

CHAPTER VIII. - THE LITTLE SCHOOL-MA'AM.

Dan balked only twice on the journey, but even this moderate rebellion so annoyed Uncle John that he declared he would walk back rather than ride behind this "mulish antiquity" again.

When they came to the Thompson dwelling it at first sight seemed deserted. A knock on the front door failed to produce any response.

"Perhaps they're away from home," suggested Louise.

"There's a path around to the back," said Uncle John. "Let's explore in that direction."

They made their way leisurely toward the rear and had almost passed the house, when a deep roar broke the stillness. It was succeeded by another, and another, like the bellowing of a mad bull, and the intruders stopped short and Louise clung to her uncle in sudden panic.

"Be still, Will! Stop, I say--stop!"

A sharp crack, as of a lash, accompanied the words, and a moan or two was followed by absolute silence.

Uncle John and Louise looked at one another with startled eyes.

"He must be worse," said the old gentleman, mopping his forehead with a handkerchief.

With one accord they started softly to retrace their steps when a new sound halted them again. It was a clear, fresh young voice singing a plaintive ditty in a nonchalant, careless tone.

"That's Ethel, I'm sure," exclaimed Louise, grasping her uncle's arm.

"Well, what shall we do?" he demanded.

"Mr.--the crazy man seems quiet now," she whispered. "Let us find the girl, if we can."

So again they traversed the path and this time came to the pretty garden behind the house. Ethel was tending a flower bed. She wore her gingham dress and a sunbonnet, and, kneeling in the path, stretched out her slim brown arm to uproot the weeds. But the crunching of the gravel aroused

her attention, and, observing her visitors, she sprang up and hastened toward them.

Louise introduced her uncle and herself in her most pleasant and gracious way, and the school teacher led them to a garden bench and begged them to be seated.

"The day is lovely," she said, "and I always find my garden more cheerful than the house. Grandfather's illness makes the house unpleasant for strangers, too."

Louise was surprised at this frank reference, and Uncle John coughed to hide his embarrassment.

"I--I hope the invalid is--is improving," he said, doubtful whether he should say anything on the delicate subject or not.

"He is always the same, sir," was the quiet response. "I suppose they have told you that grandfather is a madman? Our great trouble is well known in this neighborhood."

"He is not dangerous. I suppose?" hazarded Uncle John, remembering the brutal bellowing.

"Oh, not at all. He is fully paralyzed from his waist down, poor grandfather, and can do no harm to anyone. But often his outbreaks are unpleasant to listen to," continued the girl, deprecatingly, as if suddenly conscious that they had overheard the recent uproar.

"Has he been--this way--for long?" inquired Louise.

"His mind has been erratic and unbalanced since I can remember," answered Ethel, calmly, "but he first became violent at the time Captain Wegg died, some three years ago. Grandfather was very fond of the Captain, and happened to be with him at the time of his sudden death. The shock drove him mad."

"Was he paralyzed before that time?" asked Louise, earnestly.

"No; but the paralysis followed almost immediately. The doctor says that a blood vessel which burst in the brain is responsible for both afflictions."

The pause that followed was growing awkward when Uncle John said, with an evident effort to change the subject:

"This is a fine old homestead."

"It is, indeed," responded Ethel, brightly, "and it enjoys the distinction of being one of the first houses built in the foothills. My great-grandfather was really the first settler in these parts and originally located his cabin where the mill now stands. 'Little Bill Thompson,' he was called, for he was a small, wiry man--very different from grandfather, who in his prime was a powerful man of over six feet. Little Bill Hill and Little Bill Creek were named after this pioneer great-grandsire, who was quite successful raising flocks of sheep on the plateau. Before he died he built this house, preferring the location to his first one."

"The garden is beautiful," said Louise, enthusiastically. "And do you teach in the little brick school-house across the way?"

"Yes. Grandfather built it years ago, without dreaming I would ever teach there. Now the county supports the school and pays me my salary."

"How long have you taught?"

"For two years. It is necessary, now that grandfather is disabled. He has a small income remaining, however, and with what I earn we get along very nicely."

"It was very good of you to assist in getting our house ready for us," said Louise. "We might have found things in sorry condition but for your kindness."

"Oh, I enjoyed the work, I assure you," replied Ethel. "As it is my vacation, it was a real pleasure to me to have something to do. But I fear my arrangement of your pretty furniture was very ungraceful."

"We haven't altered a single thing," declared Louise. "You must have found it a tedious task, unpacking and getting everything in shape."

"Tom and Nora were good help, because they are fond of me and seem to understand my wishes; and Peggy McNutt brought me some men to do the lifting and rough work," explained Ethel.

"Have you known Hucks and his wife long?" asked Uncle John.

"Since I can remember, sir. They came here many years ago, with Captain Wegg."

"And has Thomas always smiled?" Louise inquired.

"Always," was the laughing reply. "It's an odd expression--isn't it?--to dwell forever on a man's face. But Tom is never angry, or hurt or excited by anything, so there is no reason he should not smile. At the time of Captain Wegg's death and poor grandfather's terrible affliction, Old Hucks kept right on smiling, the same as ever; and perhaps his pleasant face helped to cheer us all."

Louise drew a long breath.

"Then the smile is a mask," she said, "and is assumed to conceal the man's real feelings."

"I do not think so," Ethel answered, thoughtfully. "The smile is habitual, and dominates any other expression his features might be capable of; but that it is assumed I do not believe. Thomas is a simple-minded, honest-hearted old fellow, and to face the world smilingly is a part of his religion. I am sure he has nothing to conceal, and his devotion to his blind wife is very beautiful."

"But Nora--how long has she been blind?"

"Perhaps all her life; I cannot tell how long. Yet it is wonderful how perfectly she finds her way without the aid of sight. Captain Wegg used to say she was the best housekeeper he ever knew."

"Did not his wife keep house for him, when she was alive?"

"I do not remember her."

"They say she was most unhappy."

Ethel dropped her eyes and did not reply.

"How about Cap'n Wegg?" asked Uncle John. "Did you like him? You see, we're mighty curious about the family, because we've acquired their old home, and are bound to be interested in the people that used to live there."

"That is natural," remarked the little school teacher, with a sigh.

"Captain Wegg was always kind to me; but the neighbors as a rule

thought him moody and bad-tempered." After a pause she added: "He was not as kind to his son as to me. But I think his life was an unhappy one, and we have no right to reprove his memory too severely for his faults."

"What made him unhappy?" asked Louise, quickly.

Ethel smiled into her eager face.

"No one has solved that problem, they say. The Captain was as silent as he was morose."

The detective instinct was alive in Louise. She hazarded a startling query:

"Who killed Captain Wegg?" she demanded, suddenly.

Another smile preceded the reply.

"A dreadful foe called heart disease. But come; let me show you my garden. There are no such roses as these for miles around."

Louise was confident she had made progress. Ethel had admitted several things that lent countenance to the suspicions already aroused; but perhaps this simple country girl had never imagined the tragedy that had been enacted at her very door.

She cordially urged Ethel Thompson to spend a day with them at the farm, and Uncle John, who was pleased with the modesty and frankness of the fair-haired little school teacher, earnestly seconded the invitation.

Then he thought of going home, and the thought reminded him of Dan.

"Do you know," he inquired, "where I could buy a decent horse?"

The girl looked thoughtful a moment; then glanced up with a bright smile.

"Will you buy one off me?" she asked.

"Willingly, my dear, if you've an animal to sell."

"It's--it's our Joe. He was grandfather's favorite colt when his trouble came upon him. We have no use for him now, for I always ride or drive my pony. And grandmother says he's eating his head off to no purpose;

so we'd like to sell him. If you will come to the barn I'll introduce you to him."

Joe proved on inspection to be an excellent horse, if appearances were to be trusted, and Ethel assured Mr. Merrick that the steed was both gentle and intelligent.

"Do you use that surrey?" inquired Uncle John, pointing to a neat vehicle that seemed to be nearly new.

"Very seldom, sir. Grandmother would like to sell it with the horse."

"It's exactly what I need," declared Mr. Merrick. "How much for Joe and his harness, and the surrey?"

"I'll go and ask what grandmother wants."

She returned after a few minutes, stating a figure that made Uncle John lift his brows with a comical expression.

"A hundred dollars! Do you take me for a brigand, little girl? I know what horses are worth, for I've bought plenty of 'em. Your Joe seems sound as a dollar, and he's just in his prime. A hundred and fifty is dirt cheap for him, and the surrey will be worth at least seventy-five. Put in the harness at twenty-five, and I'll give you two-fifty for the outfit, and not a cent more or less. Eh?"

"No, indeed," said Ethel. "We could not get more than a hundred dollars from anyone else around here."

"Because your neighbors are countrymen, and can't afford a proper investment. So when they buy at all they only give about half what a thing is actually worth. But I'll be honest with you. The price I offer is a good deal less than I'd have to pay in the city--Hutchinson would charge me five hundred, at least--and I need just what you've got to sell. What do you say, Miss Ethel?"

"The price is one hundred dollars, Mr. Merrick."

"I won't pay it. Let me talk with your grandmother."

"She does not see anyone, sir."

Louise looked up sharply, scenting another clue.

"Isn't she well, dear?" she asked in smooth tones.

"She looks after grandfather, and helps Aunt Lucy with the housework."

"Well, come, Louise; we'll go home," said Uncle John, sadly. "I'd hoped to be able to drive this fine fellow back, but Dan'll have to groan an' balk all the way to the farm."

Ethel smiled.

"Better buy at my price, Mr. Merrick," she suggested.

"Tell you what I'll do," he said, pausing. "I'll split the difference. Take two hundred and well call it a bargain."

"But I cannot do that, sir."

"It will help pay you for the hard work of fixing up the house," he rejoined, pleadingly. "Your bill wasn't half enough."

"My bill?" wonderingly.

"The one I paid McNutt for your services."

"I made no charge, sir. I could not accept anything for a bit of assistance to a neighbor."

"Oh! Then McNutt got it, did he?"

"I'm awfully sorry, Mr. Merrick. I told Peggy I would not accept payment."

"H-m. Never mind. We're not going to quarrel, little neighbor. May I hitch Joe to the surrey?"

"If you like. I'll help you."

Uncle John led Joe from his stall and together they harnessed the horse to the surrey. The girl knew better than the man how to buckle the straps properly, while Louise stood by helplessly and watched the performance.

Then Uncle John went for old Dan, whom he led, rickety buggy and all, into the Thompson stable.

"I'll send Hucks over to get him, although we might as well knock him in the head," he said as he unharnessed the ancient steed. "Now then, Louise, hop in."

"You'll be sure to come over Thursday, for the day, Miss Thompson?" asked Louise, taking Joe's reins from her uncle's hands.

"I'll not forget such a delightful engagement, be sure."

Uncle John had his pocketbook out, and now he wadded up some bills and thrust them into the little school teacher's hand.

"Drive ahead, Louise," he called. "Good morning, my dear. See you on Thursday."

As the vehicle rolled out of the yard and turned into the highway, Ethel unrolled the bills with trembling fingers.

"If he has dared--!" she began, but paused abruptly with a smile of content.

The rich man had given her exactly one hundred dollars.