

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.