

CHAPTER XXII. - CAUGHT.

"We're early," said Beth, as they came to the edge of the woods and sighted the farm house; "but that is better than being late."

Then she stopped suddenly with a low cry and pointed to the right wing, which directly faced them. Bob West turned the corner of the house, tried the door of Uncle John's room, and then walked to one of the French windows. The sash was not fastened, so he deliberately opened it and stepped inside.

"What shall we do?" gasped Patsy, clasping her hands excitedly.

Beth was always cool in an emergency.

"You creep up to the window, dear, and wait till you hear me open the inside door," said she. "I'll run through the house and enter from the living-room. The key is under the mat, you know."

"But what can we do? Oughtn't we to wait until Uncle John and father come?" Patsy asked, in a trembling voice.

"Of course not. West might rob the cupboard and be gone by that time. We've got to act promptly, Patsy; so don't be afraid."

Without further words Beth ran around the back of the house and disappeared, while Patsy, trying to control the beating of her heart, stole softly over the lawn to the open window of Uncle John's room.

She could not help looking in, at the risk of discovery. Bob West--tall, lean and composed as ever--was standing beside the cupboard, the doors of which were wide open. The outer doors were of wood, panelled and carved; the inner ones were plates of heavy steel, and in the lock that secured these latter doors were the keys that had so long been missing. Both were attached to a slender silver chain.

As Patsy peered in at the man West was engaged in deliberately examining packet after packet of papers, evidently striving to find the missing stock certificates. He was in no hurry, believing he would have the house to himself for several hours; so he tumbled Captain Wegg's souvenirs of foreign lands in a heap on the floor beside him, thrusting his hand into every corner of the cupboard in order that the search might

be thorough. He had once before examined the place in vain; this time he intended to succeed.

Presently West drew a cigar from his pocket, lighted it, and was about to throw the match upon the floor when the thought that it might later betray his presence made him pause and then walk to the open window. As he approached, Patsy became panic-stricken and, well knowing that she ought to run or hide, stood rooted to the spot, gazing half appealingly and half defiantly into the startled eyes of the man who suddenly confronted her.

So for a moment they stood motionless. West was thinking rapidly. By some error he had miscounted the picnic party and this girl had been left at home. She had discovered his intrusion, had seen him at the cupboard, and would report the matter to John Merrick. This being the case, it would do him no good to retreat without accomplishing his purpose. If once he secured the stock certificates he could afford to laugh at his accusers, and secure them he must while he had the opportunity.

So clearly did these thoughts follow one another that West's hesitation seemed only momentary. Without a word to the girl he tossed the match upon the grass, calmly turned his back, and started for the cupboard again.

But here a new surprise awaited him. Brief as had been his absence, another girl had entered the room. Beth opened the door even as West turned toward the window, and, taking in the situation at a glance, she tiptoed swiftly to the cupboard, withdrew the keys from the lock and dropped them noiselessly into a wide-mouthed vase that stood on the table and was partially filled with flowers. The next instant West turned and saw her, but she smiled at him triumphantly. "Good afternoon, sir," said the girl, sweetly; "can I do anything to assist you?"

West uttered an impatient exclamation and regarded Beth savagely.

"Is the house full of girls?" he demanded.

"Oh, no; Patsy and I are quite alone," she replied, with a laugh. "Come in, Patsy dear, and help me to entertain our guest," she added.

Patsy came through the window and stood beside her cousin. The man stared at them, bit his lip, and then turned again to the cupboard. If he noted the absence of the keys he did not remark upon the fact, but with

hurried yet thorough examination began anew to turn over the bundles of papers.

Beth sat down and watched him, but Patsy remained standing behind her chair. West emptied all the shelves, and then after a pause took out his pocket knife and began tapping with its end the steel sides of the cupboard. There was no doubt he suspected the existence of a secret aperture, and Beth began to feel uneasy.

Slowly the man worked his way downward, from shelf to shelf, and began to sound the bottom plates, wholly oblivious of the fascinated gaze of the two young girls. Then a sudden gruff ejaculation startled them all, and West swung around to find a new group of watchers outside the window. In the foreground appeared the stern face of John Merrick.

The scene was intensely dramatic to all but the singular man who had been battling to retain a fortune. West knew in an instant that his attempt to secure the certificates was a failure. He turned from the cupboard, dusted his hands, and nodded gravely to the last arrivals.

"Come in, Mr. Merrick," said he, seating himself in a chair and removing his hat, which he had been wearing. "I owe you an apology for intruding upon your premises in your absence."

Uncle John strode into the room angry and indignant at the fellow's cool impertinence. The Major and Louise followed, and all eyes centered upon the face of Bob West.

"The contents of this cupboard," remarked the hardware merchant, calmly, "belong to the estate of Captain Wegg, and can scarcely be claimed by you because you have purchased the house. You falsely accused me the other day, sir, and I have been searching for proof that the Almaquo Timber Tract stock is entirely my property."

"Have you found such proof?" inquired Mr. Merrick.

"Not yet."

"And you say the stock was all issued to you?"

West hesitated.

"It was all transferred to me by Captain Wegg and Will Thompson."

"Does the transfer appear upon the stock itself?"

"Of course, sir."

"In that case," said Uncle John, "I shall be obliged to ask your pardon. But the fact can be easily proved."

He walked to the open cupboard, felt for the slide Joe had described to him, and drew it forward. A small drawer was behind the orifice, and from this Mr. Merrick drew a packet of papers.

West gave a start and half arose. Then he settled back into his chair again.

"H-m. This appears to be the stock in question," said Uncle John. He drew a chair to the table, unfolded the documents and examined them with deliberate care.

The nieces watched his face curiously. Mr. Merrick first frowned, then turned red, and finally a stern, determined look settled upon his rugged features.

"Take your stock, Mr. West," he said, tossing it toward the man; "and try to forgive us for making fools of ourselves!"