

CHAPTER XVIII. - THE LOCKED CUPBOARD.

Louise and Beth returned to the farm in dismal silence. Every prop had been knocked from beneath their carefully erected temple of mystery. Now there was no mystery at all.

In a few words, Joe Wegg had explained everything, and explained all so simply and naturally that Louise felt like sobbing with the bitterness of a child deprived of its pet plaything. The band of self-constituted girl detectives had been "put out of business," as Patsy said, because the plain fact had developed that there was nothing to detect, and never had been. There had been no murder, no robbery, no flight or hiding on the part of the Weggss to escape an injured enemy; nothing even mysterious, in the light of the story they had just heard. It was dreadfully humiliating and thoroughly disheartening, after all their earnest endeavor to investigate a crime that had never been committed.

Uncle John rallied his nieces on their somber faces at the dinner table, and was greatly amused when the Major, despite the appealing looks directed at him, gave Mr. Merrick a brief resume of the afternoon's developments.

"Well, I declare!" said the little man, merrily; "didn't I warn you, Louise, not to try to saddle a murder onto my new farm? How you foolish girls could ever have imagined such a carnival of crime in connection with the Weggss is certainly remarkable."

"I don't know about that, sir," returned the Major, seriously. "I was meself inoculated with the idea, and for a while I considered meself and the girls the equals of all the Pinkertons in the country. And when ye come to think of it, the history of poor Captain Wegg and his wife, and of Nora and Thomas as well, is out of the ordinary entirely, and, without the explanation, contained all the elements of a first-class mystery."

"How did you say the Weggss lost their money?" inquired Uncle John, turning the subject because he saw that it embarrassed his nieces.

"Why, forest fires at Almaquo, in Canada, burned down the timber they had bought," replied the Major. "And, by the way, John, you're interested in that matter yourself, for the Pierce-Lane Lumber Company, in which you own a lot of stock, had contracted to cut the timber on a royalty."

"How long ago?"

"Three years, sir."

"Well, we've been cutting timber at Almaquo ever since," said Mr. Merrick.

Louise dropped her fork with a clatter, disclosing, in this well-bred young lady, an unusual degree of excitement.

"Then there is something to detect!" she cried.

"Eh? What do you mean?" inquired her uncle.

"If you've been cutting timber at Almaquo for three years, the trees couldn't have burned down," Louise declared, triumphantly.

"That is evident," said the Major, dryly. "I've had it in me mind, Louise, to take that matter up for investigation; but you are so imbued with the detective spirit that there's no heading you off a trail."

"Before the dessert comes on," announced Uncle John, impressively, "I want to make a statement. You folks have tried your hands at the detective business and made a mess of it. Now it's my turn. I'll be a detective for three days, and if I don't succeed better than you did, young women, we'll mingle our tears in all humility. Eh, Major?"

"Put me in the bunch, sir," said the old soldier, "I was as bad as any of them. And go ahead in your own way, if ye like. It's me humble opinion, John, that you're no Sherlock Holmes; but ye won't believe it 'til ye satisfy yourself of the fact."

Next morning the loungers around Sam Cotting's store were thrown into a state of great excitement when "the nabob" came over from the Wegg farm and held the long-distance telephone for more than an hour, while he talked with people in New York. The natives knew that their telephone, which was built into a small booth at one end of the store-- next the post-office boxes--was part of a system that made it possible for one to talk to those in far away cities. Often the country people would eye the mysterious-looking instrument with awe and whisper to each other of its mighty powers; but no one had ever before used it to telephone farther than the Junction, and then only on rare occasions.

"It'll cost a heap o' money, Sam," said McNutt, uneasily, while Uncle John was engaged in his remarkable conversation. They could see him in the booth, through the little window.

"It will, Mac," was the solemn reply. "But the fool nabob may as well spend it thet way as any other. It's mighty little of his capital er surplus gits inter my cash-drawer; 'n' thet's a fact."

Uncle John came from the booth, perspiring, but smiling and happy. He walked across the street to see Joe Wegg, and found the youth seated in a rocking-chair and looking quite convalescent. But he had company. In a chair opposite sat a man neatly dressed, with a thin, intelligent face, a stubby gray moustache, and shrewd eyes covered by horn-rimmed spectacles.

"Good morning, Mr. Merrick," said Joe, cheerily; "this is Mr. Robert West, one of the Millville merchants, who is an old friend of our family."

"I've heard of Mr. West, and I'm glad to meet him," replied Uncle John, looking at the other calmly, but not offering to shake hands. "I believe you are the president and treasurer of the Almaquo Timber Tract Company, are you not?"

Joseph looked startled, and then embarrassed, as he overheard the question. West, without altering his position of careless ease, glanced over the rims of his glasses at the speaker.

"I am the humble individual you refer to, Mr. Merrick," he said, briefly.

"But the Almaquo timber all burned down." remarked Joe, thinking an explanation was needed.

"That's a mistake," returned Mr. Merrick. "My company has paid Mr. West, as treasurer of his company, more than fifty thousand dollars during the last three years."

West's jaw dropped.

"Your company!" he exclaimed, as if mystified.

"Yes; I own the controlling interest in the Pierce-Lane Lumber Company, which has the contract to cut your timber," answered Mr. Merrick.

The hardware dealer slowly arose and glanced at his watch.

"I must get back to my store," he said. "You are somewhat in error about your company, Mr. Merrick; but I suppose your interests are so large and varied that you cannot well keep track of them. Good morning, sir. I'll see you again soon, Joe. Glad you're improving so rapidly. Let me know if I can do anything to help you."

With these quiet words, he bowed and left the room, and when he had gone, Joe said, in a deprecating tone:

"Poor Bob must be very unhappy about having lost my father's money in that speculation, for he advocated the plan very strongly, believing it was a good investment. I'm afraid your mistake about paying him all that money upset him. Don't mind if he was a little brusque, sir. Bob West is a simple, kindly man, whom my father fully trusted. It was he that loaned me the money to get away from here with."

"Tell me," said Uncle John, thoughtfully, "did your father receive stock in the Almaquo Timber Tract Company in exchange for his money?"

"Oh, yes; I have seen it in the steel cupboard," replied Joe.

"Where is that?"

"Why, it is the cupboard in the right wing of our house, which was the Captain's own room. It was one of his whims, when he built, to provide what he called his 'bank.' You may have noticed the wooden doors of a cupboard built into the stone wall, sir?"

"Yes; I occupy the room."

"Behind the wooden doors are others of steel. The entire cupboard is steel-lined. Near the bottom is a sliding-plate, which, when pushed aside, discovers a hidden drawer--a secret my father never confided to anyone but me. He once told me that if his heart trouble earned him off suddenly I ought to know of the existence of this drawer; so he showed me how to find it. On the day after his death I took the keys, which he always carried on a small chain around his neck and concealed underneath his clothing, and opened the cupboard to see if I could find anything of value. It is needless to say, I could not discover anything that could be converted into a dollar. The Captain had filled the cupboard with old letters and papers of no value, and with relics he had brought from foreign lands during his many voyages. These last are mere rubbish, but I suppose he loved them for their association. In the secret drawer I

found his stock in the timber company, and also that of old Will Thompson, who had doubtless left it with my father for safekeeping. Knowing it was now worthless, I left it in the drawer."

"I'd like to see it," announced Uncle John.

Joe laughed.

"I've lost the keys," he said.

"How's that, my lad?"

"Why, on the day of the funeral the keys disappeared. I could never imagine what became of them. But I did not care to look in the cupboard a second time, so the loss did not matter."

Mr. Merrick seemed thoughtful.

"I suppose I own that cupboard now," he remarked.

"Of course," said Joe. "But without the keys it is not serviceable. If you drill through the steel doors you destroy their security."

"True; but I may decide to do that."

"If you do, sir, I'd like you to clear out the rubbish and papers and send them to me. They are family matters, and I did not intend to sell them with the place."

"You shall have them, Joe."

"Just underneath the left end of the lower shelf you will find the sliding steel plate. It slides toward the front. In the drawer you will find the worthless stock and a picture of my mother. I'd like to keep the picture."

"You shall, Joseph. How are you getting on?"

"Why, I'm a new man, Mr. Merrick, and today I'm feeling as strong as a buffalo--thanks to your kind guardianship."

"Don't overdo, sir. Take it easy. There's a young lady coming to see you today."

"Ethel!" the boy exclaimed, his face turning crimson.

"Yes," returned Uncle John, tersely. "You've treated that girl shamefully, Joseph Wegg. Try to make proper amends."

"I never could understand," said Joe, slowly, "why Ethel refused to answer the letter I wrote her when I went away. It explained everything, yet--"

"I'll bet the farm against your lame shoulder she never got your letter," declared Uncle John. "She thought you left her without a word."

"I gave it to McNutt to deliver after I was gone. But you say she's coming today?"

"That is her intention, sir."

Joe said nothing more, but his expressive face was smiling and eager. Uncle John pressed the boy's hand and left him, promising to call again soon.

"Now, then," muttered the little millionaire, as he walked down the street, "to beard the lion in his den."

The den proved to be the hardware store, and the lion none other than Robert West. Mr. Merrick found the merchant seated at his desk in the otherwise deserted store, and, with a nod, helped himself to the only other chair the little office contained.

"Sir," said he, "I am here to demand an explanation."

"Of what?" asked West, coldly.

"Of your action in the matter of the Almaquo Timber Tract Company. I believe that you falsely asserted to Captain Wegg and Mr. Thompson that the timber had burned and their investment was therefore worthless. The news of the disaster killed one of your confiding friends and drove the other mad; but that was a consequence that I am sure you did not intend when you planned the fraud. The most serious thing I can accuse you of is holding the earnings of the Wegg and Thompson stock--and big earnings they are, too--for your own benefit, and defrauding the heirs of your associates of their money."

West carefully balanced a penholder across his fingers, and eyed it with close attention.

"You are a queer man, Mr. Merrick," he said, quietly. "I can only excuse your insults on the grounds of ignorance, or the fact that you have been misinformed. Here is the newspaper report of the Almaquo fire, which I showed my friends the night of Captain Wegg's sudden death." He took a clipping from a drawer of the desk and handed it to Uncle John, who read it carefully.

"As a matter of fact," continued West, "you are not cutting that portion of the Almaquo tract which this fire refers to, and which Thompson and Wegg were interested in, but the north half of the tract, which they had never acquired any title to."

"I suppose the stock will show that," suggested Mr. Merrick.

"Of course, sir."

"I will look it up."

West smiled.

"You will have some trouble doing that," he said.

"Why?"

"Wegg and Thompson had transferred their entire stock to me before one died and the other went mad," was the quiet reply.

"Oh, I see." The lie was so evident that Uncle John did not try to refute it.

"I am rather busy, Mr. Merrick. Anything more, sir?"

"Not today. Bye and bye, Mr. West."

He marched out again and climbed into his buggy to drive home. The interview with Bob West had made him uneasy, for the merchant's cold, crafty nature rendered him an opponent who would stick at nothing to protect his ill-gotten gains. Uncle John had thought it an easy matter to force him to disgorge, but West was the one inhabitant of Millville who had no simplicity in his character. He was as thoroughly imbued with worldly subtlety and cunning as if he had lived amid the grille of a city all his life; and Mr. Merrick was by no means sure of his own ability to unmask the man and force him to make restitution.