

CHAPTER X. - THE MYSTERY DEEPENS.

Ethel Thompson came over the next day, as she had promised, and the sweet-faced, gentle school-mistress won the hearts of Uncle John's three nieces without an effort. She was the eldest of them all, but her retired country life had kept her fresh and natural, and Ethel seemed no more mature than the younger girls except in a certain gravity that early responsibility had thrust upon her.

Together the four laughing, light-hearted maids wandered through the pines, where the little school-ma'am showed them many pretty nooks and mossy banks that the others had not yet discovered. By following an unsuspected path, they cut across the wooded hills to the waterfall, where Little Bill Creek made a plunge of twenty feet into a rocky basin below. In spite of the bubbles, the water here showed clear as crystal, and the girls admiringly christened it the "Champagne Cup." They shed their shoes and stockings and waded in the pool, enjoying the sport with shrieks of merry laughter--more because they were happy than that there was anything to laugh at.

Afterward they traced the stream down to a lovely glade a half mile above Millville, where Ethel informed them the annual Sunday-school picnic was always held, and then trailed across the rocky plateau to the farm. By the time they reached home their appetites were well sharpened for Mary's excellent luncheon, and the afternoon was devoted to rest under the shady pines that grew beside the house.

It was now, when they felt thoroughly acquainted and at ease in one another's society, that the girls indulged in talks concerning events in their past, and Ethel was greatly interested in the nieces' recital of their recent trip abroad with Uncle John. They also spoke frankly of their old life together at Elmhurst, where Aunt Jane, who was Uncle John's sister, had congregated her three nieces for the purpose of choosing from among them one to inherit her vast estates. It seemed no source of regret to any of them that a boy, Kenneth Forbes, had finally succeeded to Aunt Jane's property, and this may be explained by the fact that Uncle John had at that interesting juncture appeared to take charge of the nieces. It was quite evident that the eccentric but kindly old fellow had succeeded in making these three girls as happy as their dispositions would allow them to be.

After the most interesting phases of their personal history had been discussed, the nieces began, perhaps unconsciously, to draw from Ethel her own story. It was simple enough, and derived its interest mainly from the fact that it concerned their new friend. Her parents had both passed away while she was young, and Ethel had always lived with her father's father, big Will Thompson, a man reputed very well-to-do for this section, and an energetic farmer from his youth.

Old Will had always been accused of being unsociable and considering himself above the neighboring farmers; and it was true that Bob West, the implement dealer, was his only associate before Captain Wegg arrived. A casual acquaintance with the Millville people might easily explain this.

With the advent of the Weggs, however, a strong friendship seemed to spring up between the retired sea captain and the bluff, erratic old farmer, which lasted until the fatal day when one died and the other became a paralytic and a maniac.

"We have always thought," said Ethel, "that the shock of the Captain's death unsettled my grandfather's mind. They had been sitting quietly in Captain Wegg's room one evening, as they were accustomed to do, when there was a sudden fall and a cry. Thomas ran in at once, and found grandfather raving over the Captain's dead body. The old seaman had heart disease, it seems, and had often declared he would die suddenly. It was a great blow to us all, but especially to Joe."

Her voice softened at this last remark, and Patsy exclaimed, impulsively:

"Tell us about Joe Wegg. Did you like him?"

"Yes," said Ethel, simply; "we were naturally thrown much together in our childhood, and became staunch friends. Grandpa often took me with him on his visits to the Weggs, and sometimes, but not often, the Captain would bring Joe to see us. He was a quiet, thoughtful boy; much like his mother, I imagine; but for some reason he had conceived an intense dislike for his father and an open hatred for this part of the country, where he was born. Aside from these morbid notions, Joe was healthy-minded and frank and genuine. Had he been educated in any other atmosphere than the gloomy one of the Wegg household I am sure Joe's character would have been wholly admirable, and I have never blamed the boy much for his peculiarities. Captain Wegg would not

permit him to go to school, but himself attended to such instructions as Joe could acquire at home, and this was so meager and the boy so ambitious that I think it was one cause of his discontent. I remember, when I was sent to school at Troy, that Joe sobbed for days because he could not have the same advantages. He used to tell me wonderful stories of what he would accomplish if he could only get out into the world.

"When he implored his father to let him go away, Captain Wegg used to assure Joe that he would some day be rich, and there was no need of his preparing himself for either a business or a profession; but that did not satisfy Joe's ambition, as you may imagine. And, when the end came, scarcely a dollar of money could be found among the Captain's possessions, and no other property than this farm; so it is evident he deceived his son for some selfish purpose.

"Joe was at last free, and the only thing I reproach him for is going away without a word to me or any of his friends. I heard, indirectly, of his working his way through a technical school, for he was always crazy about mechanics, and then he went to New York and I lost all further trace of him."

"What do you suppose became of Captain Wegg's money?" asked Louise.

"I've no idea. It is a singular thing that most of my grandfather's savings disappeared at the same time. On account of his mental condition he can never tell us what became of his little fortune; but luckily the returns from the farm, which we rent on shares, and my own salary as teacher of the district school, enable us to live quite comfortably, although we must be economical."

"Why, it's really a romance!" cried Patsy, who had listened eagerly.

"There are many romances in real life," added Beth, in her undemonstrative way.

Louise said nothing, but her heart was throbbing with excitement engendered by the tale, which so strongly corroborated the suspicions she had begun to entertain. When Ethel had gone home Louise still deliberated upon this fascinating mystery, and her resolve grew to force some sort of an explanation from the smiling lips of Old Hucks. For the sole available witness of that fatal night's tragedy, when one strong man

died and another was driven mad, was Thomas Hucks. The old servitor was also in a position to know much of the causes leading up to the catastrophe, he having been the confidential retainer of Captain Wegg for many years. Hucks must speak; but the girl was wise enough to realize that he would not do so unless urged by coaxing or forced by strategy. There was doubtless good reason why the old man had remained silent for three years. Her plan was to win his confidence. Interest him in Joe's welfare, and then the truth must come out.

The frankly related story of Ethel had supplied Louise with the motive for the crime, for that a crime had been committed she was now doubly sure. Captain Wegg had money; old Will Thompson had money; both were well-to-do men. In a retired country district, where there were no banks, it was reasonable to suppose they kept large sums of money on hand, and the knowledge of this fact had tempted some one to a dreadful deed. Captain Wegg had been killed and old Thompson perhaps injured by a blow upon the head from which he had never recovered. Any suspicion the fair young detective may have entertained that Thompson himself had killed his friend was eradicated by the fact that he had been robbed at the same time.

Louise had originally undertaken her investigation through curiosity and a desire to amuse herself by unveiling the mystery. Now she began to reflect that she was an instrument of justice, for a discovery of the truth might restore a fortune to poor Joe Wegg, now struggling with the world, and put sweet Ethel Thompson in a position where the necessity for her to teach school would be abolished. This thought added a strong impulse to her determination to succeed.

Sunday afternoon the girl took blind Nora for a long drive through the country, taking pains to explain to her all the points of interest they came to, and delighting the old woman with her bright chatter. Louise had been kind to Nora from the beginning, and her soft, sympathetic voice had quite won the poor creature's heart.

On the way home, in the delightful summer twilight, the girl dexterously led the conversation toward Nora's past history.

"Was Thomas a sailor when you married him?" she asked.

"Yes, miss. He were bos'n on Cap'n Wegg's schooner the 'Lively Kate,' an' I were livin' with Miss Mary, as come to be Mrs. Wegg arterward."

"Oh, I see. And were you blind then, Nora?"

"No, miss. I went blind arter our great trouble come to us."

"Trouble? Oh, I'm so sorry, dear. What was it?"

The old woman was silent for a time. Then she said:

"I'd better not mention it, I guess. Thomas likes to forgit, an' when I gets cryin' an' nervous he knows I've been thinkin' 'bout the old trouble."

Louise was disappointed, but changed the subject adroitly.

"And Miss Mary, who was afterward Mrs. Wegg. Did you love her, Nora?"

"Indeed I did, child."

"What was she like?"

"She were gentle, an' sweet, an' the mos' beautiful creetur in all--in--in the place where we lived. An' her fambily was that proud an' aristocratic thet no one could tech 'em with a ten-foot pole."

"I see. Did she love Captain Wegg?"

"Nat'rally, sense she married of him, an' fit all her fambily to do it. An' the Cap'n were thet proud o' her thet he thought the world lay in her sweet eyes."

"Oh. I had an idea he didn't treat her well," remarked the girl, soberly.

"That's wrong," declared Nora, promptly. "Arter the trouble come--fer it come to the Weggs as well as to Tom an' me--the Cap'n sort o' lost heart to see his Mary cry day arter day an' never be comforted. He were hard hit himself, ye see, an' that made it a gloomy house, an' no mistake."

"Do you mean after you moved here, to the farm?"

"Yes, deary."

"I hear Captain Wegg was very fond of Ethel's grandfather," continued Louise, trying to find an opening to penetrate old Nora's reserve.

"They was good friends always," was the brief reply.

"Did they ever quarrel, Nora?"

"Never that I knows of."

"And what do you suppose became of their money?" asked the girl.

"I don't know, child. Air we gettin' near home?"

"We are quite near, now. I wish you would open your heart to me, and tell me about that great trouble, Nora. I might be able to comfort you in some way."

The blind woman shook her head.

"There's no comfort but in forgettin'," she said; "an' the way to forgit ain't to talk about it."

The unsatisfactory result of this conversation did not discourage Louise, although she was sorry to meet with no better success. Gradually she was learning the inside history of the Weggs. When she discovered what that "great trouble" had been she would secure an important clue in the mystery, she was sure. Nora might some time be induced to speak more freely, and it was possible she might get the desired information from Old Hucks. She would try, anyway.

A dozen theories might be constructed to account for this "great trouble." The one that Louise finally favored was that Captain Wegg had been guilty of some crime on the high seas in which his boatswain, Old Hucks, was likewise implicated. They were obliged to abandon the sea and fly to some out-of-the-way corner inland, where they could be safely hidden and their whereabouts never discovered. It was the knowledge of this crime, she conjectured, that had ruined sweet Mrs. Wegg's life and made her weep day after day until her guilty husband became surly and silent and unsociable.

Louise now began to cultivate Thomas, but her progress was slow. Patsy seemed to be the old man's favorite, and for some reason he became glum and uncommunicative whenever Louise was around. The girl suspected that Nora had told her husband of the recent conversation, in spite of her assertion that she wished to avoid all reference to their great trouble.