

CHAPTER XV. - THE MAN IN HIDING.

Cautiously the Major approached the cabin, which seemed to have been built as a place for the berry pickers to assemble and pack their fruit. It was constructed of rough boards and had a little window in the side nearest the dwelling house and a door on the opposite side.

Creeping near to the window the Major obtained a clear view of the interior. Upon a dilapidated wicker settee, which had one end propped with a box, partially reclined the form of a man whose right arm was in splints and supported by a sling, while his head was covered with plasters and bandages. The man's back was toward the window, but from his slender form and its graceful poise the Major imagined him young.

Old Nora held the left hand of this mysterious person in a warm clasp, bending now and then to press a kiss upon it, while Hucks busied himself opening the parcel he had brought and arranging various articles of food on a rickety stand at the head of the couch. The old man's smile was more benevolent and cheery than ever, and his actions denoted that strange, suppressed eagerness the Major had marked when he had taken the money.

The three spoke little, and in tones so low that the spy outside the window failed to catch them. Soon the injured man began to eat, feeding himself laboriously with his left hand. But his hunger was quickly satisfied, and then he lay back wearily upon his pillows, while Nora tenderly spread a coverlet over him.

After this the old couple did not linger long. Hucks poured some water from a jug into a tumbler, glanced around the little room to see that everything was in order, and then--after he and Nora had both kissed the bandaged forehead--blew out the candle and retired.

The Major crouched low in the berry bushes until the couple had passed by; then he rose and thoughtfully followed after them.

Whatever Patsy's father might have thought of the Wegg farm mystery before, this adventure convinced him that the girls were not altogether foolish in imagining a romance connected with the place. And, notwithstanding Patsy's loyal defense of Old Hucks, he was evidently

tangled up in the affair to a large extent, and could explain if he chose much that was now puzzling the girl detectives.

After careful thought the Major decided to confide in Uncle John, at this juncture, rather than in the nieces; since the latest developments were more fitted for a man's interference.

By good fortune the girls had an engagement the next day, and set out together in the surrey to visit Ethel Thompson and lunch with her in the rose bower, which was the pride of the little school teacher's garden. As soon as they were gone the Major hunted up Uncle John and said:

"Come with me, sir."

"I won't," was the brisk reply; "I'm going fishing, and whoever wishes my society must come with me."

"You'll not catch anything fishing, but you're very liable to catch something if you follow my lead," said the Major, meaningly.

"What's up, Gregory?"

"I'm not sure what it is, John." And then he carefully explained his discovery that an injured man was occupying the cabin in the berry patch, and seemed to be the object of the Hucks' tender care.

"It's the secrecy of the thing that astounds me most, sir," he added. "If all was open and above board, I'd think little enough of it."

Uncle John's kindly interest was at once aroused, and he proposed that they go directly to the cabin and interview the man in hiding. Hucks being at the time busy in the barn, the two men sauntered into the berry patch without being observed, and then walked briskly along the winding paths until they sighted the building.

Pausing at the window, they saw the man still reclining upon his cot, and holding in his left hand a book--one of Patsy's, the Major observed--which he was quietly engaged in reading. Then they moved around to the door, which Uncle John pushed open.

Without hesitation, the two men entered and stood gazing down upon the strange occupant of the place.

"Good morning," said Mr. Merrick, while the Major nodded a greeting.

The man half arose, moving stiffly.

"Pardon me, sirs," he said, rather startled at the interruption; "I regret that I am physically unable to receive you with more courtesy."

The Major gazed into the partially bandaged face with a glimmer of awakening recognition.

"H-m! Ha! If I'm not mistaken," said he, "it's Joseph Wegg."

"Oh; is it?" asked Uncle John, looking upon the young man curiously. "What's happened to you, Joseph?"

"Just an automobile accident, sir. The steering gear broke, and we went over an embankment."

"I see."

"Are you Mr. Merrick, sir."

"Yes."

"I owe you an apology for intruding upon your premises in this way, and beg you to forgive the seeming impertinence. But I've been rather unlucky of late, sir, and without this refuge I don't know what would have become of me. I will explain, if you will permit me."

Uncle John nodded.

"After I had squandered the money you paid me, through Major Doyle, for this farm, in a vain endeavor to protect a patent I had secured, I was forced to become a chauffeur to earn my livelihood. I understand automobiles, you know, and obtained employment with a wealthy man who considered me a mere part of his machine. When the accident occurred, through no fault of mine, I was, fortunately, the only person injured; but my employer was so incensed over the damage to his automobile that he never even sent to inquire whether I lived or died. At a charity hospital they tried to mend my breaks and tinker up my anatomy. My shoulder-blade was shattered, my arm broken in three places, and four ribs were crashed in. The wounds in my head are mere abrasions of the scalp, and not serious. But it has taken me a long time to mend, and the crowded, stuffy hospital got on my nerves and worried me. Being penniless and friendless, I wrote to Thomas and asked him if

he could find a way to get me to the old farm, for I never imagined you would yourself take possession of the deserted place you had bought.

"Thomas and Nora have cared for me since I was born, you know, and the old man was greatly distressed by the knowledge of my sad condition. He did not tell me you were here, for fear I would hesitate to come, but he sent me the money you had given him and Nora for wages, together with all that the young ladies had kindly given him. I was thus enabled to leave the hospital, which I had come to detest, and journey to my old home. I arrived at the Junction on a night train, and Thomas met me with your surrey, drove me here under cover of darkness, and concealed me in this out-of-the-way place, hoping you would not discover me.

"I regret that I was thus foisted upon you, believe me, sir; but, being here, I have no means of getting away again. Thomas Hucks has had little worldly experience, and cannot realize the full extent of the imposition he has practiced. He feeds me from your table, and is hoarding up his money for me against the time I shall have recovered sufficiently to leave. I think that is the full explanation, Mr. Merrick."

Again Uncle John nodded.

"How are you?" he asked.

"Doing finely, sir. I can walk a little, and my appetite is improving. The doctors said my shoulder would never be very strong again, but I'm beginning to hope they were mistaken. My ribs seem all right, and in another ten days I shall remove the splints from my arm."

"You have no medical attendance?"

"Not since I left the hospital. But I imagine this pure, bracing air is better for me than a dozen doctors," was the cheerful reply.

"And what are your future plans?"

The young man smiled. He was little more than a boy, but his questioner noticed that he had a fine manly face and his eye was clear and steadfast.

"Nothing further than to get to work again as soon as I am able to undertake it," he said.

Uncle John looked thoughtfully, and drummed with his finger upon the little table.

"Joseph," he remarked, presently, "I bought this farm at a price altogether too small, considering its value."

The boy flushed.

"Please do not say that!" he exclaimed, hastily. "I am well aware that I virtually robbed you, and my only excuse is that I believed I would win my fight and be able to redeem the place. But that is over now, and you must not think that because I am ill and helpless I am an object of charity."

"Phoo!" said the little man; "aren't you accepting charity from Old Hucks?"

"But he stands as a second father to me. He is an old retainer of my family, and one of my ambitions is to secure a home for him and Nora in their old age. No; I do not feel at all embarrassed in accepting money or assistance from Thomas."

"Young man," said Uncle John, sternly, "one of the follies of youth is the idea of being independent of the good-will of your fellow-creatures. Every person who lives is dependent on some other person for something or other, and I'll not allow you to make a fool of yourself by refusing to let me take you in hand. Your brain is affected--"

"It is not!"

"You are mentally unbalanced, and need a guardian. That's me. You are helpless and cannot resist, so you're my prisoner. Dare to defy me, dare to oppose my wishes in any way, and I'll have you put in a straight-jacket and confined in a padded cell. Understand me, sir?"

Joseph Wegg looked into the little man's round face until the tears filled his own eyes and blurred his vision.

"Won't you protect me, Major Doyle?" he asked, weakly.

"Not I," said the Major, stoutly. "This brother-in-law of mine, who connected himself with me without asking permission, is a perfect demon when 'roused, and I'll not meddle with any opposition to his desires. If you value your life and happiness, Joseph Wegg, you'll accept Mr.

Merrick as a guardian until he resigns of his own accord, and then it's likely you'll wish he hadn't."

"I don't deserve----" began the young man, brokenly; but Uncle John quickly interrupted him.

"No one deserves anything," said he; "but everyone gets something or other, nevertheless, in this vale of tears. If you'll kindly remember that you've no right to express an opinion in the presence of your guardian, we'll get along better together. Now, then, you're going to leave here, because the place is not comfortable. My guests fill every room in my house, so you can't go there. But the hotel in Millville is a cheerful-looking place, and I've noticed some vine-covered windows that indicate pleasant and sunny rooms. Major, go and tell Hucks to hitch that groaning, balky Daniel to the ancient buggy, and then to drive this young man over to the hotel. We'll walk."

The Major started at once, and Uncle John continued: "I don't know whether this arrangement suits you or not, Joseph, but it suits me; and, as a matter of fact, it's none of your business. Feel able to take a ride?"

The boy smiled, gratefully.

"Yes, indeed, Mr. Merrick," said he, and was shrewd enough not to venture a word of thanks.