

AUNT JANE'S NIECES AT MILLVILLE

BY

EDITH VAN DYNE

1908

LIST OF CHAPTERS

- I UNCLE JOHN'S FARM
- II THE AGENT
- III *MILLVILLE HEARS EXCITING NEWS*
- IV ETHEL MAKES PREPARATION
- V THE ARRIVAL OF THE NABOBS
- VI PEGGY PRESENTS HIS BILL
- VII LOUISE SCENTS A MYSTERY
- VIII THE LITTLE SCHOOL-MA'AM
- IX THE "LIVES OF THE SAINTS"
- X THE MYSTERY DEEPENS
- XI THREE AMATEUR DETECTIVES
- XII THE BAITING OF PEGGY McNUTT
- XIII BOB WEST, HARDWARE DEALER
- XIV THE MAJOR IS PUZZLED
- XV THE MAN IN HIDING
- XVI A MATTER OF SPECULATION
- XVII JOE TELLS OF "THE GREAT TROUBLE"
- XVIII THE LOCKED CUPBOARD
- XIX THE COURT'N' OF SKIM CLARK
- XX A LOST CAUSE
- XXI THE TRAP IS SET
- XXII CAUGHT!
- XXIII MR. WEST EXPLAINS
- XXIV PEGGY HAS REVENGE
- XXV GOOD NEWS AT LAST

CHAPTER I.

UNCLE JOHN'S FARM.

"How did I happen to own a farm?" asked Uncle John, interrupting his soup long enough to fix an inquiring glance upon Major Doyle, who sat opposite.

"By virtue of circumstance, my dear sir," replied the Major, composedly. "It's a part of my duty, in attending to those affairs you won't look after yourself, to lend certain sums of your money to needy and ambitious young men who want a start in life."

"Oh, Uncle! Do you do that?" exclaimed Miss Patricia Doyle, who sat between her uncle and father and kept an active eye upon both.

"So the Major says," answered Uncle John, dryly.

"And it's true," asserted the other. "He's assisted three or four score young men to start in business in the last year, to my certain knowledge, by lending them sums ranging from one to three thousand dollars. And it's the most wasteful and extravagant charity I ever heard of."

"But I'm so glad!" cried Patsy, clapping her hands with a delighted gesture. "It's a splendid way to do good—to help young men to get a start in life. Without capital, you know, many a young fellow would never get his foot on the first round of the ladder."

"And many will never get it there in any event," declared the Major, with a shake of his grizzled head. "More than half the rascals that John helps go to the dogs entirely, and hang us up for all they've borrowed."

"I told you to help *deserving* young men," remarked Uncle John, with a scowl at his brother-in-law.

"And how can I tell whether they're deserving or not?" retorted Major Doyle, fiercely. "Do ye want me to become a sleuth, or engage detectives to track the objects of your erroneous philanthropy? I just have to form a judgment an' take my chances; and when a poor devil goes wrong I charge your account with the loss."

"But some of them must succeed," ventured Patsy, in a conciliatory tone.

"Some do," said John Merrick; "and that repays me for all my trouble."

"All *your* trouble, sir?" queried the Major; "you mane all *my* trouble—well, and your money. And a heap of trouble that confounded farm has cost me, with one thing and another."

"What of it?" retorted the little round faced millionaire, leaning back in his chair and staring fixedly at the other. "That's what I employ you for."

"Now, now, gentlemen!" cried Patsy, earnestly. "I'll have no business conversation at the table. You know my rules well enough."

"This isn't business," asserted the Major.

"Of course not," agreed Uncle John, mildly. "No one has any business owning a farm. How did it happen. Major?"

The old soldier had already forgotten his grievance. He quarreled persistently with his wealthy employer and brother-in-law—whom he fairly adored—to prevent the possibility (as he often confided to Patsy) of his falling down and worshipping him. John Merrick was a multi-millionaire, to be sure; but there were palliating circumstances that almost excused him. He had been so busily occupied in industry that he never noticed how his wealth was piling up until he discovered it by accident. Then he promptly retired, "to give the other fellows a chance," and he now devoted his life to simple acts of charity and the welfare and entertainment of his three nieces. He had rescued Major Doyle and his daughter from a lowly condition and placed the former in the great banking house of Isham, Marvin & Company, where John Merrick's vast interests were protected and his income wisely managed. He had given Patsy this cosy little apartment house at 3708 Willing Square and made his home with her, from which circumstance she had come to be recognized as his favorite niece.

John Merrick was sixty years old. He was short, stout and chubby-faced, with snow-white hair, mild blue eyes and an invariably cheery smile. Simple in his tastes, modest and retiring, lacking the education and refinements of polite society, but shrewd and experienced in the affairs of the world, the little man found his greatest enjoyment in the family circle that he had been instrumental in founding. Being no longer absorbed in business, he had come to detest its every detail, and so allowed his bankers to care for his fortune and his brother-in-law to disburse his income, while he himself strove to enjoy life in a shy and boyish fashion that was as unusual in a man of his wealth as it was admirable. He had never married.

Patricia was the apple of Uncle John's eye, and the one goddess enshrined in her doting father's heart. Glancing at her, as she sat here at table in her plain muslin gown, a stranger would be tempted to wonder why. She was red-haired, freckled as a robin's egg, pug-nosed and wide-mouthed. But her blue eyes were beautiful, and they sparkled with a combination of saucy mischief and kindly consideration for others that lent her face an indescribable charm.

Everyone loved Patsy Doyle, and people would gaze longer at her smiling-lips and dancing eyes than upon many a more handsome but less attractive face. She was nearly seventeen years old, not very tall, and her form, to speak charitably, was more neat than slender.

"A while ago," said the Major, resuming the conversation as he carved the roast, "a young fellow came to me who had invented a new sort of pump to inflate rubber tires. He wanted capital to patent the pump and put it on the market. The thing looked pretty good, John; so I lent him a thousand of your money."

"Quite right," returned Uncle John, nodding.

"But pretty soon he came back with a sad tale. He was in a bad fix. Another fellow was contesting his patent and fighting hard to head him off. It would take a lot of money to fight back—three thousand, at least. But he was decent about it, after all. His father had left him a little farm at Millville. He couldn't say what it was worth, but there were sixty acres and some good buildings, and he would deed it to you as security if you would let him have three thousand more."

"So you took the farm and gave him the money?"

"I did, sir. Perhaps I am to blame; but I liked the young fellow's looks. He was clean-cut and frank, and believed in his pump. I did more. At the climax of the struggle I gave another thousand, making five thousand in all."

"Well?"

"It's gone, John; and you've got the farm. The other fellows were too clever for my young friend, Joseph Wegg, and knocked out his patent."

"I'm so sorry!" said Patsy, sympathetically.

The Major coughed.

"It's not an unusual tale, my dear; especially when John advances the money," he replied.

"What became of the young man?" asked the girl.

"He's a competent chauffeur, and so he went to work driving an automobile."

"Where is Millville?" inquired Uncle John, thoughtfully.

"Somewhere at the north of the State, I believe."

"Have you investigated the farm at all?"

"I looked up a real estate dealer living at Millville, and wrote him about the Wegg farm. He said if any one wanted the place very badly it might sell for three thousand dollars."

"Humph!"

"But his best information was to the effect that no one wanted it at all."

Patsy laughed.

"Poor Uncle John!" she said.

The little man, however, was serious. For a time he ate with great deliberation and revolved an interesting thought in his mind.

"Years ago," said he, "I lived in a country town; and I love the smell of the meadows and the hum of the bees in the orchards. Any orchards at my farm, Major?"

"Don't know, sir."

"Pretty soon," continued Uncle John, "it's going to be dreadfully hot in New York, and we'll have to get away."

"Seashore's the place," remarked the Major. "Atlantic City, or Swampscott, or—"

"Rubbish!" growled the other man, impatiently. "The girls and I have just come from Europe. We've had enough sea to last us all *this* season, at least. What we pine for is country life—pure milk, apple trees and new mown hay."

"We, Uncle?" said Patsy.

"Yes, my dear. A couple of months on the farm will do all of my nieces good. Beth is still with Louise, you know, and they must find the city deadly dull, just now. The farm's the thing. And the Major can run up to see us for a couple of weeks in the hot weather, and we'll all have a glorious, lazy time."

"And we can take Mary along to do the cooking," suggested Patsy, entering into the idea enthusiastically.

"And eat in our shirt-sleeves!" said Uncle John, with a glowing face.

"And have a cow and some pigs!" cried the girl.

"Pah!" said the Major, scornfully. "You talk as if it were a real farm, instead of a place no one would have as a gift."

Uncle John looked sober again.

"Anyone live on the place, Major?" he inquired.

"I believe not. It's gone to ruin and decay the last few years."

"But it could be put into shape?"

"Perhaps so; at an expense that will add to your loss."

"Never mind that."

"If you want farm life, why don't you rent a respectable farm?" demanded the Major.

"No; this is my farm. I own it, and it's my bounded duty to live on it," said Uncle John, stubbornly. "Write to that real estate fellow at Millville tomorrow and tell him to have the place fixed up and put into ship-shape order as quickly as possible. Tell him to buy some cows and pigs and chickens, and hire a man to look after them. Also a horse and buggy, some saddle horses——"

"Go slow, John. Don't leave such a job to a country real estate dealer. If I remember right the fellow wrote like a blacksmith. If you want horses and rigs, let Hutchinson send you down the right sort, with an experienced groom and stable hands. But I'm not sure there will be a place to put them."

"Oh, Uncle!" exclaimed Patsy; "don't let us have all those luxuries. Let us live a simple life on the farm, and not degrade its charms by adding city fixin's. The cow and the chickens are all right, but let's cut out the horses until we get there. Don't you know, dear, that a big

establishment means lots of servants, and servants mean worry and strife? I want to let down the bars for the cow when she moos, and milk her myself."

"It takes a skilled mechanic to milk a cow," objected the Major.

"But Patsy's right!" cried her uncle, with conviction. "We don't want any frills at all. Just tell your man, Major, to put the place into good living condition."

"Patrichia," softly remarked the Major, with an admiring glance at his small daughter, "has more sinse in her frizzled head than both of us put together."

"If she hadn't more than you," retorted Uncle John, with a grin, "I'd put a candle inside her noodle and call her a Jack-Lantern."

CHAPTER II.

THE AGENT.

The Major hunted up the real estate dealer's former letter as soon as he reached his office next morning. The printed letter-head, somewhat blurred, because too much ink had been used, read as follows:

Marshall McMahan McNutt,
Real Estate Dealer & Horses to Pasture
by the week or month.

Also Plymouth Rock Hens & Road Commissioner
Agent for Radley's Lives of the Saints
Insurance and Watermelons My Specialty

Millville, Mount County, N.Y.

The Major shook his head doubtfully as he read the above announcement; but Mr. McNutt was the only known person to whom he could appeal to carry out John Merrick's orders. So he dictated the following letter:

Dear Sir:

Mr. John Merrick, the present owner of the Wegg farm at Millville, desires to spend his summer vacation on the premises, and therefore requests you to have the house and grounds put in first-class shape as soon as possible, and to notify me directly the work is done. Have the house thoroughly cleaned, the grass mowed around it and the barns and outbuildings repaired wherever it may be necessary. You are also instructed to procure for Mr. Merrick's use a good Jersey cow, some pigs and a dozen or so barnyard fowls. As several ladies will accompany the owner and reside with him on the place, he would like you to report what necessary furniture, if any, will be required for their comfort. Send your bill to me and it will receive prompt attention.

After several days this reply came:

Mister Doyle you must be crazy as a loon. Send me fifty cold dollars as an evvidence of good fayth and I wull see what can be done. Old Hucks is livin on the place yit do you want him to git out or what? Yours fer a square deal Marshall McMahan McNutt.

"John," said the Major, exhibiting this letter, "you're on the wrong tack. The man is justified in thinking we're crazy. Give up this idea and think of something else to bother me."

But the new proprietor of the Wegg farm was obdurate. During the past week he had indulged in sundry sly purchases, which had been shipped, in his name to Chazy Junction, the nearest railway station to Millville. Therefore, the "die had been cast," as far as Mr. Merrick was concerned, for the purchases were by this time at the farm, awaiting him, and he could not back out without sacrificing them. They included a set of gardening tools, several hammocks, croquet and tennis sets, and a remarkable collection of fishing tackle, which the sporting-goods man had declared fitted to catch anything that swam, from a whale to a minnow. Also, Uncle John decided to dress the part of a rural gentleman, and ordered his tailor to prepare a corduroy fishing costume, a suit of white flannel, one of khaki, and some old-fashioned blue jean overalls, with apron front, which, when made to order by the obliging tailor, cost about eighteen dollars a suit. To forego the farm meant to forego all these luxuries, and Mr. Merrick was unequal to the sacrifice. Why, only that same morning he had bought a charming cottage piano and shipped it to the Junction for Patsy's use. That seemed to settle the matter definitely. To be balked of his summer vacation on his own farm was a thing Mr. Merrick would not countenance for a moment.

"Give me that letter, Major," he said; "I'll run this enterprise myself."

The Major resigned with a sigh of relief.

Uncle John promptly sent the real estate agent a draft for five hundred dollars, with instructions to get the farm in shape for occupancy at the earliest possible day.

"If Old Hucks is a farm hand and a bachelor," he wrote, "let him stay till I come and look him over. If he's a married man and has a family, chuck him out at once. I'm sure you are a man of good taste and judgment. Look over the furniture in the house and telegraph me what condition it is in. Everything about the place must be made cozy and comfortable, but I wish to avoid an appearance of vulgarity or extravagance."

The answer to this was a characteristic telegram:

Furniture on the bum, like everything else. Will do the best I can. McNutt.

Uncle John did not display this discouraging report to Patsy or her father. A little thought on the matter decided him to rectify the deficiencies, in so far as it lay in his power. He visited a large establishment making a specialty of "furnishing homes complete," and ordered a new kitchen outfit, including a modern range, a mission style outfit for a dining-room, dainty summer furniture for the five chambers to be occupied by his three nieces, the Major and himself, and a variety of lawn benches, chairs, etc.

"Look after the details," he said to the dealer. "Don't neglect anything that is pretty or useful."

"I won't, sir," replied the man, who knew his customer was "the great John Merrick," who could furnish a city "complete," if he wished to, and not count the cost.

Everything was to be shipped in haste to the Junction, and Uncle John wrote McNutt to have it delivered promptly to the farm and put in order.

"As soon as things are in shape," he wrote, "wire me to that effect and I'll come down. But don't let any grass grow under your feet. I'm a man who requires prompt service."

The days were already getting uncomfortably warm, and the little man was nervously anxious to see his farm. So were the nieces, for that matter, who were always interested in the things that interested their eccentric uncle. Besides Patricia Doyle, whom we have already introduced, these nieces were Miss Louise Merrick, who had just celebrated her eighteenth birthday, and Miss Elizabeth—or "Beth"—De Graf, now well past fifteen. Beth lived in a small town in Ohio, but was then visiting her city cousin Louise, so that both girls were not only available but eager to accompany Uncle John to his new domain and assist him to enjoy his summer outing.

CHAPTER III.

MILLVILLE HEARS EXCITING NEWS.

Millville is rather difficult to locate on the map, for the railroads found it impossible to run a line there, *Chazy Junction*, the nearest station, is several miles away, and the wagon road ascends the foothills every step of the distance. Finally you pass between Mount Parnassus (whoever named it that?) and Little Bill Hill and find yourself on an almost level plateau some four miles in diameter, with a placid lake in the center and a fringe of tall pines around the edge. At the South, where tower the northern sentries of the Adirondacks, a stream called Little Bill Creek comes splashing and dashing over the rocks to force its way noisily into the lake. When it emerges again it is humble and sedate, and flows smoothly to Hooker's Falls, from whence it soon joins a tributary that leads it to far away Champlain.

Millville is built where the Little Bill rushes into the lake. The old mill, with its race and sluice-gates, still grinds wearily the scanty dole of grain fed into its hoppers and Silas Caldwell takes his toll and earns his modest living just as his father did before him and "Little Bill" Thompson did before him.

Above the mill a rickety wooden bridge spans the stream, for here the highway from Chazy Junction reaches the village of Millville and passes the wooden structures grouped on either side its main street on the way to Thompson's Crossing, nine miles farther along. The town boasts exactly eleven buildings, not counting the mill, which, being on the other side of the Little Bill, can hardly be called a part of Millville proper. Cotting's Store contains the postoffice and telephone booth, and is naturally the central point of interest. Seth Davis' blacksmith shop comes next; Widow Clark's Emporium for the sale of candy, stationery and cigars adjoins that; McNutt's office and dwelling combined is next, and then Thorne's Livery and Feed Stables. You must understand they are not set close together, but each has a little ground of its own. On the other side of the street is the hardware store, with farm machinery occupying the broad platform before it, and then the Millville House, a two-storied "hotel"

with a shed-like wing for the billiard-room and card tables. Nib Corkins' drug store, jewelry store and music store combined (with sewing machines for a "side line"), is the last of the "business establishments," and the other three buildings are dwellings occupied by Sam Cotting, Seth Davis and Nick Thorne.

Dick Pearson's farm house is scarcely a quarter of a mile up the highway, but it isn't in Millville, for all that. There's a cross lane just beyond Pearson's, leading east and west, and a mile to westward is the Wegg Farm, in the wildest part of the foothills.

It is a poor farming country around Millville. Strangers often wonder how the little shops of the town earn a living for their proprietors; but it doesn't require a great deal to enable these simple folk to live. The tourist seldom penetrates these inaccessible foothills; the roads are too rough and primitive for automobiles; so Millville is shamefully neglected, and civilization halted there some half a century ago.

However, there was a genuine sensation in store for this isolated hamlet, and it was the more welcome because anything in the way of a sensation had for many years avoided the neighborhood.

Marshall McMahan McNutt, or, as he was more familiarly called by those few who respected him most highly, "Marsh" McNutt (and sundry other appellations by those who respected him not at all), became the recipient of a letter from New York announcing the intention of a certain John Merrick, the new owner of the Wegg Farm, to spend the summer on the place. McNutt was an undersized man of about forty, with a beardless face, scraggly buff-colored hair, and eyes that were big, light blue and remarkably protruding. The stare of those eyes was impenetrable, because observers found it embarrassing to look at them. "Mac's" friends had a trick of looking away when they spoke to him, but children gazed fascinated at the expressionless blue eyeballs and regarded their owner with awe.

The "real estate agent" was considered an enterprising man by his neighbors and a "poor stick" by his wife. He had gone to school at Thompson's Crossing in his younger days; had a call to preach, but failed because he "couldn't get religion"; inherited a farm from his uncle and married Sam Cotting's sister, whose tongue and temper were so sharp that everyone marveled at the man's temerity in acquiring them. Finally he had lost one foot in a mowing machine, and the accident destroyed his further usefulness to the extent of inducing him to abandon the farm and move into town. Here he endeavored to find something to do to eke out his meagre income; so he raised "thoroughbred Plymouth Rocks," selling eggs for hatching to the farmers; doctored sick horses and pastured them in the lot back of his barn, the rear end of which was devoted to "watermelons in season"; sold subscription books to farmers who came to the mill or the village store; was elected "road commissioner" and bossed the neighbors when they had to work out their poll-tax, and turned his hand to any other affairs that offered a penny's recompense. The "real estate business" was what Seth Davis labeled "a blobbering bluff," for no property had changed hands in the neighborhood in a score of years, except the lot back of the mill, which was traded for a yoke of oxen, and the Wegg farm, which had been sold without the agent's knowledge or consent.

The only surprising thing about the sale of the Wegg farm was that anyone would buy it. Captain Wegg had died three years before, and his son Joe wandered south to Albany, worked his way through a technical school and then disappeared in the mazes of New York. So the homestead seemed abandoned altogether, except for the Huckses.

When Captain Wegg died Old Hucks, his hired man, and Hucks' blind wife Nora were the only dependents on the place, and the ancient couple had naturally remained there when Joe scorned his inheritance and ran away. After the sale they had no authority to remain but were under no compulsion to move out, so they clung to their old quarters.

When McNutt was handed his letter by the postmaster and storekeeper he stared at its contents in a bewildered way that roused the loungers to amused laughter.

"What's up, Peggy?" called Nick Thorne from his seat on the counter.
"Somebody gone off'n me hooks an' left ye a fortun'?"

"Peggy" was one of McNutt's most popular nicknames, acquired because he wore a short length of pine where his absent foot should have been.

"Not quite," was the agent's slow reply; "but here's the blamedest funniest communicate a man ever got! It's from some critter that knows the man what bought the Wegg farm."

"Let's hear it," remarked Cotting, the store-keeper, a fat individual with a bald head, who was counting matches from a shelf into the public match-box. He allowed "the boys" just twenty free matches a day.

So the agent read the letter in an uncertain halting voice, and when he had finished it the little group stared at one another for a time in thoughtful silence.

"Wall, I'll be plunked," finally exclaimed the blacksmith. "Looks like the feller's rich, don't it?"

"Ef he's rich, what the tarnation blazes is he comin' here for?" demanded Nib Corkins, the dandy of the town. "I was over t' Huntingdon las' year, 'n' seen how the rich folks live. Boys, this h'ain't no place for a man with money."

"That depends," responded Cotting, gravely. "I'm sure we'd all be better off if we had a few real bloods here to squander their substance."

"Well, here's a perposal to squander, all right," said McNutt. "But the question is, Does he know what he's runnin' up agin', and what it'll cost to do all the idiotic things as he says?"

"Prob'ly not," answered the storekeeper.

"It's the best built farm house 'round thest parts," announced the miller, who had been silent until now. "Old Wegg were a sea-cap'n once, an' rich. He dumped a lot o' money inter that place, an' never got it out agin', nuther."

"Course not. Sixty acres o' cobble-stone don't pay much divvydends, that I ever hearn tell on," replied Seth.

"There's some good fruit, though," continued Caldwell, "an' the berries allus paid the taxes an' left a little besides. Ol' Hucks gits along all right."

"Jest lives, 'n' that's all."

"Well, that's enough," said the miller. "It's about all any of us do, ain't it?"

"Do ye take it this 'ere Merrick's goin' to farm, er what?" asked Nib, speculatively.

"I take it he's plumb crazy," retorted the agent, rubbing the fringe of hair behind his ears. "One thing's certain boys, I don't do nuthin' foolish till I see the color of his money."

"Make him send you ten dollars in advance," suggested Seth.

"Make him send fifty," amended the store-keeper. "You can't buy a cow, an' pigs, an' chickens, an' make repairs on much less."

"By jinks, I will!" cried McNutt, slapping his leg for emphasis. "I'll strike him fer a cool fifty, an' if the feller don't pay he kin go to blazes. Them's my sentiments, boys, an' I'll stand by 'em!"

The others regarded him admiringly, so the energetic little man stumped away to indite his characteristic letter to Major Doyle.

If the first communication had startled the little village, the second fairly plunged it into a panic of excitement. Peggy's hand trembled as he held out the five hundred dollar draft and glared from it to his cronies with a white face.

"Suffrin' Jehu!" gasped Nick Thorne. "Is it good?"

The paper was passed reverently around, and examined with a succession of dubious head-shakes.

"Send for Bob West," suggested Cotting. "He's seen more o' that sort o' money than any of us."

The widow Clarke's boy, who was present, ran breathlessly to fetch the hardware dealer, who answered the summons when he learned that Peggy McNutt had received a "check" for five hundred dollars.

West was a tall, lean man with shrewd eyes covered by horn spectacles and a stubby gray mustache. He was the potentate of the town and reputed to be worth, at a conservative estimate, in the neighborhood of ten thousand dollars—"er more, fer that matter; fer Bob ain't tellin' his business to nobody." Hardware and implements were acknowledged to be paying merchandise, and West lent money on farm mortgages, besides. He was a quiet man, had a good library in his comfortable rooms over the store, and took the only New York paper that found its way into Millville. After a glance at the remittance he said:

"It's a draft on Isham, Marvin & Company, the New York bankers. Good as gold, McNutt. Where did you get it?"

"A lunitic named John Merrick, him that's bought the Cap'n Wegg farm, sent it on. Here's his letter, Bob."

The hardware dealer read it carefully and gave a low whistle.

"There may be more than one John Merrick," he said, thoughtfully. "But I've heard of one who is many times a millionaire and a power in the financial world. What will you do for him, McNutt, to expend this money properly?"

"Bless't if I know!" answered the man, his eyes bulging with a helpless look. "What 'n thunder *kin* I do, Bob?"

West smiled.

"I don't wish to interfere in business matters," said he, "but it is plainly evident that the new owner wishes the farm house put into such shape that it will be comfortable for a man accustomed to modern luxuries. You don't know much about such things, Mac, and Mr. Merrick has made a blunder in employing your services in such a delicate matter. But do the best you can. Ride across to the Wegg place and look it over. Then get Taft, the carpenter, to fix up whatever is necessary. I'll sell you the lumber and nails, and you've got more money than you can probably use. Telegraph Mr. Merrick frankly how you find things; but remember the report must not be based upon your own mode of life but upon that of a man of wealth and refinement. Especially he must be posted about the condition of the furniture, which I can guess is ill-suited to his needs."

"How 'bout Hucks?" asked the agent.

They all hung eagerly on West's reply, for Old Hucks was a general favorite. The fact that the old retainer of the Weggs had a blind wife to whom he was tenderly devoted made the proposition of his leaving the farm one of intense interest. Old Hucks and his patient wife had not been so much "hired help" as a part of the Wegg establishment, and it was doubtful if they had ever received any wages. It was certain that Hucks had not a dollar in the world at the present time, and if turned out of their old home the ancient couple must either starve or go to the poorhouse.

"Say nothing further about Old Hucks or his wife to Mr. Merrick," advised West, gravely. "When the owner comes he will need servants, and Hucks is a very capable old fellow. Let that problem rest until the time comes for solution. If the old folks are to be turned out, make John Merrick do it; it will put the responsibility on his shoulders."

"By dum, yer right, Bob!" exclaimed McNutt, slapping the counter with his usual impulsiveness. "I'll do the best I kin for the rich man, an' let the poor man alone."

After an examination of the farm house and other buildings (which seemed in his eyes almost palatial), and a conference with Alonzo Taft, the carpenter, the agent began to feel that his task was going to prove an easy one. He purchased a fine Jersey cow of Will Johnson, sold his own flock of Plymouth Rocks at a high price to Mr. Merrick, and hired Ned Long to work around the yard and help Hucks mow the grass and "clean up" generally.

But now his real trouble and bewilderment began. A carload of new furniture and "fixin's" was sidetracked at the junction, and McNutt was ordered to get it unloaded and carted to the farm without delay. There were four hay-rack loads of the "truck," altogether, and when it was all dumped into the big empty barn at the Wegg farm the poor agent had no idea what to do with it.

"See here," said Nick Thorne, who had done the hauling, "you've got to let a woman inter this deal, Peggy."

"That's what my wife says, gum-twist her."

"Keep yer ol' woman out'n it. She'd spile a rotten apple."

"Who then, Nick?"

"Why, school-teacher's the right one, I guess. They've got a vacation now, an' likely she'll come over here an' put things to rights. Peggy, that air new furniture's the rambunctionest stuff thet ever come inter these parts, an' it'll make the ol' house bloom like a rose in Spring. But folks like us hain't got no call to tech it. You fetch school-teacher."

Peggy sighed. He was keeping track of his time and charging John Merrick at the rate of two dollars a day, being firmly resolved to "make hay while the sun was shining" and absorb as much of the money placed in his hands as possible. To let "school-teacher" into this deal and be obliged to pay her wages was an undesirable thing to do; yet he reflected that it might be wise to adopt Nick Thorne's suggestion.

So next morning he drove the liveryman's sorrel mare out to Thompson's Crossing, where the brick school-house stood on one corner and Will Thompson's residence on another. A mile away could be seen the spires of the little church at Hooker's Falls.

McNutt hitched his horse to Thompson's post, walked up the neat pebbled path and knocked at the door.

"Ethel in?" he asked of the sad-faced woman who, after some delay, answered his summons.

"She's in the garden, weedin'."

"I'll go 'round," said the agent.

The garden was a bower of roses. Among them stood a slender girl in a checked gingham, tying vines to a trellis.

"Morn'n', Ethel," said the visitor.

The girl smiled at him. She was not very pretty, because her face was long and wan, and her nose a bit one-sided. But her golden hair sparkled in the sun like a mass of spun gold, and the smile was winning in its unconscious sweetness. Surely, such attractions were enough for a mere country girl.

Ethel Thompson had, however, another claim to distinction. She had been "edicated," as her neighbors acknowledged in awed tones, and "took a diploma from a college school at Troy." Young as she was, Ethel had taught school for two years, and might have a life tenure if she cared to retain the position. As he looked at her neat gown and noted the grace and ease of her movements the agent acknowledged that he had really "come to the right shop" to untangle his perplexing difficulties.

"New folks is comin' to the Cap'n Wegg farm," he announced, as a beginning.

She turned and looked at him queerly.

"Has Joe sold the place?" she asked.

"Near a year ago. Some fool rich man has bought it and is comin' down here to spend his summer vacation, he says. Here, read his letters. They'll explain it better 'n I can."

Her hand trembled a little as she took the letters McNutt pulled from his pocket. Then she sat upon a bench and read them all through. By that time she had regained her composure.

"The gentleman is somewhat eccentric," she remarked; "but he will make no mistake in coming to this delightful place, if he wishes quiet and rest."

"Don't know what he's after, I'm sure," replied the man. "But he's sent down enough furniture an' truck to stock a hotel, an' I want to know ef you'll go over an' put it in the rooms, an' straighten things out."

"Me!"

"Why, yes. You've lived in cities some, an' know how citified things go. Con-twist it, Ethel, there's things in the bunch that neither I ner Nick Thorne ever hearn tell of, much less knowin' what they're used for."

The girl laughed.

"When are the folks coming?" she asked.

"When I git things in shape. They've sent some money down to pay fer what's done, so you won't have to work fer nuthin'."

"I will, though," responded the girl, in a cheery tone. "It will delight me to handle pretty things. Are Nora and Tom still there?"

"Oh, yes. I had orders to turn the Huckses out, ye see; but I didn't do it."

"I'm glad of that," she returned, brightly "Perhaps we may arrange it so they can stay. Old Nora's a dear."

"But she's blind."

"She knows every inch of the Wegg house, and does her work more thoroughly than many who can see. When do you want me, Peggy?"

"Soon's you kin come."

"Then I'll be over tomorrow morning."

At that moment a wild roar, like that of a beast, came from the house. The sad faced woman ran down a passage; a door slammed, and then all was quiet again.

McNutt hitched uneasily from the wooden foot to the good one.

"How's ol' Will?" he enquired, in a low voice.

"Grandfather's about as usual," replied the girl, with trained composure.

"Still crazy as a bedbug?"

"At times he becomes a bit violent; but those attacks never last long."

"Don't s'pose I could see him?" ventured the agent, still in hesitating tones.

"Oh, no; he has seen no visitor since Captain Wegg died."

"Well, good-bye, Ethel. See you at the farm in the mornin'."

The girl sat for a long time after McNutt had driven away, seemingly lost in revery.

"Poor Joe!" she sighed, at last. "Poor, foolish Joe. I wonder what has become of him?"

CHAPTER IV.

ETHEL MAKES PREPARATION.

The Wegg homestead stood near the edge of a thin forest of pines through which Little Bill Creek wound noisily on its way to the lake. At the left was a slope on which grew a neglected orchard of apple and pear trees, their trunks rough and gnarled by the struggle to outlive many severe winters. There was a rude, rocky lane in front, separated from the yard by a fence of split pine rails, but the ground surrounding the house was rich enough to grow a profusion of June grass.

The farm was of very little value. Back of the yard was a fairly good berry patch, but aside from that some two acres of corn and a small strip of timothy represented all that was fertile of the sixty acres the place contained.

But the house itself was the most imposing dwelling for many miles around. Just why that silent old sea-dog, Jonas Wegg, had come into this secluded wilderness to locate was a problem the Millville people had never yet solved. Certainly it was with no idea of successfully farming the land he had acquired, for half of it was stony and half covered by pine forest. But the house he constructed was the wonder of the country-side in its day. It was a big, two-story building, the lower half being "jest cobblestones," as the neighbors sneeringly remarked, while the upper half was "decent pine lumber." The lower floor of this main building consisted of a single room with a great cobble-stone fireplace in the center of the rear wall and narrow, prison-like windows at the front and sides. There was a small porch in front, with a great entrance door of carved dark wood of a foreign look, which the Captain

had brought from some port in Massachusetts. A stair in one corner of the big living room led to the second story, where four large bed-chambers were arranged. These had once been plastered and papered, but the wall-paper had all faded into dull, neutral tints and in one of the rooms a big patch of plaster had fallen away from the ceiling, showing the bare lath. Only one of the upstairs rooms had ever been furnished, and it now contained a corded wooden bedstead, a cheap pine table and one broken-legged chair. Indeed, the main building, which I have briefly described, had not been in use for many years. Sometimes, when Captain Wegg was alive, he would build a log fire in the great fireplace on a winter's evening and sit before it in silent mood until far into the night. And once, when his young wife had first occupied the new house, the big room had acquired a fairly cosy and comfortable appearance. But it had always been sparsely furnished, and most of the decadent furniture that now littered it was useless and unlovely.

The big wooden lean-to at the back, and the right wing, were at this time the only really habitable parts of the mansion. The lean-to had an entrance from the living room, but Old Hucks and Nora his wife used the back door entirely. It consisted of a large and cheerful kitchen and two rooms off it, one used as a store room and the other as a sleeping chamber for the aged couple.

The right wing was also constructed of cobble-stone, and had formerly been Captain Wegg's own chamber. After his death his only child, Joe, then a boy of sixteen, had taken possession of his father's room; but after a day or two he had suddenly quitted the house where he was born and plunged into the great outside world—to seek his fortune, it was said. Decidedly there was no future for the boy here; in the cities lurks opportunity.

When Ethel Thompson arrived in the early morning that followed her interview with McNutt she rode her pony through the gap in the rail fence, across the June grass, and around to the back door. On a bench beside the pump an old woman sat shelling peas. Her form was thin but erect and her hair snowy white. She moved with alertness, and as the girl dismounted and approached her she raised her head and turned a pleasant face with deep-set, sightless gray eyes upon her visitor.

"Good morning, Ethel, dear," she said. "I knew the pony's whinney. You're up early today."

"Good morning, Nora," responded the schoolteacher, advancing to kiss the withered cheek. "Are you pretty well?"

"In body, dear. In mind both Tom 'n' me's pretty bad. I s'pose we couldn't 'a 'spected to stay here in peace forever; but the blow's come suddin-like, an' it hurts us."

"Where is Tom?"

"In the barn, lookin' over all the won'erful things the rich nabob has sent here. He says most things has strips o' wood nailed over 'em; but some hasn't; an' Tom looks 'em over keerful an' then tells me 'bout 'em. He's gone to take another look at a won'erful new cook-stove, so's he kin describe it to me right pertickler."

"Is he worried, Nora?"

"We's both worried, Ethel. Our time's come, an' no mistake. Peggy McNutt says as he had real orders to turn Hucks out if he was a married man; an' there's no disclaimin' he's married, is there? Peggy's a kind man, an' tol' us to keep stayin' 'til the nabobs arrove. Then I guess we'll git our walkin'-papers, mighty quick."

"I'm not sure of that," said the girl, thoughtfully. "They must be hard-hearted, indeed, to turn you out into the world; and you are both capable people, and would serve the city folks faithfully and well."

"It's my eyes," replied the other, in a simple, matter-of-fact tone. "Hucks might wait on the nabobs all right, but they won't tol'rate a blind woman a minute, I'm sure. An' Hucks 'd ruther be with me in the poor-house than to let me go alone."

"Right y' air, Nora girl!" cried a merry voice, and as the blind woman looked up with a smile Ethel turned around to face "Old Hucks."

A tall man, but much bent at the shoulders and limping in one leg from an old hurt aggravated by rheumatism. His form was as gnarled as the tree-trunks in the apple-orchard, and twisted almost as fantastically. But the head, uplifted from the stooped shoulders and held a little to one side, was remarkable enough to attract attention. It had scanty white locks and a fringe of white whiskers under the chin, and these framed a smiling face and features that were extremely winning in expression. No one could remember ever seeing Old Hucks when he was not smiling, and the expression was neither set nor inane, but so cheery and bright that you were tempted to smile with him, without knowing why. For dress he wore a much patched pair of woolen trousers and a "hickory" shirt of faded blue, with rough top boots and a dilapidated straw hat that looked as if it might have outlived several generations.

As Ethel greeted the man she looked him over carefully and sighed at the result; for certainly, as far as personal appearances went, he seemed as unlikely a person to serve a "nabob" as could well be imagined. But the girl knew Thomas' good points, and remembering them, took courage.

"If the worst comes," she said, brightly, "you are both to come to us to live. I've arranged all that with grandmother, you know. But I'm not much afraid of your being obliged to leave here. From all accounts this Mr. Merrick is a generous and free-hearted man, and I've discovered that strangers are not likely to be fearsome when you come to know them. The unknown always makes us childishly nervous, you see, and then we forget it's wrong to borrow trouble."

"True's gospil," said Old Hucks. "To know my Nora is to love her. Ev'body loves Nora. An' the good Lord He's took'n care o' us so long, it seems like a sort o' sacrelidge to feel that all thet pretty furn'ture in the barn spells on'y poor-house to us. Eh, Ethel?"

McNutt arrived just then, with big Ned Long, Lon Taft the carpenter, and Widow Clark, that lady having agreed to "help with the cleanin'." She didn't usually "work out," but was impelled to this task as much through curiosity to see the new furniture as from desire to secure the wages.

At once the crowd invaded the living room, and after a glance around Ethel ordered every bit of the furniture, with the exception of two antique but comfortable horse-hair sofas, carried

away to the barn and stored in the loft. It did not take long to clear the big room, and then the Widow Clark swept out and began to scrub the floor and woodwork, while school-teacher took her men into the right wing and made another clearing of its traps.

This room interested the girl very much. In it Joe was born and frail Mrs. Wegg and her silent husband had both passed away. It had two broad French windows with sash doors opening on to a little porch of its own which was covered thickly with honeysuckle vines. A cupboard was built into a niche of the thick cobble-stone wall, but it was locked and the key was missing.

Upstairs the girl had the rubbish removed for the first time in a generation. The corded bedstead in the north room was sent to join its fellows in the barn loft, and Ned Long swept everything clean in readiness for the scrubbers.

Then, while Widow Clark and Nora cleaned industriously—for the blind woman insisted on helping and did almost as much work as her companion—the "men folks" proceeded to the barn and under the school-teacher's directions uncrated the new furniture and opened the bales of rugs and matting. Lon Taft was building new steps to the front porch, but Old Hucks and Ned and McNutt reverently unpacked the "truck" and set each piece carefully aside. How they marveled at the enameled beds and colored wicker furniture, the easy chairs for lounging, the dainty dressers and all the innumerable pretty things discovered in boxes, bales and barrels, you may well imagine. Even Ethel was amazed and delighted at the thoughtfulness of the dealer in including everything that might be useful or ornamental in a summer home.

The next few days were indeed busy ones, for the girl entered enthusiastically upon her task to transform the old house, and with the material John Merrick had so amply provided she succeeded admirably. The little maid was country bred, but having seen glimpses of city life and possessing much native good taste, she arranged the rooms so charmingly that they would admit of scant improvement. The big living room must serve as a dining room as well as parlor; but so spacious was it that such an arrangement proved easy. No especial furniture for the living room had been provided, but by stealing a few chairs and odd pieces from the ample supply provided for the bedrooms, adding the two quaint sofas and the upright piano and spreading the rugs in an artistic fashion, Ethel managed to make the "parlor part" of the room appear very cosy. The dining corner had a round table and high-backed chairs finished in weathered oak, and when all was in order the effect was not inharmonious. Some inspiration had induced Mr. Merrick to send down a batch of eighteen framed pictures, procured at a bargain but from a reliable dealer. He thought they might "help out," and Ethel knew they would, for the walls of the old house were quite bare of ornament. She made them go as far as possible, and Old Hucks, by this time thoroughly bewildered, hung them where she dictated and made laughable attempts to describe the subjects to blind Nora.

A telegram, telephoned over from the junction, announced the proposed arrival of the party on Thursday morning, and the school-teacher was sure that everything would be in readiness at that time. The paint on Lon's repairs would be dry, the grass in the front yard was closely cropped, and the little bed of flowers between the corn-crib and the wood-shed was blooming finely. The cow was in the stable, the pigs in the shed, and the Plymouth Rocks strutted over the yard with an absurd assumption of pride.

Wednesday Ethel took Old Hucks over to Millville and bought for him from Sam Cotting a new suit of dark gray "store clothes," together with shirts, shoes and underwear. She made McNutt pay the bill with John Merrick's money, agreeing to explain the case to "the nabob" herself, and back up the agent in the unauthorized expenditure. Nora had a new gingham dress, too, which the girl had herself provided, and on Thursday morning Ethel was at the Wegg farm bright and early to see the old couple properly attired to receive their new master. She also put a last touch to the pretty furniture and placed vases of her own roses and sweet peas here and there, to render the place homelike and to welcome the expected arrivals.

"If they don't like it," said the girl, smiling, "they're rather hard to please."

"They're sure to like it, dear," answered old Nora, touching with sensitive fingers the flowers, the books and the opened piano. "If they don't, they're heretics an' sinners, an' there's no good in 'em whatever."

Then the little school-teacher bade good-bye to Hucks and his wife, told them to keep brave hearts, and rode her pony cross-lots to Thompson's Crossing.

CHAPTER V.

THE ARRIVAL OF THE NABOBS.

"Well," said Uncle John, looking out of the car window, "we're nearly there."

He didn't look the millionaire, or nabob, or anything else but a modest little man full of joy at getting into the country. His clothing was not distinctive of wealth, his hands were hard and roughened by years of toil, and his necktie had a plebeian trick of sliding under his left ear. Uncle John was just a plain, simple, good-hearted fellow before he acquired riches, and the possession of millions had in no way altered his nature.

The three nieces and himself were the only passengers in the coach, aside from rosy-cheeked Mary, Patricia's cook. Finding that the road did not run a sleeper to Chazy Junction, Mr. Merrick had ordered one attached to the train for his especial use; but he did not allow even Patsy to suspect this extravagance.

"It seems to me," observed Beth, as she peered out while the train puffed up the steep grade, "as if we'd arrived at the heart of a wilderness, where farms are likely to be as scarce as Egyptian temples."

"The truth is," replied her uncle, with a cheerful smile, "that none of us has an idea where we're going, or what that farm of mine looks like. We're explorers, like Stanley in mid-Africa. That's the beauty of this excursion."

"I'm glad I didn't bring any party dresses," said dainty Louise, shaking her blonde head with a doubting expression toward the rock covered hills.

"Why, you might need them for hay-rides," remarked Patsy, with a laugh; "that is, if any hay grows in this land of quarries."

The train stopped with a jerk, started with another jerk, and stopped again with a third that made them catch their breaths and hold fast to the seats.

"Chazy Junction, seh," said the colored porter, entering in haste to seize their bags.

They alighted on a small wooden platform and their hand baggage was deposited beside them. Their trunks were being tumbled off a car far ahead.

Then the whistle screamed, the train gave a jerk and proceeded on its way, and Uncle John, his nieces and their maid, found themselves confronting a solitary man in shirtsleeves, who yawned languidly, thrust his hands in his pockets and stared at the strangers unmoved.

It was six o'clock. The July sun was set in a clear sky, but the air was cool and pleasant. Uncle John glanced around with the eye of a practiced traveler. Back of the station was a huddle of frame buildings set in a hollow. The station-tender was the only person in sight.

"Isn't there a carriage to meet us?" asked Louise, in a slightly frigid tone.

"Seems not," replied her uncle. Then he addressed the native. "Can you tell us, sir, where Millville is?" he asked.

"Sev'n mile up the road."

"Thank you kindly. Is there any carriage to be had?"

The man smiled sardonically.

"Kerridges," he said, "don't grow in these parts. I take it you be the party fer the Wegg farm."

"You're right," said Mr. Merrick. "I'm glad we are getting acquainted. Folks all well?"

"Pretty fair."

"Now, sir, we want some breakfast, to begin with, and then some way to get to my farm."

"Peggy orter 'a' looked after you," remarked the man, eyeing the dainty gowns of the young ladies reflectively.

"Who's Peggy?"

"That's McNutt, the man you hired to do things."

"Ah, yes; he surely ought to have sent some sort of a team to meet us," agreed Uncle John. "What's that group of houses yonder?"

"Thet's the Junction."

"Any hotel?"

"Sure."

"And a livery stable?"

"Course there is."

"Then we'll get along," said Uncle John, assuming a sudden brisk manner.

"Just keep your eye on our baggage till we get back, my good fellow.

There are no people to interfere with it, but some bears or tigers might come out of the hills and eat it up. Now, girls, away we go!"

Uncle John's nieces were not so greatly dismayed at this experience as might have been expected. They had recently accompanied their erratic relative on a European trip and had learned to be patient under difficulties.

A quarter of a mile down the dusty road they came to the hotel, a dismal, unclean looking place that smelled of stale beer. Uncle John routed out the proprietor.

"Folks up?" he inquired.

"Long ago," said the man.

"Get us some boiled eggs, bread and butter and plenty of fresh milk—right away," ordered Mr. Merrick. "The quicker it comes the more I'll pay you. Bring a table out here on the porch and we'll eat in the open air. Where's the livery stable—eh? Oh, I see. Now, step lively, my man, and your fortune's made. I'll add a quarter of a dollar for every five minutes you save us in time."

The fellow stared, then woke up with a start and disappeared within.

"By gum, I'll bet a hen it's that air nabob!" he muttered.

Leaving his girls and Mary to sit on the wooden benches of the porch Uncle John crossed the road to the livery stable, where he discovered a man and a boy engaged in cleaning the half dozen sorry looking nags the establishment contained. A three-seated democrat wagon was engaged to carry the party to the Wegg farm at Millville, and a rickety lumber wagon would take the baggage. The liveryman recognized his customer as soon as the Wegg farm was mentioned, and determined to "do the city guy up brown."

"Road's bad an' up hill, an' my time's vallyble," he said in a surly voice. "I'll hev to charge ye three dollars."

"For what?" asked Uncle John, quietly.

"Fer the two teams to Millville."

"Get them harnessed right away, load up the baggage, and have the democrat at the hotel in twenty minutes. Here's five dollars, and if you'll look pleasant you may keep the change."

"Blame my thick skull!" muttered the livery-man, as he watched the little man depart. "What a cussed fool I were not to say four dollars instead o' three!"

But he called to his boy to hurry up, and in the stipulated time the teams were ready.

Uncle John and his nieces were just finishing their eggs, which were fresh and delicious. The milk was also a revelation. Through the windows of the hotel several frowsy looking women and an open mouthed boy were staring hard at the unconscious city folk.

Even Louise was in a mood for laughter as they mounted to the high seats of the democrat. The glorious air, the clear sunshine and a satisfactory if simple breakfast had put them all in a good humor with the world.

They stopped at the station for their hand baggage, and saw that the trunks were properly loaded on the lumber wagon. Then, slowly, they started to mount the long hill that began its incline just across the tracks.

"Sure this is the way?" inquired Uncle John, perched beside the driver.

"I were horned here," answered the man, conclusively.

"That seems to settle it. Pretty big hill, that one ahead of us."

"It's the Little Bill. When we cross it, we're at Millville."

Seven miles of desolate country could not dampen the spirits of the girls. Secretly each one was confident that Uncle John's unknown farm would prove to be impossible, and that in a day or so at the latest they would retrace their steps. But in the meantime the adventure was novel and interesting, and they were prepared to accept the inevitable with all graciousness.

When, after the long climb up the hill, they saw the quaint mill and the town lying just across rushing Little Bill Creek; when from their elevation they beheld the placid lake half hidden by its stately pines and gazed up the rugged and picturesque foot-hills to the great mountains beyond, then indeed they drew in deep breaths and began, as Patsy exclaimed, to be "glad they came."

"That Millville?" asked Uncle John, eagerly.

"Yes, sir."

"And which of those houses belongs to the Wegg farm?"

"Ye can't see the Wegg house from here; the pines hide it," said the man, urging his horses into a trot as they approached the bridge.

"Pretty good farm?" inquired Uncle John, hopefully.

"Worst in the county," was the disconcerting reply. "Half rocks an' half trees. Ol' Cap'n Wegg wasn't no farmer. He were a sea-cap'n; so it's no wonder he got took in when he bought the place."

Uncle John sighed.

"I've just bought it myself," he observed.

"There's a ol' addige," said the man, grinning, "'bout a fool an' his money. The house is a hunker; but w'at's the use of a house without a farm?"

"What is a 'hunker,' please?" inquired Louise, curiously.

The liveryman ventured no reply, perhaps because he was guiding his horses over the rickety bridge.

"Want to stop at the village?" he asked.

"No; drive on to the farm."

The scene was so rude and at the same time so picturesque that it impressed them all very agreeably. Perhaps they were the more delighted because they had expected nothing admirable in this all but forsaken spot. They did not notice the people who stared after them as they rattled through the village, or they would have seen Uncle John's "agent" in front of his office, his round eyes fairly bulging from his head.

It had never occurred to McNutt to be at the Junction to welcome his patron. He had followed his instructions and set Mr. Merrick's house in order, and there he considered that his duty ended. He would, of course, call on the nabob, presently, and render an account of the money he had received.

Sam Cotting, the store-keeper, gazed after the livery team with a sour countenance, he resented the fact that five big-boxes of groceries had been forwarded from the city to the Wegg farm. "What'n thunder's the use havin' city folks here, ef they don't buy nothin'?" he asked the boys; and they agreed it was no use at all.

Proceeding at a smart trot the horses came to the Pearson farm, where they turned into the Jane at the left and straightway subsided to a slow walk, the wheels bumping and jolting over the stony way.

"What's this?" exclaimed Uncle John, who had narrowly escaped biting his tongue through and through. "Why did you turn down here?"

"It's the road," returned the driver, with a chuckle; "it's the cobble-stone lane to yer farm, an' the farm's 'bout the same sort o' land as the lane."

For a few moments the passengers maintained a dismal silence.

"The country's lovely," said Patsy, glancing at the panorama as they mounted a slight elevation.

"Are you sure, Uncle, that there is a house, or any place of refuge, on your farm?" asked Louise, in a mischievous tone.

"Why, there's a rumor of a house, and the rumor says it's a hunker," replied Mr. Merrick, in a voice that betrayed a slight uneasiness.

"Doubtless the house matches the farm," said Beth, calmly. "I imagine it has two rooms and a leaky roof. But never mind, girls. This has been a pleasant trip, and we can seek shelter elsewhere if the worst comes to the worst."

"I guess the worst has come a'ready," observed the driver; "for the house is by odds the best part o' the Wegg farm. It's big enough fer a hotel, an' cost a lot o' money in its day. Seems like the lunatics all crowd to thet place—fust ol' Cap'n Wegg wasted of his substance on it, an' now——"

He paused, perhaps fearing he might become personal in his remarks, and Uncle John coughed while the girls shrieked with laughter.

Expecting nothing, they were amazed when they passed the orchard and the group of pines that had concealed the house and suddenly drew up beside the old-fashioned stile built into the rail fence. Every eye was instantly upon the quaint, roomy mansion, the grassy sward extending between it and the road, and the cosy and home-like setting of the outbuildings.

"Here's Wegg's," said the liveryman.

"Oh, Uncle," cried Beth; "how lovely!"

Louise's pretty face was wreathed with smiles. Patsy drew in a long breath and scrambled out of the high seat.

On the corner of the front porch stood Nora, arrayed in her neat gray gown and a cap. Her face was composed, but she felt herself trembling a little.

Old Hucks came slowly down the steps to greet the company. Never in his memory had his dress been so immaculate. The queer old fellow seemed to appreciate this as he raised his smiling face from the stooped shoulders and poised it on one side like a sparrow.

"Welcome home, sir," he said to Uncle John. "I'm Hucks, sir; Thomas Hucks," and without more words he proceeded to remove the satchels from the wagon.

"Ah, yes," returned Mr. Merrick, cheered by the welcome and the smile of the old man. "I'd forgotten about you, but I'm glad you're here."

"And that is my wife Nora, on the porch. She's the housekeeper, sir." And then, lowering his voice so that only the girls and Uncle John could hear, he added simply: "She's blind."

Patsy walked straight up to the eager, pathetic figure of the woman and took her hand in a warm clasp.

"I'm Patricia, Nora," she said, "and I'm sure we shall be friends."

Beth followed her cousin's lead.

"And I am Beth, Nora. Will you remember me?"

"Surely, miss; by your voice," returned the old woman, beaming delightedly at these evidences of kindness.

"Here is another, Nora," said their cousin, in gentle tones. "I am Louise."

"Three young and pretty girls, Nora; and as good as they are pretty," announced Uncle John, proudly. "Will you show us in, Thomas, or will your wife?"

"Nora will take the young ladies to their rooms, sir."

"Not now, Uncle!" they all protested, in nearly identical words; and Louise added: "Let us drink in the delights of this pretty picture before we shut ourselves up in the stuffy rooms. I hope they've been aired."

Patsy ran to a chicken-coop on the side lawn, where a fussy hen was calling to her children that strangers had arrived. Beth exclaimed at the honeysuckle vines and Louise sank into a rustic chair with a sigh of content.

"I'm so glad you brought us here. Uncle," she said. "What a surprise it is to find the place so pretty!"

They could hear the rush of the Little Bill in the wood behind them and a soft breeze stirred the pines and wafted their fragrance to the nostrils of the new arrivals. Uncle John squatted on the shady steps and fairly beamed upon the rustic scene spread out before him. Patsy had now thrown aside her hat and jacket and lay outstretched upon the cool grass, while the chickens eyed her with evident suspicion. Beth was picking a bouquet of honeysuckles, just because they were so sweet and homely.

"I'm almost sure I sent some hammocks and a croquet set," remarked Uncle John.

"They're here, sir," said Old Hucks, who had watched each one with his persistent smile and now stood awaiting his new master's commands. "But we didn't know jest where ye wanted 'em put."

Mary came out. She had taken off her things and donned her white apron.

"The house is quite wonderful, Mr. Merrick," she said. "There is everything we can possibly need, and all as neat as wax."

The report stirred the girls to explore. They all trooped into the big living room and were at once captivated by its charm. Nora led them upstairs to their chambers, finding the way as unerringly as if she possessed perfect vision, and here a new chorus of delight was evoked.

"The blue room is mine!" cried Louise.

"Mine is the pink room," said Beth.

"And I choose the white room," declared Patsy. "The Major's is just next, and it will please him because it is all green and gold. But where will Uncle John room?"

"The master will use the right wing," said old Nora, who had listened with real pleasure to the exclamations of delight. "It were Cap'n Wegg's room, ye know, an' we've fitted it all new."

Indeed, Uncle John was at that moment inspecting his apartment, and he sighed contentedly as he congratulated himself upon his foresight in sending down the furnishings on the chance of their being needed. They had effected a complete transformation of the old house.

But who had arranged everything? Surely the perfect taste and dainty touch evidenced everywhere was not to be attributed to blind Nora. The little man was thoughtful as he turned to Old Hucks.

"Who did it, Thomas?" he asked.

"Miss Ethel, sir; the school-ma'am."

"Oh. A city girl?"

"No, sir. Crazy Will Thompson's granddaughter. She lives 'bout nine mile away."

"Is she here now?"

"Went home this mornin', sir. It were a great pleasure to her, she said, an' she hoped as how you'd like everything, an' be happy here."

Undo John nodded.

"We must call on that girl," he remarked. "We owe her a good deal, I imagine, and she's entitled to our grateful thanks."

CHAPTER VI.

PEGGY PRESENTS HIS BILL.

Millville waited in agonized suspense for three days for tangible evidence that "the nabob was in their midst," as Nib Corkins poetically expressed it; but the city folks seemed glued to the farm and no one of them had yet appeared in the village. As a matter of fact, Patsy and Uncle John were enthusiastically fishing in the Little Bill, far up in the pine woods, and having "the time of their lives" in spite of their scant success in capturing trout. Old Hucks could go out before breakfast and bring in an ample supply of speckled beauties for Mary to fry; but Uncle John's splendid outfit seemed scorned by the finny folk, and after getting her dress torn in sundry places and a hook in the fleshy part of her arm Patsy learned to seek shelter behind a tree whenever her uncle cast his fly. But they reveled in the woods, and would lie on the bank for hours listening to the murmur of the brook and the songs of the birds.

The temper of the other two girls was different. Beth De Graf had brought along an archery outfit, and she set up her target on the ample green the day following her arrival. Here she practiced persistently, shooting at sixty yards with much skill. But occasionally, when Louise tired of her novel and her cushions in the hammock, the two girls would play tennis or croquet together—Beth invariably winning.

Such delightful laziness could brook no interference for the first days of their arrival, and it was not until Peggy McNutt ventured over on Monday morning for a settlement with Mr. Merrick that any from the little world around them dared intrude upon the dwellers at the Wegg farm.

Although the agent had been late in starting from Millville and Nick Thorne's sorrel mare had walked every step of the way, Peggy was obliged to wait in the yard a good half hour for the "nabob" to finish his breakfast. During that time he tried to decide which of the two statements of accounts that he had prepared he was most justified in presenting. He had learned from the liveryman at the Junction that Mr. Merrick had paid five dollars for a trip that was usually made for two, and also that the extravagant man had paid seventy-five cents more to Lucky Todd, the hotel keeper, than his bill came to. The knowledge of such reckless expenditures had fortified little McNutt in "marking up" the account of the money he had received, and instead of charging two dollars a day for his own services, as he had at first intended, he put them down at three dollars a day—and made the days stretch as much as possible. Also he charged a round commission on the wages of Lon Taft and Ned Long, and doubled the liveryman's bill for hauling the goods over from the Junction. Ethel Thompson had refused to accept any payment for what she had done, but Peggy bravely charged it up at good round figures. When the bill was made out and figured up it left him a magnificent surplus for his private account; but at the last his heart failed him, and he made out another bill more modest in its extortions. He had brought them both along, though, one in each pocket, vacillating between them as he thought first of the Merrick millions and then of the righteous anger he might incur. By the time Uncle John came out to him, smiling and cordial, he had not thoroughly made up his mind which account to present.

"I must thank you for carrying out my orders so intelligently," began the millionaire. "Without your assistance I might have found things in bad shape, I fear."

McNutt was reassured. The nabob would stand for bill No. 1, without a doubt.

"I tried fer to do my best, sir," he said.

"And you did very well," was the reply. "I hope you kept your expenditures well within bounds?"

The agent's heart sank at the question and the shrewd, alert look that accompanied it. Even millionaires do not allow themselves to be swindled, if they can help it. Bill No. 2 would be stiff enough; he might even have to knock a few dollars off from that.

"Most things is high in Millville," he faltered, "an' wages has gone up jest terr'ble. The boys don't seem to wanter do nuthin' without big pay."

"That is the case everywhere," responded Mr. Merrick, thoughtfully; "and between us, McNutt, I'm glad wages are better in these prosperous times. The man who works by the day should be well paid, for he has to pay well for his living. Adequately paid labor is the foundation of all prosperity."

Peggy smiled cheerfully. He was glad he had had the forethought to bring Bill No. 1 along with him.

"Hosses is high, too," he remarked, complacently, "an' lumber an' nails is up. As fer the live-stock I bought fer ye, I found I had to pay like sixty for it."

"I suppose they overcharged you because a city man wanted the animals. But of course you would not allow me to be robbed."

"Oh, 'course not, Mr. Merrick!"

"And that nag in the stable is a sorry old beast."

Peggy was in despair. Why in the world hadn't he charged for "the beast"? As it was now too late to add it to the bill he replied, grudgingly:

"The hoss you mention belongs to the place, sir. It went with the farm, 'long o' Old Hucks an' Nora."

"I'm glad you reminded me of those people," said Uncle John, seriously. "Tell me their history."

Louise sauntered from the house, at this juncture, and sank gracefully upon the grass at her uncle's feet. She carried a book, but did not open it.

"Ain't much to tell, sir, 'bout them folks," replied the agent. "Cap'n Wegg brung the Huckses with him when he settled here. Wegg were a sea-cap'n, ye see, an' when he retired he Wanted to git as far from the sea's he could."

"That was strange. A sailor usually loves to be near salt water all his days," observed Uncle John.

"Wall, Wegg he were diff'rent. He come here when I were a boy, bringin' a sad-faced young woman an' Ol' Hucks an' Nora. I s'pose Hucks were a sailor, too, though he never says nuthin' 'bout that. The Cap'n bought this no'count farm an' had this house built on it—a proceedin' that, ef I do say it, struck ev'rybody as cur'ous."

"It *was* curious," agreed Mr. Merrick.

"But the cur'ous'est thing was that he didn't make no 'tempt at farmin'. Folks said he had money to burn, fer he loaded it into this fool house an' then sot down an' smoked all day an' looked glum. Ol' Hucks planted the berry patch an' looked arter the orchard an' the stock; but Cap'n Wegg on'y smoked an' sulked. People at Millville was glad to leave him alone, an' the on'y friend he ever had were crazy Will Thompson."

"Crazy?"

"As a loon." The agent hitched uneasily on the lawn bench, where he was seated, and then continued, hastily: "But thet ain't neither here ner there. A baby was born arter a time, an' while he was young the sad-faced mother sickened an' died. Cap'n Wegg give her a decent fun'ral an' went right on smokin' his pipe an' sulkin', same as ever. Then he—he—died," rather lamely, "an' Joe—thet's the boy—bein' then about sixteen, dug out 'n' run away. We hain't seen him sense."

"Nice boy?" asked Uncle John.

"Joe were pretty well liked here, though he had a bit o' his dad's sulkiness. He 'n' Ethel Thompson—crazy Will's gran'daughter—seemed like to make up together; but even she don't know what drav him off—'nless it were the Cap'n's suddint death—ner where he went to."

Uncle John seemed thoughtful, but asked no more questions, and McNutt appeared to be relieved that he refrained. But the bill ought to be forthcoming now, and the agent gave a guilty start as his patron remarked:

"I want to settle with you for what you have done. I'm willing to pay a liberal price, you understand, but I won't submit to being robbed outrageously by you or any of your Millville people."

This was said so sternly that it sent McNutt into an ague of terror. He fumbled for the smallest bill, tremblingly placed it in Mr. Merrick's hand, and then with a thrill of despair realized he had presented the dreadful No. 1!

"It's—it's—a—'count of what I spent out," he stammered.

Uncle John ran his eye over the bill.

"What are Plymouth Rocks?" he demanded.

"He—hens, sir."

"Hens at a dollar apiece?"

"Thoroughbreds, sir. Extry fine stock. I raised 'em myself."

"H-m. You've charged them twice."

"Eh?"

"Here's an item: 'Twelve Plymouth Rocks, twelve dollars;' and farther down: 'Twelve Plymouth Rocks, eighteen dollars.'"

"Oh, yes; o' course. Ye see, I sold you a dozen first, of the dollar kind. Then I thought as how, bein' fine young birds, you'd be tempted fer to eat 'em, an' a dozen don't go fur on the table. So I up an' sold ye another dozen, extry ol' stock an' remarkable high-bred, fer a dollar-an'-a-half each. Which is dirt cheap because they's too old to eat an' jest right fer layers."

"Are they here?"

"Every one of 'em."

"Very good. I'm glad to have them. The cow seems reasonably priced, for a Jersey."

"It is. Jest extror'nary!" exclaimed Peggy, reassured.

"And your people have all done work of an unusual character in a painstaking manner. I am very much pleased. There seems to be a hundred and forty dollars my due, remaining from the five hundred I sent you."

"Here it is, sir," responded McNutt, taking the money from his pocket-book. In another place he had more money, which he had intended to pay if the smaller bill had been presented.

Uncle John took the money.

"You are an honest fellow, McNutt," said he. "I hadn't expected a dollar back, for folks usually take advantage of a stranger if he gives them half a chance. So I thank you for your honesty as well as for your services. Good morning."

The agent was thoroughly ashamed of himself. To be "sech a duffer" as to return that money, when by means of a little strategy he might have kept it, made him feel both humiliated and indignant. A hundred and forty dollars; When would he have a chance to get such a windfall again? Pah! he was a fool—to copy his identical thoughts: "a gol dum blithering idjit!"

All the way home he reflected dismally upon his lack of business foresight, and strove to plan ways to get money "out'n thet easy mark."

"Didn't the man rob you, Uncle?" asked Louise, when the agent had disappeared.

"Yes, dear; but I wouldn't give him the satisfaction of knowing I realized it."

"That was what I thought. By the way, that Wegg history seems both romantic and unusual," she said, musingly. "Don't you scent some mystery in what the man said of it?"

"Mystery!" cried Uncle John. "Lordy, no, Louise. You've been readin' too many novels. Romances don't grow in parts like these."

"But I think this is where they are most likely to grow, Uncle," persisted the girl, "just consider. A retired sea captain hides inland, with no companions but a grinning sailor and his blind housekeeper—except his pale wife, of course; and she is described as sad and unhappy. Who was she, do you think?"

"I don't think," said Uncle John, smiling and patting the fair check of his niece. "And it don't matter who she was."

"I'm sure it does. It is the key to the whole mystery. Even her baby could not cheer the poor thing's broken heart. Even the fine house the Captain built failed to interest her. She pined away and died, and——"

"And that finished the romance, Louise."

"Oh, no; that added to its interest. The boy grew up in this dismal place and brooded on his mother's wrongs. His stern, sulky old father died suddenly. Was he murdered?" in a low voice; "did the son revenge his mother's wrongs?"

"Fiddlepuff, Louise! You're getting theatric—and so early in the morning, too! Want to saddle my new farm with a murder, do you? Well, it's rubbish. Joe Wegg ran away from here to get busy in the world. Major Doyle helped him with my money, in exchange for this farm, which the boy was sensible to get rid of—although I'm glad it's now mine. The Major liked Joe Wegg, and says he's a clean-cut, fine young feller. He's an inventor, too, even if an unlucky one, and I've no doubt he'll make his way in the world and become a good citizen."

With these words Uncle John arose and sauntered around to the barn, to look at the litter of new pigs that just then served to interest and amuse him. The girl remained seated upon the grass, her hands clasped over her knee and a look of deep retrospection upon her face.

CHAPTER VII.

LOUISE SCENTS A MYSTERY.

Louise Merrick was the eldest of Uncle John's nieces, having just passed her eighteenth birthday. In the city she was devoted to the requirements of fashionable society and—urged thereto by her worldly-minded mother—led a mere butterfly existence. Her two cousins frankly agreed that Louise was shallow, insincere and inclined to be affected; but of the three girls she displayed the most equable and pleasant disposition and under the most trying circumstances was composed and charming in manner. For this reason she was an agreeable companion, and men usually admired her graceful figure and her piquant, pretty face with its crown of fluffy blonde hair and winning expression. There was a rumor that she was engaged to be married to Arthur Weldon, a young man of position in the city; but Uncle John ignored the possibility of losing one of his cherished nieces and declared that Louise was still too young to think of marriage.

When away from her frivolous mother and the inconsequent home environments the girl was more unaffected and natural in her ways, and her faults were doubtless more the result of education than of natural tendency.

One thing was indisputable, however: Louise Merrick was a clever girl, possessing a quick intellect and a keen insight into the character of others. Her apparent shallowness was a blind of the same character as her assumed graciousness, and while she would have been more lovable without any pretence or sham she could not have been Louise Merrick and allow others to read her as she actually was. Patsy and Beth thought they knew her, and admired or liked rather than loved their cousin. Uncle John thought he knew her, too, and was very proud of his eldest niece in spite of some discovered qualities that were not wholly admirable.

An extensive course of light literature, not void of "detective stories," had at this moment primed Louise with its influence to the extent of inducing her to scent a mystery in the history of Captain Wegg. The plain folks around Millville might speculate listlessly upon the "queer

doin's" at the farm, and never get anywhere near the truth. Indeed, the strange occurrences she had just heard were nearly forgotten in the community, and soon would be forgotten altogether—unless the quick ear of a young girl had caught the clue so long ignored.

At first she scarcely appreciated the importance of the undertaking. It occurred to her that an effort to read to the bottom of the sea captain's romance would be a charming diversion while she resided at Millville, and in undertaking the task she laughingly accused herself of becoming an amateur detective—an occupation that promised to be thrilling and delightful.

Warned, however, by the rebuff she had met with from Uncle John, the girl decided not to confide either her suspicions or her proposed investigation to anyone for the present, but to keep her own counsel until she could surprise them all with the denouement or required assistance to complete her work.

Inspired by the cleverness and fascination of this idea, Louise set to work to tabulate the information she had received thus far, noting the; element of mystery each fact evolved. First, Captain Wegg must have been a rich man in order to build this house, maintain two servants and live for years in comfort without any income from his barren farm lands. What became of his money after his death? Why was his only son obliged to fly to the cities in order to obtain a livelihood? Secondly, the Captain, a surly and silent man, had brought hither—perhaps by force—a young woman as his wife who was so unhappy that she pined away and died. Who was this woman? What had rendered her so unhappy and despairing?

Thirdly, the Captain's only friend had been a crazy man named Will Thompson. Was he crazy before the Captain's death, or had he become crazed at that time, some terrible tragedy unhinging his mind?

Fourthly, the granddaughter of Thompson, Ethel, and the son of Captain Wegg had been in love with each other, and people expected they would marry in time. But at his father's sudden death the boy fled and left his sweetheart without a word. Why—unless something had occurred that rendered their marriage impossible?

In the fifth place there was Old Hucks and his blind wife to be considered. What did they know about their old master's secret history? What tragic memories lurked beneath the man's perpetual smile and the woman's composed and sightless face?

Surely there was enough here to excite the curiosity and warrant an effort to untangle the mystery. And as instruments to the end there were several people available who could be of use to her; McNutt, the agent, who evidently knew more than he had cared to tell; Old Hucks and his wife and Ethel Thompson, the school-teacher. There might be others, but one or another of these four must know the truth, and it would be her pleasant duty to obtain a full disclosure. So she was anxious to begin her investigations at once.

When her uncle returned from his visit to the pigs Louise said to him:

"I've been thinking, dear, that we ought to call upon that young lady who arranged our rooms, and thank her for her kindness."

"That's true," he replied.

"Can't we drive over to Thompson's this morning, Uncle?"

"Beth and Patsy have planned a tramp to the lake, and a row after water-lilies."

"Then let us make our call together. We can invite the girl to come here and spend a day with us, when Patsy and Beth will be able to meet her."

"That's a good idea, Louise. I was wondering what I'd do this morning. Tell Old Hucks to get the nag harnessed."

The girl ran eagerly upon her errand. Old Hucks seemed surprised, and a curious expression showed for an instant through his smile. But he turned without a word to harness the horse.

Louise stood watching him.

"Your fingers are quite nimble, Thomas, considering the fact that you were once a sailor," she said.

"But sailors have to be nimble, miss," he returned, buckling a strap unmoved. "Who tol' ye I were once a sea-farin' man?"

"I guessed it."

As he appeared indisposed to say more on the subject she asked: "Did you sail with Captain Wegg?"

"Partly, miss. Dan's already now. Don't jerk the bit, fer his mouth's tender an' it makes him balky. Ef he balks jest let him rest a time, an' then speak to him. Dan ain't vicious; he's jest ornery."

She climbed into the dilapidated old buggy and took the reins. Dan groaned and ambled slowly around to where Uncle John stood awaiting his niece.

"Let me drive, Uncle," she said; "I understand Dan."

"Well, I don't," returned Uncle John, in his whimsical way, as he mounted to the seat beside her. "I don't understand how he's happened to live since the landing of Columbus, or what he's good for, or why someone don't knock him on the head."

Dan turned his long, lean face as if to give the speaker a reproachful look; then he groaned again, leaned forward, and drew the buggy slowly into the stony lane.

"Do you know where the Thompsons live?" inquired Uncle John.

"No. Whoa, Dan!"

That was the best thing the nag did. He knew how to whoa.

"Thomas!" called Uncle John, turning in his seat; and at the summons Old Hucks came from the barn and approached them. "How do you get to Miss Thompson's place?"

"Miss Ethel's?" Another fleeting expression of surprise.

"Yes; we're going over to thank her for her kindness to us."

"I—I'm 'most sure as she'll be here soon to call, sir. And—perhaps you oughtn't to—to go to—Thompson's," stammered Hucks, glancing up at them with his bright, elusive smile.

"Well, we're going, anyhow," growled Mr. Merrick.

"Then turn left at the main road an' keep straight ahead to Thompson's. Ye can't miss it, sir. Brick schoolhouse on the other corner."

"Thank you, Thomas. Drive on, Louise."

CHAPTER VIII.

THE LITTLE SCHOOL-MA'AM.

Dan balked only twice on the journey, but even this moderate rebellion so annoyed Uncle John that he declared he would walk back rather than ride behind this "mulish antiquity" again.

When they came to the Thompson dwelling it at first sight seemed deserted. A knock on the front door failed to produce any response.

"Perhaps they're away from home," suggested Louise.

"There's a path around to the back," said Uncle John. "Let's explore in that direction."

They made their way leisurely toward the rear and had almost passed the house, when a deep roar broke the stillness. It was succeeded by another, and another, like the bellowing of a mad bull, and the intruders stopped short and Louise clung to her uncle in sudden panic.

"Be still, Will! Stop, I say—stop!"

A sharp crack, as of a lash, accompanied the words, and a moan or two was followed by absolute silence.

Uncle John and Louise looked at one another with startled eyes.

"He must be worse," said the old gentleman, mopping his forehead with a handkerchief.

With one accord they started softly to retrace their steps when a new sound halted them again. It was a clear, fresh young voice singing a plaintive ditty in a nonchalant, careless tone.

"That's Ethel, I'm sure," exclaimed Louise, grasping her uncle's arm.

"Well, what shall we do?" he demanded.

"Mr.—the crazy man seems quiet now," she whispered. "Let us find the girl, if we can."

So again they traversed the path and this time came to the pretty garden behind the house. Ethel was tending a flower bed. She wore her gingham dress and a sunbonnet, and, kneeling in the path, stretched out her slim brown arm to uproot the weeds. But the crunching of the gravel aroused her attention, and, observing her visitors, she sprang up and hastened toward them.

Louise introduced her uncle and herself in her most pleasant and gracious way, and the school teacher led them to a garden bench and begged them to be seated.

"The day is lovely," she said, "and I always find my garden more cheerful than the house. Grandfather's illness makes the house unpleasant for strangers, too."

Louise was surprised at this frank reference, and Uncle John coughed to hide his embarrassment.

"I—I hope the invalid is—is improving," he said, doubtful whether he should say anything on the delicate subject or not.

"He is always the same, sir," was the quiet response. "I suppose they have told you that grandfather is a madman? Our great trouble is well known in this neighborhood."

"He is not dangerous. I suppose?" hazarded Uncle John, remembering the brutal bellowing.

"Oh, not at all. He is fully paralyzed from his waist down, poor grandfather, and can do no harm to anyone. But often his outbreaks are unpleasant to listen to," continued the girl, deprecatingly, as if suddenly conscious that they had overheard the recent uproar.

"Has he been—this way—for long?" inquired Louise.

"His mind has been erratic and unbalanced since I can remember," answered Ethel, calmly, "but he first became violent at the time Captain Wegg died, some three years ago. Grandfather was very fond of the Captain, and happened to be with him at the time of his sudden death. The shock drove him mad."

"Was he paralyzed before that time?" asked Louise, earnestly.

"No; but the paralysis followed almost immediately. The doctor says that a blood vessel which burst in the brain is responsible for both afflictions."

The pause that followed was growing awkward when Uncle John said, with an evident effort to change the subject:

"This is a fine old homestead."

"It is, indeed," responded Ethel, brightly, "and it enjoys the distinction of being one of the first houses built in the foothills. My great-grandfather was really the first settler in these parts and originally located his cabin where the mill now stands. 'Little Bill Thompson,' he was called, for he was a small, wiry man—very different from grandfather, who in his prime was a powerful man of over six feet. Little Bill Hill and Little Bill Creek were named after this pioneer great-grandfather, who was quite successful raising flocks of sheep on the plateau. Before he died he built this house, preferring the location to his first one."

"The garden is beautiful," said Louise, enthusiastically. "And do you teach in the little brick school-house across the way?"

"Yes. Grandfather built it years ago, without dreaming I would ever teach there. Now the county supports the school and pays me my salary."

"How long have you taught?"

"For two years. It is necessary, now that grandfather is disabled. He has a small income remaining, however, and with what I earn we get along very nicely."

"It was very good of you to assist in getting our house ready for us," said Louise. "We might have found things in sorry condition but for your kindness."

"Oh, I enjoyed the work, I assure you," replied Ethel. "As it is my vacation, it was a real pleasure to me to have something to do. But I fear my arrangement of your pretty furniture was very ungraceful."

"We haven't altered a single thing," declared Louise. "You must have found it a tedious task, unpacking and getting everything in shape."

"Tom and Nora were good help, because they are fond of me and seem to understand my wishes; and Peggy McNutt brought me some men to do the lifting and rough work," explained Ethel.

"Have you known Hucks and his wife long?" asked Uncle John.

"Since I can remember, sir. They came here many years ago, with Captain Wegg."

"And has Thomas always smiled?" Louise inquired.

"Always," was the laughing reply. "It's an odd expression—isn't it?—to dwell forever on a man's face. But Tom is never angry, or hurt or excited by anything, so there is no reason he should not smile. At the time of Captain Wegg's death and poor grandfather's terrible affliction, Old Hucks kept right on smiling, the same as ever; and perhaps his pleasant face helped to cheer us all."

Louise drew a long breath.

"Then the smile is a mask," she said, "and is assumed to conceal the man's real feelings."

"I do not think so," Ethel answered, thoughtfully. "The smile is habitual, and dominates any other expression his features might be capable of; but that it is assumed I do not believe. Thomas is a simple-minded, honest-hearted old fellow, and to face the world smilingly is a part of his religion. I am sure he has nothing to conceal, and his devotion to his blind wife is very beautiful."

"But Nora—how long has she been blind?"

"Perhaps all her life; I cannot tell how long. Yet it is wonderful how perfectly she finds her way without the aid of sight. Captain Wegg used to say she was the best housekeeper he ever knew."

"Did not his wife keep house for him, when she was alive?"

"I do not remember her."

"They say she was most unhappy."

Ethel dropped her eyes and did not reply.

"How about Cap'n Wegg?" asked Uncle John. "Did you like him? You see, we're mighty curious about the family, because we've acquired their old home, and are bound to be interested in the people that used to live there."

"That is natural," remarked the little school teacher, with a sigh. "Captain Wegg was always kind to me; but the neighbors as a rule thought him moody and bad-tempered." After a pause she added: "He was not as kind to his son as to me. But I think his life was an unhappy one, and we have no right to reprove his memory too severely for his faults."

"What made him unhappy?" asked Louise, quickly.

Ethel smiled into her eager face.

"No one has solved that problem, they say. The Captain was as silent as he was morose."

The detective instinct was alive in Louise. She hazarded a startling query:

"Who killed Captain Wegg?" she demanded, suddenly.

Another smile preceded the reply.

"A dreadful foe called heart disease. But come; let me show you my garden. There are no such roses as these for miles around."

Louise was confident she had made progress. Ethel had admitted several things that lent countenance to the suspicions already aroused; but perhaps this simple country girl had never imagined the tragedy that had been enacted at her very door.

She cordially urged Ethel Thompson to spend a day with them at the farm, and Uncle John, who was pleased with the modesty and frankness of the fair-haired little school teacher, earnestly seconded the invitation.

Then he thought of going home, and the thought reminded him of Dan.

"Do you know," he inquired, "where I could buy a decent horse?"

The girl looked thoughtful a moment; then glanced up with a bright smile.

"Will you buy one off me?" she asked.

"Willingly, my dear, if you've an animal to sell."

"It's—it's our Joe. He was grandfather's favorite colt when his trouble came upon him. We have no use for him now, for I always ride or drive my pony. And grandmother says he's eating his head off to no purpose; so we'd like to sell him. If you will come to the barn I'll introduce you to him."

Joe proved on inspection to be an excellent horse, if appearances were to be trusted, and Ethel assured Mr. Merrick that the steed was both gentle and intelligent.

"Do you use that surrey?" inquired Uncle John, pointing to a neat vehicle that seemed to be nearly new.

"Very seldom, sir. Grandmother would like to sell it with the horse."

"It's exactly what I need," declared Mr. Merrick. "How much for Joe and his harness, and the surrey?"

"I'll go and ask what grandmother wants."

She returned after a few minutes, stating a figure that made Uncle John lift his brows with a comical expression.

"A hundred dollars! Do you take me for a brigand, little girl? I know what horses are worth, for I've bought plenty of 'em. Your Joe seems sound as a dollar, and he's just in his prime. A hundred and fifty is dirt cheap for him, and the surrey will be worth at least seventy-five. Put in the harness at twenty-five, and I'll give you two-fifty for the outfit, and not a cent more or less. Eh?"

"No, indeed," said Ethel. "We could not get more than a hundred dollars from anyone else around here."

"Because your neighbors are countrymen, and can't afford a proper investment. So when they buy at all they only give about half what a thing is actually worth. But I'll be honest with you. The price I offer is a good deal less than I'd have to pay in the city—Hutchinson would charge me five hundred, at least—and I need just what you've got to sell. What do you say, Miss Ethel?"

"The price is one hundred dollars, Mr. Merrick."

"I won't pay it. Let me talk with your grandmother."

"She does not see anyone, sir."

Louise looked up sharply, scenting another clue.

"Isn't she well, dear?" she asked in smooth tones.

"She looks after grandfather, and helps Aunt Lucy with the housework."

"Well, come, Louise; we'll go home," said Uncle John, sadly. "I'd hoped to be able to drive this fine fellow back, but Dan'll have to groan an' balk all the way to the farm."

Ethel smiled.

"Better buy at my price, Mr. Merrick," she suggested.

"Tell you what I'll do," he said, pausing. "I'll split the difference. Take two hundred and well call it a bargain."

"But I cannot do that, sir."

"It will help pay you for the hard work of fixing up the house," he rejoined, pleadingly. "Your bill wasn't half enough."

"My bill?" wonderingly.

"The one I paid McNutt for your services."

"I made no charge, sir. I could not accept anything for a bit of assistance to a neighbor."

"Oh! Then McNutt got it, did he?"

"I'm awfully sorry, Mr. Merrick. I told Peggy I would not accept payment."

"H-m. Never mind. We're not going to quarrel, little neighbor. May I hitch Joe to the surrey?"

"If you like. I'll help you."

Uncle John led Joe from his stall and together they harnessed the horse to the surrey. The girl knew better than the man how to buckle the straps properly, while Louise stood by helplessly and watched the performance.

Then Uncle John went for old Dan, whom he led, rickety buggy and all, into the Thompson stable.

"I'll send Hucks over to get him, although we might as well knock him in the head," he said as he unharnessed the ancient steed. "Now then, Louise, hop in."

"You'll be sure to come over Thursday, for the day, Miss Thompson?" asked Louise, taking Joe's reins from her uncle's hands.

"I'll not forget such a delightful engagement, be sure."

Uncle John had his pocketbook out, and now he wadded up some bills and thrust them into the little school teacher's hand.

"Drive ahead, Louise," he called. "Good morning, my dear. See you on Thursday."

As the vehicle rolled out of the yard and turned into the highway, Ethel unrolled the bills with trembling fingers.

"If he has dared—!" she began, but paused abruptly with a smile of content.

The rich man had given her exactly one hundred dollars.

CHAPTER IX.

THE LIVES OF THE SAINTS.

On Wednesday afternoon McNutt drove the sad-eyed sorrel mare over to the Wegg farm again. He had been racking his brain for a way to get more money out of the nabob, for the idea had become a veritable passion with him and now occupied all his thoughts.

That very morning an inspiration had come to him. Among other occupations he had at one time adopted that of a book-agent, and by dint of persistent energy had sold numerous copies of "Radford's Lives of the Saints" to the surrounding farmers. They had cost him ninety cents a copy and he had sold them at three dollars each, netting a fine profit in return for his labor. The books were printed upon cheap paper, fearfully illustrated with blurred cuts, but the covers were bound in bright red with gold lettering. Through misunderstandings three of these copies had come back to him, the subscribers refusing to accept them; and so thorough had been his canvassing that there remained no other available customers for the saintly works. So Peggy had kept them on a shelf in his "office" for several years, and now, when his eye chanced to light upon them, he gave a snort of triumph and pounced upon them eagerly. Mr. Merrick was a newcomer. Without doubt he could be induced to buy a copy of Radford's Lives.

An hour later McNutt was on his mission, the three copies, which had been carefully dusted, reclining on the buggy seat beside him. Arrived at the Wegg farm, he drove up to the stile and alighted.

Louise was reading in the hammock, and merely glanced at the little man, who solemnly stumped around to the back door with the three red volumes tucked underneath his arm. He had brought them all along to make his errand "look like business."

"Where's the nabob?" he asked blind Nora.

"What's that, Mr. McNutt?" she inquired, as if puzzled. She knew his voice, as she did that of nearly everyone with whom she had ever been brought in contact.

"Why, the nabob; the boss; Mr. Merrick."

"Oh. He's in the barn with Tom, I guess."

McNutt entered the barn. Uncle John was seated upon an overturned pail watching Old Hucks oil Joe's harness. The agent approached him with a deferential bow.

"Sir," said he, "you'll 'scuse my comin' agin so soon to be a-botherin'; but I hev here three copies of Radford's famis wucks on the Lives o' the Saints, in a edishun dee looks——"

"A what?"

"A edishun dee looks, which means extry fine. It's a great book an' they's all out'n print 'cept these three, which I hain't no doubt many folks would be glad to give their weight in gold fer, an' some over."

"Stand out of the light, McNutt."

The agent shifted his position.

"Them books, sir——"

"Oh, take 'em away."

"What!"

"I don't read novels."

McNutt scratched his head, perplexed at the rebuff. His "dee looks" speech had usually resulted in a sale. An idea flashed across his brain—perhaps evolved by the scratching.

"The young lady, sir——"

"Oh, the girls are loaded with books," growled the nabob.

The agent became desperate.

"But the young lady in the hammick, sir, as I jest now left, says to tell ye she wants one o' these books mighty bad, an' hopes you'll buy it for her eddificationing."

"Oh; she does, eh?"

"Mighty bad, sir."

Uncle John watched Thomas polish a buckle.

"Is it a moral work?" he asked.

"Nuthin' could be moraler, sir. All 'bout the lives o'—"

"How much is it?"

"Comes pretty high, sir. Three dollars. But it's—"

"Here. Take your money and get out. You're interrupting me."

"Very sorry, sir. Much obleeged, sir. Where'll I leave the book?"

"Throw it in the manger."

McNutt selected a volume that had a broken corner and laid it carefully on the edge of the oat-bin. Then he put his money in his pocket and turned away.

"Morn'n' to ye, Mr. Merrick."

"Stop a bit," said Uncle John, suddenly.

The agent stopped.

"I believe I paid you ten dollars for Miss Ethel Thompson's services. Is that correct?"

"Ye—yes, Mr. Merrick."

McNutt's heart was in his shoes and he looked guiltily at his accuser, the pale blue eyes bulging fearfully.

"Very well; see that she gets it."

"Of course, Mr. Merrick."

"And at once. You may go."

McNutt stumped from the barn. He felt that a dreadful catastrophe had overtaken him. Scarcely could he restrain the impulse to sob aloud. Ten dollars!—Ten dollars gone to the dogs as the result of his visit to the nabob that morning! To lose ten dollars in order to gain three was very bad business policy. McNutt reflected bitterly that he would have been better off had he stayed at home. He ought to have been contented with what he had already made, and the severe manner the nabob had used in addressing him told the agent plainly that he need not expect further pickings from this source.

In the midst of his despair the comforting thought that Ethel would surely refuse the money came to sustain him; so he recovered somewhat his former spirits. As he turned the corner of the house he observed Louise still reading in the hammock.

In some ways McNutt was a genius. He did not neglect opportunities.

"Here's my las' chance at these idjits," he muttered, "an' I'll learn thet nabob what it costs, to make Marsh McNutt stand out'n his light."

Then he hastened over to the hammock.

"Scuse me, miss," said he, in his most ingratiating voice. "Is yer uncle 'round anywheres?"

"Isn't he in the barn?" asked the girl, looking up.

"Can't find him, high ner low. But he ordered a book of me t'other day—'Radford's Lives o' the Saints'—an' perhaps you'll take it an' pay me the money, so's I kin go home."

Louise gazed at the man musingly. He was one of the people she intended to pump for information concerning the mystery of Captain Wegg, and she must be gracious to him in order to win his good-will and induce him to speak freely. With this thought in mind she drew out her purse and asked:

"How much were you to be paid for the book?"

"Three dollars, miss."

"Here is the money, then. Tell me—your name is McNutt, isn't it?—how long have you lived in this place?"

"All my life, miss. Thank 'e, miss. Good day to ye, miss."

He placed the book in the hammock beside her.

"Don't go, please." said the girl. "I'd like you to tell me something about Captain Wegg, and of his poor wife who died, and—"

"Nuther time, miss, I'll be glad to. Ye'll find me in my orfice, any time. Jest now I'm in the dumdest hurry ye ever knew. Good day to ye, miss," he repeated, and stumped quickly to the buggy awaiting him. Next moment he had seized the reins and was urging the sorrel mare along the stony lane at her best pace.

Louise was both astonished and disappointed, but after a little thought she looked after the departing agent with a shrewd smile.

"He's afraid to talk," she murmured, "and that only confirms my suspicions that he knows more than he cares to tell."

Meantime McNutt was doing his best to get away from the premises before the discovery was made that he had sold two "Lives of the Saints" to one family. That there might be future consequences to follow his deception never occurred to him; only the immediate necessity for escape occupied his mind.

Nor were his fears altogether groundless. Turning his head from time to time for a glance behind, he had seen Mr. Merrick come from the barn with a red book in his hand and approach the hammock, whereupon the young lady arose and exhibited a second book. Then they both dropped the books and ran into the lane and began shouting for him to stop—the man's voice sounding especially indignant and imperative.

But McNutt chose to be deaf. He did not look around again, and was congratulating himself that he would soon be out of earshot when a sudden apparition ahead caused the mare to halt abruptly. It also caused the cold chills to run down the agent's back. Beth and Patsy had stepped into the lane from a field, being on their way home from their daily walk.

"They're calling to you, sir," said Patsy to the agent. "Didn't you hear them?"

"I—I'm a little deaf, miss," stammered McNutt, who recognized the young ladies as Mr. Merrick's nieces.

"I think they wish you to go back," remarked Beth, thoughtfully watching the frantic waves of Uncle John's chubby arms and Louise's energetic beckonings. They were too far off to be heard plainly, but their actions might surely be understood.

McNutt with reluctance looked over his shoulder, and a second shudder went through him.

"I hain't got time to go back," he said, as an inspiration came to him; "but I guess you kin do jest as well. This book here," picking up the last of the three from the seat, "I offered to sell yer uncle fer five dollars; but he wanted it fer four. I ain't no haggler, you understan', so I jest driv away. Now Mr. Merrick has changed his mind an' is willin' to give five fer it; but there ain't nuthin' small about me. Ef you gals'll jest give me the four dollars ye kin take the book to yer uncle, with my compliments; an' I won't hev t' go back. I'm in a drea'ful hurry."

Patsy laughed at the little man's excited manner.

"Fortunately I have some money with me," she said; "but you may as well take the five dollars, for unless Uncle had been willing to pay it he would not have called you back."

"I think so, myself, miss," he rejoined, taking the money and handing her the volume.

Uncle John and Louise, glaring at the distant group, saw the third red book change hands, and in answer to their renewed cries and gestures Patsy waved the "Lives of the Saints" at them reassuringly and came on at a brisk walk, followed by Beth.

McNutt slapped the sorrel with the ends of the reins so energetically that the mare broke into a trot, and before the girls had come within speaking distance of their uncle, the agent was well out of sight and exulting in the possession of eleven dollars to pay for his morning's work. Even if Ethel accepted that ten, he reflected, he would still be a dollar ahead. But he was sure she would tell him to keep it; and he'd "jest like to see thet air nabob git a penny back agin."

Meantime Uncle John's wrath, which was always an effervescent quality with the little gentleman, had changed to wonder when he saw his nieces approaching with the third red-and-gold book. Louise was leaning against the rail fence and laughing hysterically, and suddenly a merry smile appeared and spread over her uncle's round face as he said:

"Did you ever hear of such an audacious swindle in all your born days?"

"What will you do, Uncle?" asked the girl, wiping the tears of merriment from her eyes. "Have the man arrested?"

"Of course not, my dear. It's worth the money just to learn what talents the fellow possesses. Tell me, Patsy," he continued, as the other nieces joined them, "what did you pay for your book?"

"Five dollars. Uncle. He said—"

"Never mind what he said, my dear. It's all right. I wanted it to add to my collection. So far I've got three 'Lives of the Saints'—and I'm thankful they're not cats, or there'd be nine lives for me to accumulate."

CHAPTER X.

THE MYSTERY DEEPENS.

Ethel Thompson came over the next day, as she had promised, and the sweet-faced, gentle school-mistress won the hearts of Uncle John's three nieces without an effort. She was the eldest of them all, but her retired country life had kept her fresh and natural, and Ethel seemed no more mature than the younger girls except in a certain gravity that early responsibility had thrust upon her.

Together the four laughing, light-hearted maids wandered through the pines, where the little school-ma'am showed them many pretty nooks and mossy banks that the others had not yet discovered. By following an unsuspected path, they cut across the wooded hills to the waterfall, where Little Bill Creek made a plunge of twenty feet into a rocky basin below. In spite of the bubbles, the water here showed clear as crystal, and the girls admiringly christened it the "Champagne Cup." They shed their shoes and stockings and waded in the pool, enjoying the sport with shrieks of merry laughter—more because they were happy than that there was anything to laugh at.

Afterward they traced the stream down to a lovely glade a half mile above Millville, where Ethel informed them the annual Sunday-school picnic was always held, and then trailed across the rocky plateau to the farm. By the time they reached home their appetites were well sharpened for Mary's excellent luncheon, and the afternoon was devoted to rest under the shady pines that grew beside the house.

It was now, when they felt thoroughly acquainted and at ease in one another's society, that the girls indulged in talks concerning events in their past, and Ethel was greatly interested in the nieces' recital of their recent trip abroad with Uncle John. They also spoke frankly of their old life together at Elmhurst, where Aunt Jane, who was Uncle John's sister, had congregated her three nieces for the purpose of choosing from among them one to inherit her vast estates. It seemed no source of regret to any of them that a boy, Kenneth Forbes, had finally succeeded to Aunt Jane's property, and this may be explained by the fact that Uncle John had at that interesting juncture appeared to take charge of the nieces. It was quite evident that the eccentric but kindly old fellow had succeeded in making these three girls as happy as their dispositions would allow them to be.

After the most interesting phases of their personal history had been discussed, the nieces began, perhaps unconsciously, to draw from Ethel her own story. It was simple enough, and

derived its interest mainly from the fact that it concerned their new friend. Her parents had both passed away while she was young, and Ethel had always lived with her father's father, big Will Thompson, a man reputed very well-to-do for this section, and an energetic farmer from his youth.

Old Will had always been accused of being unsociable and considering himself above the neighboring farmers; and it was true that Bob West, the implement dealer, was his only associate before Captain Wegg arrived. A casual acquaintance with the Millville people might easily explain this.

With the advent of the Weggs, however, a strong friendship seemed to spring up between the retired sea captain and the bluff, erratic old farmer, which lasted until the fatal day when one died and the other became a paralytic and a maniac.

"We have always thought," said Ethel, "that the shock of the Captain's death unsettled my grandfather's mind. They had been sitting quietly in Captain Wegg's room one evening, as they were accustomed to do, when there was a sudden fall and a cry. Thomas ran in at once, and found grandfather raving over the Captain's dead body. The old seaman had heart disease, it seems, and had often declared he would die suddenly. It was a great blow to us all, but especially to Joe."

Her voice softened at this last remark, and Patsy exclaimed, impulsively:

"Tell us about Joe Wegg. Did you like him?"

"Yes," said Ethel, simply; "we were naturally thrown much together in our childhood, and became staunch friends. Grandpa often took me with him on his visits to the Weggs, and sometimes, but not often, the Captain would bring Joe to see us. He was a quiet, thoughtful boy; much like his mother, I imagine; but for some reason he had conceived an intense dislike for his father and an open hatred for this part of the country, where he was born. Aside from these morbid notions, Joe was healthy-minded and frank and genuine. Had he been educated in any other atmosphere than the gloomy one of the Wegg household I am sure Joe's character would have been wholly admirable, and I have never blamed the boy much for his peculiarities. Captain Wegg would not permit him to go to school, but himself attended to such instructions as Joe could acquire at home, and this was so meager and the boy so ambitious that I think it was one cause of his discontent. I remember, when I was sent to school at Troy, that Joe sobbed for days because he could not have the same advantages. He used to tell me wonderful stories of what he would accomplish if he could only get out into the world.

"When he implored his father to let him go away, Captain Wegg used to assure Joe that he would some day be rich, and there was no need of his preparing himself for either a business or a profession; but that did not satisfy Joe's ambition, as you may imagine. And, when the end came, scarcely a dollar of money could be found among the Captain's possessions, and no other property than this farm; so it is evident he deceived his son for some selfish purpose.

"Joe was at last free, and the only thing I reproach him for is going away without a word to me or any of his friends. I heard, indirectly, of his working his way through a technical school, for he was always crazy about mechanics, and then he went to New York and I lost all further trace of him."

"What do you suppose became of Captain Wegg's money?" asked Louise.

"I've no idea. It is a singular thing that most of my grandfather's savings disappeared at the same time. On account of his mental condition he can never tell us what became of his little fortune; but luckily the returns from the farm, which we rent on shares, and my own salary as teacher of the district school, enable us to live quite comfortably, although we must be economical."

"Why, it's really a romance!" cried Patsy, who had listened eagerly.

"There are many romances in real life," added Beth, in her undemonstrative way.

Louise said nothing, but her heart was throbbing with excitement engendered by the tale, which so strongly corroborated the suspicions she had begun to entertain. When Ethel had gone home Louise still deliberated upon this fascinating mystery, and her resolve grew to force some sort of an explanation from the smiling lips of Old Hucks. For the sole available witness of that fatal night's tragedy, when one strong man died and another was driven mad, was Thomas Hucks. The old servitor was also in a position to know much of the causes leading up to the catastrophe, he having been the confidential retainer of Captain Wegg for many years. Hucks must speak; but the girl was wise enough to realize that he would not do so unless urged by coaxing or forced by strategy. There was doubtless good reason why the old man had remained silent for three years. Her plan was to win his confidence. Interest him in Joe's welfare, and then the truth must come out.

The frankly related story of Ethel had supplied Louise with the motive for the crime, for that a crime had been committed she was now doubly sure. Captain Wegg had money; old Will Thompson had money; both were well-to-do men. In a retired country district, where there were no banks, it was reasonable to suppose they kept large sums of money on hand, and the knowledge of this fact had tempted some one to a dreadful deed. Captain Wegg had been killed and old Thompson perhaps injured by a blow upon the head from which he had never recovered. Any suspicion the fair young detective may have entertained that Thompson himself had killed his friend was eradicated by the fact that he had been robbed at the same time.

Louise had originally undertaken her investigation through curiosity and a desire to amuse herself by unveiling the mystery. Now she began to reflect that she was an instrument of justice, for a discovery of the truth might restore a fortune to poor Joe Wegg, now struggling with the world, and put sweet Ethel Thompson in a position where the necessity for her to teach school would be abolished. This thought added a strong impulse to her determination to succeed.

Sunday afternoon the girl took blind Nora for a long drive through the country, taking pains to explain to her all the points of interest they came to, and delighting the old woman with her bright chatter. Louise had been kind to Nora from the beginning, and her soft, sympathetic voice had quite won the poor creature's heart.

On the way home, in the delightful summer twilight, the girl dexterously led the conversation toward Nora's past history.

"Was Thomas a sailor when you married him?" she asked.

"Yes, miss. He were bos'n on Cap'n Wegg's schooner the 'Lively Kate,' an' I were livin' with Miss Mary, as come to be Mrs. Wegg arterward."

"Oh, I see. And were you blind then, Nora?"

"No, miss. I went blind arter our great trouble come to us."

"Trouble? Oh, I'm so sorry, dear. What was it?"

The old woman was silent for a time. Then she said:

"I'd better not mention it, I guess. Thomas likes to forgit, an' when I gets cryin' an' nervous he knows I've been thinkin' 'bout the old trouble."

Louise was disappointed, but changed the subject adroitly.

"And Miss Mary, who was afterward Mrs. Wegg. Did you love her, Nora?"

"Indeed I did, child."

"What was she like?"

"She were gentle, an' sweet, an' the mos' beautiful creetur in all—in—in the place where we lived. An' her fambily was that proud an' aristocratic thet no one could tech 'em with a ten-foot pole."

"I see. Did she love Captain Wegg?"

"Nat'rally, sense she married of him, an' fit all her fambily to do it. An' the Cap'n were thet proud o' her thet he thought the world lay in her sweet eyes."

"Oh. I had an idea he didn't treat her well," remarked the girl, soberly.

"That's wrong," declared Nora, promptly. "Arter the trouble come—fer it come to the Weggs as well as to Tom an' me—the Cap'n sort o' lost heart to see his Mary cry day arter day an' never be comforted. He were hard hit himself, ye see, an' that made it a gloomy house, an' no mistake."

"Do you mean after you moved here, to the farm?"

"Yes, deary."

"I hear Captain Wegg was very fond of Ethel's grandfather," continued Louise, trying to find an opening to penetrate old Nora's reserve.

"They was good friends always," was the brief reply.

"Did they ever quarrel, Nora?"

"Never that I knows of."

"And what do you suppose became of their money?" asked the girl.

"I don't know, child. Air we gettin' near home?"

"We are quite near, now. I wish you would open your heart to me, and tell me about that great trouble, Nora. I might be able to comfort you in some way."

The blind woman shook her head.

"There's no comfort but in forgettin'," she said; "an' the way to forgit ain't to talk about it."

The unsatisfactory result of this conversation did not discourage Louise, although she was sorry to meet with no better success. Gradually she was learning the inside history of the Wegg. When she discovered what that "great trouble" had been she would secure an important clue in the mystery, she was sure. Nora might some time be induced to speak more freely, and it was possible she might get the desired information from Old Hucks. She would try, anyway.

A dozen theories might be constructed to account for this "great trouble." The one that Louise finally favored was that Captain Wegg had been guilty of some crime on the high seas in which his boatswain, Old Hucks, was likewise implicated. They were obliged to abandon the sea and fly to some out-of-the-way corner inland, where they could be safely hidden and their whereabouts never discovered. It was the knowledge of this crime, she conjectured, that had ruined sweet Mrs. Wegg's life and made her weep day after day until her guilty husband became surly and silent and unsociable.

Louise now began to cultivate Thomas, but her progress was slow. Patsy seemed to be the old man's favorite, and for some reason he became glum and uncommunicative whenever Louise was around. The girl suspected that Nora had told her husband of the recent conversation, in spite of her assertion that she wished to avoid all reference to their great trouble.

CHAPTER XI.

THREE AMATEUR DETECTIVES.

Puzzling her brain what to do next, Louise suddenly decided to confide her secret to her two cousins. Not that she considered them capable of a greater success than she could herself accomplish, but they might prove valuable assistants in the capacity of lieutenants. She had great respect for Beth's calm judgment and keen intuitions, and Patsy had a way of accomplishing difficult things with ease.

The two girls listened to Louise with expressions of mingled wonder and amusement while she confided to them her first suspicions that Captain Wegg had been murdered, and then the bits of information she had gathered to strengthen the surmise and assure her she was justified in her efforts to untangle the web of mystery.

"You see, my dears," she explained, impressively, as the three lounged upon the grass in the shade of the right wing of the house, "there is a very interesting story about these people that

ought to guide us directly to a solution of the puzzle. A roving sea captain marries a girl of good family in spite of the opposition of her relatives. His boatswain, a confidential servant, marries the girl's maid. The next thing we know is that a 'great trouble' causes them to flee—doubtless some crime committed by the captain. It may have been robbery, or perhaps piracy on the high seas; who knows? Anyhow, he steals away to this forsaken spot, far from the sea or the railroads, and builds a fine house on a worthless farm, showing that he has money, but that retirement is his main object. Here the Weggs make no friends: but the wife cries her eyes out until she dies miserably, leaving a son to the tender mercies of a wicked father. So fearful is he of discovery that he will not allow the boy to go to school, but tries to educate him himself."

"Probably the captain's real name was not Wegg, at all," suggested Patsy, entering into the spirit of the relation.

"Probably not, dear. He would assume some name, of course, so that it might be more difficult to trace him," answered Louise. "But now—mark me well, girls!—a Nemesis was on the track of this wicked sinner. After many years the man Captain Wegg had wronged, or stolen from, or something, discovered his enemy's hiding place. He promptly killed the Captain, and probably recovered the money, for it's gone. Old Thompson, Ethel's grandfather, happened to be present. The murderer also took his money, and—"

"Oh, Louise! That isn't reasonable," objected Beth, who had been following the story carefully.

"Why not?"

"Because you are making the wronged party as wicked as the man who wronged him. When the avenger found his enemy he might force him to give up his ill-gotten gains; I agree with you there; but he wouldn't be liable to rob old Thompson, I'm sure."

"Beth is right," said Patsy, stoutly.

"But old Thompson lost his money at the same time, you know; at least his money could never be found afterward. And I'm sure he was dealt some blow on the head that made him crazy," answered Louise, positively.

They thought that over.

"I believe I can explain it, girls," said Beth, presently. "The avenger found Captain Wegg, all right—just as Louise has said—and when he found him he demanded a restitution of his money, threatening to send the criminal to jail. That would be very natural, wouldn't it? Well, Captain Wegg had spent a good deal of the money, and couldn't pay it all back; so Ethel's grandfather, being his friend, offered to makeup the balance himself rather than see his friend go to prison. That accounts for the disappearance of all the money."

"If that is so," observed Patsy, "I don't see why the man, having got his money back, should murder one and knock the other on the head."

It was a puzzle, they all acknowledged, and after discussing the matter from every conceivable standpoint they were no nearer an explanation. That's the way with mysteries; they're often hard to understand.

"The only thing that occurs to me as being sensible," said Louise, finally, "is that after the money was paid over they got into a quarrel. Then the avenger lost his temper and committed the murders."

"This talk about an avenger is all guess work," asserted Beth, calmly. "I don't believe the facts point to an avenger at all."

"But the old crime—the great trouble—"

"Oh, we'll allow all that," returned Beth; "and I don't say that an avenger wouldn't be the nicest person to exact retribution from the wicked captain. But avengers don't always turn up, in real life, when they ought to, girls; so we mustn't be too sure that one turned up in this case."

"But now else can you account for the captain's murder?" objected Louise.

"Well, some one else might know he had money, and that Ethel's grandfather had money, too," was the reply. "Suppose the robbery and murder had nothing to do with the old crime at all, but that the murderer knew this to be a deserted place where he could make a good haul without being discovered. The two old men sat in the right wing, quite unsuspecting, when—"

"When in walks Mr. Murderer, chokes the captain, knocks his friend on the brain-box, and makes off with the money!" continued Patsy, gleefully. "Oh, girls, I'm sure we've got it right this time."

Louise reflected a moment.

"This country is almost a wilderness," she mused, aloud, "and few strangers ever come here. Besides, a stranger would not know positively that these two men had money. If we abandon the idea of an avenger, and follow Beth's clue, then the murderer is still right here in Millville, and unsuspected by any of his neighbors."

"Oh, Louise!" with startled glances over their shoulders.

"Let us be sensible, reasoning girls; not silly things trying to figure out possible romances," continued Louise, with a pretty and impressive assumption of dignity. "Do you know, I feel that some angel of retribution has guided us to this lonely farmhouse and put the idea into my head to discover and expose a dreadful crime."

"Succotash!" cried Patsy, irrelevantly. "You're romancing this minute, Louise. The way you figure things out I wouldn't be surprised if you accused me, or Uncle John, any time during the next half hour. Adopting your last supposition, for the sake of argument, I'm interested to know what inhabitant of sleepy old Millville you suspect."

"Don't get flighty, Patricia," admonished Beth. "This is a serious matter, and Louise is in earnest. If we're going to help her we mustn't talk rubbish. Now, it isn't a bad suggestion that we ought to look nearer home for the key to this mystery. There's old Hucks."

"Hucks!"

"To be sure. No one knew so well as he the money affairs of the two men who were robbed."

"I'm ashamed of you," said Patsy.

"And the man's smile is a mask!" exclaimed Louise.

"Oh, no!" protested Patsy.

"My dear, no person who ever lived could smile every minute, winter and summer, rain or shine, day and night, and always have a reason for the smile."

"Of course not," agreed Beth. "Old Hucks is a curious character. I realized that when I had known him five minutes."

"But he's poor," urged Patsy, in defense of the old man. "He hasn't a penny in the world, and McNutt told me if we turned Thomas and Nora away they'd have to go to the poorhouse."

"That is no argument at all," said Louise, calmly. "If we consider the fact that Old Hucks may be a miser, and have a craving for money without any desire to spend it, then we are pretty close to a reason why he should bide his time and then murder his old master to obtain the riches he coveted. Mind you, I don't say Hucks is guilty, but it is our duty to consider this phase of the question."

"And then," added Beth, "if Hucks should prove to be a miser, it is easy to guess he would hide his wealth where he could secretly gloat over it, and still continue to pose as a pauper."

"I don't believe it," said Patsy, stoutly.

"You'll never make a successful detective if you allow your personal feelings to influence you," returned Louise. "I, too, sincerely hope that Thomas is innocent; but we are not justified in acquitting him until we have made a careful investigation and watched his actions."

"I'm quite sure he's connected with the mystery in some way," said Beth.

"It will do no harm to watch Old Hucks, as Louise suggests."

"And you might try to pump him, Patsy, and see if you can get him to talk of the murder. Some careless remark might give us just the clue we need and guide us to the real criminal. That would free Thomas from all suspicion, you see."

"But why do you ask me to do this?" demanded Patsy. "Thomas and I are good friends, and I'd feel like a traitor to try to get him to confess a murder."

"If he is innocent, you have done no harm," said her eldest cousin; "and if he is guilty you don't want him for your friend."

"He likes you, dear," added Beth, "and perhaps he will tell you frankly all we want to know. There's another person, though, Louise, who might tell us something."

"Who is that?"

"The little man with the golf-ball eyes; McNutt."

"Now, there's some sense in suspecting him," exclaimed Patsy. "We know he's a robber, already, and a man who is clever enough to sell Uncle John three 'Lives of the Saints' would stick at nothing, I'm sure."

"He hasn't enough courage to commit a great crime," observed Beth.

"But he may be able to give us some information," Louise asserted; "so I propose we walk over to the town tomorrow morning and interview him."

This was promptly agreed to, for even Patsy, the least enthusiastic detective of the three, was eager to find some sort of a solution of the Wegg mystery. Meantime they decided to watch Old Hucks very carefully.

Beth happened to be present when Uncle John paid Thomas his weekly wage that evening, and was interested to notice how the old man's hand trembled with eagerness as he took the money.

"How much are you accustomed to receive?" Uncle John had asked.

"Nothing 'tall, sir, since Cap'n Wegg died," was the reply. "We was glad enough to have a home, Nora an' me, 'thout 'spectin' wages."

"And there was no one here for you to serve," mused Uncle John. "But in Captain Wegg's day, how much did he give you?"

Thomas hesitated, and his smile wavered an instant.

"My old master was also my old friend," said he, in a low voice; "an' I ast him fer little money because my needs were little."

"Well, the conditions are now different," remarked Uncle John, carelessly; "and while you are in my employ you shall have your wages regularly. Will ten dollars a week be satisfactory?"

"Oh, sir!"

"And five for Nora."

"You are too good, sir. I—I—"

"Never mind, Thomas. If you want more at any time let me know."

It was then, as the old man took the fifteen dollars extended to him, that Beth noted a flash in the mild blue eyes and a trembling of the horny hands. Hucks was very glad to get the money; there was little doubt of that.

She spoke of this incident to Louise, and the following morning they tested the man again. All three girls being present, Beth tendered Old Hucks two dollars, saying it was intended as a slight mark of her appreciation of his attention. Thomas demurred at first, but on being urged took the money with the same eager gesture he had before displayed. Louise followed with a donation of a like sum, and Patsy gave the old man still another two dollar bill. This generosity so amazed him that tears stood in his eyes as he tried to thank them all. It was noticed that the smile did not give way even to the tears, although it was tinged with a pathetic expression that proved wonderfully affecting. He concealed the offerings with a stealthy motion, as if ashamed of his weakness in accepting them, and then hurried away to his work.

"Well," said Louise, when they were alone, "is Thomas a miser or not?"

"He clutched the money almost as if he loved it," observed Beth, in a musing and slightly regretful tone.

"But think how poor he has been," pleaded Patsy, "and how destitute both he and Nora are yet. Can we blame him for being glad to earn something substantial at last?"

Somehow that did not seem to explain fully the old man's behavior, and the girl who had championed him sighed and then gave a sudden shiver as she remembered the awful suspicion that had fallen upon this strange individual. If the proof must be accepted that Hucks had miserly instincts, had not Beth accidentally stumbled upon a solution of the whole mystery?

But Patsy would not believe it. If Thomas' open countenance lied, it was hard to put faith in any one.

CHAPTER XII.

THE BAITING OF PEGGY M'NUTT.

By this time the three nieces were so thoroughly impressed with the importance of the task they had undertaken that more ordinary things failed to interest them. Louise longed to solve the mystery. Beth wanted to punish the wrongdoers. Patsy yearned to exonerate the friends whom she imagined unjustly accused. Therefore the triple alliance for detective purposes was a strong one.

By mutual agreement they kept the matter secret from Uncle John, for they realized what a triumph it would be to surprise the old gentleman with proofs of their cleverness. To confide in him now would mean to invite no end of ridicule or good natured raillery, for Uncle John had not a grain of imagination or romance in his nature and would be unable to comprehend the delights of this secret investigation.

Because he was in the dark the significant looks and unnatural gravity of his nieces in the succeeding days puzzled the poor man greatly.

"What's wrong, girls?" he would ask. "Aren't you happy here? Do you miss anything you'd like? Is it too quiet and dull at Millville to suit you?"

"Oh, no!" they would exclaim. "We are having a splendid time, and would not leave the farm for anything."

And he often noticed them grouped in isolated places and conversing in low, eager tones that proved "something was up." He felt somewhat grieved that he was not their confidant, since these girls and their loyal affection for him constituted the chief joy of his life. When he put on his regulation fishing costume and carried his expensive rod and reel, his landing net and creel to the brook for a day's sport, he could no longer induce one of his girls to accompany him. Even Patsy pleaded laughingly that she had certain "fish to fry" that were not to be found in the brook.

Soon the three nieces made their proposed visit to McNutt, their idea being to pump that individual until he was dry of any information he might possess concerning the Wegg mystery. They tramped over to the village after breakfast one morning and found the agent seated on the porch before his little "office," by which name the front room of his cottage was dignified. He was dressed in faded overalls, a checked shirt and a broad-brimmed cheap straw hat. His "off foot," as he called it with grim humor, was painted green and his other foot was bare and might have been improved in color. Both these extremities rested on the rail of the porch, while McNutt smoked a corncob pipe and stared at his approaching visitors with his disconcerting, protruding eyes.

"Good morning, Mr. McNutt," said Louise, pleasantly. "We've come to see if you have any books to sell."

The agent drew a long breath. He had at first believed they had come to reproach him for his cruel deception; for although his conscience was wholly dormant, he had at times been a bit uneasy concerning his remarkable book trade.

"Uncle is making a collection of the 'Lives of the Saints.'" announced Patsy, demurely. "At present he has but three varieties of this work, one with several pages missing, another printed partly upside down, and a third with a broken corner. He is anxious to secure some further variations of the 'dee looks' Lives, if you can supply them."

Peggy's eyes couldn't stare any harder, so they just stared.

"I—I hain't got no more on hand," he stammered, fairly nonplussed by the remarkable statement.

"No more? Oh, how sad. How disappointed we are," said Beth.

"We were depending so much on you. Mr. McNutt," added Louise, in a tone of gentle reproach.

McNutt wiggled the toes of his good foot and regarded them reflectively. These city folks were surely the "easiest marks" he had ever come across.

"Ef ye could wait a few days," he began, hopefully, "I might——"

"Oh, no; we can't possibly wait a single minute," declared Patsy. "Unless Uncle can get the Saints right away he will lose interest in the collection, and then he won't care for them at all."

McNutt sighed dismally. Here was a chance to make good money by fleecing the lambs, yet he was absolutely unable to take advantage of it.

"Ye—ye couldn't use any duck eggs, could ye?" he said, a sudden thought seeming to furnish him with a brilliant idea.

"Duck eggs?"

"I got the dum-twistedest, extry fine lot o' duck eggs ye ever seen."

"But what can we do with duck eggs?" inquired Beth, wonderingly, while Patsy and Louise tried hard not to shriek with laughter.

"W'y, set 'em under a hen, an' hatch 'em out."

"Sir," said Beth, "I strongly disapprove of such deceptions. It seems to me that making a poor hen hatch out ducks, under the delusion that they are chickens, is one of the most cruel and treacherous acts that humanity can be guilty of. Imagine the poor thing's feelings when her children take to water! I'm surprised you could suggest such a wicked use for duck eggs."

McNutt wiggled his toes again, desperately.

"Can't use any sas'frass roots, can ye?"

"No, indeed; all we crave is the 'Lives of the Saints.'"

"Don't want to buy no land?"

"What have you got to sell?"

"Nuth'n, jest now. But ef ye'll buy I kin git 'most anything."

"Don't go to any trouble on our account, sir; we are quite content with our splendid farm."

"Shoo! Thet ain't no good."

"Captain Wegg thought it was," answered Louise, quickly seizing this opening. "Otherwise he would not have built so good a house upon it."

"The Cap'n were plumb crazy," declared the agent, emphatically. "He didn't want ter farm when he come here; he jest wanted to hide."

The girls exchanged quick glances of intelligence.

"Why?"

"Why?" repeated McNutt. "Thet's a thing what's puzzled us fer years, miss. Some thinks Wegg were a piret; some thinks he kidnaped that pretty wife o' his'n an' took her money; some thinks he tried to rob ol' Will Thompson, an' Will killed him an' then went crazy hisself. There's all sorts o' thinks goin' 'round; but who *knows*?"

"Don't you, Mr. McNutt?"

The agent was flattered by the question. As he had said, the Weggs had formed the chief topic of conversation in Millville for years, and no one had a more vivid interest in their history than Marshall McMahan McNutt. He enjoyed gossiping about the Weggs almost as much as he did selling books.

"I never thought I had no call to stick my nose inter other folkses privit doin's," he said, after a few puffs at the corncob pipe. "But they kain't hide much from Marsh McNutt, when he has his eyes open."

Patsy wondered if he could possibly close them. The eyelids seemed to be shy and retiring.

"I seen what I seen," continued the little man, glancing impressively at his attentive audience. "I seen Cap'n Wegg livin' without workin', fer he never lifted a hand to do even a chore. I seen him jest settin' 'round an' smokin' his pipe an' a glowerin' like a devil on ev'ryone thet come near. Say, once he ordered me off'n his premises—me!"

"What a dreadful man," said Patsy. "Did he buy any 'Lives of the Saints?'"

"Not a Life. He made poor Ol' Hucks fetch an' carry fer him ev'ry blessid minnit, an' never paid him no wages."

"Are you sure?" asked Louise.

"Sure as shootin'. Hucks hain't never been seen to spend a cent in all the years he's been here."

"Hasn't he sold berries and fruit since the Captain's death?"

"Jest 'nough to pay the taxes, which ain't much. Ye see, young Joe were away an' couldn't raise the tax money, so Ol' Hucks had to. But how they got enough ter live on, him an' Nora, beats me."

"Perhaps Captain Wegg left some money," suggested Patsy.

"No; when Joe an' Hucks ransacked the house arter the Cap'n's death they couldn't find a dollar. Cur'ous. Plenty o' money till he died, 'n' then not a red cent. Curiouser yet. Ol' Will Thompson's savin's dis'peared, too, an' never could be located to this day."

"Were they robbed, do you suppose?" asked Louise.

"Nat'rally. But who done it? Not Ol' Hucks, fer he's too honest, an' hasn't showed the color of a nickel sense. Not Joe; 'cause he had to borry five dollars of Bob West to git to the city with. Who then?"

"Perhaps," said Louise, slowly, "some burglar did it."

"Ain't no burglars 'round these parts."

"I suppose not. Only book agents," remarked Beth.

McNutt flushed.

"Do ye mean as I did it?" he demanded, angrily. "Do ye mean as I killed Cap'n Wegg an' druv Ol' Will crazy, an' robbed the house?"

His features were fairly contorted, and his colorless eyes rolled fearfully.

"If you did," said Beth, coolly, "you would be sure to deny it."

"I kin prove a alybi," answered the little man, calming down somewhat. "I kin prove my ol' woman had me locked up in the chicken-coop thet night 'cause I wouldn't split a lot o' cordwood thet were full o' knots." He cast a half fearful glance over his shoulder toward the interior of the cottage. "Next day I split 'em," he added, mildly.

"Perhaps," said Louise, again, "someone who knew Captain Wegg in the days before he came here followed him to his retreat and robbed and murdered him."

"Now ye've hit the nail on the head!" cried the agent, slapping his fat thigh energetically. "Thet's what I allus claimed, even when Bob West jest shook his head an' smiled sort o' superior like."

"Who is Bob West?" asked Louise, with interest.

"He's our implement man, an' hardware dealer. Bob were the on'y one o' the Millville folks thet could git along with Cap'n Wegg, an' even he didn't manage to be any special friend. Bob's rich, ye know. Rich as blazes. Folks do say he's wuth ten thousan' dollars; but it don't set Bob up any. He jest minds his business an' goes on sellin' plows an' harvesters to the farmers an' takin' notes fer 'em."

"And you say he knew Captain Wegg well?" inquired Patsy.

"Better 'n' most folks 'round here did. Once er twicet a year the Cap'n 'd go to Bob's office an' set around an' smoke his pipe. Sometimes Bob would go to the farm an' spend an' ev'nin'; but not often. Ol' Will Thompson might be said to be the on'y friend the Cap'n really hankered fer."

"I'd like to meet Mr. West," said Louise, casting a shrewd look at her cousins. For here was another clue unearthed.

"He's in his store now." remarked McNutt, "Last buildin' on the left. Ye can't miss it."

"Thank you. Good morning, sir."

"Can't use any buttermilk er Dutch cheese?"

"No, thank you."

McNutt stared after them disconsolately. These girls represented so much money that ought to be in his pockets, and they were, moreover, "innercent as turtle doves"; but he could think of no way to pluck their golden quills or even to arrest their flight.

"Well, let 'em go," he muttered. "This thing ain't ended yit."

CHAPTER XIII.

BOB WEST, HARDWARE DEALER.

A few steps down the little street brought the girls to the hardware store, quite the most imposing building in town. They crossed the broad platform on which stood samples of heavy farm machinery and entered a well-stocked room where many articles of hardware and house furnishings were neatly and systematically arranged.

The place seemed deserted, for at that time of day no country people were at Millville; but on passing down the aisle the visitor approached a little office built at the rear of the store. Behind the desk Bob West sat upon his high stool, gravely regarding his unusual customers over the rims of his spectacles.

"Good morning," said Louise, taking the lead. "Have you a stew pan?"

The merchant left the office and silently walked behind the counter.

"Large or small, miss?" he then asked.

The girls became interested in stew pans, which they were scarcely able to recognize by their official name. Mr. West offered no comment as they made their selection.

"Can you send this to the Wegg farm?" asked Louise, opening her purse to make payment.

West smiled.

"I have no means of delivering goods," said he; "but if you can wait a day or two I may catch some farmer going that way who will consent to take it."

"Oh. Didn't Captain Wegg purchase his supplies in the village?" asked the girl.

"Some of them. But it is our custom here to take goods that we purchase home with us. As yet Millville is scarcely large enough to require a delivery wagon."

The nieces laughed pleasantly, and Beth said:

"Are you an old inhabitant, Mr. West?"

"I have been here thirty-five years."

"Then you knew Captain Wegg?" Louise ventured.

"Very well."

The answer was so frank and free from embarrassment that his questioner hesitated. Here was a man distinctly superior to the others they had interviewed, a man of keen intellect and worldly knowledge, who would be instantly on his guard if he suspected they were cross-examining him. So Louise, with her usual tact, decided to speak plainly.

"We have been much interested in the history of the Wegg family," she remarked, easily; "and perhaps it is natural for us to speculate concerning the characters of our predecessors. It was so odd that Captain Wegg should build so good a house on such a poor farm."

"Yes."

"And he was a sea captain, who retired far from the sea, which he must have loved."

"To be sure."

"It made him dissatisfied, they say, as well as surly and unsociable; but he stuck it out even after his poor wife died, and until the day of the murder."

"Murder?" in a tone of mild surprise.

"Was it not murder?" she asked, quickly.

He gave his shoulders a quiet shrug.

"The physician pronounced it heart disease, I believe."

"What physician?"

"Eh? Why, one who was fishing in the neighborhood for trout, and staying at the hotel. Old Dr. Jackson was in Huntington at the time, I remember."

The girls exchanged significant glances, and West noted them and smiled again.

"That murder theory is a new one to me," he said; "but I see now why it originated. The employment of a strolling physician would give color to the suspicion."

"What do you think, sir?" asked Patsy, who had been watching the man's expression closely.

"I? What do I think? Why, that Captain Wegg died from heart disease, as he had often told me he was sure to do in time."

"Then what made old Mr. Thompson go mad?" inquired Beth.

"The shock of his friend's sudden death. He had been mentally unbalanced for some time previous—not quite mad, you understand, but showing by his actions at times that his brain was affected."

"Can you explain what became of their money?" asked Louise, abruptly.

West gave a start, but collected himself in an instant and covered the action with another shrug.

"I cannot say what become of their money," he answered.

It struck both Beth and Louise that his tone indicated he would not, rather than that he could not say. Before they had time to ask another question he continued:

"Will you take the saucepan with you, then, or shall I try to send it in a day or so?"

"We will take it, if you please," answered Louise. But as he wrapped it into a neat parcel she made one more effort.

"What sort of a young man was Joseph Wegg?"

"Joe? A mere boy, untried and unsettled. A bright boy, in his way, and ambitious to have a part in the big world. He's there now, I believe."

He spoke with an air of relief, and handed Louise the parcel.

"Thank you, young ladies. Pray call again if I can be of service to you," he added, in a brisker tone.

They had no recourse but to walk out, which they did without further words. Indeed, they were all three silent until they had left the village far behind and were half way to the farm.

Then Patsy said, inquiringly:

"Well, girls?"

"We have progressed," announced Louise, seriously.

"In what way?"

"Several things are impressed upon my mind," replied the girl. "One is McNutt's absurd indignation when he thought we hinted that he was the murderer."

"What do you make of that?" queried Patsy.

"It suggests that he knows something of the murder, even if he is himself wholly innocent. His alibi is another absurdity."

"Then that exonerated Old Hucks," said Patsy, relieved.

"Oh, not at all. Hucks may have committed the deed and McNutt knows about it. Or they might have been partners in the crime."

"What else have you learned, Louise?" asked Beth.

"That the man West knows what became of the money."

"He seems like a very respectable man," asserted Patsy.

"Outwardly, yes; but I don't like the cold, calculating expression in his eyes. He is the rich man of this neighborhood. Do you suppose he acquired a fortune honestly in this forsaken district, where everyone else is poor as a church mouse?"

"Seems to me," said Patsy, discontentedly, "that the plot thickens, as they say in novels. If we interview many more people we shall find ourselves suspecting an army."

"Not at all, my dear," replied Louise, coldly. "From our present knowledge the murder lies between the unknown avenger and Hucks, with the possibility that McNutt is implicated. This avenger may be the stranger who posed as a physician and said Captain Wegg died of heart disease, in order to prevent the simple people from suspecting a murder. His fishing was all a blind. Perhaps McNutt was his accomplice. That staring scarecrow would do anything for money. And then we come to the robbery. If Hucks did the murder he took the money, and perhaps West, the hardware dealer, knows this. Or West may have arrived at the house after the mysterious stranger committed the deed, and robbed the two men himself."

"And perhaps he didn't," said Patsy, skeptically. "Do you know, girls, I'd like to find Joe Wegg. He could put us right, I'm sure."

"Joe!"

"Yes. Why don't we suspect him of something? Or Ethel; or old Nora?"

"Do be sensible, Patsy," said Beth, impatiently.

But Louise walked on a way in silence. Presently she remarked:

"I'm glad you mentioned Joe Wegg. The boy gives me an idea that may reconcile many conflicting suspicions."

"In what way, Louise?"

"I'll tell you when I've thought it out," she replied.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE MAJOR IS PUZZLED.

Ethel came frequently to visit the girls at the Wegg farm, and at such times Uncle John treated her with the same affectionate consideration he bestowed upon his nieces, and made her so cordially welcome that the little school teacher felt entirely at her ease. The girls did not confide to Ethel their investigation of the Wegg mystery, but in all other matters gave her their full confidence. Together they made excursions to the Falls, to the natural caves on the rocky hill called Mount Parnassus, or rowed on the lake, or walked or drove, as the mood seized them. But mostly they loved the shade of the pines and the broad green beside the quaint mansion Captain Wegg had built, and which now contained all the elements of a modern summer home.

Once Louise asked Ethel, casually, if she knew what "great trouble" had come to Hucks and his wife in their early life, but the girl frankly answered that the old people had never referred to anything of the kind in her presence.

Finally a telegram announced the arrival of Major Doyle to join the party at the farm. Patsy was in the seventh heaven of delight, and drove Joe over to the Junction to meet her father on the arrival of the morning train.

The Major was a prime favorite with all the party and his coming infused new life into the household. He was the type of educated, polished, open-hearted Irish gentleman it is always a delight to meet, and Uncle John beamed upon his brother-in-law in a way that betokened a hearty welcome. It was a source of much satisfaction to lug the Major over the farm and prove to him how wise Mr. Merrick had been in deciding to spend the summer on his own property; and the Major freely acknowledged that he had been in error and the place was as charming as anyone could wish. It was a great treat to the grizzled old warrior to find himself in the country, away from every responsibility of work, and he promised himself a fortnight of absolute rest, with the recreation of beholding his beloved Patsy as often as he pleased.

Of course, the girl would tell her father about the Wegg mystery, for Patsy had a habit of telling him everything; therefore the cousins decided to take the Major freely into their confidence, so as to obtain the benefit of his opinion. That could not be done the first day, of course, for on that day Uncle John insisted on displaying the farm and afterward carrying the Major a willing prisoner to watch him fish in the brook. But on the following morning the girls surrounded Patsy's father and with solemn faces recounted their suspicions, the important clues they had unearthed, and their earnest desire to right the great wrong that had been done by apprehending the criminal.

The Major smoked his after breakfast cigar and listened attentively. The story, told consecutively, was quite impressive. In spite of his long experience in buffeting the world, the old soldier's heart was still as simple as that of a child, and the recital awakened his sympathies at once.

"Tis evident, me children," said he, in his quaint way, "that you've shtumbled on the inside of a crime that doesn't show on the outside. Many of the things you mention are so plain that he who runs may read; but I've remarked that it's just the things ye don't suspect in real life that prove to be the most important."

"That is true, Major," commented Louise. "At first it was just to amuse ourselves that we became amateur detectives, but the developments are so startling and serious that we now consider it our duty to uncover the whole dreadful crime, in the interests of justice."

"Just so," he said, nodding.

"But I'm sure Old Hucks is innocent!" declared Patsy, emphatically.

"Then he is," asserted the Major; "for Patsy's always right, even when she's wrong. I've had me eye on that man Hucks already, for he's the merriest faced villain I ever encountered. Do you say he's shy with you girls?"

"He seems afraid of us, or suspicious, and won't let us talk to him," answered Beth.

"Leave him to me," proposed the Major, turning a stern face but twinkling eyes upon the group. "'Twill be my task to detect him. Leave him to me, young women, an' I'll put the thumb-screws on him in short order."

Here was the sort of energetic confederate they had longed for. The Major's assurance of co-operation was welcome indeed, and while he entered heartily into their campaign he agreed that no mention of the affair ought to reach Uncle John's ears until the case was complete and they could call upon the authorities to arrest the criminal.

"It's me humble opinion," he remarked, "that the interesting individual you call the 'avenger' was put on the trail by someone here—either Thomas Hucks, or the timber-toed book agent, or the respectable hardware man. Being invited to come and do his worst, he passed himself as a docther on a fishing excursion, and having with deliberate intent murdered Captain Wegg, got himself called by the coroner to testify that the victim died of heart disease. A very pretty bit of scoundrelism; eh, me dears?"

"But the robber—who do you think he was?" asked Louise.

"That I've still to discover. You inform me that Hucks is eager for money and acts like a miser. I've seen the time I was eager for money meself, and there's not a miserly hair on me bald head. But exceptions prove the rule. I'll watch our smiling Thomas and make a report later."

Within half an hour he was telling Hucks a funny story and slapping the old man upon the back as familiarly as if he had known him for years. He found an opportunity that same day to give Thomas a dollar in return for a slight service, and was amazed at the eagerness with which the coin was clutched and the earnestness of the thanks expressed. It really did seem as if the man was fond of money. But when the Major tried to draw Hucks into speaking of his past history and of Captain Wegg's singular life and death, the old fellow became reserved at once and evaded the inquiries most skillfully.

That night, as the Major strolled in the orchard to smoke his last cigar after all the others had retired to bed, he noticed Hucks leave the back door of the lean-to with a parcel under his arm and pass hurriedly around the barn. After a little hesitation he decided to follow the man, and crept stealthily along in the shadow of the trees and buildings until he found himself at the edge of the berry-patch that was in the rear of the outbuildings. But there he paused irresolutely, for Thomas had completely disappeared.

The Major was puzzled, but decided to watch for the man's return. So he took a position where he could watch the rear door of the house and smoked patiently for nearly an hour before Hucks returned and let himself quietly in.

He said nothing to the girls next day of this mysterious proceeding, but on the following night again took his station in the orchard to watch.

Sure enough, as soon as the house was quiet the old servant came out with a bundle underneath his arm; but this time he led his blind wife by the other hand.

The Major gave a low whistle and threw away his cigar. The night was so dark that he had little difficulty in following the aged pair closely enough to keep their shadowy forms in sight, without the risk of being discovered. They passed around the barn and along a path that led through the raspberry bushes back of the yard. There were several acres of these bushes, and just now they were full-leaved and almost shoulder high. The path wound this way and that, and branched in several directions. Twice the Major thought he had lost his quarry, but was guided aright by their soft footfalls. The ground dipped here and there, and as they entered one of the hollows Major Doyle was startled to observe the twinkle of a dim light ahead. A minute later he saw the outlines of a little frame building, and within this Old Hucks and Nora presently disappeared.

CHAPTER XV.

THE MAN IN HIDING.

Cautiously the Major approached the cabin, which seemed to have been built as a place for the berry pickers to assemble and pack their fruit. It was constructed of rough boards and had a little window in the side nearest the dwelling house and a door on the opposite side.

Creeping near to the window the Major obtained a clear view of the interior. Upon a dilapidated wicker settee, which had one end propped with a box, partially reclined the form of a man whose right arm was in splints and supported by a sling, while his head was covered with plasters and bandages. The man's back was toward the window, but from his slender form and its graceful poise the Major imagined him young.

Old Nora held the left hand of this mysterious person in a warm clasp, bending now and then to press a kiss upon it, while Hucks busied himself opening the parcel he had brought and arranging various articles of food on a rickety stand at the head of the couch. The old man's smile was more benevolent and cheery than ever, and his actions denoted that strange, suppressed eagerness the Major had marked when he had taken the money.

The three spoke little, and in tones so low that the spy outside the window failed to catch them. Soon the injured man began to eat, feeding himself laboriously with his left hand. But his hunger was quickly satisfied, and then he lay back wearily upon his pillows, while Nora tenderly spread a coverlet over him.

After this the old couple did not linger long. Hucks poured some water from a jug into a tumbler, glanced around the little room to see that everything was in order, and then—after he and Nora had both kissed the bandaged forehead—blew out the candle and retired.

The Major crouched low in the berry bushes until the couple had passed by; then he rose and thoughtfully followed after them.

Whatever Patsy's father might have thought of the Wegg farm mystery before, this adventure convinced him that the girls were not altogether foolish in imagining a romance connected with the place. And, notwithstanding Patsy's loyal defense of Old Hucks, he was evidently tangled up in the affair to a large extent, and could explain if he chose much that was now puzzling the girl detectives.

After careful thought the Major decided to confide in Uncle John, at this juncture, rather than in the nieces; since the latest developments were more fitted for a man's interference.

By good fortune the girls had an engagement the next day, and set out together in the surrey to visit Ethel Thompson and lunch with her in the rose bower, which was the pride of the little school teacher's garden. As soon as they were gone the Major hunted up Uncle John and said:

"Come with me, sir."

"I won't," was the brisk reply; "I'm going fishing, and whoever wishes my society must come with me."

"You'll not catch anything fishing, but you're very liable to catch something if you follow my lead," said the Major, meaningly.

"What's up, Gregory?"

"I'm not sure what it is, John." And then he carefully explained his discovery that an injured man was occupying the cabin in the berry patch, and seemed to be the object of the Hucks' tender care.

"It's the secrecy of the thing that astounds me most, sir," he added.

"If all was open and above board, I'd think little enough of it."

Uncle John's kindly interest was at once aroused, and he proposed that they go directly to the cabin and interview the man in hiding. Hucks being at the time busy in the barn, the two men sauntered into the berry patch without being observed, and then walked briskly along the winding paths until they sighted the building.

Pausing at the window, they saw the man still reclining upon his cot, and holding in his left hand a book—one of Patsy's, the Major observed—which he was quietly engaged in reading. Then they moved around to the door, which Uncle John pushed open.

Without hesitation, the two men entered and stood gazing down upon the strange occupant of the place.

"Good morning," said Mr. Merrick, while the Major nodded a greeting.

The man half arose, moving stiffly.

"Pardon me, sirs," he said, rather startled at the interruption; "I regret that I am physically unable to receive you with more courtesy."

The Major gazed into the partially bandaged face with a glimmer of awakening recognition.

"H-m! Ha! If I'm not mistaken," said he, "it's Joseph Wegg."

"Oh; is it?" asked Uncle John, looking upon the young man curiously.

"What's happened to you, Joseph?"

"Just an automobile accident, sir. The steering gear broke, and we went over an embankment."

"I see."

"Are you Mr. Merrick, sir."

"Yes."

"I owe you an apology for intruding upon your premises in this way, and beg you to forgive the seeming impertinence. But I've been rather unlucky of late, sir, and without this refuge I don't know what would have become of me. I will explain, if you will permit me."

Uncle John nodded.

"After I had squandered the money you paid me, through Major Doyle, for this farm, in a vain endeavor to protect a patent I had secured, I was forced to become a chauffeur to earn my livelihood. I understand automobiles, you know, and obtained employment with a wealthy man who considered me a mere part of his machine. When the accident occurred, through no fault of mine, I was, fortunately, the only person injured; but my employer was so incensed over the damage to his automobile that he never even sent to inquire whether I lived or died. At a charity hospital they tried to mend my breaks and tinker up my anatomy. My shoulder-blade was shattered, my arm broken in three places, and four ribs were crashed in. The wounds in my head are mere abrasions of the scalp, and not serious. But it has taken me a long time to mend, and the crowded, stuffy hospital got on my nerves and worried me. Being penniless and friendless, I wrote to Thomas and asked him if he could find a way to get me to the old farm, for I never imagined you would yourself take possession of the deserted place you had bought.

"Thomas and Nora have cared for me since I was born, you know, and the old man was greatly distressed by the knowledge of my sad condition. He did not tell me you were here, for fear I would hesitate to come, but he sent me the money you had given him and Nora for wages, together with all that the young ladies had kindly given him. I was thus enabled to leave the hospital, which I had come to detest, and journey to my old home. I arrived at the Junction on a night train, and Thomas met me with your surrey, drove me here under cover of darkness, and concealed me in this out-of-the-way place, hoping you would not discover me.

"I regret that I was thus foisted upon you, believe me, sir; but, being here, I have no means of getting away again. Thomas Hucks has had little worldly experience, and cannot realize the full extent of the imposition he has practiced. He feeds me from your table, and is hoarding up his money for me against the time I shall have recovered sufficiently to leave. I think that is the full explanation, Mr. Merrick."

Again Uncle John nodded.

"How are you?" he asked.

"Doing finely, sir. I can walk a little, and my appetite is improving. The doctors said my shoulder would never be very strong again, but I'm beginning to hope they were mistaken. My ribs seem all right, and in another ten days I shall remove the splints from my arm."

"You have no medical attendance?"

"Not since I left the hospital. But I imagine this pure, bracing air is better for me than a dozen doctors," was the cheerful reply.

"And what are your future plans?"

The young man smiled. He was little more than a boy, but his questioner noticed that he had a fine manly face and his eye was clear and steadfast.

"Nothing further than to get to work again as soon as I am able to undertake it," he said.

Uncle John looked thoughtfully, and drummed with his finger upon the little table.

"Joseph," he remarked, presently, "I bought this farm at a price altogether too small, considering its value."

The boy flushed.

"Please do not say that!" he exclaimed, hastily. "I am well aware that I virtually robbed you, and my only excuse is that I believed I would win my fight and be able to redeem the place. But that is over now, and you must not think that because I am ill and helpless I am an object of charity."

"Phoo!" said the little man; "aren't you accepting charity from Old Hucks?"

"But he stands as a second father to me. He is an old retainer of my family, and one of my ambitions is to secure a home for him and Nora in their old age. No; I do not feel at all embarrassed in accepting money or assistance from Thomas."

"Young man," said Uncle John, sternly, "one of the follies of youth is the idea of being independent of the good-will of your fellow-creatures. Every person who lives is dependent on some other person for something or other, and I'll not allow you to make a fool of yourself by refusing to let me take you in hand. Your brain is affected—"

"It is not!"

"You are mentally unbalanced, and need a guardian. That's me. You are helpless and cannot resist, so you're my prisoner. Dare to defy me, dare to oppose my wishes in any way, and I'll have you put in a straight-jacket and confined in a padded cell. Understand me, sir?"

Joseph Wegg looked into the little man's round face until the tears filled his own eyes and blurred his vision.

"Won't you protect me, Major Doyle?" he asked, weakly.

"Not I," said the Major, stoutly. "This brother-in-law of mine, who connected himself with me without asking permission, is a perfect demon when 'roused, and I'll not meddle with any opposition to his desires. If you value your life and happiness, Joseph Wegg, you'll accept Mr. Merrick as a guardian until he resigns of his own accord, and then it's likely you'll wish he hadn't."

"I don't deserve——" began the young man, brokenly; but Uncle John quickly interrupted him.

"No one deserves anything," said he; "but everyone gets something or other, nevertheless, in this vale of tears. If you'll kindly remember that you've no right to express an opinion in the presence of your guardian, we'll get along better together. Now, then, you're going to leave here, because the place is not comfortable. My guests fill every room in my house, so you can't go there. But the hotel in Millville is a cheerful-looking place, and I've noticed some vine-covered windows that indicate pleasant and sunny rooms. Major, go and tell Hucks to hitch that groaning, balky Daniel to the ancient buggy, and then to drive this young man over to the hotel. We'll walk."

The Major started at once, and Uncle John continued: "I don't know whether this arrangement suits you or not, Joseph, but it suits me; and, as a matter of fact, it's none of your business. Feel able to take a ride?"

The boy smiled, gratefully.

"Yes, indeed, Mr. Merrick," said he, and was shrewd enough not to venture a word of thanks.

CHAPTER XVI.

A MATTER OF SPECULATION.

Old Hucks, still smiling, but dreadfully nervous over the discovery of Joe, and Mr. Merrick's sudden activity in the boy's behalf, speedily harnessed Daniel and induced the reluctant steed to amble down the path to the cabin. Leaning on Uncle John's arm, the invalid walked to the buggy and was assisted to mount to the seat beside Thomas. Then away they started, and, although Dan obeyed Hucks more willingly than any other driver, the Major and Uncle John walked 'cross-lots and reached the hotel a good fifteen minutes in advance of the equipage.

The Millville Hotel depended almost entirely for patronage upon the commercial travelers who visited the place periodically to sell goods to the merchants, and these did not come too often, because trade was never very energetic and orders never very large. Bob West boarded at the hotel, and so did Ned Long, a "farm hand," who did sundry odd jobs for anyone who needed him, and helped pay his "keep" by working for Mrs. Kebble when not otherwise engaged.

Mrs. Kebble was the landlady, and a famous cook. Kate Kebble, a slatternly girl of sixteen, helped her mother do the work and waited on the table. Chet Kebble, the landlord, was a silent old man, with billy-goat whiskers and one stray eye, which, being constructed of glass, usually assumed a slanting gaze and refused to follow the direction of its fellow. Chet minded the billiard-room, which was mostly patronized Saturday nights, and did a meager business in fire insurance; but he was "so eternal lazy an' shifless," as Mrs. Kebble sharply asserted, that he was considered more a "hanger-on" of the establishment than its recognized head.

The little rooms of the hotel were plainly furnished but maintained with exceptional neatness.

The one in the east corner of the second floor met with the approval of Uncle John and the Major, and was promptly engaged. It was cheerful and sunny, with outlooks on the lake and the village, and contained a lounge as well as the bed.

When the invalid arrived, he was assisted to this apartment and installed as its permanent occupant.

"Any baggage?" asked Mr. Merrick.

"There's a small trunk lying at the Junction," said Joe; "but it contains little of importance."

"Well, make yourself at home, my boy, and get well at your leisure," remarked Uncle John. "Mrs. Kebble has promised to look after you, and the Major and I will stop in now and then and see how you progress."

Then he went out, engaged Nick Thorne to go to the Junction for the boy's trunk, and selected several things at the store that he thought might be useful to the invalid. Afterward he marched home again beside the Major, feeling very well pleased with his morning's work.

When the girls reached home late in the afternoon, they were thrown into a state of great excitement by the news, briefly related by their uncle, that Joseph Wegg had returned to Millville "considerably smashed" by an automobile accident, and was now stopping at the village hotel for repairs.

They refrained from making remarks upon the incident until they were alone, when the secret council of three decided to make Joe Wegg's acquaintance as soon as possible, to discover what light the young man might be able to throw upon the great mystery.

"Do you know, girls," said Louise, impressively, "it almost seems as if fate had sent Joe Wegg here to be an instrument in the detection of the murderer and robber of his poor father."

"If Joe knew about it, why didn't he track the villain down himself?" inquired Patsy.

"Perhaps he hasn't suspected the truth," said Beth. "Often those who are closely concerned with such tragedies do not observe the evidences of crime as clearly as outsiders."

"Where did you get that information?" demanded Patsy.

"From one of Anna Doyle Oppenheim's detective stories," answered Beth, seriously. "I've been reading up on such things, lately."

"Detective stories," said Louise, reflectively, "are only useful in teaching us to observe the evidences of crime. This case, for example, is so intricate and unusual that only by careful thought, and following each thread of evidence to its end, can we hope to bring the criminal to justice."

"That seems to me conceited," observed Miss Doyle, composedly. "Detective stories don't have to stick to facts; or, rather, they can make the facts to be whatever they please. So I don't consider them as useful as they are ornamental. And this isn't a novel, girls; it's mostly suspicion and slander."

"You don't seem able to be in earnest about anything," objected Beth, turning a little red.

"But I try to be." said Patricia.

"We are straying from the subject now under discussion," remarked Louise. "I must say that I feel greatly encouraged by the sudden appearance of the Wegg boy. He may know something of his father's former associates that will enable us to determine the object of the murder and who accomplished it."

"Captain Wegg was killed over three years ago," suggested Miss Doyle, recovering easily from her rebuff. "By this time the murderer may have died or moved to Madagascar."

"He is probably living within our reach, never suspecting that justice is about to overtake him," asserted Louise. "We must certainly go to call upon this Wegg boy, and draw from him such information as we can. I am almost certain that the end is in sight."

"We haven't any positive proof at all, yet," observed Patsy, musingly.

"We have plenty of circumstantial evidence," returned Beth. "There is only one way to explain the facts we have already learned, and the theory we have built up will be a hard one to overthrow. The flight of Captain Wegg to this place, his unhappy wife, the great trouble that old Nora has hinted at, the—"

"The great trouble ought to come first," declared Louise. "It is the foundation upon which rest all the mysterious occurrences following, and once we have learned what the great trouble was, the rest will be plain sailing."

"I agree with you," said Beth; "and perhaps Joseph Wegg will be able to tell us what the trouble was that ruined the lives of his parents, as well as of Old Hucks and his wife, and caused them all to flee here to hide themselves."

It was not until the following morning that the Major found an opportunity to give the confederates a solemn wink to indicate he had news to confide to them. They gathered eagerly on the lawn, and he told them of the finding of Joe Wegg in the isolated cabin, and how old Thomas and Nora, loving the boy as well as if he had been their own child, had sacrificed everything to assist him in his extremity.

"So ye see, my avenging angels, that ye run off the track in the Hucks matter," he added, smiling at their bewildered faces.

Patsy was delighted at this refutation of the slanderous suspicions that Thomas was a miser and his smiling face a mask to hide his innate villainy. The other girls were somewhat depressed by the overthrow of one of their pet theories, and reluctantly admitted that if Hucks had been the robber of his master and old Will Thompson, he would not have striven so eagerly to get enough money to send to Joe Wegg. But they pointed out that the old servant was surely hiding his knowledge of Captain Wegg's past, and could not be induced to clear up that portion of the mystery which he had full knowledge of. So, while he might be personally innocent of the murder or robbery, both Beth and Louise were confident he was attempting to shield the real criminal.

"But who is the real criminal?" inquired Patsy.

"Let us consider," answer Louise, with the calm, businesslike tone she adopted in these matters. "There is the strolling physician, whom we call the Unknown Avenger, for one. A second suspect is the man McNutt, whose nature is so perverted that he would stick at nothing. The third suspicious individual is Mr. Bob West."

"Oh, Louise! Mr. West is so respectable, and so prosperous," exclaimed Patsy.

"It's a far jump from McNutt to West," added Beth.

"Leaving out Hucks," continued Louise, her eyes sparkling with the delightful excitement of maintaining her theories against odds, "here are three people who might have been concerned in the robbery or murder. Two of them are under our hands; perhaps Joseph Wegg may be able to tell us where to find the third."

They pleaded so hard with the Major to take them to call upon the injured youth that very day, that the old gentleman consented, and, without telling Uncle John of their plans, they drove to Millville in the afternoon and alighted at the hotel.

The Major went first to the boy's room, and found him not only very comfortable, but bright and cheerful in mood.

"At this rate, sir," he said, smilingly, "I shall be able to discharge my guardian in quick time. I'm twice the man I was yesterday."

"I've brought some young ladies to call upon you," announced the Major.
"Will you see them?"

Joe flushed at first, remembering his plastered skull and maimed condition. But he could not well refuse to receive his callers, whom he guessed to be the three girls Old Hucks had praised to him so highly.

"It will give me great pleasure, sir," he replied.

An invalid is usually of interest to women, so it is no wonder that the three young ladies were at once attracted by the bright-faced boy, who reclined upon his couch before the vine-covered windows. They thought of Ethel, too, and did not marvel that the girl grieved over the loss of this friend of her childhood.

Joe had to recount the adventure with the automobile, which led to his injuries, and afterward give an account of his life at the hospital. That led, naturally, to the timely assistance rendered him by the faithful Thomas, so that Louise was able to broach the subject nearest her heart.

"We have been greatly interested in your old servants—whom we acquired with the farm, it seems—and all of us admire their simplicity and sincerity," she began.

"Nora is a dear," added Beth.

"And Thomas is so cheerful that his smile is enough to vanquish any attack of the blues," said Patsy.

"The Hucks are the right sort, and no mistake," declared the Major, taking his cue from the others.

This praise evidently delighted the boy. They could have found no more direct way to win his confidence.

"Nora was my mother's maid from the time she was a mere girl," said he; "and Thomas sailed with my father many years before I was born."

They were a little surprised to hear him speak so frankly. But Louise decided to take advantage of the opening afforded her.

"Nora has told us that some great trouble came to them years ago—a trouble that also affected your own parents. But they do not wish to talk about it to us."

His face clouded.

"No, indeed," said he. "Their loving old hearts have never recovered from the blow. Would you like to know their history? It is a sad story, and pitiful; but I am sure you would understand and appreciate my old friends better after hearing it."

Their hearts fairly jumped with joy. Would they like to hear the story? Was it not this very clue which they had been blindly groping for to enable them to solve the mystery of the Wegg crime? The boy marked their interest, and began his story at once, while the hearts of the three girls sang-gladly: "At last—at last!"

CHAPTER XVII.

JOE TELLS OF "THE GREAT TROUBLE."

"As a young man, my father was a successful sea captain," said the boy, "and, before he was thirty, owned a considerable interest in the ship he sailed. Thomas Hucks was his boatswain,—an honest and able seaman in whom my father became much interested. Hucks was married, and his wife was an attendant in the employ of Hugh Carter, a wealthy ship chandler of Edmunton, the port from which my father's ship sailed. Thomas had some difficulty in enjoying his wife's society when on shore, because old Carter did not want him hanging around the house; so Captain Wegg good-naturedly offered to intercede for him.

"Carter was a gruff and disagreeable man, and, although my father had been a good customer, he refused his request and threatened to discharge Nora, which he did. This made Captain Wegg angry, and he called upon Mary Carter, whose especial attendant Nora had been, to ask her to take the girl back. Mary was a mild young lady, who dared not oppose her father; but the result of the interview was that the sea captain and Mary Carter fell mutually in love. During the next two or three years, whenever the ship was in port, the lovers frequently met by stealth at the cottage of Mrs. Hucks, a little place Thomas had rented. Here my father and mother were finally married.

"Meantime Nora had a son, a fine young chap, I've heard; and presently my mother, who had a little fortune of her own, plucked up enough courage to leave her father's roof, and took up her abode in a pretty villa on the edge of a bluff overlooking the sea. Nora came to live with her again, bringing her child, and the two women were company for one another while their husbands were at sea.

"In course of time my mother had two children, a girl and a boy, and because the Hucks boy was considerably older than they, he took care of them, to a great extent, and the three youngsters were always together. Their favorite playground was on the beach, at the foot of the bluff, and before young Tom was ten years old he could swim like a duck, and manage a boat remarkably well. The Wegg children, having something of their mother's timid nature, perhaps, were not so adventurous, but they seldom hesitated to go wherever Tom led them.

"One day, while my mother was slightly ill and Nora was attending to her, Tom disobeyed the commands that had been given him, and took his younger companions out on the ocean for a ride in his boat. No one knows how far they went, or exactly what happened to them; but a sudden squall sprang up, and the children being missed, my mother insisted, ill as she was, in running down to the shore to search for her darlings. Braving the wind and drenched by rain, the two mothers stood side by side, peering into the gloom, while brave men dared the waves to search for the missing ones. The body of the girl was first washed ashore, and my mother rocked the lifeless form in her arms until her dead son was laid beside her. Then young Tom's body was recovered, and the horror was complete.

"When my father arrived, three days later, he not only found himself bereaved of the two children he had loved so tenderly, but his young wife was raving with brain fever, and likely to follow her babies to the grave. During that terrible time, Nora, who could not forget that it was her own adventurous son who had led all three children to their death, went suddenly blind—from grief, the doctors said.

"My father pulled his wife back to life by dint of careful nursing; but whenever she looked at the sea she would scream with horror; so it became necessary to take her where the cruel sound of the breakers could never reach her ears. I think the grief of Thomas and Nora was scarcely less than that of my own parents, and both men had suffered so severely that they were willing to abandon the sea and devote their lives to comforting their poor wives. Captain Wegg sold all his interests and his wife's villa, and brought the money here, where he established a home amid entirely different surroundings. He was devoted to my mother, I have heard, and when she died, soon after my birth, the Captain seemed to lose all further interest in life, and grew morose and unsociable with all his fellow-creatures.

"That, young ladies, is the story of what Thomas and Nora call their 'great trouble'; and I think it is rightly named, because it destroyed the happiness of two families. I was born long after the tragedy, but its shadow has saddened even my own life."

When the boy had finished, his voice trembling with emotion as he uttered the last words, his auditors were much affected by the sad tale. Patsy was positively weeping, and the Major blew his nose vigorously and advised his daughter to "dry up an' be sensible." Beth's great eyes stared compassionately at the young fellow, and even Louise for the moment allowed her sympathy to outweigh the disappointment and chagrin of seeing her carefully constructed theory of crime topple over like the house of cards it was. There was now no avenger to be discovered, because there had been nothing to avenge. The simple yet pathetic story accounted for all the mystery that, in her imagination, enveloped the life and death of Captain Wegg. But—stay!

"How did your father die?" she asked, softly.

"Through a heart trouble, from which he had suffered for years, and which had obliged him to lead a very quiet life," was the reply. "That was one of the things which, after my mother's death, helped to sour his disposition. He could not return to the sea again, because he was told that any sudden excitement was likely to carry him off; and, indeed, that was exactly what happened."

"How is that, sir?" asked the Major.

"It is more difficult to explain than the first of the story," replied the boy, thoughtfully gazing through the window; "perhaps because I do not understand it so well. Our simple life here never made much of an inroad into my father's modest fortune; for our wants were few; but Captain Wegg was a poor man of business, having been a sailor during all his active life. His only intimate friend—an honest, bluff old farmer named Will Thompson—was as childish regarding money matters as my father, but had a passion for investments, and induced my father to join some of his schemes. Mr. Thompson's mind was somewhat erratic at times, but keen in some ways, nevertheless. Fearing to trust his judgment entirely, my father chose to lean upon the wisdom and experience of a shrewd merchant of Millville, named Robert West."

"The hardware dealer?" asked Louise, impulsively.

"Yes; I see you have met him," replied Joseph Wegg, with a smile at the eager, pretty face of his visitor. "Bob West was a prosperous man and very careful about his own investments; so he became a sort of business adviser to my father and Mr. Thompson, and arbitrated any

differences of opinion they might have. For several years, due to West's good offices, the two oddly mated friends were successful in their ventures, and added to their capital. Finally West came to them himself with a proposition. He had discovered a chance to make a good deal of money by purchasing an extensive pine forest near Almaquo, just across the border in Canada. West had taken an option on the property, when he found by accident that the Pierce-Lane Lumber Company was anxious to get hold of the tract and cut the timber on a royalty that would enable the owners to double their investment."

"Howld on a jiffy!" cried the Major, excitedly. "Did I understand you to say the Pierce-Lane Lumber Company?"

"That was the firm, sir. I used to overhear my father and Will Thompson talking about this matter; but I must admit my knowledge is somewhat imperfect, because I never was allowed to ask questions. I remember learning the fact that West had not enough money to swing his option, and so urged his friends to join him. Relying upon West's judgment, they put all their little fortunes into the deal, although Thompson grumbled at doing so, because he claimed he had another investment that was better, and this matter of West's would prevent him from undertaking it. The Almaquo tract was purchased, and a contract made with the lumber company to cut the timber and pay them a royalty of so much a thousand feet. Yet, although the prospects for profit seemed so good, I know that for some reason both my father and Thompson were dissatisfied with the deal, and this may be accounted for by the fact that every penny of their money was tied up in one investment. West used to come to the house and argue with them that the property was safe as the Bank of England, and then old Will would tell him how much more he could have made out of another investment he had in mind; so that a coolness grew up between West and the others that gradually led to their estrangement.

"I can well remember the evening when Bob West's pretty financial bubble burst. Thompson and my father were sitting together in the right wing, smoking solemnly, and exchanging a few words, as was their custom, when West arrived with a white face, and a newspaper under his arm. I was in the next room, lying half asleep upon the sofa, when I heard West cry despairingly: 'Ruined—ruined—ruined!' I crept to the half-opened door, then, and looked in. Both men were staring, open-mouthed and half-dazed, at West, who was explaining in a trembling voice that a terrible forest fire had swept through the Almaquo section and wiped out every tree upon the property. He had the full account in the newspaper, and had begun reading it, when my father uttered a low moan and tumbled off his chair to the floor.

"Will Thompson gave a wild cry and knelt beside him.

"My God! he's dead, Bob,—he's dead!—and you've killed him with your good news!" he screamed, already raving; and then Old Hucks ran in just in time to prevent the madman from throttling West, for his fingers were even then twined around Bob's throat. There was a desperate struggle, and I remember that, scared as I was, I joined Thomas in trying to pull Thompson off his prey. But suddenly old Will threw up his arms and toppled backward, still raving like a demon, but unable to move his body from the waist downward. West helped us to put him in bed, and said he was paralyzed, which afterward proved to be the truth. Also, his mind was forever gone; and I think it was father's death that did that, rather than the loss of his money."

They were all staring, white-faced, at the speaker. Most of the mystery was being cleared away; indeed, there was now little of mystery remaining at all.

"West hurried after a doctor," continued Joe, who was almost as much absorbed in his story as were his listeners, and spoke in a reflective, musing way, "and he succeeded in finding one who was stopping for a few days at the hotel. Poor Bob was very kind to us in our trouble, and I never heard him mention a word about his own losses, which must have been severe. After the funeral was over, and I found I had nothing to inherit but the farm, I decided to go to the city and make my way there, as I had long wished to do. West gave me a little money to start me on my way, and the rest of my story is not very interesting to anybody. Major Doyle knows something of it, after the time when I got through my technical school by working as a servant to pay for my instruction. I'm a failure in life, so far, young ladies; but if you'll not bear that against me I'll try to do better in the future."

"Good!" cried the Major, approvingly, as he took the boy's left hand in both his own and pressed it. "You're developing the right spirit, Joseph, me lad, and we'll think no more about the sadness of the past, but look forward to the joy of your future."

"Of course," said Patsy, nodding gravely; "Joe Wegg is bound to be a great man, some day."

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE LOCKED CUPBOARD.

Louise and Beth returned to the farm in dismal silence. Every prop had been knocked from beneath their carefully erected temple of mystery. Now there was no mystery at all.

In a few words, Joe Wegg had explained everything, and explained all so simply and naturally that Louise felt like sobbing with the bitterness of a child deprived of its pet plaything. The band of self-constituted girl detectives had been "put out of business," as Patsy said, because the plain fact had developed that there was nothing to detect, and never had been. There had been no murder, no robbery, no flight or hiding on the part of the Wegg family to escape an injured enemy; nothing even mysterious, in the light of the story they had just heard. It was dreadfully humiliating and thoroughly disheartening, after all their earnest endeavor to investigate a crime that had never been committed.

Uncle John rallied his nieces on their somber faces at the dinner table, and was greatly amused when the Major, despite the appealing looks directed at him, gave Mr. Merrick a brief resume of the afternoon's developments.

"Well, I declare!" said the little man, merrily; "didn't I warn you, Louise, not to try to saddle a murder onto my new farm? How you foolish girls could ever have imagined such a carnival of crime in connection with the Wegg family is certainly remarkable."

"I don't know about that, sir," returned the Major, seriously. "I was meself inoculated with the idea, and for a while I considered meself and the girls the equals of all the Pinkertons in the country. And when ye come to think of it, the history of poor Captain Wegg and his wife, and

of Nora and Thomas as well, is out of the ordinary entirely, and, without the explanation, contained all the elements of a first-class mystery."

"How did you say the Weggs lost their money?" inquired Uncle John, turning the subject because he saw that it embarrassed his nieces.

"Why, forest fires at Almaquo, in Canada, burned down the timber they had bought," replied the Major. "And, by the way, John, you're interested in that matter yourself, for the Pierce-Lane Lumber Company, in which you own a lot of stock, had contracted to cut the timber on a royalty."

"How long ago?"

"Three years, sir."

"Well, we've been cutting timber at Almaquo ever since," said Mr. Merrick.

Louise dropped her fork with a clatter, disclosing, in this well-bred young lady, an unusual degree of excitement.

"Then there *is* something to detect!" she cried.

"Eh? What do you mean?" inquired her uncle.

"If you've been cutting timber at Almaquo for three years, the trees couldn't have burned down," Louise declared, triumphantly.

"That is evident," said the Major, dryly. "I've had it in me mind, Louise, to take that matter up for investigation; but you are so imbued with the detective spirit that there's no heading you off a trail."

"Before the dessert comes on," announced Uncle John, impressively, "I want to make a statement. You folks have tried your hands at the detective business and made a mess of it. Now it's my turn. I'll be a detective for three days, and if I don't succeed better than you did, young women, we'll mingle our tears in all humility. Eh, Major?"

"Put me in the bunch, sir," said the old soldier, "I was as bad as any of them. And go ahead in your own way, if ye like. It's me humble opinion, John, that you're no Sherlock Holmes; but ye won't believe it 'til ye satisfy yourself of the fact."

Next morning the loungers around Sam Cotting's store were thrown into a state of great excitement when "the nabob" came over from the Wegg farm and held the long-distance telephone for more than an hour, while he talked with people in New York. The natives knew that their telephone, which was built into a small booth at one end of the store—next the post-office boxes—was part of a system that made it possible for one to talk to those in far away cities. Often the country people would eye the mysterious-looking instrument with awe and whisper to each other of its mighty powers; but no one had ever before used it to telephone farther than the Junction, and then only on rare occasions.

"It'll cost a heap o' money, Sam," said McNutt, uneasily, while Uncle John was engaged in his remarkable conversation. They could see him in the booth, through the little window.

"It will, Mac," was the solemn reply. "But the fool nabob may as well spend it thet way as any other. It's mighty little of his capital er surplus gits inter *my* cash-drawer; 'n' thet's a fact."

Uncle John came from the booth, perspiring, but smiling and happy. He walked across the street to see Joe Wegg, and found the youth seated in a rocking-chair and looking quite convalescent. But he had company. In a chair opposite sat a man neatly dressed, with a thin, intelligent face, a stubby gray moustache, and shrewd eyes covered by horn-rimmed spectacles.

"Good morning, Mr. Merrick," said Joe, cheerily; "this is Mr. Robert West, one of the Millville merchants, who is an old friend of our family."

"I've heard of Mr. West, and I'm glad to meet him," replied Uncle John, looking at the other calmly, but not offering to shake hands. "I believe you are the president and treasurer of the Almaquo Timber Tract Company, are you not?"

Joseph looked startled, and then embarrassed, as he overheard the question. West, without altering his position of careless ease, glanced over the rims of his glasses at the speaker.

"I am the humble individual you refer to, Mr. Merrick," he said, briefly.

"But the Almaquo timber all burned down." remarked Joe, thinking an explanation was needed.

"That's a mistake," returned Mr. Merrick. "My company has paid Mr. West, as treasurer of his company, more than fifty thousand dollars during the last three years."

West's jaw dropped.

"Your company!" he exclaimed, as if mystified.

"Yes; I own the controlling interest in the Pierce-Lane Lumber Company, which has the contract to cut your timber," answered Mr. Merrick.

The hardware dealer slowly arose and glanced at his watch.

"I must get back to my store," he said. "You are somewhat in error about your company, Mr. Merrick; but I suppose your interests are so large and varied that you cannot well keep track of them. Good morning, sir. I'll see you again soon, Joe. Glad you're improving so rapidly. Let me know if I can do anything to help you."

With these quiet words, he bowed and left the room, and when he had gone, Joe said, in a deprecating tone:

"Poor Bob must be very unhappy about having lost my father's money in that speculation, for he advocated the plan very strongly, believing it was a good investment. I'm afraid your mistake about paying him all that money upset him. Don't mind if he was a little brusque, sir.

Bob West is a simple, kindly man, whom my father fully trusted. It was he that loaned me the money to get away from here with."

"Tell me," said Uncle John, thoughtfully, "did your father receive stock in the Almaquo Timber Tract Company in exchange for his money?"

"Oh, yes; I have seen it in the steel cupboard," replied Joe.

"Where is that?"

"Why, it is the cupboard in the right wing of our house, which was the Captain's own room. It was one of his whims, when he built, to provide what he called his 'bank.' You may have noticed the wooden doors of a cupboard built into the stone wall, sir?"

"Yes; I occupy the room."

"Behind the wooden doors are others of steel. The entire cupboard is steel-lined. Near the bottom is a sliding-plate, which, when pushed aside, discovers a hidden drawer—a secret my father never confided to anyone but me. He once told me that if his heart trouble earned him off suddenly I ought to know of the existence of this drawer; so he showed me how to find it. On the day after his death I took the keys, which he always carried on a small chain around his neck and concealed underneath his clothing, and opened the cupboard to see if I could find anything of value. It is needless to say, I could not discover anything that could be converted into a dollar. The Captain had filled the cupboard with old letters and papers of no value, and with relics he had brought from foreign lands during his many voyages. These last are mere rubbish, but I suppose he loved them for their association. In the secret drawer I found his stock in the timber company, and also that of old Will Thompson, who had doubtless left it with my father for safekeeping. Knowing it was now worthless, I left it in the drawer."

"I'd like to see it," announced Uncle John.

Joe laughed.

"I've lost the keys," he said.

"How's that, my lad?"

"Why, on the day of the funeral the keys disappeared. I could never imagine what became of them. But I did not care to look in the cupboard a second time, so the loss did not matter."

Mr. Merrick seemed thoughtful.

"I suppose I own that cupboard now," he remarked.

"Of course," said Joe. "But without the keys it is not serviceable. If you drill through the steel doors you destroy their security."

"True; but I may decide to do that."

"If you do, sir, I'd like you to clear out the rubbish and papers and send them to me. They are family matters, and I did not intend to sell them with the place."

"You shall have them, Joe."

"Just underneath the left end of the lower shelf you will find the sliding steel plate. It slides toward the front. In the drawer you will find the worthless stock and a picture of my mother. I'd like to keep the picture."

"You shall, Joseph. How are you getting on?"

"Why, I'm a new man, Mr. Merrick, and today I'm feeling as strong as a buffalo—thanks to your kind guardianship."

"Don't overdo, sir. Take it easy. There's a young lady coming to see you today."

"Ethel!" the boy exclaimed, his face turning crimson.

"Yes," returned Uncle John, tersely. "You've treated that girl shamefully, Joseph Wegg. Try to make proper amends."

"I never could understand," said Joe, slowly, "why Ethel refused to answer the letter I wrote her when I went away. It explained everything, yet—"

"I'll bet the farm against your lame shoulder she never got your letter," declared Uncle John. "She thought you left her without a word."

"I gave it to McNutt to deliver after I was gone. But you say she's coming today?"

"That is her intention, sir."

Joe said nothing more, but his expressive face was smiling and eager. Uncle John pressed the boy's hand and left him, promising to call again soon.

"Now, then," muttered the little millionaire, as he walked down the street, "to beard the lion in his den."

The den proved to be the hardware store, and the lion none other than Robert West. Mr. Merrick found the merchant seated at his desk in the otherwise deserted store, and, with a nod, helped himself to the only other chair the little office contained.

"Sir," said he, "I am here to demand an explanation."

"Of what?" asked West, coldly.

"Of your action in the matter of the Almaquo Timber Tract Company. I believe that you falsely asserted to Captain Wegg and Mr. Thompson that the timber had burned and their investment was therefore worthless. The news of the disaster killed one of your confiding friends and drove the other mad; but that was a consequence that I am sure you did not intend when you planned the fraud. The most serious thing I can accuse you of is holding the

earnings of the Wegg and Thompson stock—and big earnings they are, too—for your own benefit, and defrauding the heirs of your associates of their money."

West carefully balanced a penholder across his fingers, and eyed it with close attention.

"You are a queer man, Mr. Merrick," he said, quietly. "I can only excuse your insults on the grounds of ignorance, or the fact that you have been misinformed. Here is the newspaper report of the Almaquo fire, which I showed my friends the night of Captain Wegg's sudden death." He took a clipping from a drawer of the desk and handed it to Uncle John, who read it carefully.

"As a matter of fact," continued West, "you are not cutting that portion of the Almaquo tract which this fire refers to, and which Thompson and Wegg were interested in, but the north half of the tract, which they had never acquired any title to."

"I suppose the stock will show that," suggested Mr. Merrick.

"Of course, sir."

"I will look it up."

West smiled.

"You will have some trouble doing that," he said.

"Why?"

"Wegg and Thompson had transferred their entire stock to me before one died and the other went mad," was the quiet reply.

"Oh, I see." The lie was so evident that Uncle John did not try to refute it.

"I am rather busy, Mr. Merrick. Anything more, sir?"

"Not today. Bye and bye, Mr. West."

He marched out again and climbed into his buggy to drive home. The interview with Bob West had made him uneasy, for the merchant's cold, crafty nature rendered him an opponent who would stick at nothing to protect his ill-gotten gains. Uncle John had thought it an easy matter to force him to disgorge, but West was the one inhabitant of Millville who had no simplicity in his character. He was as thoroughly imbued with worldly subtlety and cunning as if he had lived amid the grille of a city all his life; and Mr. Merrick was by no means sure of his own ability to unmask the man and force him to make restitution.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE COURT'N OF SKIM CLARK.

By this time the summer was well advanced, and the rich people at the Wegg farm had ceased to be objects of wonder to the Millville folk. The girls were still regarded with curious looks when they wandered into the village on an errand, and Mr. Merrick and Major Doyle inspired a certain amount of awe; but time had dulled the edge of marvelous invasion and the city people were now accepted as a matter of course.

Peggy McNutt was still bothering his head over schemes to fleece the strangers, in blissful ignorance of the fact that one of his neighbors was planning to get ahead of him.

The Widow Clark was a shrewd woman. She had proven this by becoming one of the merchants of Millville after her husband's death. The poor man had left an insurance of five hundred dollars and the little frame building wherein he had conducted a harness shop. Mrs. Clark couldn't make and repair harness; so she cleared the straps and scraps and wax-ends out of the place, painted the interior of the shop bright yellow, with a blue ceiling, erected some shelves and a counter and turned part of the insurance money into candy, cigars, stationery, and a meager stock of paper-covered novels.

Skim, her small son, helped her as far as he was able, and between them they managed things so frugally that at the end of eight years the widow still had her five hundred dollars capital, and the little store had paid her living expenses.

Skim was named after his uncle, Peter Skimbley, who owned a farm near Watertown. The widow's hopeful was now a lank, pale-faced youth of eighteen, whose most imposing features were his big hands and a long nose that ended in a sharp point. The shop had ruined him for manual labor, for he sat hunched up by the stove in winter, and in summer hung around Cotting's store and listened to the gossip of the loungers. He was a boy of small conversational powers, but his mother declared that Skim "done a heap o' thinkin' that nobody suspected."

The widow was a good gossip herself, and knew all the happenings in the little town. She had a habit of reading all her stock of paper-covered novels before she sold them, and her mind was stocked with the mass of romance and adventure she had thus absorbed. "What I loves more'n eat'n' or sleep'n'," she often said, "is a rattlin' good love story. There don't seem to be much love in real life, so a poor lone crittur like me has to calm her hankerin's by a-readin' novels."

No one had been more interested in the advent of the millionaire at the Wegg farm than the widow Clark. She had helped "fix up" the house for the new owner and her appreciative soul had been duly impressed by the display of wealth demonstrated by the fine furniture sent down from the city. She had watched the arrival of the party and noticed with eager eyes the group of three pretty and stylishly dressed nieces who accompanied their rich uncle. Once or twice since the young ladies had entered her establishment to purchase pens or stationery, and on such occasions the widow was quite overcome by their condescension.

All this set her thinking to some purpose. One day she walked over to the farm and made her way quietly to the back door. By good fortune she found blind Nora hemming napkins and in a mood to converse. Nora was an especially neat seamstress, but required some one to thread her needles. Mary the cook had been doing this, but now Mrs. Clark sat down beside Nora to "hev a little talk" and keep the needles supplied with thread.

She learned a good deal about the nieces, for old Nora could not praise them enough. They were always sweet and kind to her and she loved to talk about them. They were all rich, too, or would be; for their uncle had no children of his own and could leave several millions to each one when he died.

"An' they're so simple, too," said the old woman; "nothin' cityfied ner stuck-up about any on 'em, I kin tell ye. They dresses as fine as the Queen o' Sheba, Tom says; but they romp 'round just like they was borned in the country. Miss Patsy she's learnin' to milk the cow, an' Miss Beth takes care o' the chickens all by herself. They're reg'lar girls, Marthy Clark, an' money hain't spiled 'em a bit."

This report tended to waken a great ambition in the widow's heart. Or perhaps the ambition had already taken form and this gossip confirmed and established it. Before she left the farm she had a chance to secretly observe the girls, and they met with her full approval.

At supper that evening she said to her hopeful:

"Skim, I want ye to go courtin'."

Skim looked up in amazement.

"Me, ma?" he asked.

"Yes, you. It's time you was thinkin' of gittin' married."

Skim held his knife in his mouth a moment while he thought over this startling proposition. Then he removed the cutlery, heaved a deep sigh, and enquired:

"Who at, ma?"

"What's that?"

"Who'll I go courtin' at?"

"Skim, you 'member in thet las' book we read, 'The Angel Maniac's Revenge,' there was a sayin' that fate knocks wunst on ev'ry man's door. Well, fate's knockin' on your door."

Skim listened, with a nervous glance toward the doorway. Then he shook his head.

"All fool fancy, ma," he remarked. "Don't ye go an' git no rumantic notions out'n books inter yer head."

"Skim, am I a fool, er ain't I?"

"'Tain't fer me ter say, ma."

"Fate's knockin', an' if you don't open to it, Skim, I'll wash my hands o' ye, an' ye kin jest starve to death."

The boy looked disturbed.

"What's aggrivatin' of ye, then?" he enquired, anxiously.

"A millionaire is come right under yer nose. He's here in Millville, with three gals fer nieces thet's all got money to squander an's bound to hev more."

Skim gave a low whistle.

"Ye don't mean fer me to be courtin' at them gals, do ye?" he demanded.

"Why not? Yer fambly's jest as respectable as any, 'cept thet yer Uncle Mell backslided after the last revival, an' went to a hoss race. Yer young, an' yer han'some; an' there's three gals waitin' ready to be won by a bold wooer. Be bold, Skim; take fate by the fetlock, an' yer fortun's made easy!"

Skim did not reply at once. He gulped down his tea and stared at the opposite wall in deep thought. It wasn't such a "tarnal bad notion," after all, and so thoroughly impressed was he with his own importance and merit that it never occurred to him he would meet with any difficulties if he chose to undertake the conquest.

"Peggy says marri'ge is the mark of a fool; an' Peggy married money, too," he remarked slowly.

"Pah! money! Mary Ann Cotting didn't hev but a hundred an' forty dollars, all told, an' she were an old maid an' soured an' squint-eyed when Peggy hitched up with her."

"I hain't seen nuthin' o' the world, yit," continued Skim, evasively.

"Ner ye won't nuther, onless ye marry money. Any one o' them gals could take ye to Europe an' back a dozen times."

Skim reflected still farther.

"Courtin' ought to hev some decent clothes," he said. "I kain't set in the nabob's parlor, with all thet slick furnitur', in Nick Thorne's cast-off Sunday suit."

"The cloth's as good as ever was made, an' I cut 'em down myself, an' stitched 'em all over."

"They don't look like store clothes, though," objected Skim.

The widow sighed.

"Tain't the coat that makes the man, Skim."

"It's the coat thet makes decent courtin', though," he maintained, stubbornly. "Gals like to see a feller dressed up. It shows he means business an' 'mounts to somethin'."

"I give Nick Thorne two dollars an' a packidge o' terbacker fer them clotlies, which the on'y thing wrong about was they'd got too snug fer comfert. Nick said so himself. But I'll make a

bargain with ye, Skim. Ef you'll agree to give me fifty dollars after yer married, I'll buy ye some store clothes o' Sam Cotting, to do courtin' in."

"Fifty dollars!"

"Well, I've brung ye up, hain't I?" "I've worked like a nigger, mindin' shop." "Say forty dollars. I ain't small, an' ef ye git one o' them city gals, Skim, forty dollars won't mean no more'n a wink of an eye to ye."

Skim frowned. Then he smiled, and the smile disclosed a front tooth missing.

"I'll dream on't," he said. "Let ye know in the mornin', ma. But I won't court a minite, mind ye, 'nless I git store clothes."

CHAPTER XX.

A LOST CAUSE.

The boy's musings confirmed him in the idea that his mother's scheme was entirely practical. He didn't hanker much to marry, being young and fairly satisfied with his present lot; but opportunities like this did not often occur, and it seemed his bounden duty to take advantage of it.

He got the "store clothes" next day, together with a scarlet necktie that was "all made up in the latest style," as Sam Cotting assured him, and a pair of yellow kid gloves "fit fer a howlin' swell." Skim wasn't sure, at first, about the gloves, but capitulated when Sam declared they were "real cityfied."

In the evening he "togged up," with his mother's help, and then walked over to the Wegg farm.

Beth answered the knock at the door. The living room was brightly lighted; Uncle John and the Major were playing checkers in a corner and Patsy was softly drumming on the piano. Louise had a book and Beth had been engaged upon some fancy-work.

When the door opened Skim bobbed his head and said:

"Evenin', mom. I've come a-visitin'."

Beth conquered an inclination to smile.

"Won't you come in?" she said, sweetly.

"Thankee; I will. I'm Skimbley Clark, ye know; down t' the village. Ma keeps a store there."

"I'm pleased to meet you, Mr. Clark. Allow me to introduce to you my uncle and cousins," said the girl, her eyes dancing with amusement.

Skim acknowledged the introductions with intense gravity, and then sat down upon a straight-backed chair near the piano, this being the end of the room where the three girls were grouped. Uncle John gave a chuckle and resumed his game with the Major, who whispered that he would give a dollar for an oil painting of Mr. Clark—if it couldn't be had for less.

Louise laid down her book and regarded the visitor wonderingly. Patsy scented fun and drew a chair nearer the group. Beth resumed her embroidery with a demure smile that made Skim decide at once that "he picked the pretty one."

Indeed, the decision did justice to his discretion. Beth De Graf was a rarely beautiful girl and quite outshone her cousins in this respect. Louise might be attractive and Patsy fascinating; but Beth was the real beauty of the trio, and the most charming trait in her character was her unconsciousness that she excelled in good looks.

So Skim stared hard at Beth, and answered the preliminary remarks addressed to him by Patsy and Louise in a perfunctory manner.

"Won't you take off your gloves?" asked Louise, soberly. "It's so warm this evening, you know."

The boy looked at his hands.

"It's sech a tarnal job to git 'em on agin," he replied.

"Don't put them on, then," advised Patsy. "Here in the country we are allowed to dispense with much unnecessary social etiquette."

"Air ye? Then off they come. I ain't much stuck on gloves, myself; but ma she 'lowed that a feller goin' courtin' orter look like a sport."

A chorus of wild laughter, which greeted this speech, had the effect of making Skim stare at the girls indignantly. He couldn't find anything funny in his remark; but there they sat facing him and uttering hysterical peals of merriment, until the tears ran down their cheeks.

Silently and with caution he removed the yellow gloves from his hands, and so gave the foolish creatures a chance "to laugh out their blamed giggle."

But they were watching him, and saw that he was disconcerted. They had no mind to ruin the enjoyment in store for them by offending their guest, so they soon resumed a fitting gravity and began to assist the youth to forget their rudeness.

"May I ask," said Patsy, very graciously, "which one of us you intend to favor with your attentions?"

"I ain't much used to sech things," he replied, looking down at his big hands and growing a little red-faced. "P'raps I hadn't orter tell, before the rest o' ye."

"Oh, yes; do tell!" pleaded Louise. "We're so anxious to know."

"I don't s'pose it's right clever to pick an' choose when ye're all by," said Skim, regaining confidence. "But ma, she 'lowed that with three gals handy I order git one on 'em, to say the least."

"If you got more than one," remarked Beth, calmly, "it would be illegal."

"Oh, one's enough," said Skim, with a grin. "Peggy says it's too many, an' a feller oughtn't to take his gal out'n a grab-bag."

"I should think not, indeed," returned Patsy. "But here are three of us openly displayed, and unless you turn us all down as unworthy, it will be necessary for you to make a choice."

"What foolishness are you girls up to now?" demanded Uncle John, catching a stray word from the other corner while engaged in a desperate struggle with the Major.

"This is a time for you to keep quiet, Uncle," retorted Patsy, merrily. "We've got important things to consider that are none of your affairs, whatever."

Skim reflected that he didn't want this one, except as a last resort. She was "too bossy."

"When I started out," he said, "I jest come a-courtin', as any feller might do thet wasn't much acquainted. But ef I've got to settle down to one o' ye—"

He hesitated.

"Oh, you must really take one at a time, you know," asserted Louise. "It's the only proper way."

"Then I'll start on thet dark-eyed one thet's a sewin'," he said, slowly.

Beth looked up from her work and smiled.

"Go ahead, Mr. Clark," she said, encouragingly. "My name is Beth. Had you forgotten it?"

"Call me Skim," he said, gently.

"Very well, Skim,—Now look here, Patsy Doyle, if you're going to sit there and giggle you'll spoil everything. Mr. Clark wants to court, and it's getting late."

"Praps I've went fur enough fer tonight," remarked Skim, uneasily. "Next time they'll leave us alone, an' then——"

"Oh, don't postpone it, please!" begged Beth, giving the boy a demure glance from her soft brown eyes. "And don't mind my cousins. I don't."

"These things kain't be hurried," he said. "Si Merkle courted three weeks afore he popped. He tol' me so."

"Then he was a very foolish man," declared Patsy, positively. "Just look at Beth! She's dying to have you speak out. What's the use of waiting, when she knows why you are here?"

By this time Skim had been flattered to the extent of destroying any stray sense he might ever have possessed. His utter ignorance of girls and their ways may have been partly responsible for his idiocy, or his mother's conviction that all that was necessary was for him to declare himself in order to be accepted had misled him and induced him to abandon any native diffidence he might have had. Anyway, the boy fell into the snare set by the mischievous young ladies without a suspicion of his impending fate.

"Miss Beth," said he, "ef yer willin', I'll marry ye; any time ye say. I agreed t' help Dick Pearson with the harvestin', but I'll try to 'git Ned Long to take my place, an' it don't matter much, nohow."

"But I couldn't have you break an engagement," cried Beth, hastily.

"Why not?"

"Oh, it wouldn't be right, at all. Mr. Pearson would never forgive me," she asserted.

"Can't ye—"

"No; not before harvest, Skim. I couldn't think of it."

"But arterward—"

"No; I've resolved never to marry after harvest. So, as you're engaged, and I don't approve of breaking engagements, I must refuse your proposition entirely."

Skim looked surprised; then perplexed; then annoyed.

"P'raps I didn't pop jest right," he murmured, growing red again.

"You popped beautifully," declared Patsy. "But Beth is very peculiar, and set in her ways. I'm afraid she wouldn't make you a good wife, anyhow."

"Then p'raps the gal in blue——"

"No;" said Louise. "I have the same prejudices as my cousin. If you hadn't been engaged for the harvest I might have listened to you; but that settles the matter definitely, as far as I am concerned."

Skim sighed.

"Ma'll be mad as a hornet ef I don't get any of ye," he remarked, sadly. "She's paid Sam Cotting fer this courtin' suit, an' he won't take back the gloves on no 'count arter they've been wore; an' thet'll set ma crazy. Miss Patsy, ef yo' think ye could——"

"I'm sure I couldn't," said Patsy, promptly. "I'm awfully sorry to break your heart, Skim, dear, and ruin your future life, and make you misanthropic and cynical, and spoil your mother's

investment and make her mad as a hornet. All this grieves me terribly; but I'll recover from it, if you'll only give me time. And I hope you'll find a wife that will be more congenial than I could ever be."

Skim didn't understand all these words, but the general tenor of the speech was convincing, and filled him with dismay.

"Rich gals is tarnal skeerce in these parts," he said, regretfully.

Then they gave way again, and so lusty was the merriment that Uncle John and the Major abandoned their game and came across the room to discover the source of all this amusement.

"What's up, young women?" asked their Uncle, glancing from their laughing faces to the lowering, sullen one of the boy, who had only now begun to suspect that he was being "poked fun at."

"Oh, Uncle!" cried Patsy; "you've no idea how near you have been to losing us. We have each had an offer of marriage within the last half hour!"

"Dear me!" ejaculated Uncle John.

"It shows the young man's intelligence and good taste," said the Major, much amused. "But is it a Mormon ye are, sir, to want all three?" directing a keen glance at Skim.

"Naw, 'tain't," he returned, wholly disgusted with the outcome of his suit. "All three got as't 'cause none of 'em's got sense enough t' know a good thing when they seen it."

"But I do," said the Major, stoutly; "and I maintain that you're a good thing, and always will be. I hope, sir, you'll call 'round and see me in Baltimore next year. I'll not be there, but ye can leave your card, just the same."

"Please call again, sir," added Uncle John; "about October—just before snow flies."

The boy got up.

"I don't keer none," he said, defiantly. "It's all ma's fault, gittin' me laughed at, an' she won't hear the last of it in a hurry, nuther."

"Be gentle with her, Skim," suggested Beth, softly. "Remember she has to face the world with you by her side."

Having no retort for this raillery, which he felt rather than understood, Skim seized his hat and fled. Then Patsy wiped the tears from her eyes and said:

"Wasn't it grand, girls? I haven't had so much fun since I was born."

CHAPTER XXI.

THE TRAP IS SET.

Uncle John was forced to acknowledge to his nieces that his boast to unmask Bob West within three days was mere blustering. If he accomplished anything in three weeks he would consider himself fortunate. But he had no wish to conceal anything from the girls, so he told them frankly of his interview with the hardware merchant, and also what Joe Wegg had said about the stock in the locked cupboard. They were, of course, greatly interested in this new phase of the matter and canvassed it long and eagerly.

"The man is lying, of course," said Patsy, "for Captain Wegg and poor Mr. Thompson could not transfer their stock to West after that fatal night when he brought to them the news of the fire."

"I believe the stock is still in this cupboard," declared Uncle John.

"Unless West stole the keys and has taken it away," suggested Louise.

"I'm sure he did not know about the secret drawer," said her uncle. "Probably he stole the keys and searched the cupboard; if he had found the stock he would have left the keys, which would then be of no further use to him. As he did not find the stock certificates, he carried the keys away, that he might search again at his leisure. And they've never yet been returned."

"Why, John, ye're possessed of the true detective instinct," the Major remarked, admiringly. "Your reasoning is at once clever and unassailable."

"I wonder," mused Beth, "if we could tempt Mr. West to come again to search the cupboard."

"He will scarcely venture to do that while we are here," replied Uncle John.

"I said 'tempt him,' Uncle."

"And what did you mean by that expression, Beth?"

"I'll think it over and tell you later," she returned, quietly.

* * * * *

Ethel Thompson would have shown Joe Wegg how much she resented his leaving Millville without a word to her, had she not learned from Mr. Merrick the boy's sad condition. Knowing her old friend was ill, she determined to ignore the past and go to him at once, and Uncle John knew very well there would be explanations to smooth away all the former misunderstandings.

Joe was now aware of the fact that his letter to Ethel had never reached its destination, so, as soon as the girl had arrived and the first rather formal greetings were over, he sent Kate Kebble to McNutt's to ask the agent to come over to the hotel at once.

The girl returned alone.

"Peggy says as he can't come," she announced.

"Why not?" asked Joe.

"Says he's jest painted his off foot blue an' striped it with red, an' it hain't dried yit."

"Go back," said Joe, firmly. "Tell Peggy he's in trouble, and it's likely to cost him more than a new coat of paint for his foot if he doesn't come here at once."

Kate went back, and in due time the stump of McNutt's foot was heard on the stairs. He entered the room looking worried and suspicious, and the stern faces of Ethel and Joe did not reassure him, by any means. But he tried to disarm the pending accusation with his usual brazen impertinence.

"Nice time ter send fer me, this is, Joe," he grumbled. "It's gittin' so a feller can't even paint his foot in peace an' quiet."

"Peggy," said Joe, "when I went away, three years ago, I gave you a letter for Miss Ethel. What did you do with it?"

Peggy's bulging eyes stared at his blue foot, which he turned first one side and then the other to examine the red stripes.

"It's this way, Joe," he replied; "there wa'n't no postige stamp on the letter, an' Sam Cotting said it couldn't be posted no way 'thout a stamp."

"It wasn't to be sent through the post-office," said the boy. "I gave you a quarter to deliver it in person to Miss Ethel."

"Did ye, Joe? did ye?"

"Of course I did."

"Cur'ous," said McNutt, leaning over to touch the foot cautiously with one finger, to see if the paint was dry.

"Well, sir!"

"Well, Joe, there's no use gittin' mad 'bout it. Thet blamed quarter ye giv me rolled down a crack in the stoop, an' got lost. Sure. Got lost as easy as anything."

"Well, what was that to me?"

"Oh, I ain't blamin' you," said Peggy; "but 'twere a good deal to me, I kin tell ye. A whole quarter lost!"

"Why didn't you take up a board, and get it again?"

"Oh, I did," said McNutt, cheerfully. "I did, Joe. But the money was all black an' tarnished like, by that time, an' didn't look at all like silver. Sam he wouldn't take it at the store, so my ol' woman she 'lowed she'd polish it up a bit. Ye know how sort o' vig'rous she is, Joe. She polished that blamed quarter the same way she jaws an' sweeps; she polished it 'til she rubbed both sides smooth as glass, an' then Sam wouldn't take it, nuther, 'n' said it wasn't money any more. So I drilled two holes in it an' sewed it on my pants fer a 'spender butt'n."

"But why didn't you deliver the letter?"

"Did ye 'spect I'd tramp way t' Thompson's Crossing fer nuthin'?"

"I gave you a quarter."

"An' it turned out to be on'y a 'spender butt'n. Be reason'ble, Joe."

"Where is the letter?"

"Tain't a letter no more. It's on'y ol' fambly papers by this time. Three years is——"

"Where is it? By thunder, Peggy, if you don't answer me I'll put you in jail for breach of trust!"

"Ye've changed, Joe," sadly. "Ye ain't no more like——"

"Where is it?"

"Behind the lookin'-glass in my sett'n-room."

"Go and get it immediately, sir!"

"Ef I hev to cross that dusty road twic't more, I'll hev to paint all over agin, an' that's a fact."

"Ethel," said Joe, with the calmness of despair, "you'll have to telephone over to the Junction and ask them to send a constable here at once."

"Never mind," cried McNutt, jumping up hastily; "I'll go. Paint don't cost much, nohow."

He stumped away, but on his return preferred to let Kate carry the soiled, torn envelope up to the young folks. The letter had palpably been tampered with. It had been opened and doubtless read, and the flap clumsily glued down again.

But Ethel had it now, and even after three years her sweet eyes dimmed as she read the tender words that Joe had written because he lacked the courage to speak them. "My one great ambition is to win a home for us, dear," he had declared, and with this before her eyes Ethel reproached herself for ever doubting his love or loyalty.

When she rode her pony over to the Wegg farm next day Ethel's bright face was wreathed with smiles. She told her girl friends that she and Joe had had a "good talk" together, and understood each other better than ever before. The nieces did not tell her of their newly

conceived hopes that the young couple would presently possess enough money to render their future comfortable, because there were so many chances that Bob West might win the little game being played. But at this moment Ethel did not need worldly wealth to make her heart light and happy, for she had regained her childhood's friend, and his injuries only rendered the boy the more interesting and companionable.

Meantime Uncle John had been busily thinking. It annoyed him to be so composedly defied by a rascally country merchant, and he resolved, if he must fight, to fight with all his might.

So he wired to his agent in New York the following words:

"What part of the Almaquo timber tract burned in forest fire three years ago?"

The answer he received made him give a satisfied grunt.

"No forest fires near Almaquo three years ago. Almadona, seventy miles north, burned at that time, and newspaper reports confounded the names."

"Very good!" exclaimed Uncle John. "I've got the rascal now."

He issued instructions to the lumber company to make no further payments of royalties to Robert West until otherwise advised, and this had the effect of bringing West to the farm white with rage.

"What do you mean by this action, Mr. Merrick?" he demanded.

"We've been paying you money that does not belong to you for three years, sir," was the reply. "In a few days, when my investigations are complete, I will give you the option of being arrested for embezzlement of funds belonging to Joseph Wegg and the Thompsons, or restoring to them every penny of their money."

West stared.

"You are carrying matters with a high hand, sir," he sneered.

"Oh, no; I am acting very leniently," said Uncle John.

"Neither Joe nor the Thompsons own a dollar's interest in the Almaquo property. It is all mine, and mine alone."

"Then produce the stock and prove it!" retorted Mr. Merrick, triumphantly.

At that moment Louise interrupted the interview by entering the room suddenly.

"Oh, Uncle," said she, "will you join us in a picnic to the Falls tomorrow afternoon? We are all going."

"Then I won't be left behind," he replied, smiling upon her.

"We shall take even Thomas and Nora, and come home late in the evening, by moonlight."

"That suits me, my dear," said he.

West stood silent and scowling, but as the girl tripped away she saw him raise his eyes and glance slyly toward the cupboard, for they were in the right wing room.

"Mr. Merrick," he resumed, in a harsh voice; "I warn you that if your company holds up the payment of my royalties it will break the contract, and I will forbid them to cut another tree. You are doubtless aware that there are a dozen firms willing to take your place and pay me higher royalties."

"Act as you please, sir," said Uncle John, indifferently. "I believe you are face to face with ruin, and it won't matter much what you do."

West went away more quietly than he had come, and the girls exclaimed, delightedly:

"The trap is set, Uncle!"

"I think so, myself," he rejoined. "That picnic was a happy thought, Louise."

Early the next afternoon they started out with hammocks and baskets and all the paraphernalia of a picnic party. The three girls, Nora and Uncle John squeezed themselves into the surrey, while the Major and Old Hucks rode after them in the ancient buggy, with Dan moaning and groaning every step he took. But the old horse moved more briskly when following Joe, and Hucks could get more speed out of him than anyone else; so he did not lag much behind.

The procession entered Millville, where a brief stop was made at the store, and then made its exit by the north road. West was standing in the door of his hardware store, quietly observing them. When they disappeared in the grove he locked the door of his establishment and sauntered in the direction of the Pearson farm, no one noticing him except Peggy McNutt, who was disappointed because he had intended to go over presently and buy a paper of tacks.

When the village was left behind, Uncle John drove swiftly along, following the curve of the lake until he reached a primitive lane that he had discovered formed a short cut directly back to the Wegg farm. Old Thomas was amazed by this queer action on the part of the picnic party, but aside from blind Nora, who had no idea where they were, the others seemed full of repressed eagerness, and in no way surprised.

The lane proved very rocky though, and they were obliged to jolt slowly over the big cobble stones. So Beth and Patsy leaped out of the surrey and the former called out:

"We will run through the forest, Uncle, and get home as soon as you do."

"Be careful not to show yourselves, then," he replied. "Remember our plans."

"We will. And don't forget to tie the horses in the thicket, and warn Thomas and Nora to keep quiet until we come for them," said Patsy.

"I'll attend to all that, dear," remarked Louise, composedly. "But if you girls are determined to walk, you must hurry along, or you will keep us waiting."

The nieces had explored every path in the neighborhood by this time, so Beth and Patsy were quite at home in the pine forest. The horses started up again, and after struggling along another quarter of a mile a wheel of the surrey dished between two stones, and with a bump the axle struck the ground and the journey was promptly arrested.

"What shall we do now?" asked Uncle John, much annoyed, as the party alighted to examine the wreck.

"Send Thomas back to the village for another wheel" suggested the Major.

"Not today!" cried Louise. "We mustn't appear in the village again this afternoon, on any account. It is absolutely necessary we should keep out of sight."

"True," agreed Uncle John, promptly. "Thomas and Nora must picnic here all by themselves, until nearly midnight. Then they may drive the buggy home, leading Daniel behind them. It will be time enough tomorrow to get a new buggy wheel, and the broken surrey won't be in anybody's way until we send for it."

If Old Hucks thought they had all gone crazy that day he was seemingly justified in the suspicion, for his master left the baskets of good things to be consumed by himself and Nora and started to walk to the farm, the Major and Louise accompanying him.

"We mustn't loiter," said the girl, "for while West may wait until darkness falls to visit the farm, he is equally liable to arrive at any time this afternoon. He has seen us all depart, and believes the house deserted."

But they were obliged to keep to the lane, where walking was difficult, and meantime Patsy and Beth were tripping easily along their woodland paths and making much better progress.

CHAPTER XXII.

CAUGHT.

"We're early," said Beth, as they came to the edge of the woods and sighted the farm house; "but that is better than being late."

Then she stopped suddenly with a low cry and pointed to the right wing, which directly faced them. Bob West turned the corner of the house, tried the door of Uncle John's room, and then walked to one of the French windows. The sash was not fastened, so he deliberately opened it and stepped inside.

"What shall we do?" gasped Patsy, clasping her hands excitedly.

Beth was always cool in an emergency.

"You creep up to the window, dear, and wait till you hear me open the inside door," said she. "I'll run through the house and enter from the living-room. The key is under the mat, you know."

"But what can we do? Oughtn't we to wait until Uncle John and father come?" Patsy asked, in a trembling voice.

"Of course not. West might rob the cupboard and be gone by that time. We've got to act promptly, Patsy; so don't be afraid."

Without further words Beth ran around the back of the house and disappeared, while Patsy, trying to control the beating of her heart, stole softly over the lawn to the open window of Uncle John's room.

She could not help looking in, at the risk of discovery. Bob West—tall, lean and composed as ever—was standing beside the cupboard, the doors of which were wide open. The outer doors were of wood, panelled and carved; the inner ones were plates of heavy steel, and in the lock that secured these latter doors were the keys that had so long been missing. Both were attached to a slender silver chain.

As Patsy peered in at the man West was engaged in deliberately examining packet after packet of papers, evidently striving to find the missing stock certificates. He was in no hurry, believing he would have the house to himself for several hours; so he tumbled Captain Wegg's souvenirs of foreign lands in a heap on the floor beside him, thrusting his hand into every corner of the cupboard in order that the search might be thorough. He had once before examined the place in vain; this time he intended to succeed.

Presently West drew a cigar from his pocket, lighted it, and was about to throw the match upon the floor when the thought that it might later betray his presence made him pause and then walk to the open window. As he approached, Patsy became panic-stricken and, well knowing that she ought to run or hide, stood rooted to the spot, gazing half appealingly and half defiantly into the startled eyes of the man who suddenly confronted her.

So for a moment they stood motionless. West was thinking rapidly. By some error he had miscounted the picnic party and this girl had been left at home. She had discovered his intrusion, had seen him at the cupboard, and would report the matter to John Merrick. This being the case, it would do him no good to retreat without accomplishing his purpose. If once he secured the stock certificates he could afford to laugh at his accusers, and secure them he must while he had the opportunity.

So clearly did these thoughts follow one another that West's hesitation seemed only momentary. Without a word to the girl he tossed the match upon the grass, calmly turned his back, and started for the cupboard again.

But here a new surprise awaited him. Brief as had been his absence, another girl had entered the room. Beth opened the door even as West turned toward the window, and, taking in the situation at a glance, she tiptoed swiftly to the cupboard, withdrew the keys from the lock and dropped them noiselessly into a wide-mouthed vase that stood on the table and was partially filled with flowers. The next instant West turned and saw her, but she smiled at him triumphantly. "Good afternoon, sir," said the girl, sweetly; "can I do anything to assist you?"

West uttered an impatient exclamation and regarded Beth savagely.

"Is the house full of girls?" he demanded.

"Oh, no; Patsy and I are quite alone," she replied, with a laugh. "Come in, Patsy dear, and help me to entertain our guest," she added.

Patsy came through the window and stood beside her cousin. The man stared at them, bit his lip, and then turned again to the cupboard. If he noted the absence of the keys he did not remark upon the fact, but with hurried yet thorough examination began anew to turn over the bundles of papers.

Beth sat down and watched him, but Patsy remained standing behind her chair. West emptied all the shelves, and then after a pause took out his pocket knife and began tapping with its end the steel sides of the cupboard. There was no doubt he suspected the existence of a secret aperture, and Beth began to feel uneasy.

Slowly the man worked his way downward, from shelf to shelf, and began to sound the bottom plates, wholly oblivious of the fascinated gaze of the two young girls. Then a sudden gruff ejaculation startled them all, and West swung around to find a new group of watchers outside the window. In the foreground appeared the stern face of John Merrick.

The scene was intensely dramatic to all but the singular man who had been battling to retain a fortune. West knew in an instant that his attempt to secure the certificates was a failure. He turned from the cupboard, dusted his hands, and nodded gravely to the last arrivals.

"Come in, Mr. Merrick," said he, seating himself in a chair and removing his hat, which he had been wearing. "I owe you an apology for intruding upon your premises in your absence."

Uncle John strode into the room angry and indignant at the fellow's cool impertinence. The Major and Louise followed, and all eyes centered upon the face of Bob West.

"The contents of this cupboard," remarked the hardware merchant, calmly, "belong to the estate of Captain Wegg, and can scarcely be claimed by you because you have purchased the house. You falsely accused me the other day, sir, and I have been searching for proof that the Almaquo Timber Tract stock is entirely my property."

"Have you found such proof?" inquired Mr. Merrick.

"Not yet."

"And you say the stock was all issued to you?"

West hesitated.

"It was all transferred to me by Captain Wegg and Will Thompson."

"Does the transfer appear upon the stock itself?"

"Of course, sir."

"In that case," said Uncle John, "I shall be obliged to ask your pardon. But the fact can be easily proved."

He walked to the open cupboard, felt for the slide Joe had described to him, and drew it forward. A small drawer was behind the orifice, and from this Mr. Merrick drew a packet of papers.

West gave a start and half arose. Then he settled back into his chair again.

"H-m. This appears to be the stock in question," said Uncle John. He drew a chair to the table, unfolded the documents and examined them with deliberate care.

The nieces watched his face curiously. Mr. Merrick first frowned, then turned red, and finally a stern, determined look settled upon his rugged features.

"Take your stock, Mr. West," he said, tossing it toward the man; "and try to forgive us for making fools of ourselves!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

MR. WEST EXPLAINS.

A cry of amazed protest burst from the girls. The Major whistled softly and walked to the window.

"I find the stock properly transferred," continued Uncle John, grimly conscious that he was as thoroughly disappointed as the girls. "It is signed by both Wegg and Thompson, and witnessed in the presence of a notary. I congratulate you, Mr. West. You have acquired a fortune."

"But not recently," replied the hardware dealer, enjoying the confusion of his recent opponents. "I have owned this stock for more than three years, and you will see by the amount endorsed upon it that I paid a liberal price for it, under the circumstances."

Uncle John gave a start and a shrewd look.

"Of course you did," said he. "On paper."

"I have records to prove that both Captain Wegg and Will Thompson received their money," said West, quietly. "I see it is hard for you to abandon the idea that I am a rogue."

There could be no adequate reply to this, so for a time all sat in moody silence. But the thoughts of some were busy.

"I would like Mr. West to explain what became of the money he paid for this stock," said Louise; adding: "That is, if he will be so courteous."

West did not answer for a moment. Then he said, with a gesture of indifference:

"I am willing to tell all I know. But you people must admit that the annoyances you have caused me during the past fortnight, to say nothing of the gratuitous insults heaped upon my head, render me little inclined to favor you."

"You are quite justified in feeling as you do," replied Uncle John, meekly. "I have been an ass, West; but circumstances warranted me in suspecting you, and even Joseph Wegg did not know that the Almaquo stock had been transferred to you. He merely glanced at it at the time of his father's death, without noticing the endorsement, and thought the fire had rendered it worthless. But if you then owned the stock, why was it not in your possession?"

"That was due to my carelessness," was the reply. "The only notary around here is at Hooker's Falls, and Mr. Thompson offered to have him come to Captain Wegg's residence and witness the transfer. As my presence was not necessary for this, and I had full confidence in my friends' integrity, I paid them their money, which they were eager to secure at once, and said I would call in a few days for the stock. I did call, and was told the notary had been here and the transfer had been legally made. Wegg said he would get the stock from the cupboard and hand it to me; but we both forgot it at that time. After his death I could not find it, for it was in the secret drawer."

"Another thing, sir," said Uncle John. "If neither Wegg nor Thompson was then interested in the Almaquo property, why did the news of its destruction by fire shock them so greatly that the result was Captain Wegg's death?"

"I see it will be necessary for me to explain to you more fully," returned West, with a thoughtful look. "It is evident, Mr. Merrick, from your questions, that some of these occurrences seem suspicious to a stranger, and perhaps you are not so much to be blamed as, in my annoyance and indignation, I have imagined."

"I would like the matter cleared up for the sake of Ethel and Joe," said Mr. Merrick, simply.

"And so would I," declared the hardware dealer. "You must know, sir, that Will Thompson was the one who first led Captain Wegg into investing his money. I think the Captain did it merely to please Will, for at that time he had become so indifferent to worldly affairs that he took no interest in anything beyond a mild wish to provide for his son's future. But Thompson was erratic in judgment, so Wegg used to bring their matters to me to decide upon. I always advised them as honestly as I was able. At the time I secured an option on the Almaquo tract, and wanted them to join me, Will Thompson had found another lot of timber, but located in an out-of-the-way corner, which he urged the Captain to join him in buying. Wegg brought the matter to me, as usual, and I pointed out that my proposed contract with the Pierce-Lane Lumber Company would assure our making a handsome profit at Almaquo, while Thompson had no one in view to cut the other tract. Indeed, it was far away from any railroad. Wegg saw the force of my argument, and insisted that Thompson abandon his idea and accept my proposition. Together we bought the property, having formed a stock company, and the contract for cutting the timber was also secured. Things were looking bright for us and royalty payments would soon be coming in."

"Then, to my amazement, Wegg came to me and wanted to sell out their interests. He said Thompson had always been dissatisfied because they had not bought the other tract of timber, and that the worry and disappointment was affecting his friend's mind. He was personally

satisfied that my investment was the best, but, in order to sooth old Will and prevent his mind from giving way, Wegg wanted to withdraw and purchase the other tract.

"I knew there was a fortune in Almaquo, so I went to New York and mortgaged all I possessed, discounting a lot of notes given me by farmers in payment for machinery, and finally borrowing at a high rate of interest the rest of the money I needed. In other words I risked all my fortune on Almaquo, and brought the money home to pay Wegg and Thompson for their interest. The moment they received the payment they invested it in the Bogue tract—"

"Hold on!" cried Uncle John. "What tract did you say?"

"The Bogue timber tract, sir. It lies—"

"I know where it lies. Our company has been a whole year trying to find out who owned it."

"Wegg and Thompson bought it. I was angry at the time, because their withdrawal had driven me into a tight corner to protect my investment, and I told them they would bitterly regret their action. I think Wegg agreed with me, but Will Thompson was still stubborn.

"Then came the news of the fire at Almaquo. It was a false report, I afterward learned, but at that time I believed the newspapers, and the blow almost deprived me of reason. In my excitement I rushed over to Wegg's farm and found the two men together, whereupon I told them I was ruined.

"The news affected them powerfully because they had just saved themselves from a like ruin, they thought. Wegg was also a sympathetic man, in spite of his reserve. His old heart trouble suddenly came upon him, aggravated by the excitement of the hour, and he died with scarcely a moan. Thompson, whose reason was tottering long before this, became violently insane at witnessing his friend's death, and has never since recovered. That is all I am able to tell you, sir."

"The Bogue tract," said Uncle John, slowly, "is worth far more than the Almaquo. Old Will Thompson was sane enough when insisting on that investment. But where is the stock, or deed, to show they bought that property?"

"I do not know, sir. I only know they told me they had effected the purchase."

"Pardon me," said the Major. "Have you not been through this cupboard before?"

West looked at him with a frown.

"Yes; in a search for my own stock," he said. "But I found neither that nor any deed to the Bogue property. I am not a thief, Major Doyle."

"You stole the keys, though," said Louise, pointedly.

"I did not even do that," said West. "On the day of the funeral Joe carelessly left them lying upon a table, so I slipped them into my pocket. When I thought of them again Joe had gone away and I did not know his address. I came over and searched the cupboard unsuccessfully.

But it was not a matter of great importance at that time if the stock was mislaid, since there was no one to contest my ownership of it. It was only after Mr. Merrick accused me of robbing my old friends and ordered my payments stopped that I realized it was important to me to prove my ownership. That is why I came here today."

Again a silence fell upon the group. Said Uncle John, finally:

"If the deed to the Bogue tract can be found, Joe and Ethel will be rich. I wonder what became of the paper."

No one answered, for here was another mystery.

CHAPTER XXIV.

PEGGY HAS REVENGE.

Joe Wegg made a rapid recovery, his strength returning under the influence of pleasant surroundings and frequent visits from Ethel and Uncle John's three nieces. Not a word was hinted to either the invalid or the school teacher regarding the inquiries Mr. Merrick was making about the deed to the Bogue timber lands, which, if found, would make the young couple independent. Joe was planning to exploit a new patent as soon as he could earn enough to get it introduced, and Ethel exhibited a sublime confidence in the boy's ability that rendered all question of money insignificant.

Joe's sudden appearance in the land of his birth and his generally smashed up condition were a nine days' wonder in Millville. The gossips wanted to know all the whys and wherefores, but the boy kept his room in the hotel, or only walked out when accompanied by Ethel or one of the three nieces. Sometimes they took him to ride, as he grew better, and the fact that Joe "were hand an' glove wi' the nabobs" lent him a distinction he had never before possessed.

McNutt, always busy over somebody else's affairs, was very curious to know what had caused the accident Joe had suffered. Notwithstanding the little affair of the letter, in which he had not appeared with especial credit, Peggy made an effort to interview the young man that resulted in his complete discomfiture. But that did not deter him from indulging in various vivid speculations about Joe Wegg, which the simple villagers listened to with attention. For one thing, he confided to "the boys" at the store that, in his opinion, the man who had murdered Cap'n Wegg had tried to murder his son also, and it wasn't likely Joe could manage to escape him a second time. Another tale evolved from Peggy's fertile imagination was that Joe, being about to starve to death in the city, had turned burglar and been shot in the arm in an attempt at housebreaking.

"Wouldn't be s'prised," said the agent, in an awed voice, "ef the p'lice was on his track now. P'raps there's a reward offered, boys; let's keep an eye on him!"

He waylaid the nieces once or twice, and tried to secure from them a verification of his somber suspicions, which they mischievously fostered.

The girls found him a source of much amusement, and relieved their own disappointment at finding the "Wegg Mystery" a pricked bubble by getting McNutt excited over many sly suggestions of hidden crimes. They knew he was harmless, for even his neighbors needed proof of any assertion he made; moreover, the investigation Uncle John was making would soon set matters right; so the young ladies did not hesitate to "have fun" at the little agent's expense.

One of McNutt's numerous occupations was raising a "patch" of watermelons each year on the lot back of the house. These he had fostered with great care since the plants had first sprouted through the soil, and in these late August days two or three hundreds of fine, big melons were just getting ripe. He showed the patch with much pride one day to the nieces, saying:

"Here's the most extry-fine melling-patch in this county, ef I do say it myself. Dan Brayley he thinks he kin raise mellings, but the ol' fool ain't got a circumstance to this. Ain't they beauties?"

"It seems to me," observed Patsy, gravely, "that Brayley's are just as good. We passed his place this morning and wondered how he could raise such enormous melons."

"Normous! Brayley's!"

"I'm sure they are finer than these," said Beth.

"Well, I'll be jiggered!" Peggy's eyes stared as they had never stared before. "Dan Brayley, he's a miser'ble ol' skinflint. Thet man couldn't raise decent mellings ef he tried."

"What do you charge for melons, Mr. McNutt?" inquired Louise.

"Charge? Why—er—fifty cents a piece is my price to nabobs; an' dirt cheap at that!"

"That is too much," declared Patsy. "Mr. Brayley says he will sell his melons for fifteen cents each."

"Him! Fifteen cents!" gasped Peggy, greatly disappointed. "Say, Brayley's a disturbin' element in these parts. He oughter go to jail fer asking fifteen cents fer them mean little mellings o' his'n."

"They seem as large as yours," murmured Louise.

"But they ain't. An' Brayley's a cheat an' a rascal, while a honester man ner me don't breathe. Nobody likes Brayley 'round Millville. Why, on'y las' winter he called me a meddler—in public!—an' said as I shot off my mouth too much. Me!"

"How impolite."

"But that's Dan Brayley. My mellings at fifty cents is better 'n his'n at fifteen."

"Tell me," said Patsy, with a smile, "did you ever rob a melon-patch, Mr. McNutt?"

"Me? I don't hev to. I grow 'em."

"But the ones you grow are worth fifty cents each, are they not?"

"Sure; mine is."

"Then every time you eat one of your own melons you eat fifty cents. If you were eating one of Mr. Brayley's melons you would only eat fifteen cents."

"And it would be Brayley's fifteen cents, too," added Beth, quickly.

Peggy turned his protruding eyes from one to the other, and a smile slowly spread over his features.

"By jinks, let's rob Brayley's melling-patch!" he cried.

"All right; we'll help you," answered Patsy, readily.

"Oh, my dear!" remonstrated Louise, not understanding.

"It will be such fun," replied her cousin, with eyes dancing merrily. "Boys always rob melon-patches, so I don't see why girls shouldn't. When shall we do it, Mr. McNutt?"

"There ain't any moon jest now, an' the nights is dark as blazes. Let's go ternight."

"It's a bargain," declared Patsy. "We will come for you in the surrey at ten o'clock, and all drive together to the back of Brayley's yard and take all the melons we want."

"It'll serve him right," said Peggy, delightedly. "Ol' Dan called me a meddler onc't—in public—an' I'm bound t' git even with him."

"Don't betray us, sir," pleaded Beth.

"I can't," replied McNutt, frankly; "I'm in it myself, an' we'll jest find out what his blame-twisted ol' fifteen-cent mellings is like."

Patsy was overjoyed at the success of her plot, which she had conceived on the spur of the moment, as most clever plots are conceived. On the way home she confided to her cousins a method of securing revenge upon the agent for selling them the three copies of the "Lives of the Saints."

"McNutt wants to get even with Brayley, he says, and we want to get even with McNutt. I think our chances are best, don't you?" she asked.

And they decided to join the conspiracy.

There was some difficulty escaping from Uncle John and the Major that night, but Patsy got them interested in a game of chess that was likely to last some hours, while Beth stole to the barn and harnessed Joe to the surrey. Soon the others slipped out and joined her, and with

Patsy and Beth on the front seat and Louise Inside the canopy they drove slowly away until the sound of the horse's feet on the stones was no longer likely to betray them.

McNutt was waiting for them when they quietly drew up before his house. The village was dark and silent, for its inhabitants retired early to bed. By good fortune the sky was overcast with heavy clouds and not even the glimmer of a star relieved the gloom.

They put McNutt on the back seat with Louise, cautioned him to be quiet, and then drove away. Dan Brayley's place was two miles distant, but in answer to Peggy's earnest inquiry if she knew the way Beth declared she could find it blind-folded. In a few moments Louise had engaged the agent in a spirited discussion of the absorbing "mystery" and so occupied his attention that he paid no heed to the direction they had taken. The back seat was hemmed in by side curtains and the canopy, so it would be no wonder if he lost all sense of direction, even had not the remarks of the girl at his side completely absorbed him.

Beth drove slowly down the main street, up a lane, back by the lake road and along the street again; and this programme was repeated several times, until she thought a sufficient distance had been covered to convince the agent they had arrived at Brayley's. The way was pitch dark, but the horse was sensible enough to keep in the middle of the road, so they met with no accident more than to jolt over a stone now and then.

But now the most difficult part of the enterprise lay before them. The girls turned down the lane back of the main street and bumped over the ruts until they thought they had arrived at a spot opposite McNutt's own melon patch.

"What's wrong?" asked the agent, as they suddenly stopped with a jerk.

"This ought to be Brayley's," said Beth; "but it's so dark I'm not certain just where we are."

McNutt thrust his head out and peered into the blackness.

"Drive along a little," he whispered.

The girl obeyed.

"Stop—stop!" said he, a moment later. "I think that's them contwisted fifteen-cent mellings—over there!"

They all got out and Beth tied the horse to the fence. Peggy climbed over and at once whispered:

"Come on! It's them, all right."

Through the drifting clouds there was just enough light to enable them to perceive the dark forms of the melons lying side by side upon their vines. The agent took out his big clasp knife and recklessly slashed one of them open.

"Green's grass!" he grumbled, and slashed another.

Patsy giggled, and the others felt a sudden irresistible impulse to join her.

"Keep still!" cautioned McNutt. "Wouldn't ol' Dan be jest ravin' ef he knew this? Say—here's a ripe one. Hev a slice."

They all felt for the slices he offered and ate the fruit without being able to see it. But it really tasted delicious.

As the girls feasted they heard a crunching sound and inquired in low voices what it was.

McNutt was stumping over the patch and plumping his wooden foot into every melon he could find, smashing them wantonly against the ground. The discovery filled them with horror. They had thought inducing the agent to rob his own patch of a few melons, while under the delusion that they belonged to his enemy Brayley, a bit of harmless fun; but here was the vindictive fellow actually destroying his own property by the wholesale.

"Oh, don't! Please don't, Mr. McNutt!" pleaded Patsy, in frightened accents.

"Yes, I will," declared the agent, stubbornly. "I'll git even with Dan Brayley fer once in my life, ef I never do another thing, by gum!"

"But it's wrong—it's wicked!" protested Beth.

"Can't help it; this is my chance, an' I'll make them bum fifteen-cent mellings look like a penny a piece afore I gits done with 'em."

"Never mind, girls," whispered Louise. "It's the law of retribution. Poor Peggy will be sorry for this tomorrow."

The man had not the faintest suspicion where he was. He knew his own melon patch well enough, having worked in it at times all the summer; but he had never climbed over the fence and approached it from the rear before, so it took on a new aspect to him from this point of view, and moreover the night was dark enough to deceive anybody.

If he came across an especially big melon McNutt would lug it to the carriage and dump it in. And so angry and energetic was the little man that in a brief space the melon patch was a scene of awful devastation, and the surrey contained all the fruit that survived the massacre.

Beth unhitched the horse and they all took their places in the carriage again, having some difficulty to find places for their feet on account of the cargo of melons. McNutt was stowed away inside, with Louise, and they drove away up the lane. The agent was jubilant and triumphant, and chuckled in gleeful tones that thrilled the girls with remorse as they remembered the annihilation of McNutt's cherished melons.

"Ol' Dan usu'lly has a dorg," said Peggy, between his fits of laughter; "but I guess he had him chained up ternight."

"I'm not positively sure that was Brayley's place," remarked Beth; "it's so very dark."

"Oh, it were Brayley's, all right," McNutt retorted. "I could tell by the second-class taste o' them mellings, an' their measley little size. Them things ain't a circumstance to the kind I raise."

"Are you sure?" asked Louise.

"Sure's shoot'n'. Guess I'm a jedge o' mellings, when I sees 'em."

"No one could see tonight," said Beth.

"Feelin's jest the same," declared the little man, confidently.

After wandering around a sufficient length of time to allay suspicion, Beth finally drew up before McNutt's house again.

"I'll jest take my share o' them mellings," said Peggy, as he alighted. "They ain't much 'count, bein' Brayley's; but it'll save me an' the ol' woman from eatin' our own, or perhaps I kin sell 'em to Sam Cotting."

He took rather more than his share of the spoils, but the girls had no voice to object. They were by this time so convulsed with suppressed merriment that they had hard work not to shriek aloud their laughter. For, in spite of the tragic revelations the morrow would bring forth, the situation was so undeniably ridiculous that they could not resist its humor.

"I've had a heap o' fun," whispered McNutt. "Good night, gals. Ef ye didn't belong to thet gum-twisted nabob, ye'd be some pun'kins."

"Thank you, Mr. McNutt. Good night."

And it was not until well on their journey to the farm that the girls finally dared to abandon further restraint. Then, indeed, they made the grim, black hills of the plateau resound to the peals of their merry laughter.

CHAPTER XXV.

GOOD NEWS AT LAST.

It was on the morning following this adventure that Uncle John received a bulky envelope from the city containing the result of the investigation he had ordered regarding the ownership of the Bogue tract of pine forest. It appeared that the company in which he was so largely interested had found the tract very valuable, and had been seeking for the owners in order to purchase it or lease the right to cut the timber. But although they had traced it through the hands of several successive owners the present holders were all unknown to them until Mr. Merrick's information had furnished them with a clue. A year ago the company had paid up the back taxes—two years overdue—in order to establish a claim to the property, and now they easily succeeded in finding the record of the deed from a certain Charles Walton to Jonas Wegg and William Thompson. The deed itself could not be found, but Uncle John considered the county record a sufficient claim to entitle the young folks to the property unless the ownership should be contested by others, which was not likely.

Uncle John invited Ethel and Joe to dine with him that evening, and Mary was told the occasion merited the best menu she could provide. The young folks arrived without any idea

of receiving more than a good dinner and the pleasure of mingling with the cordial, kindly household at the farm; but the general air of hilarity and good fellowship pervading the family circle this evening inspired the guests with like enthusiasm, and no party could be merrier than the one that did full justice to Mary's superior cookery.

One of the last courses consisted of iced watermelon, and when it appeared the three girls eyed one another guiltily and then made frantic attempts to suppress their laughter, which was unseemly because no one but themselves understood the joke. But all else was speedily forgotten in the interest of the coming ceremony, which Mr. Merrick had carefully planned and prepared.

The company was invited to assemble in the room comprising the spacious right wing, and when all were seated the little gentleman coughed to clear his throat and straightway began his preamble.

He recited the manner in which Captain Wegg and Will Thompson, having money to invest, were led into an enterprise which Bob West had proposed, but finally preferred another venture and so withdrew their money altogether from the Almaquo tract.

This statement caused both Joe and Ethel to stare hard, but they said nothing.

"Your grandfather, Ethel," continued the narrator, "was much impressed by the value of another timber tract, although where he got his information concerning it I have been unable to discover. This piece of property, called the Bogue tract, was purchased by Wegg and Thompson with the money they withdrew from Almaquo, and still stands in their name."

Then he recounted, quite frankly, his unjust suspicions of the hardware dealer, and told of the interview in which the full details of this transaction were disclosed by West, as well as the truth relating to the death of Captain Wegg and the sudden insanity and paralysis of old Will Thompson.

Joe could corroborate this last, and now understood why Thompson had cried out that West's "good news" had killed his father. He meant, of course, their narrow escape from being involved in West's supposed ruin, for at that time no one knew the report of the fire was false.

Finally, these matters being cleared up, Uncle John declared that the Pierce-Lane Lumber Company was willing to contract to cut the timber on the Bogue property, or would pay a lump sum of two hundred thousand dollars for such title to the tract as could be given. He did not add that he had personally offered to guarantee the title. That was an unnecessary bit of information.

You may perhaps imagine the happiness this announcement gave Joe and Ethel. They could scarcely believe the good news was true, even when the kindly old gentleman, with tears in his eyes, congratulated the young couple on the fortune in store for them. The Major followed with a happy speech of felicitation, and then the three girls hugged the little school teacher rapturously and told her how glad they were.

"I think, sir," said Joe, striving to curb his elation, "that it will be better in the end for us to accept the royalty. Don't you?"

"I do, indeed, my boy," was the reply. "For if our people make an offer for the land of two hundred thousand you may rest assured it is worth much more. The manager has confided to me in his letter that if we are obliged to pay royalties the timber will cost us nearly double what it would by an outright purchase of the tract."

"In that case, sir," began Joe, eagerly, "we will—"

"Nonsense. The company can afford the royalty, Joe, for it is making a heap of money—more than I wish it were. One of my greatest trials is to take care of the money I've already made, and—"

"And he couldn't do it at all without my help," broke in the Major. "Don't ye hesitate to take an advantage of him, Joseph, if ye can get it—which I doubt—for Mr. Merrick is most disgracefully rich already."

"That's true," sighed the little millionaire. "So it will be a royalty, Joe. We are paying the same percentage to Bob West for the Almaquo tract, but yours is so much better that I am sure your earnings will furnish you and Ethel with all the income you need."

They sat discoursing upon the happy event for some time longer, but Joe had to return to the hotel early because he was not yet strong enough to be out late.

"Before I go, Mr. Merrick," he said, "I'd like you to give me my mother's picture, which is in the secret drawer of the cupboard. You have the keys, now, and Ethel is curious to see how my mother looked."

Uncle John went at once to the cupboard and unlocked the doors. Joe himself pushed the slide and took out of the drawer the picture, which had lain just beneath the Almaquo stock certificates.

The picture was passed reverently around. A sweet-faced, sad little woman it showed, with appealing eyes and lips that seemed to quiver even in the photograph.

As Louise held it in her hand something induced her to turn it over.

"Here is some writing upon the back," she said.

Joe bent over and read it aloud. It was in his father's handwriting.

"Press the spring in the left hand lower corner of the secret drawer."

"Hah!" cried Uncle John, while the others stared stupidly. "That's it! That's the information we've been wanting so long, Joseph!"

He ran to the cupboard, even as he spoke, and while they all thronged about him thrust in his hand, felt for the spring, and pressed it.

The bottom of the drawer lifted, showing another cavity beneath. From this the searcher withdrew a long envelope, tied with red tape.

"At last, Joseph!" he shouted, triumphantly waving the envelope over his head. And then he read aloud the words docketed upon the outside: "'Warranty Deed and Conveyance from Charles Walton to Jonas Wegg and William Thompson.' Our troubles are over, my boy, for here is the key to your fortune."

"Also," whispered Louise to her cousins, rather disconsolately, "it explains the last shred of mystery about the Wegg case. Heigh-ho! what a chase we've had for nothing!"

"Not for nothing, dear," replied Patsy, softly, "for we've helped make two people happy, and that ought to repay us for all our anxiety and labor."

* * * * *

A knock was heard at the door, and Old Hucks entered and handed Mr. Merrick a paper.

"He's waiting, sir," said he, ambiguously.

"Oh, Tom—Tom!" cried Joe Wegg, rising to throw his arms around the old man's neck, "I'm rich, Tom—all my troubles are over—and Mr. Merrick has done it all—for Ethel and me!"

The ever smiling face of the ancient retainer did not change, but his eyes softened and filled with tears as he hugged the boy close to his breast.

"God be praised. Joe!" he said in a low voice. "I allus knew the Merricks 'd bring us luck."

"What the devil does this mean?" demanded Uncle John at this juncture, as he fluttered the paper and glared angrily around.

"What is it, dear?" inquired Louise.

"See for yourself," he returned.

She took the paper and read it, while Patsy and Beth peered over her shoulder. The following was scrawled upon a sheet of soiled stationery:

"John Merrak, esquire, to
Marshall McMahan McNutt, detter.

"To yur gals Smashin' 162 mellings at 50 cents a one
.....\$81.00
Pleas remitt & save trouble."

The nieces screamed, laughing until they cried, while Uncle John spluttered, smiled, beamed, and then requested an explanation.

Patsy told the story of the watermelon raid with rare humor, and it served to amuse everybody and relieve the strain that had preceded the arrival of McNutt's bill.

"Did you say the man is waiting, Thomas?" asked Uncle John.

"Yes, sir."

"Here—give him five dollars and tell him to receipt the bill. If he refuses, I'll carry the matter to the courts. McNutt's a rascal, and a fool in the bargain; but we've had some of his melons and the girls have had five dollars' worth of fun in getting them. But assure him that this squares accounts, Thomas."

Thomas performed his mission.

McNutt rolled his eyes, pounded the floor with his stump to emphasize his mingled anger and satisfaction, and then receipted the bill.

"It's jest five more'n I 'spected to git, Hucks," he said with a grin.

"But what's the use o' havin' nabobs around, ef ye don't bleed 'em?"