

CHAPTER XXV. - GOOD NEWS AT LAST.

It was on the morning following this adventure that Uncle John received a bulky envelope from the city containing the result of the investigation he had ordered regarding the ownership of the Bogue tract of pine forest. It appeared that the company in which he was so largely interested had found the tract very valuable, and had been seeking for the owners in order to purchase it or lease the right to cut the timber. But although they had traced it through the hands of several successive owners the present holders were all unknown to them until Mr. Merrick's information had furnished them with a clue. A year ago the company had paid up the back taxes--two years overdue--in order to establish a claim to the property, and now they easily succeeded in finding the record of the deed from a certain Charles Walton to Jonas Wegg and William Thompson. The deed itself could not be found, but Uncle John considered the county record a sufficient claim to entitle the young folks to the property unless the ownership should be contested by others, which was not likely.

Uncle John invited Ethel and Joe to dine with him that evening, and Mary was told the occasion merited the best menu she could provide. The young folks arrived without any idea of receiving more than a good dinner and the pleasure of mingling with the cordial, kindly household at the farm; but the general air of hilarity and good fellowship pervading the family circle this evening inspired the guests with like enthusiasm, and no party could be merrier than the one that did full justice to Mary's superior cookery.

One of the last courses consisted of iced watermelon, and when it appeared the three girls eyed one another guiltily and then made frantic attempts to suppress their laughter, which was unseemly because no one but themselves understood the joke. But all else was speedily forgotten in the interest of the coming ceremony, which Mr. Merrick had carefully planned and prepared.

The company was invited to assemble in the room comprising the spacious right wing, and when all were seated the little gentleman coughed to clear his throat and straightway began his preamble.

He recited the manner in which Captain Wegg and Will Thompson, having money to invest, were led into an enterprise which Bob West had proposed, but finally preferred another venture and so withdrew their money altogether from the Almaquo tract.

This statement caused both Joe and Ethel to stare hard, but they said nothing.

"Your grandfather, Ethel," continued the narrator, "was much impressed by the value of another timber tract, although where he got his information concerning it I have been unable to discover. This piece of property, called the Bogue tract, was purchased by Wegg and Thompson with the money they withdrew from Almaquo, and still stands in their name."

Then he recounted, quite frankly, his unjust suspicions of the hardware dealer, and told of the interview in which the full details of this transaction were disclosed by West, as well as the truth relating to the death of Captain Wegg and the sudden insanity and paralysis of old Will Thompson.

Joe could corroborate this last, and now understood why Thompson had cried out that West's "good news" had killed his father. He meant, of course, their narrow escape from being involved in West's supposed ruin, for at that time no one knew the report of the fire was false.

Finally, these matters being cleared up, Uncle John declared that the Pierce-Lane Lumber Company was willing to contract to cut the timber on the Bogue property, or would pay a lump sum of two hundred thousand dollars for such title to the tract as could be given. He did not add that he had personally offered to guarantee the title. That was an unnecessary bit of information.

You may perhaps imagine the happiness this announcement gave Joe and Ethel. They could scarcely believe the good news was true, even when the kindly old gentleman, with tears in his eyes, congratulated the young couple on the fortune in store for them. The Major followed with a happy speech of felicitation, and then the three girls hugged the little school teacher rapturously and told her how glad they were.

"I think, sir," said Joe, striving to curb his elation, "that it will be better in the end for us to accept the royalty. Don't you?"

"I do, indeed, my boy," was the reply. "For if our people make an offer for the land of two hundred thousand you may rest assured it is worth much more. The manager has confided to me in his letter that if we are obliged to pay royalties the timber will cost us nearly double what it would by an outright purchase of the tract."

"In that case, sir," began Joe, eagerly, "we will--"

"Nonsense. The company can afford the royalty, Joe, for it is making a heap of money--more than I wish it were. One of my greatest trials is to take care of the money I've already made, and--"

"And he couldn't do it at all without my help," broke in the Major. "Don't ye hesitate to take an advantage of him, Joseph, if ye can get it--which I doubt--for Mr. Merrick is most disgracefully rich already."

"That's true," sighed the little millionaire. "So it will be a royalty, Joe. We are paying the same percentage to Bob West for the Almaquo tract, but yours is so much better that I am sure your earnings will furnish you and Ethel with all the income you need."

They sat discoursing upon the happy event for some time longer, but Joe had to return to the hotel early because he was not yet strong enough to be out late.

"Before I go, Mr. Merrick," he said, "I'd like you to give me my mother's picture, which is in the secret drawer of the cupboard. You have the keys, now, and Ethel is curious to see how my mother looked."

Uncle John went at once to the cupboard and unlocked the doors. Joe himself pushed the slide and took out of the drawer the picture, which had lain just beneath the Almaquo stock certificates.

The picture was passed reverently around. A sweet-faced, sad little woman it showed, with appealing eyes and lips that seemed to quiver even in the photograph.

As Louise held it in her hand something induced her to turn it over.

"Here is some writing upon the back," she said.

Joe bent over and read it aloud. It was in his father's handwriting.

"Press the spring in the left hand lower corner of the secret drawer."

"Hah!" cried Uncle John, while the others stared stupidly. "That's it! That's the information we've been wanting so long, Joseph!"

He ran to the cupboard, even as he spoke, and while they all thronged about him thrust in his hand, felt for the spring, and pressed it.

The bottom of the drawer lifted, showing another cavity beneath. From this the searcher withdrew a long envelope, tied with red tape.

"At last, Joseph!" he shouted, triumphantly waving the envelope over his head. And then he read aloud the words docketed upon the outside: "'Warranty Deed and Conveyance from Charles Walton to Jonas Wegg and William Thompson.' Our troubles are over, my boy, for here is the key to your fortune."

"Also," whispered Louise to her cousins, rather disconsolately, "it explains the last shred of mystery about the Wegg case. Heigh-ho! what a chase we've had for nothing!"

"Not for nothing, dear," replied Patsy, softly, "for we've helped make two people happy, and that ought to repay us for all our anxiety and labor."

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A knock was heard at the door, and Old Hucks entered and handed Mr. Merrick a paper.

"He's waiting, sir," said he, ambiguously.

"Oh, Tom--Tom!" cried Joe Wegg, rising to throw his arms around the old man's neck, "I'm rich, Tom--all my troubles are over--and Mr. Merrick has done it all--for Ethel and me!"

The ever smiling face of the ancient retainer did not change, but his eyes softened and filled with tears as he hugged the boy close to his breast.

"God be praised. Joe!" he said in a low voice. "I allus knew the Merricks 'd bring us luck."

"What the devil does this mean?" demanded Uncle John at this juncture, as he fluttered the paper and glared angrily around.

"What is it, dear?" inquired Louise.

"See for yourself," he returned.

She took the paper and read it, while Patsy and Beth peered over her shoulder. The following was scrawled upon a sheet of soiled stationery:

"John Merrak, esquire, to Marshall McMahan McNutt, detter.

"To yur gals Smashin' 162 mellings at 50 cents a one

81.00 Pleas remitt & save trouble."

The nieces screamed, laughing until they cried, while Uncle John spluttered, smiled, beamed, and then requested an explanation.

Patsy told the story of the watermelon raid with rare humor, and it served to amuse everybody and relieve the strain that had preceded the arrival of McNutt's bill.

"Did you say the man is waiting, Thomas?" asked Uncle John.

"Yes, sir."

"Here--give him five dollars and tell him to receipt the bill. If he refuses, I'll carry the matter to the courts. McNutt's a rascal, and a fool in the bargain; but we've had some of his melons and the girls have had five dollars' worth of fun in getting them. But assure him that this squares accounts, Thomas."

Thomas performed his mission.

McNutt rolled his eyes, pounded the floor with his stump to emphasize his mingled anger and satisfaction, and then receipted the bill.

"It's jest five more'n I 'spected to git, Hucks," he said with a grin. "But what's the use o' havin' nabobs around, ef ye don't bleed 'em?"