

## CHAPTER II

### THE INVASION OF MILLVILLE

Over the brow of the little hill appeared a three-seated wagon, drawn by a pair of handsome sorrels, and in a moment the equipage halted beside the sleeper.

"Oh, Thomas Hucks--you dear, dear Thomas!" cried a clear, eager voice, and out from the car rushed Miss Patricia Doyle, to throw her arms about the neck of the old, stoop-shouldered and white-haired driver, whose face was illumined by a joyous smile.

"Glad to see ye, Miss Patsy; right glad 'n deed, child," returned the old man. But others were waiting to greet him; pretty Beth De Graf and dainty Louise Merrick--not Louise "Merrick" any longer, though, but bearing a new name she had recently acquired--and demure Mary, Patsy's little maid and an old friend of Thomas Hucks', and Uncle John with his merry laugh and cordial handshake and, finally, a tall and rather dandified young man who remained an interested spectator in the background until Mr. Merrick seized and dragged him forward.

"Here's another for you to know, Thomas," said the little millionaire.

"This is the other half of our Louise--Mr. Arthur Weldon--and by and by you can judge whether he's the better half or not."

The aged servant, hat in hand, made a respectful bow to Mr. Weldon. His frank eyes swept the young man from head to foot but his smile was the same as before.

"Miss Louise is wiser ner I be," said the old fellow simply; "I'm safe to trust to her jedgment, I guess."

There was a general laugh, at this, and they began to clamber aboard the wagon and to stow away beneath the seats the luggage the colored porter was bringing out.

"Stop at the Junction House, Thomas," said Mr. Merrick as they moved away.

"Nora has the breakfast all ready at home, sir," replied Thomas.

"Good for Nora! But we can't fast until we reach home--eight good miles of jolting--so we'll stop at the Junction House for a glass of Mrs. Todd's famous milk."

"Very good, sir."

"Is anyone coming for our trunks and freight? There's half a car of truck to be carted over."

"Ned's on the way, sir; and he'll get the liveryman to help if he can't carry it all."

The Junction House was hidden from the station by the tiny hill, as were the half dozen other buildings tributary to Chazy Junction. As the wagon drew up before the long piazza which extended along the front of the little frame inn they saw a man in shabby gray seated at a small table with some bread and a glass of milk before him. It was their unrecognized guest of the night--the uninvited lodger on the rear platform--but he did not raise his eyes or appear to notice the new arrivals.

"Mrs. Todd! Hey, Mrs. Todd!" called Uncle John. "Anybody milked the cow yet?"

A frowsy looking woman came out, all smiles, and nodded pleasantly at the expectant group in the wagon. Behind her loomed the tall, lean form of Lucky Todd, the "proprietor," who was serious as a goat, which animal he closely resembled in feature.

"Breakfas' all 'round, Mr. Merrick?" asked the woman.

"Not this time, Mrs. Todd. Nora has our breakfast waiting for us. But we want some of your delicious milk to last us to the farm."

"Las' night's milkin's half cream by this time," she rejoined, as she

briskly reentered the house.

The man at the table held out his empty glass.

"Here; fill this up," he said to Lucky Todd.

The somber-faced proprietor turned his gaze from the Merrick group to the stranger, eyed him pensively a moment and then faced the wagon again. The man in gray got up, placed the empty glass in Todd's hand, whirled him around facing the door and said sternly:

"More milk!"

The landlord walked in like an automaton, and a suppressed giggle came from the girls in the wagon. Uncle John was likewise amused, and despite the unknown's frazzled apparel the little millionaire addressed him in the same tone he would have used toward an equal.

"Don't blame you, sir. Nobody ever tasted better milk than they have at the Junction House."

The man, who had resumed his seat, stood up, took off his hat and bowed. But he made no reply.

Out came Mrs. Todd, accompanied by another frowsy woman. Between them they bore a huge jug of milk, a number of thick glasses and a plate of

crackers.

"The crackers come extry, Mr. Merrick," said the landlady, "but seein' as milk's cheap I thought you might like 'em."

The landlord now came out and placed the stranger's glass, about half filled with milk, on the table before him. The man looked at it, frowned, and tossed off the milk in one gulp.

"More!" he said, holding out the glass.

Todd shook his head.

"Ain't no more," he declared.

His wife overheard him and pausing in her task of refilling the glasses for the rich man's party she looked over her shoulder and said:

"Give him what he wants, Lucky."

The landlord pondered.

"Not fer ten cents, Nancy," he protested. "The feller said he wanted ten cents wuth o' breakfas', an' by Joe he's had it."

"Milk's cheap," remarked Mrs. Todd. "It's crackers as is expensive these

days. Fill up his glass, Lucky."

"Why is your husband called 'Lucky,' Mrs. Todd?" inquired Patsy, who was enjoying the cool, creamy milk.

"'Cause he got me to manage him, I guess," was the laughing reply. "Todd ain't much 'count 'nless I'm on the spot to order him 'round."

The landlord came out with the glass of milk but paused before he set it down.

"Let's see your money," he said suspiciously.

It seemed to the girls, who were curiously watching the scene, that the tramp flushed under his bronzed skin; but without reply he searched in a pocket and drew out four copper cents, which he laid upon the table. After further exploration he abstracted a nickel from another pocket and pushed the coins toward the landlord.

"'Nother cent," said Todd.

Continued search seemed for a time hopeless, but at last, in quite an unexpected way, the man produced the final cent and on receiving it Todd set down the milk.

"Anything more, yer honor?" he asked sarcastically.

"Yes; you might bring me the morning paper," was the reply.

Everyone except Todd laughed frankly at this retort. Uncle John put two silver dollars in Mrs. Todd's chubby hand and told Thomas to drive on.

"I dunno," remarked old Hucks, when they were out of earshot, "whether that feller's jest a common tramp or a workman goin' over to the paper mill at Royal. Jedgin' from the fact as he had money I guess he's a workman."

"Wrong, Thomas, quite wrong," said Beth, seated just behind him. "Did you notice his hands?"

"No, Miss Beth."

"They were not rough and the fingers were slender and delicate."

"That's the mark of a cracksman," said Arthur Weldon, with a laugh. "If there are any safes out here that are worth cracking, I'd say look out for the gentleman."

"His face isn't bad at all," remarked Patsy, reflectively. "Isn't there any grade between a workman and a thief?"

"Of course," asserted Mr. Merrick, in his brisk way. "This fellow,

shabby as he looked, might be anything--from a strolling artist to a gentleman down on his luck. But what's the news, Thomas? How are Ethel and Joe?"

"Mr. an' Mrs. Wegg is quite comft'ble, sir, thank you," replied old Hucks, with a show of eagerness. "Miss Ethel's gran'ther, ol' Will Thompson, he's dead, you know, an' the young folks hev fixed up the Thompson house like a palace. Guess ye'd better speak to 'em about spendin' so much money, Mr. Merrick; I'm 'fraid they may need it some day."

"Don't worry. They've a fine income for life, Thomas, and there will be plenty to leave to their children--if they have any. But tell me about the mill at Royal. Where is Royal, anyhow?"

"Four mile up the Little Bill Creek, sir, where the Royal Waterfall is. A feller come an' looked the place over las' year an' said the pine forest would grind up inter paper an' the waterfall would do the grindin'. So he bought a mile o' forest an' built a mill, an' they do say things is hummin' up to the new settlement. There's more'n two hundred hands a-workin' there, a'ready."

"Goodness me!" cried Patsy; "this thing must have livened up sleepy old Millville considerably."

"Not yet," said Hucks, shaking his head. "The comp'ny what owns the mill



keeps a store there for the workmen, an' none of 'em come much to Millville. Our storekeepers is madder'n blazes about it; but fer my part I'm glad the two places is separated."

"Why?" asked Louise.

"They're a kinder tough lot, I guess. Turnin' pine trees inter paper mus' be a job thet takes more muscle than brains. I don't see how it's done, at all."

"It's simple enough," said Mr. Merrick. "First the wood is ground into pulp, and then the pulp is run through hot rollers, coming out paper. It's a mighty interesting process, so some day we will all go to Royal and see the paper made."

"But not just yet, Uncle," remarked Patsy. "Let's have time to settle down on the farm and enjoy it. Oh, how glad I am to be back in this restful, sleepy, jumping-off-place of the world again! Isn't it delightful, Arthur Weldon? Did you ever breathe such ozony, delicious mountain air? And do you get the fragrance of the pine forests, and the--the--"

"The bumps?" asked Arthur, as the wagon gave a jolt a bit more emphatic than usual; "yes, Patsy dear, I get them all; but I won't pass judgment on Millville and Uncle John's farm just yet. Are we 'most there?"

"We're to have four whole months of it," sighed Beth. "That ought to enable us to renew our youth, after the strenuous winter."

"Rubbish!" said Uncle John. "You haven't known a strenuous moment, my dears, and you're all too young to need renewals, anyhow. But if you can find happiness here, my girls, our old farm will become a paradise."

These three nieces of Mr. Merrick were well worth looking at. Louise, the eldest, was now twenty--entirely too young to be a bride; but having decided to marry Arthur Weldon, the girl would brook no interference and, having a will of her own, overcame all opposition. Her tall, slender form was exceedingly graceful and willowy, her personality dainty and refined, her temperament under ordinary conditions essentially sweet and agreeable. In crises Louise developed considerable character, in strong contrast with her usual assumption of well-bred composure. That the girl was insincere in little things and cultivated a polished manner to conceal her real feelings, is undeniable; but in spite of this she might be relied upon to prove loyal and true in emergencies.

Patricia Doyle was more than two years the junior of her cousin Louise and very unlike her. Patsy's old father, Major Gregory Doyle, said "she wore her heart on her sleeve," and the girl was frank and outspoken to a fault. Patsy had no "figure" to speak of, being somewhat dumpy in build, nor were her piquant features at all beautiful. Her nose tipped at the end, her mouth was broad and full-lipped and her complexion badly

freckled. But Patsy's hair was of that indescribable shade that hovers between burnished gold and sunset carmine. "Fiery red" she was wont to describe it, and most people considered it, very justly, one of her two claims to distinction. Her other admirable feature was a pair of magnificent deep blue eyes--merry, mischievous and scintillating as diamonds. Few could resist those eyes, and certain it is that Patsy Doyle was a universal favorite and won friends without a particle of effort.

The younger of the three nieces, Elizabeth De Graf, was as beautiful a girl as you will often discover, one of those rarely perfect creations that excite our wonder and compel admiration--as a beautiful picture or a bit of statuary will. Dreamy and reserved in disposition, she lacked the graciousness of Louise and Patsy's compelling good humor; yet you must not think her stupid or disagreeable. Her reserve was really diffidence; her dreamy, expressionless gaze the result of a serious nature and a thoughtful temperament. Beth was quite practical and matter-of-fact, the reverse of Patsy's imaginative instincts or Louise's affected indifference. Those who knew Beth De Graf best loved her dearly, but strangers found her hard to approach and were often repulsed by her unresponsive manner. Underneath all, the girl was a real girl, with many splendid qualities, and Uncle John relied upon Beth's stability more than on that of his other two nieces. Her early life had been a stormy and unhappy one, so she was but now developing her real nature beneath the warmth of her uncle's protecting love.

Topping the brow of a little hill the wagon came to a smooth downward grade where the road met the quaint old bridge that spanned Little Bill Creek, beside which stood the antiquated flour and feed mill that had given Millville its name. The horses were able to maintain their brisk trot across the bridge and through the main street of the town, which was merely a cluster of unimposing frame buildings, that lined either side of the highway for the space of an ordinary city block. Then they were in the wilds again and rattling over another cobblestone trail.

"This 'ere country's nuth'n' but pine woods 'n' cobblestones," sighed old Hucks, as the horses subsided to a walk. "Lor' knows what would 'a' happened to us without the trees! They saves our grace, so's to speak."

"I think the scenery is beautiful," observed Patsy. "It's so different from other country places."

"Not much farming around here, I imagine," said Arthur Weldon.

"More than you'd think, sir," replied Thomas. "There's certain crops as thrives in stony land, an' a few miles north o' here, towards Huntingdon, the soil's mighty rich 'n' productive. Things ain't never as bad as they seem in this world, sir," he added, turning his persistently smiling face toward the young man.

Mr. Merrick sat beside the driver on the front seat. The middle seat was occupied by Patsy and Beth, between whom squeezed little Mary, the

maid. Louise and Arthur had the back seat.

A quarter of a mile beyond the town they came to a sort of lane running at right angles with the turnpike, and down this lane old Hucks turned his team. It seemed like a forbidding prospect, for ahead of them loomed only a group of tall pines marking the edge of the forest, yet as they came nearer and made a little bend in the road the Wegg farm suddenly appeared in view. The house seemed so cozy and homelike, set upon its green lawn with the tall pines for a background, that the girls, who knew the place well, exclaimed with delight, and Arthur, who now saw it for the first time, nodded his head approvingly.

Uncle John was all excitement over the arrival at his country home. An old fashioned stile was set in a rail fence which separated the grounds from the lane, and Hucks drew up the wagon so his passengers could all alight upon the step of the stile. Patsy was out at a bound. Louise followed more deliberately, assisted by her boy husband, and Beth came more sedately yet. But Uncle John rode around to the barn with Thomas, being eager to see the cows and pigs and poultry with which the establishment was liberally stocked.

The house was of two stories, the lower being built of cobblestones and the upper of pine slabs; but it had been artistically done and the effect was delightful. It was a big, rambling dwelling, and Mr. Merrick had furnished the old place in a lavish manner, so that his nieces would lack no modern comfort when they came there to spend a summer.

On the porch stood an old woman clothed in a neat gingham dress and wearing a white apron and cap. Her pleasant face was wreathed in smiles as she turned it toward the laughing, chattering group that came up the path. Patsy spied her and rushed up to give old Nora a hug and kiss, and the other two girls saluted the blind woman with equal cordiality, for long ago she had won the love and devotion of all three. Arthur, who had heard of Nora, pressed her hand and told her she must accept him as another of her children, and then she asked for Mr. Merrick and ran in to get the breakfast served. For, although blind, old Nora was far from being helpless, and the breakfast she had prepared in anticipation of their arrival was as deliciously cooked as if she had been able to use her eyes as others did.