

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.