

CHAPTER XVI. - A MATTER OF SPECULATION.

Old Hucks, still smiling, but dreadfully nervous over the discovery of Joe, and Mr. Merrick's sudden activity in the boy's behalf, speedily harnessed Daniel and induced the reluctant steed to amble down the path to the cabin. Leaning on Uncle John's arm, the invalid walked to the buggy and was assisted to mount to the seat beside Thomas. Then away they started, and, although Dan obeyed Hucks more willingly than any other driver, the Major and Uncle John walked 'cross-lots and reached the hotel a good fifteen minutes in advance of the equipage.

The Millville Hotel depended almost entirely for patronage upon the commercial travelers who visited the place periodically to sell goods to the merchants, and these did not come too often, because trade was never very energetic and orders never very large. Bob West boarded at the hotel, and so did Ned Long, a "farm hand," who did sundry odd jobs for anyone who needed him, and helped pay his "keep" by working for Mrs. Kebble when not otherwise engaged.

Mrs. Kebble was the landlady, and a famous cook. Kate Kebble, a slatternly girl of sixteen, helped her mother do the work and waited on the table. Chet Kebble, the landlord, was a silent old man, with billy-goat whiskers and one stray eye, which, being constructed of glass, usually assumed a slanting gaze and refused to follow the direction of its fellow. Chet minded the billiard-room, which was mostly patronized Saturday nights, and did a meager business in fire insurance; but he was "so eternal lazy an' shifless," as Mrs. Kebble sharply asserted, that he was considered more a "hanger-on" of the establishment than its recognized head.

The little rooms of the hotel were plainly furnished but maintained with exceptional neatness.

The one in the east corner of the second floor met with the approval of Uncle John and the Major, and was promptly engaged. It was cheerful and sunny, with outlooks on the lake and the village, and contained a lounge as well as the bed.

When the invalid arrived, he was assisted to this apartment and installed as its permanent occupant.

"Any baggage?" asked Mr. Merrick.

"There's a small trunk lying at the Junction," said Joe; "but it contains little of importance."

"Well, make yourself at home, my boy, and get well at your leisure," remarked Uncle John. "Mrs. Kebble has promised to look after you, and the Major and I will stop in now and then and see how you progress."

Then he went out, engaged Nick Thorne to go to the Junction for the boy's trunk, and selected several things at the store that he thought might be useful to the invalid. Afterward he marched home again beside the Major, feeling very well pleased with his morning's work.

When the girls reached home late in the afternoon, they were thrown into a state of great excitement by the news, briefly related by their uncle, that Joseph Wegg had returned to Millville "considerably smashed" by an automobile accident, and was now stopping at the village hotel for repairs.

They refrained from making remarks upon the incident until they were alone, when the secret council of three decided to make Joe Wegg's acquaintance as soon as possible, to discover what light the young man might be able to throw upon the great mystery.

"Do you know, girls," said Louise, impressively, "it almost seems as if fate had sent Joe Wegg here to be an instrument in the detection of the murderer and robber of his poor father."

"If Joe knew about it, why didn't he track the villain down himself?" inquired Patsy.

"Perhaps he hasn't suspected the truth," said Beth. "Often those who are closely concerned with such tragedies do not observe the evidences of crime as clearly as outsiders."

"Where did you get that information?" demanded Patsy.

"From one of Anna Doyle Oppenheim's detective stories," answered Beth, seriously. "I've been reading up on such things, lately."

"Detective stories," said Louise, reflectively, "are only useful in teaching us to observe the evidences of crime. This case, for example, is so intricate and unusual that only by careful thought, and following each

thread of evidence to its end, can we hope to bring the criminal to justice."

"That seems to me conceited," observed Miss Doyle, composedly.

"Detective stories don't have to stick to facts; or, rather, they can make the facts to be whatever they please. So I don't consider them as useful as they are ornamental. And this isn't a novel, girls; it's mostly suspicion and slander."

"You don't seem able to be in earnest about anything," objected Beth, turning a little red.

"But I try to be." said Patricia.

"We are straying from the subject now under discussion," remarked Louise. "I must say that I feel greatly encouraged by the sudden appearance of the Wegg boy. He may know something of his father's former associates that will enable us to determine the object of the murder and who accomplished it."

"Captain Wegg was killed over three years ago," suggested Miss Doyle, recovering easily from her rebuff. "By this time the murderer may have died or moved to Madagascar."

"He is probably living within our reach, never suspecting that justice is about to overtake him," asserted Louise. "We must certainly go to call upon this Wegg boy, and draw from him such information as we can. I am almost certain that the end is in sight."

"We haven't any positive proof at all, yet," observed Patsy, musingly.

"We have plenty of circumstantial evidence," returned Beth. "There is only one way to explain the facts we have already learned, and the theory we have built up will be a hard one to overthrow. The flight of Captain Wegg to this place, his unhappy wife, the great trouble that old Nora has hinted at, the--"

"The great trouble ought to come first," declared Louise. "It is the foundation upon which rest all the mysterious occurrences following, and once we have learned what the great trouble was, the rest will be plain sailing."

"I agree with you," said Beth; "and perhaps Joseph Wegg will be able to tell us what the trouble was that ruined the lives of his parents, as well as of Old Hucks and his wife, and caused them all to flee here to hide themselves."

It was not until the following morning that the Major found an opportunity to give the confederates a solemn wink to indicate he had news to confide to them. They gathered eagerly on the lawn, and he told them of the finding of Joe Wegg in the isolated cabin, and how old Thomas and Nora, loving the boy as well as if he had been their own child, had sacrificed everything to assist him in his extremity.

"So ye see, my avenging angels, that ye run off the track in the Hucks matter," he added, smiling at their bewildered faces.

Patsy was delighted at this refutation of the slanderous suspicions that Thomas was a miser and his smiling face a mask to hide his innate villainy. The other girls were somewhat depressed by the overthrow of one of their pet theories, and reluctantly admitted that if Hucks had been the robber of his master and old Will Thompson, he would not have striven so eagerly to get enough money to send to Joe Wegg. But they pointed out that the old servant was surely hiding his knowledge of Captain Wegg's past, and could not be induced to clear up that portion of the mystery which he had full knowledge of. So, while he might be personally innocent of the murder or robbery, both Beth and Louise were confident he was attempting to shield the real criminal.

"But who is the real criminal?" inquired Patsy.

"Let us consider," answer Louise, with the calm, businesslike tone she adopted in these matters. "There is the strolling physician, whom we call the Unknown Avenger, for one. A second suspect is the man McNutt, whose nature is so perverted that he would stick at nothing. The third suspicious individual is Mr. Bob West."

"Oh, Louise! Mr. West is so respectable, and so prosperous," exclaimed Patsy.

"It's a far jump from McNutt to West," added Beth.

"Leaving out Hucks," continued Louise, her eyes sparkling with the delightful excitement of maintaining her theories against odds, "here are three people who might have been concerned in the robbery or murder.

Two of them are under our hands; perhaps Joseph Wegg may be able to tell us where to find the third."

They pleaded so hard with the Major to take them to call upon the injured youth that very day, that the old gentleman consented, and, without telling Uncle John of their plans, they drove to Millville in the afternoon and alighted at the hotel.

The Major went first to the boy's room, and found him not only very comfortable, but bright and cheerful in mood.

"At this rate, sir," he said, smilingly, "I shall be able to discharge my guardian in quick time. I'm twice the man I was yesterday."

"I've brought some young ladies to call upon you," announced the Major. "Will you see them?"

Joe flushed at first, remembering his plastered skull and maimed condition. But he could not well refuse to receive his callers, whom he guessed to be the three girls Old Hucks had praised to him so highly.

"It will give me great pleasure, sir," he replied.

An invalid is usually of interest to women, so it is no wonder that the three young ladies were at once attracted by the bright-faced boy, who reclined upon his couch before the vine-covered windows. They thought of Ethel, too, and did not marvel that the girl grieved over the loss of this friend of her childhood.

Joe had to recount the adventure with the automobile, which led to his injuries, and afterward give an account of his life at the hospital. That led, naturally, to the timely assistance rendered him by the faithful Thomas, so that Louise was able to broach the subject nearest her heart.

"We have been greatly interested in your old servants--whom we acquired with the farm, it seems--and all of us admire their simplicity and sincerity," she began.

"Nora is a dear," added Beth.

"And Thomas is so cheerful that his smile is enough to vanquish any attack of the blues," said Patsy.

"The Hucks are the right sort, and no mistake," declared the Major, taking his cue from the others.

This praise evidently delighted the boy. They could have found no more direct way to win his confidence.

"Nora was my mother's maid from the time she was a mere girl," said he; "and Thomas sailed with my father many years before I was born."

They were a little surprised to hear him speak so frankly. But Louise decided to take advantage of the opening afforded her.

"Nora has told us that some great trouble came to them years ago--a trouble that also affected your own parents. But they do not wish to talk about it to us."

His face clouded.

"No, indeed," said he. "Their loving old hearts have never recovered from the blow. Would you like to know their history? It is a sad story, and pitiful; but I am sure you would understand and appreciate my old friends better after hearing it."

Their hearts fairly jumped with joy. Would they like to hear the story? Was it not this very clue which they had been blindly groping for to enable them to solve the mystery of the Wegg crime? The boy marked their interest, and began his story at once, while the hearts of the three girls sang-gladly: "At last--at last!"