

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 diffrent. 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 thet 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 cheek 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?"

"Figgelpiff, 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.