

## **CHAPTER IX. - THE LIVES OF THE SAINTS.**

On Wednesday afternoon McNutt drove the sad-eyed sorrel mare over to the Wegg farm again. He had been racking his brain for a way to get more money out of the nabob, for the idea had become a veritable passion with him and now occupied all his thoughts.

That very morning an inspiration had come to him. Among other occupations he had at one time adopted that of a book-agent, and by dint of persistent energy had sold numerous copies of "Radford's Lives of the Saints" to the surrounding farmers. They had cost him ninety cents a copy and he had sold them at three dollars each, netting a fine profit in return for his labor. The books were printed upon cheap paper, fearfully illustrated with blurred cuts, but the covers were bound in bright red with gold lettering. Through misunderstandings three of these copies had come back to him, the subscribers refusing to accept them; and so thorough had been his canvassing that there remained no other available customers for the saintly works. So Peggy had kept them on a shelf in his "office" for several years, and now, when his eye chanced to light upon them, he gave a snort of triumph and pounced upon them eagerly. Mr. Merrick was a newcomer. Without doubt he could be induced to buy a copy of Radford's Lives.

An hour later McNutt was on his mission, the three copies, which had been carefully dusted, reclining on the buggy seat beside him. Arrived at the Wegg farm, he drove up to the stile and alighted.

Louise was reading in the hammock, and merely glanced at the little man, who solemnly stumped around to the back door with the three red volumes tucked underneath his arm. He had brought them all along to make his errand "look like business."

"Where's the nabob?" he asked blind Nora.

"What's that, Mr. McNutt?" she inquired, as if puzzled. She knew his voice, as she did that of nearly everyone with whom she had ever been brought in contact.

"Why, the nabob; the boss; Mr. Merrick."

"Oh. He's in the barn with Tom, I guess."

McNutt entered the barn. Uncle John was seated upon an overturned pail watching Old Hucks oil Joe's harness. The agent approached him with a deferential bow.

"Sir," said he, "you'll 'scuse my comin' agin so soon to be a-botherin'; but I hev here three copies of Radford's famis wucks on the Lives o' the Saints, in a edishun dee looks----"

"A what?"

"A edishun dee looks, which means extry fine. It's a great book an' they's all out'n print 'cept these three, which I hain't no doubt many folks would be glad to give their weight in gold fer, an' some over."

"Stand out of the light, McNutt."

The agent shifted his position.

"Them books, sir----"

"Oh, take 'em away."

"What!"

"I don't read novels."

McNutt scratched his head, perplexed at the rebuff. His "dee looks" speech had usually resulted in a sale. An idea flashed across his brain--perhaps evolved by the scratching.

"The young lady, sir--"

"Oh, the girls are loaded with books," growled the nabob.

The agent became desperate.

"But the young lady in the hammick, sir, as I jest now left, says to tell ye she wants one o' these books mighty bad, an' hopes you'll buy it for her eddificationing."

"Oh; she does, eh?"

"Mighty bad, sir."

Uncle John watched Thomas polish a buckle.

"Is it a moral work?" he asked.

"Nuthin' could be moraler, sir. All 'bout the lives o'--"

"How much is it?"

"Comes pretty high, sir. Three dollars. But it's--"

"Here. Take your money and get out. You're interrupting me."

"Very sorry, sir. Much obleeged, sir. Where'll I leave the book?"

"Throw it in the manger."

McNutt selected a volume that had a broken corner and laid it carefully on the edge of the oat-bin. Then he put his money in his pocket and turned away.

"Morn'n' to ye, Mr. Merrick."

"Stop a bit," said Uncle John, suddenly.

The agent stopped.

"I believe I paid you ten dollars for Miss Ethel Thompson's services. Is that correct?"

"Ye--yes, Mr. Merrick."

McNutt's heart was in his shoes and he looked guiltily at his accuser, the pale blue eyes bulging fearfully.

"Very well; see that she gets it."

"Of course, Mr. Merrick."

"And at once. You may go."

McNutt stumped from the barn. He felt that a dreadful catastrophe had overtaken him. Scarcely could he restrain the impulse to sob aloud. Ten dollars!--Ten dollars gone to the dogs as the result of his visit to the nabob that morning! To lose ten dollars in order to gain three was very bad business policy. McNutt reflected bitterly that he would have been better off had he stayed at home. He ought to have been contented with what he had already made, and the severe manner the nabob had used in addressing him told the agent plainly that he need not expect further pickings from this source.

In the midst of his despair the comforting thought that Ethel would surely refuse the money came to sustain him; so he recovered somewhat his former spirits. As he turned the corner of the house he observed Louise still reading in the hammock.

In some ways McNutt was a genius. He did not neglect opportunities.

"Here's my las' chance at these idjits," he muttered, "an' I'll learn thet nabob what it costs, to make Marsh McNutt stand out'n his light."

Then he hastened over to the hammock.

"Scuse me, miss," said he, in his most ingratiating voice. "Is yer uncle 'round anywheres?"

"Isn't he in the barn?" asked the girl, looking up.

"Can't find him, high ner low. But he ordered a book of me t'other day-- 'Radford's Lives o' the Saints'--an' perhaps you'll take it an' pay me the money, so's I kin go home."

Louise gazed at the man musingly. He was one of the people she intended to pump for information concerning the mystery of Captain Wegg, and she must be gracious to him in order to win his good-will and induce him to speak freely. With this thought in mind she drew out her purse and asked:

"How much were you to be paid for the book?"

"Three dollars, miss."

"Here is the money, then. Tell me--your name is McNutt, isn't it?--how long have you lived in this place?"

"All my life, miss. Thank 'e, miss. Good day to ye, miss."

He placed the book in the hammock beside her.

"Don't go, please." said the girl. "I'd like you to tell me something about Captain Wegg, and of his poor wife who died, and--"

"Nuther time, miss, I'll be glad to. Ye'll find me in my orfice, any time. Jest now I'm in the dumdest hurry ye ever knew. Good day to ye, miss," he repeated, and stumped quickly to the buggy awaiting him. Next

moment he had seized the reins and was urging the sorrel mare along the stony lane at her best pace.

Louise was both astonished and disappointed, but after a little thought she looked after the departing agent with a shrewd smile.

"He's afraid to talk," she murmured, "and that only confirms my suspicions that he knows more than he cares to tell."

Meantime McNutt was doing his best to get away from the premises before the discovery was made that he had sold two "Lives of the Saints" to one family. That there might be future consequences to follow his deception never occurred to him; only the immediate necessity for escape occupied his mind.

Nor were his fears altogether groundless. Turning his head from time to time for a glance behind, he had seen Mr. Merrick come from the barn with a red book in his hand and approach the hammock, whereupon the young lady arose and exhibited a second book. Then they both dropped the books and ran into the lane and began shouting for him to stop--the man's voice sounding especially indignant and imperative.

But McNutt chose to be deaf. He did not look around again, and was congratulating himself that he would soon be out of earshot when a sudden apparition ahead caused the mare to halt abruptly. It also caused the cold chills to run down the agent's back. Beth and Patsy had stepped into the lane from a field, being on their way home from their daily walk.

"They're calling to you, sir," said Patsy to the agent. "Didn't you hear them?"

"I--I'm a little deaf, miss," stammered McNutt, who recognized the young ladies as Mr. Merrick's nieces.

"I think they wish you to go back," remarked Beth, thoughtfully watching the frantic waves of Uncle John's chubby arms and Louise's energetic beckonings. They were too far off to be heard plainly, but their actions might surely be understood.

McNutt with reluctance looked over his shoulder, and a second shudder went through him.

"I hain't got time to go back," he said, as an inspiration came to him; "but I guess you kin do jest as well. This book here," picking up the last of the three from the seat, "I offered to sell yer uncle fer five dollars; but he wanted it fer four. I ain't no haggler, you understan', so I jest driv away. Now Mr. Merrick has changed his mind an' is willin' to give five fer it; but there ain't nuthin' small about me. Ef you gals'll jest give me the four dollars ye kin take the book to yer uncle, with my compliments; an' I won't hev t' go back. I'm in a drea'ful hurry."

Patsy laughed at the little man's excited manner.

"Fortunately I have some money with me," she said; "but you may as well take the five dollars, for unless Uncle had been willing to pay it he would not have called you back."

"I think so, myself, miss," he rejoined, taking the money and handing her the volume.

Uncle John and Louise, glaring at the distant group, saw the third red book change hands, and in answer to their renewed cries and gestures Patsy waved the "Lives of the Saints" at them reassuringly and came on at a brisk walk, followed by Beth.

McNutt slapped the sorrel with the ends of the reins so energetically that the mare broke into a trot, and before the girls had come within speaking distance of their uncle, the agent was well out of sight and exulting in the possession of eleven dollars to pay for his morning's work. Even if Ethel accepted that ten, he reflected, he would still be a dollar ahead. But he was sure she would tell him to keep it; and he'd "jest like to see thet air nabob git a penny back agin."

Meantime Uncle John's wrath, which was always an effervescent quality with the little gentleman, had changed to wonder when he saw his nieces approaching with the third red-and-gold book. Louise was leaning against the rail fence and laughing hysterically, and suddenly a merry smile appeared and spread over her uncle's round face as he said:

"Did you ever hear of such an audacious swindle in all your born days?"

"What will you do, Uncle?" asked the girl, wiping the tears of merriment from her eyes. "Have the man arrested?"

"Of course not, my dear. It's worth the money just to learn what talents the fellow possesses. Tell me, Patsy," he continued, as the other nieces joined them, "what did you pay for your book?"

"Five dollars. Uncle. He said--"

"Never mind what he said, my dear. It's all right. I wanted it to add to my collection. So far I've got three 'Lives of the Saints'--and I'm thankful they're not cats, or there'd be nine lives for me to accumulate."