

## **CHAPTER XVII. - JOE TELLS OF "THE GREAT TROUBLE."**

"As a young man, my father was a successful sea captain," said the boy, "and, before he was thirty, owned a considerable interest in the ship he sailed. Thomas Hucks was his boatswain,--an honest and able seaman in whom my father became much interested. Hucks was married, and his wife was an attendant in the employ of Hugh Carter, a wealthy ship chandler of Edmunton, the port from which my fathers ship sailed. Thomas had some difficulty in enjoying his wife's society when on shore, because old Carter did not want him hanging around the house; so Captain Wegg good-naturedly offered to intercede for him.

"Carter was a gruff and disagreeable man, and, although my father had been a good customer, he refused his request and threatened to discharge Nora, which he did. This made Captain Wegg angry, and he called upon Mary Carter, whose especial attendant Nora had been, to ask her to take the girl back. Mary was a mild young lady, who dared not oppose her father; but the result of the interview was that the sea captain and Mary Carter fell mutually in love. During the next two or three years, whenever the ship was in port, the lovers frequently met by stealth at the cottage of Mrs. Hucks, a little place Thomas had rented. Here my father and mother were finally married.

"Meantime Nora had a son, a fine young chap, I've heard; and presently my mother, who had a little fortune of her own, plucked up enough courage to leave her father's roof, and took up her abode in a pretty villa on the edge of a bluff overlooking the sea. Nora came to live with her again, bringing her child, and the two women were company for one another while their husbands were at sea.

"In course of time my mother had two children, a girl and a boy, and because the Hucks boy was considerably older than they, he took care of them, to a great extent, and the three youngsters were always together. Their favorite playground was on the beach, at the foot of the bluff, and before young Tom was ten years old he could swim like a duck, and manage a boat remarkably well. The Wegg children, having something of their mother's timid nature, perhaps, were not so adventurous, but they seldom hesitated to go wherever Tom led them.

"One day, while my mother was slightly ill and Nora was attending to her, Tom disobeyed the commands that had been given him, and took his younger companions out on the ocean for a ride in his boat. No one knows how far they went, or exactly what happened to them; but a sudden squall sprang up, and the children being missed, my mother insisted, ill as she was, in running down to the shore to search for her darlings. Braving the wind and drenched by rain, the two mothers stood side by side, peering into the gloom, while brave men dared the waves to search for the missing ones. The body of the girl was first washed ashore, and my mother rocked the lifeless form in her arms until her dead son was laid beside her. Then young Tom's body was recovered, and the horror was complete.

"When my father arrived, three days later, he not only found himself bereaved of the two children he had loved so tenderly, but his young wife was raving with brain fever, and likely to follow her babies to the grave. During that terrible time, Nora, who could not forget that it was her own adventurous son who had led all three children to their death, went suddenly blind--from grief, the doctors said.

"My father pulled his wife back to life by dint of careful nursing; but whenever she looked at the sea she would scream with horror; so it became necessary to take her where the cruel sound of the breakers could never reach her ears. I think the grief of Thomas and Nora was scarcely less than that of my own parents, and both men had suffered so severely that they were willing to abandon the sea and devote their lives to comforting their poor wives. Captain Wegg sold all his interests and his wife's villa, and brought the money here, where he established a home amid entirely different surroundings. He was devoted to my mother, I have heard, and when she died, soon after my birth, the Captain seemed to lose all further interest in life, and grew morose and unsociable with all his fellow-creatures.

"That, young ladies, is the story of what Thomas and Nora call their 'great trouble'; and I think it is rightly named, because it destroyed the happiness of two families. I was born long after the tragedy, but its shadow has saddened even my own life."

When the boy had finished, his voice trembling with emotion as he uttered the last words, his auditors were much affected by the sad tale. Patsy was positively weeping, and the Major blew his nose vigorously and

advised his daughter to "dry up an' be sinsible." Beth's great eyes stared compassionately at the young fellow, and even Louise for the moment allowed her sympathy to outweigh the disappointment and chagrin of seeing her carefully constructed theory of crime topple over like the house of cards it was. There was now no avenger to be discovered, because there had been nothing to avenge. The simple yet pathetic story accounted for all the mystery that, in her imagination, enveloped the life and death of Captain Wegg. But--stay!

"How did your father die?" she asked, softly.

"Through a heart trouble, from which he had suffered for years, and which had obliged him to lead a very quiet life," was the reply. "That was one of the things which, after my mother's death, helped to sour his disposition. He could not return to the sea again, because he was told that any sudden excitement was likely to carry him off; and, indeed, that was exactly what happened."

"How is that, sir?" asked the Major.

"It is more difficult to explain than the first of the story," replied the boy, thoughtfully gazing through the window; "perhaps because I do not understand it so well. Our simple life here never made much of an inroad into my father's modest fortune; for our wants were few; but Captain Wegg was a poor man of business, having been a sailor during all his active life. His only intimate friend--an honest, bluff old farmer named Will Thompson--was as childish regarding money matters as my father, but had a passion for investments, and induced my father to join some of his schemes. Mr. Thompson's mind was somewhat erratic at times, but keen in some ways, nevertheless. Fearing to trust his judgment entirely, my father chose to lean upon the wisdom and experience of a shrewd merchant of Millville, named Robert West."

"The hardware dealer?" asked Louise, impulsively.

"Yes; I see you have met him," replied Joseph Wegg, with a smile at the eager, pretty face of his visitor. "Bob West was a prosperous man and very careful about his own investments; so he became a sort of business adviser to my father and Mr. Thompson, and arbitrated any differences of opinion they might have. For several years, due to West's good offices, the two oddly mated friends were successful in their ventures, and added to their capital. Finally West came to them himself with a proposition. He

had discovered a chance to make a good deal of money by purchasing an extensive pine forest near Almaquo, just across the border in Canada. West had taken an option on the property, when he found by accident that the Pierce-Lane Lumber Company was anxious to get hold of the tract and cut the timber on a royalty that would enable the owners to double their investment."

"Howld on a jiffy!" cried the Major, excitedly. "Did I understand you to say the Pierce-Lane Lumber Company?"

"That was the firm, sir. I used to overhear my father and Will Thompson talking about this matter; but I must admit my knowledge is somewhat imperfect, because I never was allowed to ask questions. I remember learning the fact that West had not enough money to swing his option, and so urged his friends to join him. Relying upon West's judgment, they put all their little fortunes into the deal, although Thompson grumbled at doing so, because he claimed he had another investment that was better, and this matter of West's would prevent him from undertaking it. The Almaquo tract was purchased, and a contract made with the lumber company to cut the timber and pay them a royalty of so much a thousand feet. Yet, although the prospects for profit seemed so good, I know that for some reason both my father and Thompson were dissatisfied with the deal, and this may be accounted for by the fact that every penny of their money was tied up in one investment. West used to come to the house and argue with them that the property was safe as the Bank of England, and then old Will would tell him how much more he could have made out of another investment he had in mind; so that a coolness grew up between West and the others that gradually led to their estrangement.

"I can well remember the evening when Bob West's pretty financial bubble burst. Thompson and my father were sitting together in the right wing, smoking solemnly, and exchanging a few words, as was their custom, when West arrived with a while face, and a newspaper under his arm. I was in the next room, lying half asleep upon the sofa, when I heard West cry despairingly: 'Ruined--ruined--ruined!' I crept to the half-opened door, then, and looked in. Both men were staring, open-mouthed and half-dazed, at West, who was explaining in a trembling voice that a terrible forest fire had swept through the Almaquo section and wiped out every tree upon the property. He had the full account in the newspaper,

and had begun reading it, when my father uttered a low moan and tumbled off his chair to the floor.

"Will Thompson gave a wild cry and knelt beside him.

"My God! he's dead, Bob,--he's dead!--and you've killed him with your good news!" he screamed, already raving; and then Old Hucks ran in just in time to prevent the madman from throttling West, for his fingers were even then twined around Bob's throat. There was a desperate struggle, and I remember that, scared as I was, I joined Thomas in trying to pull Thompson off his prey. But suddenly old Will threw up his arms and toppled backward, still raving like a demon, but unable to move his body from the waist downward. West helped us to put him in bed, and said he was paralyzed, which afterward proved to be the truth. Also, his mind was forever gone; and I think it was father's death that did that, rather than the loss of his money."

They were all staring, white-faced, at the speaker. Most of the mystery was being cleared away; indeed, there was now little of mystery remaining at all.

"West hurried after a doctor," continued Joe, who was almost as much absorbed in his story as were his listeners, and spoke in a reflective, musing way, "and he succeeded in finding one who was stopping for a few days at the hotel. Poor Bob was very kind to us in our trouble, and I never heard him mention a word about his own losses, which must have been severe. After the funeral was over, and I found I had nothing to inherit but the farm, I decided to go to the city and make my way there, as I had long wished to do. West gave me a little money to start me on my way, and the rest of my story is not very interesting to anybody. Major Doyle knows something of it, after the time when I got through my technical school by working as a servant to pay for my instruction. I'm a failure in life, so far, young ladies; but if you'll not bear that against me I'll try to do better in the future."

"Good!" cried the Major, approvingly, as he took the boy's left hand in both his own and pressed it. "You're developing the right spirit, Joseph, me lad, and we'll think no more about the sadness of the past, but look forward to the joy of your future."

"Of course," said Patsy, nodding gravely; "Joe Wegg is bound to be a great man, some day."

