

## **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 thet 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."