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George Marston stood near 'Lisbeth's' corner, smiling in astonished 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 incubator. But he looked on with pleased admiration at her industry.

The young men crowded about Mand's corner, and Alec looked in her direction very often with envious eyes. She had a due 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, Mand's father. He had just come in and was looking about in bewilderment, but just as Alec saw him he turned and saw Mand, and she saw him. Slowly he made his way toward her.

"Well, Mand, a fine place this!" Alec heard him say. He saw Mand's lips answer "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 Bennett went on after a pause to look about, in which his eyes met Alec's, though it was hastily withdrawn.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 Mand 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.

"Is he going to marry you?" "He's been a good friend to me," said Mand hastily, as if in answer to an accusing tone in Mr. Bennett's voice.

Alec 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 Mand 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 \$300 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.

CHAPTER XXII.

WINTER.

The winter had settled down early, as the weather prophets had foretold. The snow lay thick over the ground, and the roads had a packed and icy bed. Carts disappeared, and sleighs, sleds and cutters took their places. How lightly the iron shoes skimmed over the ground, and the horses, stimulated by the crisp air, flew as if they had no load at all. And soon the heavy bobsleds, drawn by double teams of horses or oxen, came from every direction loaded with rough timber for the sawmill, or high corded piles of firewood which had been waiting for the snow to be hauled into the farmyards, where it could be sawed at leisure, when there was no possibility of other work.

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

hands had to be warmed in boys' pockets.

Every day the school children, as they climbed the long hill back from their ride, stopped at the store as at a sort of half way house, to warm their numbed hands and toes, for Alec always kept a roaring fire in the big round stove.

But winter was especially the time for social gatherings and lyceums and entertainments in the hall by the ladies' sewing society. Thanksgiving soon came, and what family gatherings there were! For a full week beforehand the women were engaged in making fat mince pies and pumpkin pies and squash pies and cranberry tarts, and then at the last chicken pies and cranberry sauce and preparing the big turkey. No house was so small or poor it didn't have a feast of some sort, and if there were any brothers or sisters to come home, they always came, and abandoned themselves for one day to old country cheer, spiced sometimes with clear hard cider.

For a week just before Christmas Alec had a grand sale of holiday goods in the big hall, and people came even from the neighboring towns for miles about, and the sales were really very large. Alec decorated the store and tavern plentifully with evergreens, and they had a little Christmas tree, with all the pies and puddings and candies the children, big and little, could possibly eat.

Christmas evening was a clear, cold starlit night. The day had been a gloriously joyful one, and Jim brought out his big new double runner and wanted the whole family to go and slide down hill with him. Alec was ready at the first word, and Mand soon consented, and after awhile 'Lisbeth said she would go. Only Mrs. Higgins held out, till every one turned against her, and they fairly carried her off, placing her on the sled and pulling her up the hill.

When they were ready to make the descent, Jim sat in front to steer, Mrs. Higgins came next and took a firm grasp of her young son, while 'Lisbeth, immediately behind, did more to secure her mother's welfare than her own safety. Then the little ones sat close up between 'Lisbeth and Mand, who was behind them. Alec pushed the sled off.

How they did whistle through the air, while fences and houses and church and store and woods went scudding by them. Even Alec caught his breath and held it hard as they rounded a sharp corner, leaning in to balance the veering sled.

What if they should all go rolling in the snow, and what if there were broken bones or cracked skulls?

But there was no casualty. The sled came to the end of its journey in a leisurely glide, and there was the long tramp back again. When they reached the store, Mrs. Higgins wouldn't think of going again, and 'Lisbeth cried off and took the little ones, though they wept for more. But Jim said he was going if he had to slide alone, and Alec invited Mand to join him in keeping Jim company. So off they went, Jim tugging at the sled in front, Alec and Mand following leisurely behind. He slipped her arm into his and helped her gallantly. It was the first time he had ever paid her any special attention, but tonight he helped her and tended her as if she had been a child or a young lady from the city. He sat close behind her on the journeys downward and held her firmly with one hand about her waist, while with the other he grasped the side of the sled. Once, indeed, they went rolling in the snow near the foot of the ledge hill, and Alec had to pick her up and wipe the snow gently from her face and eyes and brush her skirts and cloak and warm her cold hands in his.

It was very sweet, and she was very happy, and so was Alec, if the truth be told. He wanted to take her in his arms and kiss her, but he didn't, and she never dreamed of his desire, though assuredly it would not have shocked her.

But the next day they fell to work again. Mand was but the servant and Alec was virtual master. He was a good and courteous master, but master is a cold and formal word, and Mand felt it, though she did not complain even to herself. As for Alec, he reproached himself with having made no progress in introducing Mand to some eligible young man, as he had meant to do.

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 illimitably 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, lest in the keen, cold air their mysteries might be revealed.

And the wide valley between stretched its white expanse as far as the eye could reach, broken here and there by farmhouses and barns whose roofs were heavily snow laden, or by rough thickets of bare trees, or the dark evergreen woods of pine and spruce and hemlock and fir. It was a cold and forbidding prospect, yet fascinating, too, a mysterious monotony, a wilderness and a gulfing infinitude, from which perhaps

the countryman gets that blank calm-eyed 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 held aloof from Mand. 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, he hated 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 icy 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 Mand were, because they were more than half an hour late in coming down.

About once a month he went to Pavaonia, 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 is 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 \$800 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 that 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 Georgespeoke 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 Dora 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 his 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 bag was thrown over the counter, and the mail man had matched 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 hard.

His plans were made to go in a week, but now he changed them and decided to go the next day. 'Lisbeth told Mand at supper that night, and Alec spent the evening in packing his bag. Mrs. Higgins came to his room and begged him not to leave them. He said he would come back, and even gave her a filial kiss that comforted her. Then Jim and the little ones came and stood respectfully by as he packed his few belongings.

That night he tossed restlessly in bed. Never before was his heart so full of problems. What should he do? What should he not do? He did not know, and no voice seemed to tell him. And yet perhaps in the book of fate it was all decided long ago. With that thought he fell asleep.

The next morning he was busy in the store till nearly the time for starting. There were so many things to talk over with George Marston.

And his mind kept wandering back to his father. He did honor him. He really loved him. Had he been left alone he would never have driven his son from his home. Perhaps he would excuse his stepmother's unkindness and forget what she had done. But he finally felt how impossible it was ever to go back except to follow his father's body to the grave. Poor father! He, too, had struggled and conquered, and Alec was proud of having followed in his footsteps.

He intended to walk over to the railway station because it was such a pleasant morning, and 'Lisbeth could not conveniently go to drive him and bring the horse back. He went to say goodbye to 'Lisbeth, who was in the kitchen.

"Where is Mand?" he asked. "I think she's gone out," replied 'Lisbeth. But when she saw the blank look on Alec's face she added, "She said you would never come back and went down that path toward the woods."

Alec walked to the door and looked steadily down the path Mand had taken. After a moment he turned suddenly and asked:

"What's the matter?" Something in the manner of 'Lisbeth seemed mysterious, and he could not guess its meaning.

"Don't you know?" replied 'Lisbeth slowly, while a faint smile gathered round the corners of her lips.

Then Alec understood everything. Without a word he turned and flew down the path. On he sped into the cool woods, over the slippery pine needles, stumbling on the rocks and branches in his path. But he had not gone many rods before he stopped short, for there she was, lying at the foot of a great pine tree, stretched upon the ground, with her face buried in her folded arms, while sobs shook her whole body. He stopped abruptly, then cautiously ap-



There she was, lying at the foot of a great pine tree.

proached. But she had detected him. He knew it because the sobs stopped, and she lay perfectly quiet. Alec finally threw himself at full length beside her. His arm stole round her shoulders, his hand touched her cheek, but still she made no movement or sound, only under his arm he could feel the regular coming and going of her breath.

"Mand," said he. But he could find no other words, and the sentence he would have passed died away in silence. Instead he passed his hand caressingly over her head and hair and finally gave a gentle pressure to turn her face toward him. In a moment it yielded. She felt all the time that he was looking at her, and she knew that her face was stained with tears. But she did not care. He saw at once the tear stained face, the quivering lips, the moist eyelids, and then he looked into those round, brown eyes and saw that they were looking into his. Slowly he drew the face nearer and kissed the cheek and lips, and then she gently raised her damp lips and kissed him.

At last Mand sat up at the foot of the pine, leaning her back against it.

"You've lost your train," she said. But her face was happy and smiling.

"There'll be another," he answered. "You'll come back?" she asked, not as an inquiry, but simply to hear the words that he would say.

"I may be back in a week," he said cheerfully and took her hand in his and kissed it. No country lover would have done that, she thought to herself proudly.

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

"Goodby. I'll be back soon," he cried, and ran 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 Mand. 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.

THE END.

FRANCE IS RECEDING.

Various Methods Being Tried to Increase Her Declining Population.

Frenchmen, or a large section of them, are beginning to manifest serious concern over the revelation of the last census, that France is the only great nation which is no longer obeying the divine command to increase and multiply.

The subject has been taken vigorously in hand by public men and others, and various plans have already been suggested for making Frenchmen amenable to compulsory fatherhood. It has been pointed out that by reason of her shortcomings in this respect France loses every year a battle of Sedan. The National Alliance For the Increase of the Population of France has presented a petition to the prime minister, setting forth certain drastic measures which the government is urged to adopt.