

CHAPTER XII. - THE BAITING OF PEGGY M'NUTT.

By this time the three nieces were so thoroughly impressed with the importance of the task they had undertaken that more ordinary things failed to interest them. Louise longed to solve the mystery. Beth wanted to punish the wrongdoers. Patsy yearned to exonerate the friends whom she imagined unjustly accused. Therefore the triple alliance for detective purposes was a strong one.

By mutual agreement they kept the matter secret from Uncle John, for they realized what a triumph it would be to surprise the old gentleman with proofs of their cleverness. To confide in him now would mean to invite no end of ridicule or good natured raillery, for Uncle John had not a grain of imagination or romance in his nature and would be unable to comprehend the delights of this secret investigation.

Because he was in the dark the significant looks and unnatural gravity of his nieces in the succeeding days puzzled the poor man greatly.

"What's wrong, girls?" he would ask. "Aren't you happy here? Do you miss anything you'd like? Is it too quiet and dull at Millville to suit you?"

"Oh, no!" they would exclaim. "We are having a splendid time, and would not leave the farm for anything."

And he often noticed them grouped in isolated places and conversing in low, eager tones that proved "something was up." He felt somewhat grieved that he was not their confidant, since these girls and their loyal affection for him constituted the chief joy of his life. When he put on his regulation fishing costume and carried his expensive rod and reel, his landing net and creel to the brook for a day's sport, he could no longer induce one of his girls to accompany him. Even Patsy pleaded laughingly that she had certain "fish to fry" that were not to be found in the brook.

Soon the three nieces made their proposed visit to McNutt, their idea being to pump that individual until he was dry of any information he might possess concerning the Wegg mystery. They tramped over to the village after breakfast one morning and found the agent seated on the porch before his little "office," by which name the front room of his cottage was dignified. He was dressed in faded overalls, a checked shirt and a broad-brimmed cheap straw hat. His "off foot," as he called it with

grim humor, was painted green and his other foot was bare and might have been improved in color. Both these extremities rested on the rail of the porch, while McNutt smoked a corncob pipe and stared at his approaching visitors with his disconcerting, protruding eyes.

"Good morning, Mr. McNutt," said Louise, pleasantly. "We've come to see if you have any books to sell."

The agent drew a long breath. He had at first believed they had come to reproach him for his cruel deception; for although his conscience was wholly dormant, he had at times been a bit uneasy concerning his remarkable book trade.

"Uncle is making a collection of the 'Lives of the Saints.'" announced Patsy, demurely. "At present he has but three varieties of this work, one with several pages missing, another printed partly upside down, and a third with a broken corner. He is anxious to secure some further variations of the 'dee looks' Lives, if you can supply them."

Peggy's eyes couldn't stare any harder, so they just stared.

"I--I hain't got no more on hand," he stammered, fairly nonplussed by the remarkable statement.

"No more? Oh, how sad. How disappointed we are," said Beth.

"We were depending so much on you. Mr. McNutt," added Louise, in a tone of gentle reproach.

McNutt wiggled the toes of his good foot and regarded them reflectively. These city folks were surely the "easiest marks" he had ever come across.

"Ef ye could wait a few days," he began, hopefully, "I might----"

"Oh, no; we can't possibly wait a single minute," declared Patsy. "Unless Uncle can get the Saints right away he will lose interest in the collection, and then he won't care for them at all."

McNutt sighed dismally. Here was a chance to make good money by fleecing the lambs, yet he was absolutely unable to take advantage of it.

"Ye--ye couldn't use any duck eggs, could ye?" he said, a sudden thought seeming to furnish him with a brilliant idea.

"Duck eggs?"

"I got the dum-twistedest, extry fine lot o' duck eggs ye ever seen."

"But what can we do with duck eggs?" inquired Beth, wonderingly, while Patsy and Louise tried hard not to shriek with laughter.

"W'y, set 'em under a hen, an' hatch 'em out."

"Sir," said Beth, "I strongly disapprove of such deceptions. It seems to me that making a poor hen hatch out ducks, under the delusion that they are chickens, is one of the most cruel and treacherous acts that humanity can be guilty of. Imagine the poor thing's feelings when her children take to water! I'm surprised you could suggest such a wicked use for duck eggs."

McNutt wiggled his toes again, desperately.

"Can't use any sas'frass roots, can ye?"

"No, indeed; all we crave is the 'Lives of the Saints.'"

"Don't want to buy no land?"

"What have you got to sell?"

"Nuth'n, jest now. But ef ye'll buy I kin git 'most anything."

"Don't go to any trouble on our account, sir; we are quite content with our splendid farm."

"Shoo! Thet ain't no good."

"Captain Wegg thought it was," answered Louise, quickly seizing this opening. "Otherwise he would not have built so good a house upon it."

"The Cap'n were plumb crazy," declared the agent, emphatically. "He didn't want ter farm when he come here; he jest wanted to hide."

The girls exchanged quick glances of intelligence.

"Why?"

"Why?" repeated McNutt. "Thet's a thing what's puzzled us fer years, miss. Some thinks Wegg were a piret; some thinks he kidnaped thet pretty wife o' his'n an' took her money; some thinks he tried to rob ol' Will Thompson, an' Will killed him an' then went crazy hisself. There's all sorts o' thinks goin' 'round; but who knows?"

"Don't you, Mr. McNutt?"

The agent was flattered by the question. As he had said, the Weggs had formed the chief topic of conversation in Millville for years, and no one had a more vivid interest in their history than Marshall McMahon McNutt. He enjoyed gossiping about the Weggs almost as much as he did selling books.

"I never thought I had no call to stick my nose inter other folkses privit doin's," he said, after a few puffs at the corncob pipe. "But they kain't hide much from Marsh McNutt, when he has his eyes open."

Patsy wondered if he could possibly close them. The eyelids seemed to be shy and retiring.

"I seen what I seen," continued the little man, glancing impressively at his attentive audience. "I seen Cap'n Wegg livin' without workin', fer he never lifted a hand to do even a chore. I seen him jest settin' 'round an' smokin' his pipe an' a glowerin' like a devil on ev'ryone thet come near. Say, once he ordered me off'n his premises--me!"

"What a dreadful man," said Patsy. "Did he buy any 'Lives of the Saints?'"

"Not a Life. He made poor Ol' Hucks fetch an' carry fer him ev'ry blessid minnit, an' never paid him no wages."

"Are you sure?" asked Louise.

"Sure as shootin'. Hucks hain't never been seen to spend a cent in all the years he's been here."

"Hasn't he sold berries and fruit since the Captain's death?"

"Jest 'nough to pay the taxes, which ain't much. Ye see, young Joe were away an' couldn't raise the tax money, so Ol' Hucks had to. But how they got enough ter live on, him an' Nora, beats me."

"Perhaps Captain Wegg left some money," suggested Patsy.

"No; when Joe an' Hucks ransacked the house arter the Cap'n's death they couldn't find a dollar. Cur'ous. Plenty o' money till he died, 'n' then not a red cent. Curiouser yet. Ol' Will Thompson's savin's dis'peared, too, an' never could be located to this day."

"Were they robbed, do you suppose?" asked Louise.

"Nat'rally. But who done it? Not Ol' Hucks, fer he's too honest, an' hasn't showed the color of a nickel sense. Not Joe; 'cause he had to borrow five dollars of Bob West to git to the city with. Who then?"

"Perhaps," said Louise, slowly, "some burglar did it."

"Ain't no burglars 'round these parts."

"I suppose not. Only book agents," remarked Beth.

McNutt flushed.

"Do ye mean as I did it?" he demanded, angrily. "Do ye mean as I killed Cap'n Wegg an' druv Ol' Will crazy, an' robbed the house?"

His features were fairly contorted, and his colorless eyes rolled fearfully.

"If you did," said Beth, coolly, "you would be sure to deny it."

"I kin prove a alybi," answered the little man, calming down somewhat. "I kin prove my ol' woman had me locked up in the chicken-coop that night 'cause I wouldn't split a lot o' cordwood that were full o' knots." He cast a half fearful glance over his shoulder toward the interior of the cottage.

"Next day I split 'em," he added, mildly.

"Perhaps," said Louise, again, "someone who knew Captain Wegg in the days before he came here followed him to his retreat and robbed and murdered him."

"Now ye've hit the nail on the head!" cried the agent, slapping his fat thigh energetically. "Thet's what I allus claimed, even when Bob West jest shook his head an' smiled sort o' superior like."

"Who is Bob West?" asked Louise, with interest.

"He's our implement man, an' hardware dealer. Bob were the on'y one o' the Millville folks that could git along with Cap'n Wegg, an' even he didn't manage to be any special friend. Bob's rich, ye know. Rich as blazes. Folks do say he's wuth ten thousan' dollars; but it don't set Bob up any. He jest minds his business an' goes on sellin' plows an' harvesters to the farmers an' takin' notes fer 'em."

"And you say he knew Captain Wegg well?" inquired Patsy.

"Better 'n' most folks 'round here did. Once er twicet a year the Cap'n 'd go to Bob's office an' set around an' smoke his pipe. Sometimes Bob would go to the farm an' spend an' ev'nin'; but not often. Ol' Will Thompson might be said to be the on'y friend the Cap'n really hankered fer."

"I'd like to meet Mr. West," said Louise, casting a shrewd look at her cousins. For here was another clue unearthed.

"He's in his store now." remarked McNutt, "Last buildin' on the left. Ye can't miss it."

"Thank you. Good morning, sir."

"Can't use any buttermilk er Dutch cheese?"

"No, thank you."

McNutt stared after them disconsolately. These girls represented so much money that ought to be in his pockets, and they were, moreover, "innercent as turtle doves"; but he could think of no way to pluck their golden quills or even to arrest their flight.

"Well, let 'em go," he muttered. "This thing ain't ended yit."