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## Chapter 22 - Positively Last Appearance

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'Upon my word, I feel as if I lived in a powder-magazine, and don't know which barrel will explode next, and send me flying,' said Mrs Jo to herself next day, as she trudged up to Parnassus to suggest to her sister that perhaps the most charming of the young nurses had better return to her marble gods before she unconsciously added another wound to those already won by the human hero. She told no secrets; but a hint was sufficient; for Mrs Amy guarded her daughter as a pearl of great price, and at once devised a very simple means of escape from danger. Mr Laurie was going to Washington on Dan's behalf, and was delighted to take his family with him when the idea was carelessly suggested. So the conspiracy succeeded finely; and Mrs Jo went home, feeling more like a traitor than ever. She expected an explosion; but Dan took the news so quietly, it was plain that he cherished no hope; and Mrs Amy was sure her romantic sister had been mistaken. If she had seen Dan's face when Bess went to say good-bye, her maternal eye would have discovered far more than the unconscious girl did. Mrs Jo trembled lest he should betray himself; but he had learned self-control in a stern school, and would have got through the hard moment bravely, only, when he took both hands, saying heartily:

'Good-bye, Princess. If we don't meet again, remember your old friend Dan sometimes,' she, touched by his late danger and the wistful look he wore, answered with unusual warmth: 'How can I help it, when you make us all so proud of you? God bless your mission, and bring you safely home to us again!'

As she looked up at him with a face full of frank affection and sweet regret, all that he was losing rose so vividly before him that Dan could not resist the impulse to take the 'dear goldy head' between his hands and kiss it, with a broken 'Good-bye'; then hurried back to his room, feeling as if it were the prison-cell again, with no glimpse of heaven's blue to comfort him.

This abrupt caress and departure rather startled Bess; for she felt with a girl's quick instinct that there was something in that kiss unknown before, and looked after him with sudden colour in her cheeks and new trouble in her eyes. Mrs Jo saw it, and fearing a very natural question answered it before it was put.

'Forgive him, Bess. He has had a great trouble, and it makes him tender at parting with old friends; for you know he may never come back from the wild world he is going to.'

'You mean the fall and danger of death?' asked Bess, innocently.

'No, dear; a greater trouble than that. But I cannot tell you any more - except that he has come through it bravely; so you may trust and respect him, as I do.'

'He has lost someone he loved. Poor Dan! We must be very kind to him.'

Bess did not ask the question, but seemed content with her solution of the mystery - which was so true that Mrs Jo confirmed it by a nod, and let her go away believing that some tender loss and sorrow wrought the great change all saw in Dan, and made him so slow to speak concerning the past year.

But Ted was less easily satisfied, and this unusual reticence goaded him to desperation. His mother had warned him not to trouble Dan with questions till he was quite well; but this prospect of approaching departure made him resolve to have a full, clear, and satisfactory account of the adventures which he felt sure must have been thrilling, from stray words Dan let fall in his fever. So one day when the coast was clear, Master Ted volunteered to amuse the invalid, and did so in the following manner:

'Look here, old boy, if you don't want me to read, you've got to talk, and tell me all about Kansas, and the farms, and that part. The Montana business I know, but you seem to forget what went before. Brace up, and let's have it,' he began, with an abruptness which roused Dan from a brown study most effectually.

'No, I don't forget; it isn't interesting to anyone but myself. I didn't see any farms - gave it up,' he said slowly.

'Why?'

'Other things to do.'

'What?'

'Well, brush-making for one thing.'

'Don't chaff a fellow. Tell true.'

'I truly did.'

'What for?'

'To keep out of mischief, as much as anything.'

'Well, of all the queer things - and you've done a lot - that's the queerest,' cried Ted, taken aback at this disappointing discovery. But he didn't mean to give up yet, and began again.

'What mischief, Dan?'

'Never you mind. Boys shouldn't bother.'

'But I do want to know, awfully, because I'm your pal, and care for you no end. Always did. Come, now, tell me a good yarn. I love scrapes. I'll be mum as an oyster if you

don't want it known.'

'Will you?' and Dan looked at him, wondering how the boyish face would change if the truth were suddenly told him.

'I'll swear it on locked fists, if you like. I know it was jolly, and I'm aching to hear.'

'You are as curious as a girl. More than some - Josie and - and Bess never asked a question.'

'They don't care about rows and things; they liked the mine business, heroes, and that sort. So do I, and I'm as proud as Punch over it; but I see by your eyes that there was something else before that, and I'm bound to find out who Blair and Mason are, and who was hit and who ran away, and all the rest of it.'

'What!' cried Dan, in a tone that made Ted jump.

'Well, you used to mutter about 'em in your sleep, and Uncle Laurie wondered. So did I; but don't mind, if you can't remember, or would rather not.'

'What else did I say? Queer, what stuff a man will talk when his wits are gone.'

'That's all I heard; but it seemed interesting, and I just mentioned it, thinking it might refresh your memory a bit,' said Teddy, very politely; for Dan's frown was heavy at that moment.

It cleared off at this reply, and after a look at the boy squirming with suppressed impatience in his chair, Dan made up his mind to amuse him with a game of cross-purposes and half-truths, hoping to quench his curiosity, and so get peace.

'Let me see; Blair was a lad I met in the cars, and Mason a poor fellow who was in a - well, a sort of hospital where I happened to be. Blair ran off to his brothers, and I suppose I might say Mason was hit, because he died there. Does that suit you?'

'No, it doesn't. Why did Blair run? and who hit the other fellow? I'm sure there was a fight somewhere, wasn't there?'

'Yes!

'I guess I know what it was about.'

'The devil, you do! Let's hear you guess. Must be amusing,' said Dan, affecting an ease he did not feel.

Charmed to be allowed to free his mind, Ted at once unfolded the boyish solution of the mystery which he had been cherishing, for he felt that there was one somewhere.

'You needn't say yes, if I guess right and you are under oath to keep silent. I shall know by your face, and never tell. Now see if I'm not right. Out there they have wild doings, and it's my belief you were in some of 'em. I don't mean robbing mails, and KluKluxing, and that sort of thing; but defending the settlers, or hanging some scamp, or even shooting a few, as a fellow must sometimes, in self-defence. Ah, ha! I've hit it, I see. Needn't speak; I know the flash of your old eye, and the clench of your big fist. And Ted pranced with satisfaction.

'Drive on, smart boy, and don't lose the trail,' said Dan, finding a curious sense of comfort in some of these random words, and longing, but not daring, to confirm the true ones. He might have confessed the crime, but not the punishment that followed, the sense of its disgrace was still so strong upon him.

'I knew I should get it; can't deceive me long,' began Ted, with such an air of pride Dan could not help a short laugh.

'It's a relief, isn't it, to have it off your mind? Now, just confide in me and it's all safe, unless you've sworn not to tell.'

'I have.'

'Oh, well, then don't'; and Ted's face fell, but he was himself again in a moment and said, with the air of a man of the world: 'It's all right - I understand - honour binds - silence to death, etc. Glad you stood by your mate in the hospital. How many did you kill?'

'Only one.'

'Bad lot, of course?'

'A damned rascal.'

'Well, don't look so fierce; I've no objection. Wouldn't mind popping at some of those bloodthirsty blackguards myself. Had to dodge and keep quiet after it, I suppose.'

'Pretty quiet for a long spell.'

'Got off all right in the end, and headed for your mines and did that jolly brave thing. Now, I call that decidedly interesting and capital. I'm glad to know it; but I won't blab.'

'Mind you don't. Look here. Ted, if you'd killed a man, would it trouble you - a bad one, I mean?'

The lad opened his mouth to say, 'Not a bit,' but checked that answer as if something in Dan's face made him change his mind. 'Well, if it was my duty in war or self-defence, I suppose I shouldn't; but if I'd pitched into him in a rage, I guess I should be very sorry. Shouldn't wonder if he sort of haunted me, and remorse gnawed me as it did Aram and those fellows. You don't mind, do you? It was a fair fight, wasn't it?'

'Yes, I was in the right; but I wish I'd been out of it. Women don't see it that way, and look horrified at such things. Makes it hard; but it don't matter.'

'Don't tell 'em; then they can't worry,' said Ted, with the nod of one versed in the management of the sex.

'Don't intend to. Mind you keep your notions to yourself, for some of 'em are wide of the mark. Now you may read if you like'; and there the talk ended; but Ted took great comfort in it, and looked as wise as an owl afterwards.

A few quiet weeks followed, during which Dan chafed at the delay; and when at length matters were ready, he was eager to be off, to forget a vain love in hard work, and live for others, since he might not for himself.

So one wild March morning our Sintram rode away, with horse and hound, to face again the enemies who would have conquered him, but for Heaven's help and human pity.

'Ah, me! it does seem as if life was made of partings, and they get harder as we go on,' sighed Mrs Jo, a week later, as she sat in the long parlour at Parnassus one evening, whither the family had gone to welcome the travellers back.

'And meetings too, dear; for here we are, and Nat is on his way at last. Look for the silver lining, as Marmee used to say, and be comforted,' answered Mrs Amy, glad to be at home and find no wolves prowling near her sheepfold.

'I've been so worried lately, I can't help croaking. I wonder what Dan thought at not seeing you again? It was wise; but he would have enjoyed another look at home faces before he went into the wilderness,' said Mrs Jo regretfully.

'Much better so. We left notes and all we could think of that he might need, and slipped away before he came. Bess really seemed relieved; I'm sure I was'; and Mrs Amy smoothed an anxious line out of her white forehead, as she smiled at her daughter, laughing happily among her cousins.

Mrs Jo shook her head as if the silver lining of that cloud was hard to find; but she had no time to croak again, for just then Mr Laurie came in looking well pleased at something.

'A new picture has arrived; face towards the music-room, good people, and tell me how you like it. I call it "Only a fiddler", after Andersen's story. What name will you give it?'

As he spoke he threw open the wide doors, and just beyond they saw a young man standing, with a beaming face, and a violin in his hand. There was no doubt about the name to this picture, and with the cry 'Nat! Nat!' there was a general uprising. But Daisy reached him first, and seemed to have lost her usual composure somewhere on the way, for she clung to him, sobbing with the shock of a surprise and joy too great for her to bear quietly. Everything was settled by that tearful and tender embrace, for, though Mrs Meg speedily detached her daughter, it was only to take her place; while Demi shook Nat's hand with brotherly warmth, and Josie danced round them like Macbeth's three witches in one, chanting in her most tragic tones:

'Chirper thou wast; second violin thou art; first thou shalt be. Hail, all hail!'

This caused a laugh, and made things gay and comfortable at once. Then the usual fire of questions and answers began, to be kept up briskly while the boys admired Nat's blond beard and foreign clothes, the girls his improved appearance - for he was ruddy with good English beef and beer, and fresh with the sea-breezes which had blown him swiftly home - and the older folk rejoiced over his prospects. Of course all wanted to hear him play; and when tongues tired, he gladly did his best for them, surprising the most critical by his progress in music even more than by the energy and self-possession which made a new man of bashful Nat. By and by when the violin - that most human of all instruments - had sung to them the loveliest songs without words, he said, looking about him at these old friends with what Mr Bhaer called a 'feeling-full' expression of happiness and content:

'Now let me play something that you will all remember though you won't love it as I do'; and standing in the attitude which Ole Bull has immortalized, he played the street melody he gave them the first night he came to Plumfield. They remembered it, and joined in the plaintive chorus, which fitly expressed his own emotions:

'Oh my heart is sad and weary  
Everywhere I roam,  
Longing for the old plantation  
And for the old folks at home.'

'Now I feel better,' said Mrs Jo, as they all trooped down the hill soon after. 'Some of our boys are failures, but I think this one is going to be a success, and patient Daisy a happy girl at last. Nat is your work, Fritz, and I congratulate you heartily.'

'Ach, we can but sow the seed and trust that it falls on good ground. I planted, perhaps, but you watched that the fowls of the air did not devour it, and brother Laurie watered generously; so we will share the harvest among us, and be glad even for a small one, heart's-dearest.'

'I thought the seed had fallen on very stony ground with my poor Dan; but I shall not be surprised if he surpasses all the rest in the real success of life, since there is more rejoicing over one repentant sinner than many saints,' answered Mrs Jo, still clinging fast to her black sheep although a whole flock of white ones trotted happily before her.

It is a strong temptation to the weary historian to close the present tale with an earthquake which should engulf Plumfield and its environs so deeply in the bowels of the earth that no youthful Schliemann could ever find a vestige of it. But as that somewhat melodramatic conclusion might shock my gentle readers, I will refrain, and forestall the usual question, 'How did they end?' by briefly stating that all the marriages turned out well. The boys prospered in their various callings; so did the girls, for Bess and Josie won honours in their artistic careers, and in the course of time found worthy mates. Nan remained a busy, cheerful, independent spinster, and dedicated her life to her suffering sisters and their children, in which true woman's work she found abiding happiness. Dan never married, but lived, bravely and usefully, among his chosen people till he was shot defending them, and at last lay quietly asleep in the green wilderness he loved so well, with a lock of golden hair upon his breast, and a smile on his face which seemed to say that Aslauga's Knight had fought his last fight and was at peace. Stuffy became an alderman, and died suddenly of apoplexy after a public dinner. Dolly was a society man of mark till he lost his money, when he found congenial employment in a fashionable tailoring establishment. Demi became a partner, and lived to see his name above the door, and Rob was a professor at Laurence College; but Teddy eclipsed them all by becoming an eloquent and famous clergyman, to the great delight of his astonished mother. And now, having endeavoured to suit everyone by many weddings, few deaths, and as much prosperity as the eternal fitness of things will permit, let the music stop, the lights die out, and the curtain fall for ever on the March family.