

CHAPTER VII. - LOUISE SCENTS A MYSTERY.

Louise Merrick was the eldest of Uncle John's nieces, having just passed her eighteenth birthday. In the city she was devoted to the requirements of fashionable society and--urged thereto by her worldly-minded mother--led a mere butterfly existence. Her two cousins frankly agreed that Louise was shallow, insincere and inclined to be affected; but of the three girls she displayed the most equable and pleasant disposition and under the most trying circumstances was composed and charming in manner. For this reason she was an agreeable companion, and men usually admired her graceful figure and her piquant, pretty face with its crown of fluffy blonde hair and winning expression. There was a rumor that she was engaged to be married to Arthur Weldon, a young man of position in the city; but Uncle John ignored the possibility of losing one of his cherished nieces and declared that Louise was still too young to think of marriage.

When away from her frivolous mother and the inconsequent home environments the girl was more unaffected and natural in her ways, and her faults were doubtless more the result of education than of natural tendency.

One thing was indisputable, however: Louise Merrick was a clever girl, possessing a quick intellect and a keen insight into the character of others. Her apparent shallowness was a blind of the same character as her assumed graciousness, and while she would have been more lovable without any pretence or sham she could not have been Louise Merrick and allow others to read her as she actually was. Patsy and Beth thought they knew her, and admired or liked rather than loved their cousin. Uncle John thought he knew her, too, and was very proud of his eldest niece in spite of some discovered qualities that were not wholly admirable.

An extensive course of light literature, not void of "detective stories," had at this moment primed Louise with its influence to the extent of inducing her to scent a mystery in the history of Captain Wegg. The plain folks around Millville might speculate listlessly upon the "queer doin's" at the farm, and never get anywhere near the truth. Indeed, the strange occurrences she had just heard were nearly forgotten in the community,

and soon would be forgotten altogether--unless the quick ear of a young girl had caught the clue so long ignored.

At first she scarcely appreciated the importance of the undertaking. It occurred to her that an effort to read to the bottom of the sea captain's romance would be a charming diversion while she resided at Millville, and in undertaking the task she laughingly accused herself of becoming an amateur detective--an occupation that promised to be thrilling and delightful.

Warned, however, by the rebuff she had met with from Uncle John, the girl decided not to confide either her suspicions or her proposed investigation to anyone for the present, but to keep her own counsel until she could surprise them all with the denouement or required assistance to complete her work.

Inspired by the cleverness and fascination of this idea, Louise set to work to tabulate the information she had received thus far, noting the element of mystery each fact evolved. First, Captain Wegg must have been a rich man in order to build this house, maintain two servants and live for years in comfort without any income from his barren farm lands. What became of his money after his death? Why was his only son obliged to fly to the cities in order to obtain a livelihood? Secondly, the Captain, a surly and silent man, had brought hither--perhaps by force--a young woman as his wife who was so unhappy that she pined away and died. Who was this woman? What had rendered her so unhappy and despairing?

Thirdly, the Captain's only friend had been a crazy man named Will Thompson. Was he crazy before the Captain's death, or had he become crazed at that time, some terrible tragedy unhinging his mind?

Fourthly, the granddaughter of Thompson, Ethel, and the son of Captain Wegg had been in love with each other, and people expected they would marry in time. But at his father's sudden death the boy fled and left his sweetheart without a word. Why--unless something had occurred that rendered their marriage impossible?

In the fifth place there was Old Hucks and his blind wife to be considered. What did they know about their old master's secret history? What tragic memories lurked beneath the man's perpetual smile and the woman's composed and sightless face?

Surely there was enough here to excite the curiosity and warrant an effort to untangle the mystery. And as instruments to the end there were several people available who could be of use to her; McNutt, the agent, who evidently knew more than he had cared to tell; Old Hucks and his wife and Ethel Thompson, the school-teacher. There might be others, but one or another of these four must know the truth, and it would be her pleasant duty to obtain a full disclosure. So she was anxious to begin her investigations at once.

When her uncle returned from his visit to the pigs Louise said to him:

"I've been thinking, dear, that we ought to call upon that young lady who arranged our rooms, and thank her for her kindness."

"That's true," he replied.

"Can't we drive over to Thompson's this morning, Uncle?"

"Beth and Patsy have planned a tramp to the lake, and a row after water-lilies."

"Then let us make our call together. We can invite the girl to come here and spend a day with us, when Patsy and Beth will be able to meet her."

"That's a good idea, Louise. I was wondering what I'd do this morning. Tell Old Hucks to get the nag harnessed."

The girl ran eagerly upon her errand. Old Hucks seemed surprised, and a curious expression showed for an instant through his smile. But he turned without a word to harness the horse.

Louise stood watching him.

"Your fingers are quite nimble, Thomas, considering the fact that you were once a sailor," she said.

"But sailors have to be nimble, miss," he returned, buckling a strap unmoved. "Who tol' ye I were once a sea-farin' man?"

"I guessed it."

As he appeared indisposed to say more on the subject she asked: "Did you sail with Captain Wegg?"

"Partly, miss. Dan's already now. Don't jerk the bit, fer his mouth's tender an' it makes him balky. Ef he balks jest let him rest a time, an' then speak to him. Dan ain't vicious; he's jest ornery."

She climbed into the dilapidated old buggy and took the reins. Dan groaned and ambled slowly around to where Uncle John stood awaiting his niece.

"Let me drive, Uncle," she said; "I understand Dan."

"Well, I don't," returned Uncle John, in his whimsical way, as he mounted to the seat beside her. "I don't understand how he's happened to live since the landing of Columbus, or what he's good for, or why someone don't knock him on the head."

Dan turned his long, lean face as if to give the speaker a reproachful look; then he groaned again, leaned forward, and drew the buggy slowly into the stony lane.

"Do you know where the Thompsons live?" inquired Uncle John.

"No. Whoa, Dan!"

That was the best thing the nag did. He knew how to whoa.

"Thomas!" called Uncle John, turning in his seat; and at the summons Old Hucks came from the barn and approached them. "How do you get to Miss Thompson's place?"

"Miss Ethel's?" Another fleeting expression of surprise.

"Yes; we're going over to thank her for her kindness to us."

"I--I'm 'most sure as she'll be here soon to call, sir. And--perhaps you oughtn't to--to go to--Thompson's," stammered Hucks, glancing up at them with his bright, elusive smile.

"Well, we're going, anyhow," growled Mr. Merrick.

"Then turn left at the main road an' keep straight ahead to Thompson's. Ye can't miss it, sir. Brick schoolhouse on the other corner."

"Thank you, Thomas. Drive on, Louise."