

#### **CHAPTER XIV. - THE MAJOR IS PUZZLED.**

Ethel came frequently to visit the girls at the Wegg farm, and at such times Uncle John treated her with the same affectionate consideration he bestowed upon his nieces, and made her so cordially welcome that the little school teacher felt entirely at her ease. The girls did not confide to Ethel their investigation of the Wegg mystery, but in all other matters gave her their full confidence. Together they made excursions to the Falls, to the natural caves on the rocky hill called Mount Parnassus, or rowed on the lake, or walked or drove, as the mood seized them. But mostly they loved the shade of the pines and the broad green beside the quaint mansion Captain Wegg had built, and which now contained all the elements of a modern summer home.

Once Louise asked Ethel, casually, if she knew what "great trouble" had come to Hucks and his wife in their early life, but the girl frankly answered that the old people had never referred to anything of the kind in her presence.

Finally a telegram announced the arrival of Major Doyle to join the party at the farm. Patsy was in the seventh heaven of delight, and drove Joe over to the Junction to meet her father on the arrival of the morning train.

The Major was a prime favorite with all the party and his coming infused new life into the household. He was the type of educated, polished, open-hearted Irish gentleman it is always a delight to meet, and Uncle John beamed upon his brother-in-law in a way that betokened a hearty welcome. It was a source of much satisfaction to lug the Major over the farm and prove to him how wise Mr. Merrick had been in deciding to spend the summer on his own property; and the Major freely acknowledged that he had been in error and the place was as charming as anyone could wish. It was a great treat to the grizzled old warrior to find himself in the country, away from every responsibility of work, and he promised himself a fortnight of absolute rest, with the recreation of beholding his beloved Patsy as often as he pleased.

Of course, the girl would tell her father about the Wegg mystery, for Patsy had a habit of telling him everything; therefore the cousins decided to take the Major freely into their confidence, so as to obtain the benefit

of his opinion. That could not be done the first day, of course, for on that day Uncle John insisted on displaying the farm and afterward carrying the Major a willing prisoner to watch him fish in the brook. But on the following morning the girls surrounded Patsy's father and with solemn faces recounted their suspicions, the important clues they had unearthed, and their earnest desire to right the great wrong that had been done by apprehending the criminal.

The Major smoked his after breakfast cigar and listened attentively. The story, told consecutively, was quite impressive. In spite of his long experience in buffeting the world, the old soldier's heart was still as simple as that of a child, and the recital awakened his sympathies at once.

"'Tis evident, me children," said he, in his quaint way, "that you've shtumbled on the inside of a crime that doesn't show on the outside. Many of the things you mention are so plain that he who runs may read; but I've remarked that it's just the things ye don't suspect in real life that prove to be the most important."

"That is true, Major," commented Louise. "At first it was just to amuse ourselves that we became amateur detectives, but the developments are so startling and serious that we now consider it our duty to uncover the whole dreadful crime, in the interests of justice."

"Just so," he said, nodding.

"But I'm sure Old Hucks is innocent!" declared Patsy, emphatically.

"Then he is," asserted the Major; "for Patsy's always right, even when she's wrong. I've had me eye on that man Hucks already, for he's the merriest faced villain I ever encountered. Do you say he's shy with you girls?"

"He seems afraid of us, or suspicious, and won't let us talk to him," answered Beth.

"Leave him to me," proposed the Major, turning a stern face but twinkling eyes upon the group. "'Twill be my task to detect him. Leave him to me, young women, an' I'll put the thumb-screws on him in short order."

Here was the sort of energetic confederate they had longed for. The Major's assurance of co-operation was welcome indeed, and while he entered heartily into their campaign he agreed that no mention of the affair ought to reach Uncle John's ears until the case was complete and they could call upon the authorities to arrest the criminal.

"It's me humble opinion," he remarked, "that the interesting individual you call the 'avenger' was put on the trail by someone here--either Thomas Hucks, or the timber-toed book agent, or the respectable hardware man. Being invited to come and do his worst, he passed himself as a docther on a fishing excursion, and having with deliberate intent murdered Captain Wegg, got himself called by the coroner to testify that the victim died of heart disease. A very pretty bit of scoundrelism; eh, me dears?"

"But the robber--who do you think he was?" asked Louise.

"That I've still to discover. You inform me that Hucks is eager for money and acts like a miser. I've seen the time I was eager for money meself, and there's not a miserly hair on me bald head. But exceptions prove the rule. I'll watch our smiling Thomas and make a report later."

Within half an hour he was telling Hucks a funny story and slapping the old man upon the back as familiarly as if he had known him for years. He found an opportunity that same day to give Thomas a dollar in return for a slight service, and was amazed at the eagerness with which the coin was clutched and the earnestness of the thanks expressed. It really did seem as if the man was fond of money. But when the Major tried to draw Hucks into speaking of his past history and of Captain Wegg's singular life and death, the old fellow became reserved at once and evaded the inquiries most skillfully.

That night, as the Major strolled in the orchard to smoke his last cigar after all the others had retired to bed, he noticed Hucks leave the back door of the lean-to with a parcel under his arm and pass hurriedly around the barn. After a little hesitation he decided to follow the man, and crept stealthily along in the shadow of the trees and buildings until he found himself at the edge of the berry-patch that was in the rear of the outbuildings. But there he paused irresolutely, for Thomas had completely disappeared.

The Major was puzzled, but decided to watch for the man's return. So he took a position where he could watch the rear door of the house and smoked patiently for nearly an hour before Hucks returned and let himself quietly in.

He said nothing to the girls next day of this mysterious proceeding, but on the following night again took his station in the orchard to watch.

Sure enough, as soon as the house was quiet the old servant came out with a bundle underneath his arm; but this time he led his blind wife by the other hand.

The Major gave a low whistle and threw away his cigar. The night was so dark that he had little difficulty in following the aged pair closely enough to keep their shadowy forms in sight, without the risk of being discovered. They passed around the barn and along a path that led through the raspberry bushes back of the yard. There were several acres of these bushes, and just now they were full-leaved and almost shoulder high. The path wound this way and that, and branched in several directions. Twice the Major thought he had lost his quarry, but was guided aright by their soft footfalls. The ground dipped here and there, and as they entered one of the hollows Major Doyle was startled to observe the twinkle of a dim light ahead. A minute later he saw the outlines of a little frame building, and within this Old Hucks and Nora presently disappeared.