

## CHAPTER XXIII. - MR. WEST EXPLAINS.

A cry of amazed protest burst from the girls. The Major whistled softly and walked to the window.

"I find the stock properly transferred," continued Uncle John, grimly conscious that he was as thoroughly disappointed as the girls. "It is signed by both Wegg and Thompson, and witnessed in the presence of a notary. I congratulate you, Mr. West. You have acquired a fortune."

"But not recently," replied the hardware dealer, enjoying the confusion of his recent opponents. "I have owned this stock for more than three years, and you will see by the amount endorsed upon it that I paid a liberal price for it, under the circumstances."

Uncle John gave a start and a shrewd look.

"Of course you did," said he. "On paper."

"I have records to prove that both Captain Wegg and Will Thompson received their money," said West, quietly. "I see it is hard for you to abandon the idea that I am a rogue."

There could be no adequate reply to this, so for a time all sat in moody silence. But the thoughts of some were busy.

"I would like Mr. West to explain what became of the money he paid for this stock," said Louise; adding: "That is, if he will be so courteous."

West did not answer for a moment. Then he said, with a gesture of indifference:

"I am willing to tell all I know. But you people must admit that the annoyances you have caused me during the past fortnight, to say nothing of the gratuitous insults heaped upon my head, render me little inclined to favor you."

"You are quite justified in feeling as you do," replied Uncle John, meekly. "I have been an ass, West; but circumstances warranted me in suspecting you, and even Joseph Wegg did not know that the Almaquo stock had been transferred to you. He merely glanced at it at the time of his father's death, without noticing the endorsement, and thought the

fire had rendered it worthless. But if you then owned the stock, why was it not in your possession?"

"That was due to my carelessness," was the reply. "The only notary around here is at Hooker's Falls, and Mr. Thompson offered to have him come to Captain Wegg's residence and witness the transfer. As my presence was not necessary for this, and I had full confidence in my friends' integrity, I paid them their money, which they were eager to secure at once, and said I would call in a few days for the stock. I did call, and was told the notary had been here and the transfer had been legally made. Wegg said he would get the stock from the cupboard and hand it to me; but we both forgot it at that time. After his death I could not find it, for it was in the secret drawer."

"Another thing, sir," said Uncle John. "If neither Wegg nor Thompson was then interested in the Almaquo property, why did the news of its destruction by fire shock them so greatly that the result was Captain Wegg's death?"

"I see it will be necessary for me to explain to you more fully," returned West, with a thoughtful look. "It is evident, Mr. Merrick, from your questions, that some of these occurrences seem suspicious to a stranger, and perhaps you are not so much to be blamed as, in my annoyance and indignation, I have imagined."

"I would like the matter cleared up for the sake of Ethel and Joe," said Mr. Merrick, simply.

"And so would I," declared the hardware dealer. "You must know, sir, that Will Thompson was the one who first led Captain Wegg into investing his money. I think the Captain did it merely to please Will, for at that time he had become so indifferent to worldly affairs that he took no interest in anything beyond a mild wish to provide for his son's future. But Thompson was erratic in judgment, so Wegg used to bring their matters to me to decide upon. I always advised them as honestly as I was able. At the time I secured an option on the Almaquo tract, and wanted them to join me, Will Thompson had found another lot of timber, but located in an out-of-the-way corner, which he urged the Captain to join him in buying. Wegg brought the matter to me, as usual, and I pointed out that my proposed contract with the Pierce-Lane Lumber Company would assure our making a handsome profit at Almaquo, while Thompson had no one in view to cut the other tract. Indeed, it was far

away from any railroad. Wegg saw the force of my argument, and insisted that Thompson abandon his idea and accept my proposition. Together we bought the property, having formed a stock company, and the contract for cutting the timber was also secured. Things were looking bright for us and royalty payments would soon be coming in.

"Then, to my amazement, Wegg came to me and wanted to sell out their interests. He said Thompson had always been dissatisfied because they had not bought the other tract of timber, and that the worry and disappointment was affecting his friend's mind. He was personally satisfied that my investment was the best, but, in order to sooth old Will and prevent his mind from giving way, Wegg wanted to withdraw and purchase the other tract.

"I knew there was a fortune in Almaquo, so I went to New York and mortgaged all I possessed, discounting a lot of notes given me by farmers in payment for machinery, and finally borrowing at a high rate of interest the rest of the money I needed. In other words I risked all my fortune on Almaquo, and brought the money home to pay Wegg and Thompson for their interest. The moment they received the payment they invested it in the Bogue tract--"

"Hold on!" cried Uncle John. "What tract did you say?"

"The Bogue timber tract, sir. It lies--"

"I know where it lies. Our company has been a whole year trying to find out who owned it."

"Wegg and Thompson bought it. I was angry at the time, because their withdrawal had driven me into a tight corner to protect my investment, and I told them they would bitterly regret their action. I think Wegg agreed with me, but Will Thompson was still stubborn.

"Then came the news of the fire at Almaquo. It was a false report, I afterward learned, but at that time I believed the newspapers, and the blow almost deprived me of reason. In my excitement I rushed over to Wegg's farm and found the two men together, whereupon I told them I was ruined.

"The news affected them powerfully because they had just saved themselves from a like ruin, they thought. Wegg was also a sympathetic man, in spite of his reserve. His old heart trouble suddenly came upon

him, aggravated by the excitement of the hour, and he died with scarcely a moan. Thompson, whose reason was tottering long before this, became violently insane at witnessing his friend's death, and has never since recovered. That is all I am able to tell you, sir."

"The Bogue tract," said Uncle John, slowly, "is worth far more than the Almaquo. Old Will Thompson was sane enough when insisting on that investment. But where is the stock, or deed, to show they bought that property?"

"I do not know, sir. I only know they told me they had effected the purchase."

"Pardon me," said the Major. "Have you not been through this cupboard before?"

West looked at him with a frown.

"Yes; in a search for my own stock," he said. "But I found neither that nor any deed to the Bogue property. I am not a thief, Major Doyle."

"You stole the keys, though," said Louise, pointedly.

"I did not even do that," said West. "On the day of the funeral Joe carelessly left them lying upon a table, so I slipped them into my pocket. When I thought of them again Joe had gone away and I did not know his address. I came over and searched the cupboard unsuccessfully. But it was not a matter of great importance at that time if the stock was mislaid, since there was no one to contest my ownership of it. It was only after Mr. Merrick accused me of robbing my old friends and ordered my payments stopped that I realized it was important to me to prove my ownership. That is why I came here today."

Again a silence fell upon the group. Said Uncle John, finally:

"If the deed to the Bogue tract can be found, Joe and Ethel will be rich. I wonder what became of the paper."

No one answered, for here was another mystery.