BAUM LYMAN FRANK

AUNT JANE'S NIECES AT MILLVILLE

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Содержание

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CHAPTER I.
UNCLE JOHN'S FARM

"How did I happen to own a farm?" asked Uncle John, interrupting his soup long enough to fix an inquiring glance upon Major Doyle, who sat opposite.

"By virtue of circumstance, my dear sir," replied the Major, composedly. "It's a part of my duty, in attending to those affairs you won't look afther yourself, to lend certain sums of your money to needy and ambitious young men who want a start in life."

"Oh, Uncle! Do you do that?" exclaimed Miss Patricia Doyle, who sat between her uncle and father and kept an active eye upon both.

"So the Major says," answered Uncle John, dryly.

"And it's true," asserted the other. "He's assisted three or four score young men to start in business in the last year, to my certain knowledge, by lending them sums ranging from one to three thousand dollars. And it's the most wasteful and extravagant charity I ever heard of."

"But I'm so glad!" cried Patsy, clapping her hands with a delighted gesture. "It's a splendid way to do good – to help young men to get a start in life. Without capital, you know, many a young fellow would never get his foot on the first round of the ladder."

"And many will never get it there in any event," declared the Major, with a shake of his grizzled head. "More than half the rascals that John helps go to the dogs entirely, and hang us up for all they've borrowed."

"I told you to help *deserving* young men," remarked Uncle John, with a scowl at his brother-in-law.

"And how can I tell whether they're desarving or not?" retorted Major Doyle, fiercely. "Do ye want me to become a sleuth, or engage detectives to track the objects of your erroneous philanthropy? I just have to form a judgment an' take me chances; and whin a poor devil goes wrong I charge your account with the loss."

"But some of them must succeed," ventured Patsy, in a conciliatory tone.

"Some do," said John Merrick; "and that repays me for all my trouble."

"All *your* throuble, sir?" queried the Major; "you mane all *my* throuble – well, and your money. And a heap of throuble that confounded farm has cost me, with one thing and another."

"What of it?" retorted the little round faced millionaire, leaning back in his chair and staring fixedly at the other. "That's

what I employ you for."

"Now, now, gentlemen!" cried Patsy, earnestly. "I'll have no business conversation at the table. You know my rules well enough."

"This isn't business," asserted the Major.

"Of course not," agreed Uncle John, mildly. "No one has any business owning a farm. How did it happen. Major?"

The old soldier had already forgotten his grievance. He quarreled persistently with his wealthy employer and brother-in-law – whom he fairly adored – to prevent the possibility (as he often confided to Patsy) of his falling down and worshiping him. John Merrick was a multi-millionaire, to be sure; but there were palliating circumstances that almost excused him. He had been so busily occupied in industry that he never noticed how his wealth was piling up until he discovered it by accident. Then he promptly retired, "to give the other fellows a chance," and he now devoted his life to simple acts of charity and the welfare and entertainment of his three nieces. He had rescued Major Doyle and his daughter from a lowly condition and placed the former in the great banking house of Isham, Marvin & Company, where John Merrick's vast interests were protected and his income wisely managed. He had given Patsy this cosy little apartment house at 3708 Willing Square and made his home with her, from which circumstance she had come to be recognized as his favorite niece.

John Merrick was sixty years old. He was short, stout and

chubby-faced, with snow-white hair, mild blue eyes and an invariably cheery smile. Simple in his tastes, modest and retiring, lacking the education and refinements of polite society, but shrewd and experienced in the affairs of the world, the little man found his greatest enjoyment in the family circle that he had been instrumental in founding. Being no longer absorbed in business, he had come to detest its every detail, and so allowed his bankers to care for his fortune and his brother-in-law to disburse his income, while he himself strove to enjoy life in a shy and boyish fashion that was as unusual in a man of his wealth as it was admirable. He had never married.

Patricia was the apple of Uncle John's eye, and the one goddess enshrined in her doting father's heart. Glancing at her, as she sat here at table in her plain muslin gown, a stranger would be tempted to wonder why. She was red-haired, freckled as a robin's egg, pug-nosed and wide-mouthed. But her blue eyes were beautiful, and they sparkled with a combination of saucy mischief and kindly consideration for others that lent her face an indescribable charm.

Everyone loved Patsy Doyle, and people would gaze longer at her smiling-lips and dancing eyes than upon many a more handsome but less attractive face. She was nearly seventeen years old, not very tall, and her form, to speak charitably, was more neat than slender.

"A while ago," said the Major, resuming the conversation as he carved the roast, "a young fellow came to me who had

invented a new sort of pump to inflate rubber tires. He wanted capital to patent the pump and put it on the market. The thing looked pretty good, John; so I lent him a thousand of your money."

"Quite right," returned Uncle John, nodding.

"But pretty soon he came back with a sad tale. He was in a bad fix. Another fellow was contesting his patent and fighting hard to head him off. It would take a lot of money to fight back – three thousand, at least. But he was decent about it, after all. His father had left him a little farm at Millville. He couldn't say what it was worth, but there were sixty acres and some good buildings, and he would deed it to you as security if you would let him have three thousand more."

"So you took the farm and gave him the money?"

"I did, sir. Perhaps I am to blame; but I liked the young fellow's looks. He was clean-cut and frank, and believed in his pump. I did more. At the climax of the struggle I gave another thousand, making five thousand in all."

"Well?"

"It's gone, John; and you've got the farm. The other fellows were too clever for my young friend, Joseph Wegg, and knocked out his patent."

"I'm so sorry!" said Patsy, sympathetically.

The Major coughed.

"It's not an unusual tale, my dear; especially when John advances the money," he replied.

"What became of the young man?" asked the girl.

"He's a competent chauffeur, and so he went to work driving an automobile."

"Where is Millville?" inquired Uncle John, thoughtfully.

"Somewhere at the north of the State, I believe."

"Have you investigated the farm at all?"

"I looked up a real estate dealer living at Millville, and wrote him about the Wegg farm. He said if any one wanted the place very badly it might sell for three thousand dollars."

"Humph!"

"But his best information was to the effect that no one wanted it at all."

Patsy laughed.

"Poor Uncle John!" she said.

The little man, however, was serious. For a time he ate with great deliberation and revolved an interesting thought in his mind.

"Years ago." said he, "I lived in a country town; and I love the smell of the meadows and the hum of the bees in the orchards. Any orchards at my farm, Major?"

"Don't know, sir."

"Pretty soon," continued Uncle John, "it's going to be dreadfully hot in

New York, and we'll have to get away."

"Seashore's the place," remarked the Major. "Atlantic City, or Swampscott, or – "

"Rubbish!" growled the other man, impatiently. "The girls and I have just come from Europe. We've had enough sea to last us all *this* season, at least. What we pine for is country life – pure milk, apple trees and new mown hay."

"We, Uncle?" said Patsy.

"Yes, my dear. A couple of months on the farm will do all of my nieces good. Beth is still with Louise, you know, and they must find the city deadly dull, just now. The farm's the thing. And the Major can run up to see us for a couple of weeks in the hot weather, and we'll all have a glorious, lazy time."

"And we can take Mary along to do the cooking," suggested Patsy, entering into the idea enthusiastically.

"And eat in our shirt-sleeves!" said Uncle John, with a glowing face.

"And have a cow and some pigs!" cried the girl.

"Pah!" said the Major, scornfully. "You talk as if it were a real farm, instead of a place no one would have as a gift."

Uncle John looked sober again.

"Anyone live on the place, Major?" he inquired.

"I believe not. It's gone to ruin and decay the last few years."

"But it could be put into shape?"

"Perhaps so; at an expense that will add to your loss."

"Never mind that."

"If you want farm life, why don't you rent a respectable farm?" demanded the Major.

"No; this is my farm. I own it, and it's my bounded duty to

live on it," said Uncle John, stubbornly. "Write to that real estate fellow at Millville tomorrow and tell him to have the place fixed up and put into ship-shape order as quickly as possible. Tell him to buy some cows and pigs and chickens, and hire a man to look after them. Also a horse and buggy, some saddle horses – "

"Go slow, John. Don't leave such a job to a country real estate dealer. If I remember right the fellow wrote like a blacksmith. If you want horses and rigs, let Hutchinson send you down the right sort, with an experienced groom and stable hands. But I'm not sure there will be a place to put them."

"Oh, Uncle!" exclaimed Patsy; "don't let us have all those luxuries. Let us live a simple life on the farm, and not degrade its charms by adding city fixin's. The cow and the chickens are all right, but let's cut out the horses until we get there. Don't you know, dear, that a big establishment means lots of servants, and servants mean worry and strife? I want to let down the bars for the cow when she moos, and milk her myself."

"It takes a skilled mechanic to milk a cow," objected the Major.

"But Patsy's right!" cried her uncle, with conviction. "We don't want any frills at all. Just tell your man, Major, to put the place into good living condition."

"Patrichia," softly remarked the Major, with an admiring glance at his small daughter, "has more sinse in her frizzled head than both of us put together."

"If she hadn't more than you," retorted Uncle John, with a

grin, "I'd put a candle inside her noodle and call her a Jack-Lantern."

CHAPTER II.
THE AGENT

The Major hunted up the real estate dealer's former letter as soon as he reached his office next morning. The printed letter-head, somewhat blurred, because too much ink had been used, read as follows:

> Marshall McMahon McNutt,
> Real Estate Dealer & Horses to Pasture
> by the week or month.
> Also Plymouth Rock Hens & Road Commissioner
> Agent for Radley's Lives of the Saints
> Insurance and Watermelons My Specialty

Millville, Mount County, N.Y.

The Major shook his head doubtfully as he read the above announcement; but Mr. McNutt was the only known person to whom he could appeal to carry out John Merrick's orders. So he dictated the following letter:

Dear Sir:

Mr. John Merrick, the present owner of the Wegg farm at Millville, desires to spend his summer vacation on the premises, and therefore requests you to have the house and grounds put in first-class shape as soon as possible, and to notify me directly the work is done. Have the house thoroughly cleaned, the grass mowed

around it and the barns and outbuildings repaired wherever it may be necessary. You are also instructed to procure for Mr. Merrick's use a good Jersey cow, some pigs and a dozen or so barnyard fowls. As several ladies will accompany the owner and reside with him on the place, he would like you to report what necessary furniture, if any, will be required for their comfort. Send your bill to me and it will receive prompt attention.

After several days this reply came:

Mister Doyle you must be crazy as a loon. Send me fifty cold dollars as an evvidence of good fayth and I wull see what can be done. Old Hucks is livin on the place yit do you want him to git out or what? Yours fer a square deal Marshall McMahon McNutt.

"John," said the Major, exhibiting this letter, "you're on the wrong tack. The man is justified in thinking we're crazy. Give up this idea and think of something else to bother me."

But the new proprietor of the Wegg farm was obdurate. During the past week he had indulged in sundry sly purchases, which had been shipped, in his name to Chazy Junction, the nearest railway station to Millville. Therefore, the "die had been cast," as far as Mr. Merrick was concerned, for the purchases were by this time at the farm, awaiting him, and he could not back out without sacrificing them. They included a set of gardening tools, several hammocks, croquet and tennis sets, and a remarkable collection of fishing tackle, which the sporting-goods man had declared fitted to catch anything that swam, from a whale to a minnow. Also, Uncle John decided to dress the part

of a rural gentleman, and ordered his tailor to prepare a corduroy fishing costume, a suit of white flannel, one of khaki, and some old-fashioned blue jean overalls, with apron front, which, when made to order by the obliging tailor, cost about eighteen dollars a suit. To forego the farm meant to forego all these luxuries, and Mr. Merrick was unequal to the sacrifice. Why, only that same morning he had bought a charming cottage piano and shipped it to the Junction for Patsy's use. That seemed to settle the matter definitely. To be balked of his summer vacation on his own farm was a thing Mr. Merrick would not countenance for a moment.

"Give me that letter, Major," he said; "I'll run this enterprise myself."

The Major resigned with a sigh of relief.

Uncle John promptly sent the real estate agent a draft for five hundred dollars, with instructions to get the farm in shape for occupancy at the earliest possible day.

"If Old Hucks is a farm hand and a bachelor," he wrote, "let him stay till I come and look him over. If he's a married man and has a family, chuck him out at once. I'm sure you are a man of good taste and judgment. Look over the furniture in the house and telegraph me what condition it is in. Everything about the place must be made cozy and comfortable, but I wish to avoid an appearance of vulgarity or extravagance."

The answer to this was a characteristic telegram:

Furniture on the bum, like everything else. Will do the best I can. McNutt.

Uncle John did not display this discouraging report to Patsy or her father. A little thought on the matter decided him to rectify the deficiencies, in so far as it lay in his power. He visited a large establishment making a specialty of "furnishing homes complete," and ordered a new kitchen outfit, including a modern range, a mission style outfit for a dining-room, dainty summer furniture for the five chambers to be occupied by his three nieces, the Major and himself, and a variety of lawn benches, chairs, etc.

"Look after the details," he said to the dealer. "Don't neglect anything that is pretty or useful."

"I won't, sir," replied the man, who knew his customer was "the great John Merrick," who could furnish a city "complete," if he wished to, and not count the cost.

Everything was to be shipped in haste to the Junction, and Uncle John wrote McNutt to have it delivered promptly to the farm and put in order.

"As soon as things are in shape," he wrote, "wire me to that effect and I'll come down. But don't let any grass grow under your feet. I'm a man who requires prompt service."

The days were already getting uncomfortably warm, and the little man was nervously anxious to see his farm. So were the nieces, for that matter, who were always interested in the things that interested their eccentric uncle. Besides Patricia Doyle, whom we have already introduced, these nieces were Miss Louise Merrick, who had just celebrated her eighteenth birthday, and Miss Elizabeth – or "Beth" – De Graf, now well past fifteen.

Beth lived in a small town in Ohio, but was then visiting her city cousin Louise, so that both girls were not only available but eager to accompany Uncle John to his new domain and assist him to enjoy his summer outing.

CHAPTER III.
MILLVILLE HEARS EXCITING NEWS

Millville is rather difficult to locate on the map, for the railroads found it impossible to run a line there, *Chazy* Junction, the nearest station, is several miles away, and the wagon road ascends the foothills every step of the distance. Finally you pass between Mount Parnassus (whoever named it that?) and Little Bill Hill and find yourself on an almost level plateau some four miles in diameter, with a placid lake in the center and a fringe of tall pines around the edge. At the South, where tower the northern sentries of the Adirondacks, a stream called Little Bill Creek comes splashing and dashing over the rocks to force its way noisily into the lake. When it emerges again it is humble and sedate, and flows smoothly to Hooker's Falls, from whence it soon joins a tributary that leads it to far away Champlain.

Millville is built where the Little Bill rushes into the lake. The old mill, with its race and sluice-gates, still grinds wearily the scanty dole of grain fed into its hoppers and Silas Caldwell takes his toll and earns his modest living just as his father did before him and "Little Bill" Thompson did before him.

Above the mill a rickety wooden bridge spans the stream, for here the highway from Chary Junction reaches the village

of Millville and passes the wooden structures grouped on either side its main street on the way to Thompson's Crossing, nine miles farther along. The town boasts exactly eleven buildings, not counting the mill, which, being on the other side of the Little Bill, can hardly be called a part of Millville proper. Cotting's Store contains the postoffice and telephone booth, and is naturally the central point of interest. Seth Davis' blacksmith shop comes next; Widow Clark's Emporium for the sale of candy, stationery and cigars adjoins that; McNutt's office and dwelling combined is next, and then Thorne's Livery and Feed Stables. You must understand they are not set close together, but each has a little ground of its own. On the other side of the street is the hardware store, with farm machinery occupying the broad platform before it, and then the Millville House, a two-storied "hotel" with a shed-like wing for the billiard-room and card tables. Nib Corkins' drug store, jewelry store and music store combined (with sewing machines for a "side line"), is the last of the "business establishments," and the other three buildings are dwellings occupied by Sam Cotting, Seth Davis and Nick Thorne.

Dick Pearson's farm house is scarcely a quarter of a mile up the highway, but it isn't in Millville, for all that. There's a cross lane just beyond Pearson's, leading east and west, and a mile to westward is the Wegg Farm, in the wildest part of the foothills.

It is a poor farming country around Millville. Strangers often wonder how the little shops of the town earn a living for

their proprietors; but it doesn't require a great deal to enable these simple folk to live. The tourist seldom penetrates these inaccessible foothills; the roads are too rough and primitive for automobiles; so Millville is shamefully neglected, and civilization halted there some half a century ago.

However, there was a genuine sensation in store for this isolated hamlet, and it was the more welcome because anything in the way of a sensation had for many years avoided the neighborhood.

Marshall McMahon McNutt, or, as he was more familiarly called by those few who respected him most highly, "Marsh" McNutt (and sundry other appellations by those who respected him not at all), became the recipient of a letter from New York announcing the intention of a certain John Merrick, the new owner of the Wegg Farm, to spend the summer on the place. McNutt was an undersized man of about forty, with a beardless face, scraggly buff-colored hair, and eyes that were big, light blue and remarkably protruding. The stare of those eyes was impenetrable, because observers found it embarrassing to look at them. "Mac's" friends had a trick of looking away when they spoke to him, but children gazed fascinated at the expressionless blue eyeballs and regarded their owner with awe.

The "real estate agent" was considered an enterprising man by his neighbors and a "poor stick" by his wife. He had gone to school at Thompson's Crossing in his younger days; had a call to preach, but failed because he "couldn't get religion"; inherited

a farm from his uncle and married Sam Cotting's sister, whose tongue and temper were so sharp that everyone marveled at the man's temerity in acquiring them. Finally he had lost one foot in a mowing machine, and the accident destroyed his further usefulness to the extent of inducing him to abandon the farm and move into town. Here he endeavored to find something to do to eke out his meagre income; so he raised "thoroughbred Plymouth Rocks," selling eggs for hatching to the farmers; doctored sick horses and pastured them in the lot back of his barn, the rear end of which was devoted to "watermelons in season"; sold subscription books to farmers who came to the mill or the village store; was elected "road commissioner" and bossed the neighbors when they had to work out their poll-tax, and turned his hand to any other affairs that offered a penny's recompense. The "real estate business" was what Seth Davis labeled "a blobbering bluff," for no property had changed hands in the neighborhood in a score of years, except the lot back of the mill, which was traded for a yoke of oxen, and the Wegg farm, which had been sold without the agent's knowledge or consent.

The only surprising thing about the sale of the Wegg farm was that anyone would buy it. Captain Wegg had died three years before, and his son Joe wandered south to Albany, worked his way through a technical school and then disappeared in the mazes of New York. So the homestead seemed abandoned altogether, except for the Huckses.

When Captain Wegg died Old Hucks, his hired man, and

Hucks' blind wife Nora were the only dependents on the place, and the ancient couple had naturally remained there when Joe scorned his inheritance and ran away. After the sale they had no authority to remain but were under no compulsion to move out, so they clung to their old quarters.

When McNutt was handed his letter by the postmaster and storekeeper he stared at its contents in a bewildered way that roused the loungers to amused laughter.

"What's up, Peggy?" called Nick Thorne from his seat on the counter.

"Somebody gone off'n me hooks an' left ye a fortun'?"

"Peggy" was one of McNutt's most popular nicknames, acquired because he wore a short length of pine where his absent foot should have been.

"Not quite," was the agent's slow reply; "but here's the blamedest funniest communicate a man ever got! It's from some critter that knows the man what bought the Wegg farm."

"Let's hear it," remarked Cotting, the store-keeper, a fat individual with a bald head, who was counting matches from a shelf into the public match-box. He allowed "the boys" just twenty free matches a day.

So the agent read the letter in an uncertain halting voice, and when he had finished it the little group stared at one another for a time in thoughtful silence.

"Wall, I'll be plunked," finally exclaimed the blacksmith. "Looks like the feller's rich, don't it?"

"Ef he's rich, what the tarnation blazes is he comin' here for?" demanded Nib Corkins, the dandy of the town. "I was over t' Huntingdon las' year, 'n' seen how the rich folks live. Boys, this h'ain't no place for a man with money."

"That depends," responded Cotting, gravely. "I'm sure we'd all be better off if we had a few real bloods here to squander their substance."

"Well, here's a perposal to squander, all right," said McNutt. "But the question is, Does he know what he's runnin' up agin', and what it'll cost to do all the idiotic things as he says?"

"Prob'ly not," answered the storekeeper.

"It's the best built farm house 'round thest parts," announced the miller, who had been silent until now. "Old Wegg were a sea-cap'n once, an' rich. He dumped a lot o' money inter that place, an' never got it out agin', nuther."

"'Course not. Sixty acres o' cobble-stone don't pay much divvydends, that I ever hearn tell on," replied Seth.

"There's some good fruit, though," continued Caldwell, "an' the berries allus paid the taxes an' left a little besides. Ol' Hucks gits along all right."

"Jest lives, 'n' that's all."

"Well, thet's enough," said the miller. "It's about all any of us do, ain't it?"

"Do ye take it this 'ere Merrick's goin' to farm, er what?" asked Nib, speculatively.

"I take it he's plumb crazy," retorted the agent, rubbing the

fringe of hair behind his ears. "One thing's certain boys, I don't do nuthin' foolish till I see the color of his money."

"Make him send you ten dollars in advance," suggested Seth.

"Make him send fifty," amended the store-keeper. "You can't buy a cow, an' pigs, an' chickens, an' make repairs on much less."

"By jinks, I will!" cried McNutt, slapping his leg for emphasis. "I'll strike him fer a cool fifty, an' if the feller don't pay he kin go to blazes. Them's my sentiments, boys, an' I'll stand by 'em!"

The others regarded him admiringly, so the energetic little man stumped away to indite his characteristic letter to Major Doyle.

If the first communication had startled the little village, the second fairly plunged it into a panic of excitement. Peggy's hand trembled as he held out the five hundred dollar draft and glared from it to his cronies with a white face.

"Suff'rin' Jehu!" gasped Nick Thorne. "Is it good?"

The paper was passed reverently around, and examined with a succession of dubious head-shakes.

"Send for Bob West," suggested Cotting. "He's seen more o' that sort o' money than any of us."

The widow Clarke's boy, who was present, ran breathlessly to fetch the hardware dealer, who answered the summons when he learned that Peggy McNutt had received a "check" for five hundred dollars.

West was a tall, lean man with shrewd eyes covered by horn spectacles and a stubby gray mustache. He was the potentate of

the town and reputed to be worth, at a conservative estimate, in the neighborhood of ten thousand dollars – "er more, fer that matter; fer Bob ain't tellin' his business to nobody." Hardware and implements were acknowledged to be paying merchandise, and West lent money on farm mortgages, besides. He was a quiet man, had a good library in his comfortable rooms over the store, and took the only New York paper that found its way into Millville. After a glance at the remittance he said:

"It's a draft on Isham, Marvin & Company, the New York bankers. Good as gold, McNutt. Where did you get it?"

"A lunitic named John Merrick, him that's bought the Cap'n Wegg farm, sent it on. Here's his letter, Bob."

The hardware dealer read it carefully and gave a low whistle.

"There may be more than one John Merrick," he said, thoughtfully. "But I've heard of one who is many times a millionaire and a power in the financial world. What will you do for him, McNutt, to expend this money properly?"

"Bless't if I know!" answered the man, his eyes bulging with a helpless look. "What 'n thunder *kin* I do, Bob?"

West smiled.

"I don't wish to interfere in business matters," said he, "but it is plainly evident that the new owner wishes the farm house put into such shape that it will be comfortable for a man accustomed to modern luxuries. You don't know much about such things, Mac, and Mr. Merrick has made a blunder in employing your services in such a delicate matter. But do the best you can. Ride across to

the Wegg place and look it over. Then get Taft, the carpenter, to fix up whatever is necessary. I'll sell you the lumber and nails, and you've got more money than you can probably use. Telegraph Mr. Merrick frankly how you find things; but remember the report must not be based upon your own mode of life but upon that of a man of wealth and refinement. Especially he must be posted about the condition of the furniture, which I can guess is ill-suited to his needs."

"How 'bout Hucks?" asked the agent.

They all hung eagerly on West's reply, for Old Hucks was a general favorite. The fact that the old retainer of the Weggs had a blind wife to whom he was tenderly devoted made the proposition of his leaving the farm one of intense interest. Old Hucks and his patient wife had not been so much "hired help" as a part of the Wegg establishment, and it was doubtful if they had ever received any wages. It was certain that Hucks had not a dollar in the world at the present time, and if turned out of their old home the ancient couple must either starve or go to the poorhouse.

"Say nothing further about Old Hucks or his wife to Mr. Merrick," advised West, gravely. "When the owner comes he will need servants, and Hucks is a very capable old fellow. Let that problem rest until the time comes for solution. If the old folks are to be turned out, make John Merrick do it; it will put the responsibility on his shoulders."

"By dum, yer right, Bob!" exclaimed McNutt. slapping the

counter with his usual impulsiveness. "I'll do the best I kin for the rich man, an' let the poor man alone."

After an examination of the farm house and other buildings (which seemed in his eyes almost palatial), and a conference with Alonzo Taft, the carpenter, the agent began to feel that his task was going to prove an easy one. He purchased a fine Jersey cow of Will Johnson, sold his own flock of Plymouth Rocks at a high price to Mr. Merrick, and hired Ned Long to work around the yard and help Hucks mow the grass and "clean up" generally.

But now his real trouble and bewilderment began. A carload of new furniture and "fixin's" was sidetracked at the junction, and McNutt was ordered to get it unloaded and carted to the farm without delay. There were four hay-rack loads of the "truck," altogether, and when it was all dumped into the big empty barn at the Wegg farm the poor agent had no idea what to do with it.

"See here," said Nick Thorne, who had done the hauling, "you've got to let a woman inter this deal, Peggy."

"That's what my wife says, gum-twist her."

"Keep yer ol' woman out'n it. She'd spile a rotten apple."

"Who then, Nick?"

"Why, school-teacher's the right one, I guess. They've got a vacation now, an' likely she'll come over here an' put things to rights. Peggy, that air new furniture's the rambunctionest stuff thet ever come inter these parts, an' it'll make the ol' house bloom like a rose in Spring. But folks like us hain't got no call to tech it. You fetch school-teacher."

Peggy sighed. He was keeping track of his time and charging John Merrick at the rate of two dollars a day, being firmly resolved to "make hay while the sun was shining" and absorb as much of the money placed in his hands as possible. To let "school-teacher" into this deal and be obliged to pay her wages was an undesirable thing to do; yet he reflected that it might be wise to adopt Nick Thorne's suggestion.

So next morning he drove the liveryman's sorrel mare out to Thompson's

Crossing, where the brick school-house stood on one corner and Will

Thompson's residence on another. A mile away could be seen the spires of the little church at Hooker's Falls.

McNutt hitched his horse to Thompson's post, walked up the neat pebbled path and knocked at the door.

"Ethel in?" he asked of the sad-faced woman who, after some delay, answered his summons.

"She's in the garden, weedin'."

"I'll go 'round," said the agent.

The garden was a bower of roses. Among them stood a slender girl in a checked gingham, tying vines to a trellis.

"Morn'n', Ethel," said the visitor.

The girl smiled at him. She was not very pretty, because her face was long and wan, and her nose a bit one-sided. But her golden hair sparkled in the sun like a mass of spun gold, and the smile was winning in its unconscious sweetness. Surely, such

attractions were enough for a mere country girl.

Ethel Thompson had, however, another claim to distinction. She had been "eddicated," as her neighbors acknowledged in awed tones, and "took a diploma from a college school at Troy." Young as she was, Ethel had taught school for two years, and might have a life tenure if she cared to retain the position. As he looked at her neat gown and noted the grace and ease of her movements the agent acknowledged that he had really "come to the right shop" to untangle his perplexing difficulties.

"New folks is comin' to the Cap'n Wegg farm," he announced, as a beginning.

She turned and looked at him queerly.

"Has Joe sold the place?" she asked.

"Near a year ago. Some fool rich man has bought it and is comin' down here to spend his summer vacation, he says. Here, read his letters. They'll explain it better 'n I can."

Her hand trembled a little as she took the letters McNutt pulled from his pocket. Then she sat upon a bench and read them all through. By that time she had regained her composure.

"The gentleman is somewhat eccentric," she remarked; "but he will make no mistake in coming to this delightful place, if he wishes quiet and rest."

"Don't know what he's after, I'm sure," replied the man. "But he's sent down enough furniture an' truck to stock a hotel, an' I want to know ef you'll go over an' put it in the rooms, an' straighten things out."

"Me!"

"Why, yes. You've lived in cities some, an' know how citified things go.

Con-twist it, Ethel, there's things in the bunch that neither I ner Nick

Thorne ever hearn tell of, much less knowin' what they're used for."

The girl laughed.

"When are the folks coming?" she asked.

"When I git things in shape. They've sent some money down to pay fer what's done, so you won't have to work fer nuthin'."

"I will, though," responded the girl, in a cheery tone. "It will delight me to handle pretty things. Are Nora and Tom still there?"

"Oh, yes. I had orders to turn the Huckses out, ye see; but I didn't do it."

"I'm glad of that," she returned, brightly "Perhaps we may arrange it so they can stay. Old Nora's a dear."

"But she's blind."

"She knows every inch of the Wegg house, and does her work more thoroughly than many who can see. When do you want me, Peggy?"

"Soon's you kin come."

"Then I'll be over tomorrow morning."

At that moment a wild roar, like that of a beast, came from the house. The sad faced woman ran down a passage; a door

slammed, and then all was quiet again.

McNutt hitched uneasily from the wooden foot to the good one.

"How's ol' Will?" he enquired, in a low voice.

"Grandfather's about as usual," replied the girl, with trained composure.

"Still crazy as a bedbug?"

"At times he becomes a bit violent; but those attacks never last long."

"Don't s'pose I could see him?" ventured the agent, still in hesitating tones.

"Oh, no; he has seen no visitor since Captain Wegg died."

"Well, good-bye, Ethel. See you at the farm in the mornin'."

The girl sat for a long time after McNutt had driven away, seemingly lost in revery.

"Poor Joe!" she sighed, at last. "Poor, foolish Joe. I wonder what has become of him?"

CHAPTER IV.
ETHEL MAKES PREPARATION

The Wegg homestead stood near the edge of a thin forest of pines through which Little Bill Creek wound noisily on its way to the lake. At the left was a slope on which grew a neglected orchard of apple and pear trees, their trunks rough and gnarled by the struggle to outlive many severe winters. There was a rude, rocky lane in front, separated from the yard by a fence of split pine rails, but the ground surrounding the house was rich enough to grow a profusion of June grass.

The farm was of very little value. Back of the yard was a fairly good berry patch, but aside from that some two acres of corn and a small strip of timothy represented all that was fertile of the sixty acres the place contained.

But the house itself was the most imposing dwelling for many miles around. Just why that silent old sea-dog, Jonas Wegg, had come into this secluded wilderness to locate was a problem the Millville people had never yet solved. Certainly it was with no idea of successfully farming the land he had acquired, for half of it was stony and half covered by pine forest. But the house he constructed was the wonder of the country-side in its day. It was a big, two-story building, the lower half being "jest cobblestones," as the neighbors sneeringly remarked, while the upper half was

"decent pine lumber." The lower floor of this main building consisted of a single room with a great cobble-stone fireplace in the center of the rear wall and narrow, prison-like windows at the front and sides. There was a small porch in front, with a great entrance door of carved dark wood of a foreign look, which the Captain had brought from some port in Massachusetts. A stair in one corner of the big living room led to the second story, where four large bed-chambers were arranged. These had once been plastered and papered, but the wall-paper had all faded into dull, neutral tints and in one of the rooms a big patch of plaster had fallen away from the ceiling, showing the bare lath. Only one of the upstairs rooms had ever been furnished, and it now contained a corded wooden bedstead, a cheap pine table and one broken-legged chair. Indeed, the main building, which I have briefly described, had not been in use for many years. Sometimes, when Captain Wegg was alive, he would build a log fire in the great fireplace on a winter's evening and sit before it in silent mood until far into the night. And once, when his young wife had first occupied the new house, the big room had acquired a fairly cosy and comfortable appearance. But it had always been sparsely furnished, and most of the decadent furniture that now littered it was useless and unlovely.

The big wooden lean-to at the back, and the right wing, were at this time the only really habitable parts of the mansion. The lean-to had an entrance from the living room, but Old Hucks and Nora his wife used the back door entirely. It consisted of a large

and cheerful kitchen and two rooms off it, one used as a store room and the other as a sleeping chamber for the aged couple.

The right wing was also constructed of cobble-stone, and had formerly been Captain Wegg's own chamber. After his death his only child, Joe, then a boy of sixteen, had taken possession of his father's room; but after a day or two he had suddenly quitted the house where he was born and plunged into the great outside world – to seek his fortune, it was said. Decidedly there was no future for the boy here; in the cities lurks opportunity.

When Ethel Thompson arrived in the early morning that followed her interview with McNutt she rode her pony through the gap in the rail fence, across the June grass, and around to the back door. On a bench beside the pump an old woman sat shelling peas. Her form was thin but erect and her hair snowy white. She moved with alertness, and as the girl dismounted and approached her she raised her head and turned a pleasant face with deep-set, sightless gray eyes upon her visitor.

"Good morning, Ethel, dear," she said. "I knew the pony's whinney.

You're up early today."

"Good morning, Nora," responded the schoolteacher, advancing to kiss the withered cheek. "Are you pretty well?"

"In body, dear. In mind both Tom 'n' me's pretty bad. I s'pose we couldn't 'a 'spected to stay here in peace forever; but the blow's come suddin-like, an' it hurts us."

"Where is Tom?"

"In the barn, lookin' over all the won'erful things the rich nabob has sent here. He says most things has strips o' wood nailed over 'em; but some hasn't; an' Tom looks 'em over keerful an' then tells me 'bout 'em. He's gone to take another look at a won'erful new cook-stove, so's he kin describe it to me right pertickler."

"Is he worried, Nora?"

"We's both worried, Ethel. Our time's come, an' no mistake. Peggy McNutt says as he had real orders to turn Hucks out if he was a married man; an' there's no disclaimin' he's married, is there? Peggy's a kind man, an' tol' us to keep stayin' 'til the nabobs arrove. Then I guess we'll git our walkin'-papers, mighty quick."

"I'm not sure of that," said the girl, thoughtfully. "They must be hard-hearted, indeed, to turn you out into the world; and you are both capable people, and would serve the city folks faithfully and well."

"It's my eyes," replied the other, in a simple, matter-of-fact tone. "Hucks might wait on the nabobs all right, but they won't tol'rate a blind woman a minute, I'm sure. An' Hucks 'd ruther be with me in the poor-house than to let me go alone."

"Right y' air, Nora girl!" cried a merry voice, and as the blind woman looked up with a smile Ethel turned around to face "Old Hucks."

A tall man, but much bent at the shoulders and limping in one leg from an old hurt aggravated by rheumatism. His form was as gnarled as the tree-trunks in the apple-orchard, and twisted

almost as fantastically. But the head, uplifted from the stooped shoulders and held a little to one side, was remarkable enough to attract attention. It had scanty white locks and a fringe of white whiskers under the chin, and these framed a smiling face and features that were extremely winning in expression. No one could remember ever seeing Old Hucks when he was not smiling, and the expression was neither set nor inane, but so cheery and bright that you were tempted to smile with him, without knowing why. For dress he wore a much patched pair of woolen trousers and a "hickory" shirt of faded blue, with rough top boots and a dilapidated straw hat that looked as if it might have outlived several generations.

As Ethel greeted the man she looked him over carefully and sighed at the result; for certainly, as far as personal appearances went, he seemed as unlikely a person to serve a "nabob" as could well be imagined. But the girl knew Thomas' good points, and remembering them, took courage.

"If the worst comes," she said, brightly, "you are both to come to us to live. I've arranged all that with grandmother, you know. But I'm not much afraid of your being obliged to leave here. From all accounts this Mr. Merrick is a generous and free-hearted man, and I've discovered that strangers are not likely to be fearsome when you come to know them. The unknown always makes us childishly nervous, you see, and then we forget it's wrong to borrow trouble."

"True's gospil," said Old Hucks. "To know my Nora is to love

her. Ev'body loves Nora. An' the good Lord He's took'n care o' us so long, it seems like a sort o' sacrelidge to feel that all thet pretty furn'ture in the barn spells on'y poor-house to us. Eh, Ethel?"

McNutt arrived just then, with big Ned Long, Lon Taft the carpenter, and Widow Clark, that lady having agreed to "help with the cleanin'." She didn't usually "work out," but was impelled to this task as much through curiosity to see the new furniture as from desire to secure the wages.

At once the crowd invaded the living room, and after a glance around Ethel ordered every bit of the furniture, with the exception of two antique but comfortable horse-hair sofas, carried away to the barn and stored in the loft. It did not take long to clear the big room, and then the Widow Clark swept out and began to scrub the floor and woodwork, while school-teacher took her men into the right wing and made another clearing of its traps.

This room interested the girl very much. In it Joe was born and frail Mrs. Wegg and her silent husband had both passed away. It had two broad French windows with sash doors opening on to a little porch of its own which was covered thickly with honeysuckle vines. A cupboard was built into a niche of the thick cobble-stone wall, but it was locked and the key was missing.

Upstairs the girl had the rubbish removed for the first time in a generation. The corded bedstead in the north room was sent to join its fellows in the barn loft, and Ned Long swept everything clean in readiness for the scrubbers.

Then, while Widow Clark and Nora cleaned industriously – for the blind woman insisted on helping and did almost as much work as her companion – the "men folks" proceeded to the barn and under the school-teacher's directions uncrated the new furniture and opened the bales of rugs and matting. Lon Taft was building new steps to the front porch, but Old Hucks and Ned and McNutt reverently unpacked the "truck" and set each piece carefully aside. How they marveled at the enameled beds and colored wicker furniture, the easy chairs for lounging, the dainty dressers and all the innumerable pretty things discovered in boxes, bales and barrels, you may well imagine. Even Ethel was amazed and delighted at the thoughtfulness of the dealer in including everything that might be useful or ornamental in a summer home.

The next few days were indeed busy ones, for the girl entered enthusiastically upon her task to transform the old house, and with the material John Merrick had so amply provided she succeeded admirably. The little maid was country bred, but having seen glimpses of city life and possessing much native good taste, she arranged the rooms so charmingly that they would admit of scant improvement. The big living room must serve as a dining room as well as parlor; but so spacious was it that such an arrangement proved easy. No especial furniture for the living room had been provided, but by stealing a few chairs and odd pieces from the ample supply provided for the bedrooms, adding the two quaint sofas and the upright piano and spreading the rugs

in an artistic fashion, Ethel managed to make the "parlor part" of the room appear very cosy. The dining corner had a round table and high-backed chairs finished in weathered oak, and when all was in order the effect was not inharmonious. Some inspiration had induced Mr. Merrick to send down a batch of eighteen framed pictures, procured at a bargain but from a reliable dealer. He thought they might "help out," and Ethel knew they would, for the walls of the old house were quite bare of ornament. She made them go as far as possible, and Old Hucks, by this time thoroughly bewildered, hung them where she dictated and made laughable attempts to describe the subjects to blind Nora.

A telegram, telephoned over from the junction, announced the proposed arrival of the party on Thursday morning, and the school-teacher was sure that everything would be in readiness at that time. The paint on Lon's repairs would be dry, the grass in the front yard was closely cropped, and the little bed of flowers between the corn-crib and the wood-shed was blooming finely. The cow was in the stable, the pigs in the shed, and the Plymouth Rocks strutted over the yard with an absurd assumption of pride.

Wednesday Ethel took Old Hucks over to Millville and bought for him from Sam Cotting a new suit of dark gray "store clothes," together with shirts, shoes and underwear. She made McNutt pay the bill with John Merrick's money, agreeing to explain the case to "the nabob" herself, and back up the agent in the unauthorized expenditure. Nora had a new gingham dress, too, which the girl had herself provided, and on Thursday morning Ethel was at

the Wegg farm bright and early to see the old couple properly attired to receive their new master. She also put a last touch to the pretty furniture and placed vases of her own roses and sweet peas here and there, to render the place homelike and to welcome the expected arrivals.

"If they don't like it," said the girl, smiling, "they're rather hard to please."

"They're sure to like it, dear," answered old Nora, touching with sensitive fingers the flowers, the books and the opened piano. "If they don't, they're heretics an' sinners, an' there's no good in 'em whatever."

Then the little school-teacher bade good-bye to Hucks and his wife, told them to keep brave hearts, and rode her pony cross-lots to Thompson's Crossing.

CHAPTER V.
THE ARRIVAL OF THE NABOBS

"Well," said Uncle John, looking out of the car window, "we're nearly there."

He didn't look the millionaire, or nabob, or anything else but a modest little man full of joy at getting into the country. His clothing was not distinctive of wealth, his hands were hard and roughened by years of toil, and his necktie had a plebeian trick of sliding under his left ear. Uncle John was just a plain, simple, good-hearted fellow before he acquired riches, and the possession of millions had in no way altered his nature.

The three nieces and himself were the only passengers in the coach, aside from rosy-cheeked Mary, Patricia's cook. Finding that the road did not run a sleeper to Chazy Junction, Mr. Merrick had ordered one attached to the train for his especial use; but he did not allow even Patsy to suspect this extravagance.

"It seems to me," observed Beth, as she peered out while the train puffed up the steep grade, "as if we'd arrived at the heart of a wilderness, where farms are likely to be as scarce as Egyptian temples."

"The truth is," replied her uncle, with a cheerful smile, "that none of us has an idea where we're going, or what that farm of mine looks like. We're explorers, like Stanley in mid-Africa.

That's the beauty of this excursion."

"I'm glad I didn't bring any party dresses," said dainty Louise, shaking her blonde head with a doubting expression toward the rock covered hills.

"Why, you might need them for hay-rides," remarked Patsy, with a laugh; "that is, if any hay grows in this land of quarries."

The train stopped with a jerk, started with another jerk, and stopped again with a third that made them catch their breaths and hold fast to the seats.

"Chazy Junction, seh," said the colored porter, entering in haste to seize their bags.

They alighted on a small wooden platform and their hand baggage was deposited beside them. Their trunks were being tumbled off a car far ahead.

Then the whistle screamed, the train gave a jerk and proceeded on its way, and Uncle John, his nieces and their maid, found themselves confronting a solitary man in shirtsleeves, who yawned languidly, thrust his hands in his pockets and stared at the strangers unmoved.

It was six o'clock. The July sun was set in a clear sky, but the air was cool and pleasant. Uncle John glanced around with the eye of a practiced traveler. Back of the station was a huddle of frame buildings set in a hollow. The station-tender was the only person in sight.

"Isn't there a carriage to meet us?" asked Louise, in a slightly frigid tone.

"Seems not," replied her uncle. Then he addressed the native. "Can you tell us, sir, where Millville is?" he asked.

"Sev'n mile up the road."

"Thank you kindly. Is there any carriage to be had?"

The man smiled sardonically.

"Kerridges," he said, "don't grow in these parts. I take it you be the party fer the Wegg farm."

"You're right," said Mr. Merrick. "I'm glad we are getting acquainted.

Folks all well?"

"Pretty fair."

"Now, sir, we want some breakfast, to begin with, and then some way to get to my farm."

"Peggy orter 'a' looked after you," remarked the man, eyeing the dainty gowns of the young ladies reflectively.

"Who's Peggy?"

"That's McNutt, the man you hired to do things."

"Ah, yes; he surely ought to have sent some sort of a team to meet us," agreed Uncle John. "What's that group of houses yonder?"

"Thet's the Junction."

"Any hotel?"

"Sure."

"And a livery stable?"

"'Course there is."

"Then we'll get along," said Uncle John, assuming a sudden

brisk manner.

"Just keep your eye on our baggage till we get back, my good fellow.

There are no people to interfere with it, but some bears or tigers might come out of the hills and eat it up. Now, girls, away we go!"

Uncle John's nieces were not so greatly dismayed at this experience as might have been expected. They had recently accompanied their erratic relative on a European trip and had learned to be patient under difficulties.

A quarter of a mile down the dusty road they came to the hotel, a dismal, unclean looking place that smelled of stale beer. Uncle John routed out the proprietor.

"Folks up?" he inquired.

"Long ago," said the man.

"Get us some boiled eggs, bread and butter and plenty of fresh milk – right away," ordered Mr. Merrick. "The quicker it comes the more I'll pay you. Bring a table out here on the porch and we'll eat in the open air. Where's the livery stable – eh? Oh, I see. Now, step lively, my man, and your fortune's made. I'll add a quarter of a dollar for every five minutes you save us in time."

The fellow stared, then woke up with a start and disappeared within.

"By gum, I'll bet a hen it's thet air nabob!" he muttered.

Leaving his girls and Mary to sit on the wooden benches of the porch Uncle John crossed the road to the livery stable, where he

discovered a man and a boy engaged in cleaning the half dozen sorry looking nags the establishment contained. A three-seated democrat wagon was engaged to carry the party to the Wegg farm at Millville, and a rickety lumber wagon would take the baggage. The liveryman recognized his customer as soon as the Wegg farm was mentioned, and determined to "do the city guy up brown."

"Road's bad an' up hill, an' my time's vallyble," he said in a surly voice. "I'll hev to charge ye three dollars."

"For what?" asked Uncle John, quietly.

"Fer the two teams to Millville."

"Get them harnessed right away, load up the baggage, and have the democrat at the hotel in twenty minutes. Here's five dollars, and if you'll look pleasant you may keep the change."

"Blame my thick skull!" muttered the livery-man, as he watched the little man depart. "What a cussed fool I were not to say four dollars instead o' three!"

But he called to his boy to hurry up, and in the stipulated time the teams were ready.

Uncle John and his nieces were just finishing their eggs, which were fresh and delicious. The milk was also a revelation. Through the windows of the hotel several frowsy looking women and an open mouthed boy were staring hard at the unconscious city folk.

Even Louise was in a mood for laughter as they mounted to the high seats of the democrat. The glorious air, the clear sunshine and a satisfactory if simple breakfast had put them all in a good humor with the world.

They stopped at the station for their hand baggage, and saw that the trunks were properly loaded on the lumber wagon. Then, slowly, they started to mount the long hill that began its incline just across the tracks.

"Sure this is the way?" inquired Uncle John, perched beside the driver.

"I were horned here," answered the man, conclusively.

"That seems to settle it. Pretty big hill, that one ahead of us."

"It's the Little Bill. When we cross it, we're at Millville."

Seven miles of desolate country could not dampen the spirits of the girls. Secretly each one was confident that Uncle John's unknown farm would prove to be impossible, and that in a day or so at the latest they would retrace their steps. But in the meantime the adventure was novel and interesting, and they were prepared to accept the inevitable with all graciousness.

When, after the long climb up the hill, they saw the quaint mill and the town lying just across rushing Little Bill Creek; when from their elevation they beheld the placid lake half hidden by its stately pines and gazed up the rugged and picturesque foot-hills to the great mountains beyond, then indeed they drew in deep breaths and began, as Patsy exclaimed, to be "glad they came."

"That Millville?" asked Uncle John, eagerly.

"Yes, sir."

"And which of those houses belongs to the Wegg farm?"

"Ye can't see the Wegg house from here; the pines hide it," said the man, urging his horses into a trot as they approached

the bridge.

"Pretty good farm?" inquired Uncle John, hopefully.

"Worst in the county," was the disconcerting reply. "Half rocks an' half trees. Ol' Cap'n Wegg wasn't no farmer. He were a sea-cap'n; so it's no wonder he got took in when he bought the place."

Uncle John sighed.

"I've just bought it myself," he observed.

"There's a ol' addige," said the man, grinning, "'bout a fool an' his money. The house is a hunker; but w'at's the use of a house without a farm?"

"What is a 'hunker,' please?" inquired Louise, curiously.

The liveryman ventured no reply, perhaps because he was guiding his horses over the rickety bridge.

"Want to stop at the village?" he asked.

"No; drive on to the farm."

The scene was so rude and at the same time so picturesque that it impressed them all very agreeably. Perhaps they were the more delighted because they had expected nothing admirable in this all but forsaken spot. They did not notice the people who stared after them as they rattled through the village, or they would have seen Uncle John's "agent" in front of his office, his round eyes fairly bulging from his head.

It had never occurred to McNutt to be at the Junction to welcome his patron. He had followed his instructions and set Mr. Merrick's house in order, and there he considered that his duty

ended. He would, of course, call on the nabob, presently, and render an account of the money he had received.

Sam Cotting, the store-keeper, gazed after the livery team with a sour countenance, he resented the fact that five big-boxes of groceries had been forwarded from the city to the Wegg farm. "What'n thunder's the use havin' city folks here, ef they don't buy nothin'?" he asked the boys; and they agreed it was no use at all.

Proceeding at a smart trot the horses came to the Pearson farm, where they turned into the Jane at the left and straightway subsided to a slow walk, the wheels bumping and jolting over the stony way.

"What's this?" exclaimed Uncle John, who had narrowly escaped biting his tongue through and through. "Why did you turn down here?"

"It's the road," returned the driver, with a chuckle; "it's the cobble-stone lane to yer farm, an' the farm's 'bout the same sort o' land as the lane."

For a few moments the passengers maintained a dismal silence.

"The country's lovely," said Patsy, glancing at the panorama as they mounted a slight elevation.

"Are you sure, Uncle, that there is a house, or any place of refuge, on your farm?" asked Louise, in a mischievous tone.

"Why, there's a rumor of a house, and the rumor says it's a hunker," replied Mr. Merrick, in a voice that betrayed a slight uneasiness.

"Doubtless the house matches the farm," said Beth, calmly. "I imagine it has two rooms and a leaky roof. But never mind, girls. This has been a pleasant trip, and we can seek shelter elsewhere if the worst comes to the worst."

"I guess the worst has come a'ready," observed the driver; "for the house is by odds the best part o' the Wegg farm. It's big enough fer a hotel, an' cost a lot o' money in its day. Seems like the lunatics all crowd to thet place – fust ol' Cap'n Wegg wasted of his substance on it, an' now – "

He paused, perhaps fearing he might become personal in his remarks, and

Uncle John coughed while the girls shrieked with laughter.

Expecting nothing, they were amazed when they passed the orchard and the group of pines that had concealed the house and suddenly drew up beside the old-fashioned stile built into the rail fence. Every eye was instantly upon the quaint, roomy mansion, the grassy sward extending between it and the road, and the cosy and home-like setting of the outbuildings.

"Here's Wegg's," said the liveryman.

"Oh, Uncle," cried Beth; "how lovely!"

Louise's pretty face was wreathed with smiles. Patsy drew in a long breath and scrambled out of the high seat.

On the corner of the front porch stood Nora, arrayed in her neat gray gown and a cap. Her face was composed, but she felt herself trembling a little.

Old Hucks came slowly down the steps to greet the company.

Never in his memory had his dress been so immaculate. The queer old fellow seemed to appreciate this as he raised his smiling face from the stooped shoulders and poised it on one side like a sparrow.

"Welcome home, sir," he said to Uncle John. "I'm Hucks, sir; Thomas Hucks," and without more words he proceeded to remove the satchels from the wagon.

"Ah, yes," returned Mr. Merrick, cheered by the welcome and the smile of the old man. "I'd forgotten about you, but I'm glad you're here."

"And that is my wife Nora, on the porch. She's the housekeeper, sir." And then, lowering his voice so that only the girls and Uncle John could hear, he added simply: "She's blind."

Patsy walked straight up to the eager, pathetic figure of the woman and took her hand in a warm clasp.

"I'm Patricia, Nora," she said, "and I'm sure we shall be friends."

Beth followed her cousin's lead.

"And I am Beth, Nora. Will you remember me?"

"Surely, miss; by your voice," returned the old woman, beaming delightedly at these evidences of kindliness.

"Here is another, Nora," said their cousin, in gentle tones. "I am

Louise."

"Three young and pretty girls, Nora; and as good as they are pretty," announced Uncle John, proudly. "Will you show us in,

Thomas, or will your wife?"

"Nora will take the young ladies to their rooms, sir."

"Not now, Uncle!" they all protested, in nearly identical words; and Louise added: "Let us drink in the delights of this pretty picture before we shut ourselves up in the stuffy rooms. I hope they've been aired."

Patsy ran to a chicken-coop on the side lawn, where a fussy hen was calling to her children that strangers had arrived. Beth exclaimed at the honeysuckle vines and Louise sank into a rustic chair with a sigh of content.

"I'm so glad you brought us here. Uncle," she said. "What a surprise it is to find the place so pretty!"

They could hear the rush of the Little Bill in the wood behind them and a soft breeze stirred the pines and wafted their fragrance to the nostrils of the new arrivals. Uncle John squatted on the shady steps and fairly beamed upon the rustic scene spread out before him. Patsy had now thrown aside her hat and jacket and lay outstretched upon the cool grass, while the chickens eyed her with evident suspicion. Beth was picking a bouquet of honeysuckles, just because they were so sweet and homely.

"I'm almost sure I sent some hammocks and a croquet set," remarked Uncle

John.

"They're here, sir," said Old Hucks, who had watched each one with his persistent smile and now stood awaiting his new master's commands. "But we didn't know jest where ye wanted

'em put."

Mary came out. She had taken off her things and donned her white apron.

"The house is quite wonderful, Mr. Merrick," she said. "There is everything we can possibly need, and all as neat as wax."

The report stirred the girls to explore. They all trooped into the big living room and were at once captivated by its charm. Nora led them upstairs to their chambers, finding the way as unerringly as if she possessed perfect vision, and here a new chorus of delight was evoked.

"The blue room is mine!" cried Louise.

"Mine is the pink room," said Beth.

"And I choose the white room," declared Patsy. "The Major's is just next, and it will please him because it is all green and gold. But where will Uncle John room?"

"The master will use the right wing," said old Nora, who had listened with real pleasure to the exclamations of delight. "It were Cap'n Wegg's room, ye know, an' we've fitted it all new."

Indeed, Uncle John was at that moment inspecting his apartment, and he sighed contentedly as he congratulated himself upon his foresight in sending down the furnishings on the chance of their being needed. They had effected a complete transformation of the old house.

But who had arranged everything? Surely the perfect taste and dainty touch evidenced everywhere was not to be attributed to blind Nora. The little man was thoughtful as he turned to Old

Hucks.

"Who did it, Thomas?" he asked.

"Miss Ethel, sir; the school-ma'am."

"Oh. A city girl?"

"No, sir. Crazy Will Thompson's granddaughter. She lives 'bout nine mile away."

"Is she here now?"

"Went home this mornin', sir. It were a great pleasure to her, she said, an' she hoped as how you'd like everything, an' be happy here."

Undo John nodded.

"We must call on that girl," he remarked. "We owe her a good deal, I imagine, and she's entitled to our grateful thanks."

CHAPTER VI.
PEGGY PRESENTS HIS BILL

Millville waited in agonized suspense for three days for tangible evidence that "the nabob was in their midst," as Nib Corkins poetically expressed it; but the city folks seemed glued to the farm and no one of them had yet appeared in the village. As a matter of fact, Patsy and Uncle John were enthusiastically fishing in the Little Bill, far up in the pine woods, and having "the time of their lives" in spite of their scant success in capturing trout. Old Hucks could go out before breakfast and bring in an ample supply of speckled beauties for Mary to fry; but Uncle John's splendid outfit seemed scorned by the finny folk, and after getting her dress torn in sundry places and a hook in the fleshy part of her arm Patsy learned to seek shelter behind a tree whenever her uncle cast his fly. But they reveled in the woods, and would lie on the bank for hours listening to the murmur of the brook and the songs of the birds.

The temper of the other two girls was different. Beth De Graf had brought along an archery outfit, and she set up her target on the ample green the day following her arrival. Here she practiced persistently, shooting at sixty yards with much skill. But occasionally, when Louise tired of her novel and her cushions in the hammock, the two girls would play tennis or croquet

together – Beth invariably winning.

Such delightful laziness could brook no interference for the first days of their arrival, and it was not until Peggy McNutt ventured over on Monday morning for a settlement with Mr. Merrick that any from the little world around them dared intrude upon the dwellers at the Wegg farm.

Although the agent had been late in starting from Millville and Nick Thorne's sorrel mare had walked every step of the way, Peggy was obliged to wait in the yard a good half hour for the "nabob" to finish his breakfast. During that time he tried to decide which of the two statements of accounts that he had prepared he was most justified in presenting. He had learned from the liveryman at the Junction that Mr. Merrick had paid five dollars for a trip that was usually made for two, and also that the extravagant man had paid seventy-five cents more to Lucky Todd, the hotel keeper, than his bill came to. The knowledge of such reckless expenditures had fortified little McNutt in "marking up" the account of the money he had received, and instead of charging two dollars a day for his own services, as he had at first intended, he put them down at three dollars a day – and made the days stretch as much as possible. Also he charged a round commission on the wages of Lon Taft and Ned Long, and doubled the liveryman's bill for hauling the goods over from the Junction. Ethel Thompson had refused to accept any payment for what she had done, but Peggy bravely charged it up at good round figures. When the bill was made out and figured up it left

him a magnificent surplus for his private account; but at the last his heart failed him, and he made out another bill more modest in its extortions. He had brought them both along, though, one in each pocket, vacillating between them as he thought first of the Merrick millions and then of the righteous anger he might incur. By the time Uncle John came out to him, smiling and cordial, he had not thoroughly made up his mind which account to present.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.