worth of goods had been sold for cash or credit, and the management of Alec and 'Lisbeth was firmly established in popularity among the young people, while the older ones looked on with approval. That "store opening" led the way for a general revival of social interest throughout the town, and its significance was regarded on all sides as decidedly more social than mercantile. Another tie in the indissoluble bonds had bound Alec to the country.

But, though he was for the most part very busy, Alec, too, had fits of loneliness and melancholy, when he would climb the attic stairs to stand before the little window that looked out on the balcony and the mountains. There the mountains were still, but different now, yet huge and vast, stretching imminently away, the blinding white expanse of their sides broken by patches of dark pine woods or brown bare ledges. But as the eye traveled upward the glittering summits seemed to blend insensibly with the gray clouds above them, far above the white valley that lay between. And always a vague icy mist seemed hanging over them, last in the keen, cold air their mysteries might be revealed.

And how the sleds, loaded with rosy-faced boys and girls, went shooting down the east hill and past the watering trough and church and store, and then down the ledge hill far along the forest road. They came before school, and at noon and after school, and sometimes in the evening with bigger boys and girls whose arms had good excuse for clinging closely about each other, and girls

the countryman gets that blank calm expression of his that the men of the city can never understand and which sometimes is mistaken for stupidity. The city enthusiast is at times astonished at the apparent blindness of the countryman to the grandeur and beauty about him, but if he does not look and admire it, it is because his bones have become imbued with the sights, and his fingers feel them, and his nerves are tuned to them. Take him from their presence, and he would die of loneliness.

Alec learned these lessons slowly, but surely. The country was absorbing him, though he rebelled at times. That was why he had aloof from Maud. She was the last strong link that would



People came even from the neighboring towns.

bind him, country girl that she was, and not yet would he yield himself wholly. All that winter, day after day, they went about their work, no word spoken, no glance exchanged, that was not of the commonest order. And yet each day he verged imperceptibly nearer and nearer, and from time to time he realized how the distance had lessened, though even now he stubbornly resisted, and, going up to the attic window and looking over the snowbound balcony, regarded the mysterious mountains for their subtle witchery.

Every morning he rose at 6 and kindled the fire in the kitchen for 'Lisbeth and then that in the icy cold store. He broke the ice in the water buckets and went to the pump for fresh water. He washed his face and hands in ice cold water in the kitchen sink and pulled Jim out of bed when he had not the courage to get up. Sometimes he even felt it his duty to pound loudly on the door of the room where 'Lisbeth and Maud were, because they were more than half an hour late in coming down.

About once a month he went to Pomeroy, and sometimes with a sled in order to bring back a load of grain. The work was monotonous, but not disagreeable to one who had something in his head to think about, as Alec had. The living was rough, and sometimes he longed for the dainty comforts of his city home, but at the same time he felt his body growing more and more rugged, and physical health was a great boon.

CHAPTER XXIII.

DEATH AND LOVE.

In May the first six months of the new management of the store were completed, and George Marston advised a balancing of accounts. He and Alec and 'Lisbeth worked steadily at the account books for three days, and then the result was known. The profits exceeded by \$300 those of any previous six months in the history of the store. There was a great jubilation of a quiet sort among the three managers, though Alec received the most of the congratulations.

But one success is only a stepping stone to another. It was a good beginning, but what next?

As the summer was approaching the old plan for summer boarders was revived, and Alec suggested spending the \$300 they had gained in getting the old hall into bedrooms furnished for the boarders. The plan was well talked over and at last decided on, and Alec was to be sent to New York to buy the furniture and arrange for the necessary advertising.

It was tacitly understood in the following autumn 'Lisbeth and George would be married. If Alec remained and took charge of the store for Mrs. Higgins, 'Lisbeth would go to live at the house of the Marstons. It seemed to be taken for granted that he would stay, and when George spoke of the matter he always assumed that he should have 'Lisbeth with him very soon, though of course his and her share in the control of affairs at the store would continue as long as there was any need.

It was with a thrill that Alec heard the proposition to go to New York. It was a year since he had left his home, as he now suspected forever, and not one word of news or affection had come to him. Even the irrepressible Miss Dern Thistle seemed to have forgotten him. Should he go back to his father and say: "I have succeeded. Give me your blessing?" Or should he forget, as he was forgotten? Those were painful, bitter thoughts.

But one day toward the end of May a letter came. It was 'Lisbeth who found it.

"Here's a letter for you, Alec," she said, holding out a great square envelope edged with a wide band of black.

Alec glanced at the address. It was old mother's handwriting, and he trembled for the news it must contain. Six months before he had written her and sent his address, but till now he had heard nothing.

Of course the mail had to be distributed before he could read the letter, so it lay on the board shelf before him as he worked. But soon the last bug was thrown over the counter, and the mail man had snatched it up and hurried into his big three-seated wagon, chirped to his horses and was gone, and 'Lisbeth was handing out to the waiting ones all the letters that had not been delivered as they came to them in sorting.

Alec tore open his letter, while 'Lisbeth glanced at him nervously, wondering what the letter could mean.

It was brief. It said that Alec's father was dead, and he must come home. It also inclosed a check for \$100, bidding him pay up his debts and buy some clothes so as to come looking as decent as possible.

Indeed! Evidently they thought he had been wallowing in the gutter up here. How could he ever go back to such a home as that, and how could a mourning mother write such a cruel letter? 'Lisbeth could not have done it, with all her hardness. Impossible!

He hurriedly told 'Lisbeth that his father was dead and hurried away to think. He must at least go and follow with the mourners to his father's grave, and after all he loved his father's memory, and he would always cherish it. He had been a good man, but mercenary and rod away.

"Goodby," she murmured and stood watching him down the forest path, for he meant to cut across the fields to the railway station. He looked back several times, and just as he was turning the corner of the trees to go out of sight he stopped and waved his hand.

"Goodby," he shouted, and she murmured "Goodby." But he heard it.

How the birds sang, how soft the air was, how bright the sun! As he hurried along he remembered that he had said goodby to nobody, not even Mrs. Higgins or 'Lisbeth—only Maud. But it did not matter. In a week he would be back again—home again.

* * * * *

Alexander Howe is now the rich man of the town of Ashton. He made a considerable fortune in his business and owns a large farm, which he intends turning into a private park—private, but open to all his townspeople. They call him squire, and it is he who makes the big subscriptions for the minister's salary, and for the town poor, and for patriotic celebrations, and the old men tell how he came to Ashton years ago a poor lad without a penny in his pocket.

And he has the handsomest wife in the state, and all the town is proud of her. She loves her husband just as she loved him in those old years, and when he holds her hands and looks at her he glances on to the mountains, for he believes that her love is as unchanging as they.

"What time is it?" she asked. "You'd better be going."

"Goodby, I'll be back soon," he cried a rod away.

"Goodby," she murmured and stood watching him down the forest path, for he meant to cut across the fields to the railway station. He looked back several times, and just as he was turning the corner of the trees to go out of sight he stopped and waved his hand.

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