

CHAPTER XI. - THREE AMATEUR DETECTIVES.

Puzzling her brain what to do next, Louise suddenly decided to confide her secret to her two cousins. Not that she considered them capable of a greater success than she could herself accomplish, but they might prove valuable assistants in the capacity of lieutenants. She had great respect for Beth's calm judgment and keen intuitions, and Patsy had a way of accomplishing difficult things with ease.

The two girls listened to Louise with expressions of mingled wonder and amusement while she confided to them her first suspicions that Captain Wegg had been murdered, and then the bits of information she had gathered to strengthen the surmise and assure her she was justified in her efforts to untangle the web of mystery.

"You see, my dears," she explained, impressively, as the three lounged upon the grass in the shade of the right wing of the house, "there is a very interesting story about these people that ought to guide us directly to a solution of the puzzle. A roving sea captain marries a girl of good family in spite of the opposition of her relatives. His boatswain, a confidential servant, marries the girl's maid. The next thing we know is that a 'great trouble' causes them to flee--doubtless some crime committed by the captain. It may have been robbery, or perhaps piracy on the high seas; who knows? Anyhow, he steals away to this forsaken spot, far from the sea or the railroads, and builds a fine house on a worthless farm, showing that he has money, but that retirement is his main object. Here the Weggs make no friends: but the wife cries her eyes out until she dies miserably, leaving a son to the tender mercies of a wicked father. So fearful is he of discovery that he will not allow the boy to go to school, but tries to educate him himself."

"Probably the captain's real name was not Wegg, at all," suggested Patsy, entering into the spirit of the relation.

"Probably not, dear. He would assume some name, of course, so that it might be more difficult to trace him," answered Louise. "But now--mark me well, girls!--a Nemesis was on the track of this wicked sinner. After many years the man Captain Wegg had wronged, or stolen from, or something, discovered his enemy's hiding place. He promptly killed the Captain, and probably recovered the money, for it's gone. Old Thompson,

Ethel's grandfather, happened to be present. The murderer also took his money, and--"

"Oh, Louise! That isn't reasonable," objected Beth, who had been following the story carefully.

"Why not?"

"Because you are making the wronged party as wicked as the man who wronged him. When the avenger found his enemy he might force him to give up his ill-gotten gains; I agree with you there; but he wouldn't be liable to rob old Thompson, I'm sure."

"Beth is right," said Patsy, stoutly.

"But old Thompson lost his money at the same time, you know; at least his money could never be found afterward. And I'm sure he was dealt some blow on the head that made him crazy," answered Louise, positively.

They thought that over.

"I believe I can explain it, girls," said Beth, presently. "The avenger found Captain Wegg, all right--just as Louise has said--and when he found him he demanded a restitution of his money, threatening to send the criminal to jail. That would be very natural, wouldn't it? Well, Captain Wegg had spent a good deal of the money, and couldn't pay it all back; so Ethel's grandfather, being his friend, offered to makeup the balance himself rather than see his friend go to prison. That accounts for the disappearance of all the money."

"If that is so," observed Patsy, "I don't see why the man, having got his money back, should murder one and knock the other on the head."

It was a puzzle, they all acknowledged, and after discussing the matter from every conceivable standpoint they were no nearer an explanation. That's the way with mysteries; they're often hard to understand.

"The only thing that occurs to me as being sensible," said Louise, finally, "is that after the money was paid over they got into a quarrel. Then the avenger lost his temper and committed the murders."

"This talk about an avenger is all guess work," asserted Beth, calmly. "I don't believe the facts point to an avenger at all."

"But the old crime--the great trouble--"

"Oh, we'll allow all that," returned Beth; "and I don't say that an avenger wouldn't be the nicest person to exact retribution from the wicked captain. But avengers don't always turn up, in real life, when they ought to, girls; so we mustn't be too sure that one turned up in this case."

"But now else can you account for the captain's murder?" objected Louise.

"Well, some one else might know he had money, and that Ethel's grandfather had money, too," was the reply. "Suppose the robbery and murder had nothing to do with the old crime at all, but that the murderer knew this to be a deserted place where he could make a good haul without being discovered. The two old men sat in the right wing, quite unsuspecting, when----"

"When in walks Mr. Murderer, chokes the captain, knocks his friend on the brain-box, and makes off with the money!" continued Patsy, gleefully. "Oh, girls, I'm sure we've got it right this time."

Louise reflected a moment.

"This country is almost a wilderness," she mused, aloud, "and few strangers ever come here. Besides, a stranger would not know positively that these two men had money. If we abandon the idea of an avenger, and follow Beth's clue, then the murderer is still right here in Millville, and unsuspected by any of his neighbors."

"Oh, Louise!" with startled glances over their shoulders.

"Let us be sensible, reasoning girls; not silly things trying to figure out possible romances," continued Louise, with a pretty and impressive assumption of dignity. "Do you know, I feel that some angel of retribution has guided us to this lonely farmhouse and put the idea into my head to discover and expose a dreadful crime."

"Succotash!" cried Patsy, irrelevantly. "You're romancing this minute, Louise. The way you figure things out I wouldn't be surprised if you accused me, or Uncle John, any time during the next half hour. Adopting your last supposition, for the sake of argument, I'm interested to know what inhabitant of sleepy old Millville you suspect."

"Don't get flighty, Patricia," admonished Beth. "This is a serious matter, and Louise is in earnest. If we're going to help her we mustn't talk rubbish. Now, it isn't a bad suggestion that we ought to look nearer home for the key to this mystery. There's old Hucks."

"Hucks!"

"To be sure. No one knew so well as he the money affairs of the two men who were robbed."

"I'm ashamed of you," said Patsy.

"And the man's smile is a mask!" exclaimed Louise.

"Oh, no!" protested Patsy.

"My dear, no person who ever lived could smile every minute, winter and summer, rain or shine, day and night, and always have a reason for the smile."

"Of course not," agreed Beth. "Old Hucks is a curious character. I realized that when I had known him five minutes."

"But he's poor," urged Patsy, in defense of the old man. "He hasn't a penny in the world, and McNutt told me if we turned Thomas and Nora away they'd have to go to the poorhouse."

"That is no argument at all," said Louise, calmly. "If we consider the fact that Old Hucks may be a miser, and have a craving for money without any desire to spend it, then we are pretty close to a reason why he should bide his time and then murder his old master to obtain the riches he coveted. Mind you, I don't say Hucks is guilty, but it is our duty to consider this phase of the question."

"And then," added Beth, "if Hucks should prove to be a miser, it is easy to guess he would hide his wealth where he could secretly gloat over it, and still continue to pose as a pauper."

"I don't believe it," said Patsy, stoutly.

"You'll never make a successful detective if you allow your personal feelings to influence you," returned Louise. "I, too, sincerely hope that Thomas is innocent; but we are not justified in acquitting him until we have made a careful investigation and watched his actions."

"I'm quite sure he's connected with the mystery in some way," said Beth. "It will do no harm to watch Old Hucks, as Louise suggests."

"And you might try to pump him, Patsy, and see if you can get him to talk of the murder. Some careless remark might give us just the clue we need and guide us to the real criminal. That would free Thomas from all suspicion, you see."

"But why do you ask me to do this?" demanded Patsy. "Thomas and I are good friends, and I'd feel like a traitor to try to get him to confess a murder."

"If he is innocent, you have done no harm," said her eldest cousin; "and if he is guilty you don't want him for your friend."

"He likes you, dear," added Beth, "and perhaps he will tell you frankly all we want to know. There's another person, though, Louise, who might tell us something."

"Who is that?"

"The little man with the golf-ball eyes; McNutt."

"Now, there's some sense in suspecting him," exclaimed Patsy. "We know he's a robber, already, and a man who is clever enough to sell Uncle John three 'Lives of the Saints' would stick at nothing, I'm sure."

"He hasn't enough courage to commit a great crime," observed Beth.

"But he may be able to give us some information," Louise asserted; "so I propose we walk over to the town tomorrow morning and interview him."

This was promptly agreed to, for even Patsy, the least enthusiastic detective of the three, was eager to find some sort of a solution of the Wegg mystery. Meantime they decided to watch Old Hucks very carefully.

Beth happened to be present when Uncle John paid Thomas his weekly wage that evening, and was interested to notice how the old man's hand trembled with eagerness as he took the money.

"How much are you accustomed to receive?" Uncle John had asked.

"Nothing 'tall, sir, since Cap'n Wegg died," was the reply. "We was glad enough to have a home, Nora an' me, 'thout 'spectin' wages."

"And there was no one here for you to serve," mused Uncle John. "But in Captain Wegg's day, how much did he give you?"

Thomas hesitated, and his smile wavered an instant.

"My old master was also my old friend," said he, in a low voice; "an' I ast him fer little money because my needs were little."

"Well, the conditions are now different," remarked Uncle John, carelessly; "and while you are in my employ you shall have your wages regularly. Will ten dollars a week be satisfactory?"

"Oh, sir!"

"And five for Nora."

"You are too good, sir. I--I--"

"Never mind, Thomas. If you want more at any time let me know."

It was then, as the old man took the fifteen dollars extended to him, that Beth noted a flash in the mild blue eyes and a trembling of the horny hands. Hucks was very glad to get the money; there was little doubt of that.

She spoke of this incident to Louise, and the following morning they tested the man again. All three girls being present, Beth tendered Old Hucks two dollars, saying it was intended as a slight mark of her appreciation of his attention. Thomas demurred at first, but on being urged took the money with the same eager gesture he had before displayed. Louise followed with a donation of a like sum, and Patsy gave the old man still another two dollar bill. This generosity so amazed him that tears stood in his eyes as he tried to thank them all. It was noticed that the smile did not give way even to the tears, although it was tinged with a pathetic expression that proved wonderfully affecting. He concealed the offerings with a stealthy motion, as if ashamed of his weakness in accepting them, and then hurried away to his work.

"Well," said Louise, when they were alone, "is Thomas a miser or not?"

"He clutched the money almost as if he loved it," observed Beth, in a musing and slightly regretful tone.

"But think how poor he has been," pleaded Patsy, "and how destitute both he and Nora are yet. Can we blame him for being glad to earn something substantial at last?"

Somehow that did not seem to explain fully the old man's behavior, and the girl who had championed him sighed and then gave a sudden shiver as she remembered the awful suspicion that had fallen upon this strange individual. If the proof must be accepted that Hucks had miserly instincts, had not Beth accidentally stumbled upon a solution of the whole mystery?

But Patsy would not believe it. If Thomas' open countenance lied, it was hard to put faith in any one.