Frank Baum

# Aunt Jane's Nieces

CHAPTER I.BETH RECEIVES AN INVITATION.Professor De Graf was sorting the mail at the breakfast table."Here's a letter for you, Beth," said he, and tossed it across thecloth to where his daughter sat.The girl raised her eyebrows, expressing surprise. It was somethingunusual for her to receive a letter. She picked up the square envelopebetween a finger and thumb and carefully read the inscription, "MissElizabeth De Graf, Cloverton, Ohio." Turning the envelope she found onthe reverse flap a curious armorial emblem, with the word "Elmhurst."Then she glanced at her father, her eyes big and somewhat startledin expression. The Professor was deeply engrossed in a letter fromBenjamin Lowenstein which declared that a certain note must be paid atmaturity. His weak, watery blue eyes stared rather blankly from behindthe gold-rimmed spectacles. His flat nostrils extended and compressedlike those of a frightened horse; and the indecisive mouth wastremulous. At the best the Professor was not an imposing personage.He wore a dressing-gown of soiled quilted silk and linen not tooimmaculate; but his little sandy moustache and the goatee thatdecorated his receding chin were both carefully waxed into sharppoints--an indication that he possessed at least one vanity. Threedays in the week he taught vocal and instrumental music to theambitious young ladies of Cloverton. The other three days he rode toPelham's Grove, ten miles away, and taught music to all who wished toacquire that desirable accomplishment. But the towns were small andthe fees not large, so that Professor De Graf had much difficulty insecuring an income sufficient for the needs of his family.The stout, sour-visaged lady who was half-hidden by her newspaper atthe other end of the table was also a bread-winner, for she taughtembroidery to the women of her acquaintance and made various articlesof fancy-work that were sold at Biggar's Emporium, the largest storein Cloverton. So, between them, the Professor and Mrs. DeGraf managedto defray ordinary expenses and keep Elizabeth at school; but therewere one or two dreadful "notes" that were constantly hanging overtheir heads like the sword of Damocles, threatening to ruin them atany moment their creditors proved obdurate.Finding her father and mother both occupied, the girl ventured to openher letter. It was written in a sharp, angular, feminine hand and readas follows:"My Dear Niece: It will please me to have you spend the months of Julyand August as my guest at Elmhurst. I am in miserable health, andwish to become better acquainted with you before I die. A check fornecessary expenses is enclosed and I shall expect you to arrivepromptly on the first of July."Your Aunt,"JANE MERRICK."A low exclamation from Elizabeth caused her father to look in herdirection. He saw the bank check lying beside her plate and the sightlent an eager thrill to his voice."What is it, Beth?""A letter from Aunt Jane."Mrs. De Graf gave a jump and crushed the newspaper into her lap."What!" she screamed."Aunt Jane has invited me to spend two months at Elmhurst" saidElizabeth, and passed the letter to her mother, who grabbed itexcitedly."How big is the check, Beth?" enquired the Professor, in a low tone."A hundred dollars. She says it's for my expenses."Huh! Of course you won't go near that dreadful old cat, so we can usethe money to better advantage.""Adolph!"The harsh, cutting voice was that of his wife, and the Professorshrank back in his chair."Your sister Jane is a mean, selfish, despicable old female," hemuttered. "You've said so a thousand times yourself, Julia.""My sister Jane is a very wealthy woman, and she's a Merrick,"returned the lady, severely. "How dare you--a common De Graf--asperseher character?""The De Grafs are a very good family," he retorted."Show me one who is wealthy! Show me one who is famous!""I can't," said the Professor. "But they're decent, and they'regenerous, which is more than can be said for your tribe.""Elizabeth must go to Elmhurst," said Mrs. De Graf, ignoring herhusband's taunt."She shan't. Your sister refused to loan me fifty dollars last year,when I was in great trouble. She hasn't given you a single cent sinceI married you. No daughter of mine shall go In Elmhurst to be bulliedand insulted by Jane Merrick.""Adolph, try to conceal the fact that you're a fool," said his wife."Jane is in a desperate state of health, and can't live very long atthe best. I believe she's decided to leave her money to Elizabeth, orshe never would have invited the child to visit her. Do you want tofly in the face of Providence, you doddering old imbecile?""No," said the Professor, accepting the doubtful appellation without ablush. "How much do you suppose Jane is worth?""A half million, at the very least. When she was a girl she inheritedfrom Thomas Bradley, the man she was engaged to marry, and who wassuddenly killed in a railway accident, more than a quarter of amillion dollars, besides that beautiful estate of Elmhurst. I don'tbelieve Jane has even spent a quarter of her income, and the fortunemust have increased enormously. Elizabeth will be one of thewealthiest heiresses in the country!""If she gets the money, which I doubt," returned the Professor,gloomily."Why should you doubt it, after this letter?""You had another sister and a brother, and they both had children,"said he."They each left a girl. I admit. But Jane has never favored themany more than she has me. And this invitation, coming; when Jane ispractically on her death bed, is a warrant that Beth will get themoney.""I hope she will," sighed the music teacher. "We all need it badenough, I'm sure."During this conversation Elizabeth, who might be supposed the one mostinterested in her Aunt's invitation, sat silently at her place, eatingher breakfast with her accustomed calmness of demeanor and scarcelyglancing at her parents.She had pleasant and quite regular features, for a girl of fifteen,with dark hair and eyes--the "Merrick eyes," her mother proudlydeclared--and a complexion denoting perfect health and colored withthe rosy tints of youth. Her figure was a bit slim and unformed,and her shoulders stooped a little more than was desirable; but inCloverton Elizabeth had the reputation of being "a pretty girl," and asullen and unresponsive one as well.Presently she rose from her seat, glanced at the clock, and then wentinto the hall to get her hat and school-books. The prospect of beingan heiress some day had no present bearing on the fact that it wastime to start for school.Her father came to the door with the check in his hand."Just sign your name on the back of this, Beth," said he, "and I'llget it cashed for you."The girl shook her head."No, father," she answered. "If I decide to go to Aunt Jane's I mustbuy some clothes; and if you get the money I'll never see a cent ofit.""When will you decide?" he asked."There's no hurry. I'll take time to think it over," she replied. "Ihate Aunt Jane, of course; so if I go to her I must be a hypocrite,and pretend to like her, or she never will leave me her property."Well, Beth?""Perhaps it will be worth while; but if I go into that woman's houseI'll be acting a living lie.""But think of the money!" said her mother."I do think of it. That's why I didn't tell you at once to send thecheck back to Aunt Jane. I'm going to think of everything before Idecide. But if I go--if I allow this money to make me a hypocrite--Iwon't stop at trifles, I assure you. It's in my nature to bedreadfully wicked and cruel and selfish, and perhaps the money isn'tworth the risk I run of becoming depraved.""Elizabeth!""Good-bye; I'm late now," she continued, in the same quiet tone, andwalked slowly down the walk.The Professor twisted his moustache and looked into his wife's eyeswith a half frightened glance."Beth's a mighty queer girl," he muttered."She's very like her Aunt Jane," returned Mrs. De Graf, thoughtfullygazing after her daughter. "But she's defiant and wilful enough forall the Merricks put together. I do hope she'll decide to go toElmhurst."CHAPTER II.MOTHER AND DAUGHTER.In the cosy chamber of an apartment located in a fashionable quarterof New York Louise Merrick reclined upon a couch, dressed in adainty morning gown and propped and supported by a dozen embroideredcushions.Upon a taboret beside her stood a box of bonbons, the contents ofwhich she occasionally nibbled as she turned the pages of her novel.The girl had a pleasant and attractive face, although its listlessexpression was singular in one so young. It led you to suspect thatthe short seventeen years of her life had robbed her of all theanticipation and eagerness that is accustomed to pulse in strong youngblood, and filled her with experiences that compelled her to acceptexistence in a half bored and wholly matter-of-fact way.The room was tastefully though somewhat elaborately furnished; yeteverything in it seemed as fresh and new as if it had just come fromthe shop--which was not far from the truth. The apartment itselfwas new, with highly polished floors and woodwork, and decorationsundimmed by time. Even the girl's robe, which she wore so gracefully,was new, and the books upon the center-table were of the latesteditions.The portiere was thrust aside and an elderly lady entered the room,seating herself quietly at the window, and, after a single glance atthe form upon the couch, beginning to embroider patiently upon somework she took from a silken bag. She moved so noiselessly that thegirl did not hear her and for several minutes absolute silencepervaded the room.Then, however, Louise in turning a leaf glanced up and saw the headbent over the embroidery. She laid down her book and drew an openletter from between the cushions beside her, which she languidlytossed into the other's lap."Who is this woman, mamma?" she asked.Mrs. Merrick glanced at the letter and then read it carefully through,before replying."Jane Merrick is your father's sister," she said, at last, as shethoughtfully folded the letter and placed it upon the table."Why have I never heard of her before?" enquired the girl, with aslight accession of interest in her tones."That I cannot well explain. I had supposed you knew of your poorfather's sister Jane, although you were so young when he died that itis possible he never mentioned her name in your presence.""They were not on friendly terms, you know. Jane was rich, havinginherited a fortune and a handsome country place from a young man whomshe was engaged to marry, but who died on the eve of his wedding day.""How romantic!" exclaimed Louise."It does seem romantic, related in this way," replied her mother. "Butwith the inheritance all romance disappeared from your aunt's life.She became a crabbed, disagreeable woman, old before her time andfriendless because she suspected everyone of trying to rob her of hermoney. Your poor father applied to her in vain for assistance, and Ibelieve her refusal positively shortened his life. When he died, afterstruggling bravely to succeed in his business, he left nothing but hislife-insurance.""Thank heaven he left that!" sighed Louise."Yes; we would have been beggared, indeed, without it," agreed Mrs.Merrick. "Yet I often wonder, Louise, how we managed to live upon theinterest of that money for so many years.""We didn't live--we existed," corrected the girl, yawning. "Wescrimped and pinched, and denied ourselves everything but barenecessities. And had it not been for your brilliant idea, mater dear,we would still be struggling in the depths of poverty."Mrs. Merrick frowned, and leaned back in her chair."I sometimes doubt if the idea was so brilliant, after all," shereturned, with a certain grimness of expression. "We're plunging,Louise; and it may be into a bottomless pit.""Don't worry, dear," said the girl, biting into a bonbon. "We areonly on the verge of our great adventure, and there's no reason tobe discouraged yet, I assure you. Brilliant! Of course the ideawas brilliant, mamma. The income of that insurance money wasinsignificant, but the capital is a very respectable sum. I am justseventeen years of age--although I feel that I ought to be thirty, atthe least--and in three years I shall be twenty, and a married woman.You decided to divide our capital into three equal parts, and spend athird of it each year, this plan enabling us to live in good style andto acquire a certain social standing that will allow me to select awealthy husband. It's a very brilliant idea, my dear! Three years is along time. I'll find my Croesus long before that, never fear.""You ought to," returned the mother, thoughtfully. "But if you fail,we shall be entirely ruined.""A strong incentive to succeed." said Louise, smiling. "An ordinarygirl might not win out; but I've had my taste of poverty, and I don'tlike it. No one will suspect us of being adventurers, for as long aswe live in this luxurious fashion we shall pay our bills promptly andbe proper and respectable in every way. The only chance we run lies inthe danger that eligible young men may prove shy, and refuse to takeour bait; but are we not diplomats, mother dear? We won't despise amillionaire, but will be content with a man who can support us in goodstyle, or even in comfort, and in return for his money I'll be a verygood wife to him. That seems sensible and wise, I'm sure, and not atall difficult of accomplishment."Mrs. Merrick stared silently out of the window, and for a few momentsseemed lost in thought."I think, Louise," she said at last, "you will do well to cultivateyour rich aunt, and so have two strings to your bow.""You mean that I should accept her queer invitation to visit her?""Yes.""She has sent me a check for a hundred dollars. Isn't it funny?""Jane was always a whimsical woman. Perhaps she thinks we are quitedestitute, and fears you would not be able to present a respectableappearance at Elmhurst without this assistance. But it is an evidenceof her good intentions. Finding death near at hand she is obliged toselect an heir, and so invites you to visit her that she may studyyour character and determine whether you are worthy to inherit herfortune."The girl laughed, lightly."It will be easy to cajole the old lady," she said. "In two days I canso win her heart that she will regret she has neglected me so long.""Exactly.""If I get her money we will change our plans, and abandon theadventure we were forced to undertake. But if, for any reason, thatplan goes awry, we can fall back upon this prettily conceived schemewhich we have undertaken. As you say, it is well to have two stringsto one's bow; and during July and August everyone will be out of town,and so we shall lose no valuable time."Mrs. Merrick did not reply. She stitched away in a methodical manner,as if abstracted, and Louise crossed her delicate hands behind herhead and gazed at her mother reflectively. Presently she said:"Tell me more of my father's family. Is this rich aunt of mine theonly relative he had?""No, indeed. There were two other sisters and a brother--a veryuninteresting lot, with the exception, of your poor father. The eldestwas John Merrick, a common tinsmith, if I remember rightly, who wentinto the far west many years ago and probably died there, for he wasnever heard from. Then came Jane, who in her young days had someslight claim to beauty. Anyway, she won the heart of Thomas Bradley,the wealthy young man I referred to, and she must have been clever tohave induced him to leave her his money. Your father was a year or soyounger than Jane, and after him came Julia, a coarse anddisagreeable creature who married a music-teacher and settled in someout-of-the-way country town. Once, while your father was alive, shevisited us for a few days, with her baby daughter, and nearly drove usall crazy. Perhaps she did not find us very hospitable, for we weretoo poor to entertain lavishly. Anyway, she went away suddenly afteryou had a fight with her child and nearly pulled its hair out by theroots, and I have never heard of her since.""A daughter, eh," said Louise, musingly. "Then this rich Aunt Jane hasanother niece besides myself.""Perhaps two," returned Mrs. Merrick; "for her youngest sister, whowas named Violet, married a vagabond Irishman and had a daughterabout a year younger than you. The mother died, but whether the childsurvived her or not I have never learned.""What was her name?" asked Louise."I cannot remember. But it is unimportant. You are the only Merrick ofthem all, and that is doubtless the reason Jane has sent for you."The girl shook her blonde head."I don't like it," she observed."Don't like what?""All this string of relations. It complicates matters."Mrs. Merrick seemed annoyed."If you fear your own persuasive powers," she said, with almost asneer in her tones, "you'd better not go to Elmhurst. One or theother of your country cousins might supplant you in your dear aunt'saffections."The girl yawned and took up her neglected novel."Nevertheless, mater dear," she said briefly, "I shall go."CHAPTER III.PATSY."Now, Major, stand up straight and behave yourself! How do you expectme to sponge your vest when you're wriggling around in that way?""Patsy, dear, you're so sweet this evening, I just had to kiss yourlips.""Don't do it again, sir," replied Patricia, severely, as she scrubbedthe big man's waistcoat with a damp cloth. "And tell me, Major, howyou ever happened to get into such a disgraceful condition.""The soup just shpilled," said the Major, meekly.Patricia laughed merrily. She was a tiny thing, appearing to be nomore than twelve years old, although in reality she was sixteen. Herhair was a decided red--not a beautiful "auburn," but really red--andher round face was badly freckled. Her nose was too small and hermouth too wide to be beautiful, but the girl's wonderful blue eyesfully redeemed these faults and led the observer to forget all elsebut their fascinations. They could really dance, these eyes, and sendout magnetic, scintillating sparks of joy and laughter that werepotent to draw a smile from the sourest visage they smiled upon.Patricia was a favorite with all who knew her, but the big,white-moustached Major Doyle, her father, positively worshipped her,and let the girl rule him as her fancy dictated."Now, sir, you're fairly decent again," she said, after a few vigorousscrubs. "So put on your hat and we'll go out to dinner."They occupied two small rooms at the top of a respectable butmiddle-class tenement building, and had to descend innumerable flightsof bare wooden stairs before they emerged upon a narrow streetthronged with people of all sorts and descriptions except those whowere too far removed from the atmosphere of Duggan street to know thatit existed.The big major walked stiffly and pompously along, swinging hissilver-trimmed cane in one hand while Patricia clung to his other arm.The child wore a plain grey cloak, for the evening was chill. She hada knack of making her own clothes, all of simple material and fashion,but fitting neatly and giving her an air of quiet refinement that mademore than one passer-by turn to look back at her curiously.After threading their way for several blocks they turned in at theopen door of an unobtrusive restaurant where many of the round whitetables were occupied by busy and silent patrons.The proprietor nodded to the major and gave Patricia a smile. Therewas no need to seat them, for they found the little table in thecorner where they were accustomed to eat, and sat down."Did you get paid tonight?" asked the girl."To be sure, my Patsy.""Then hand over the coin," she commanded.The major obeyed. She counted it carefully and placed it in herpocketbook, afterwards passing a half-dollar back to her father."Remember, Major, no riotous living! Make that go as far as you can,and take care not to invite anyone to drink with you.""Yes, Patsy.""And now I'll order the dinner."The waiter was bowing and smiling beside her. Everyone smiled atPatsy, it seemed.They gave the usual order, and then, after a moment's hesitation, sheadded:"And a bottle of claret for the Major."Her father fairly gasped with amazement."Patsy!"People at the near-by tables looked up as her gay laugh rang out, andbeamed upon her in sympathy."I'm not crazy a bit. Major," said she, patting the hand he hadstretched toward her, partly in delight and partly in protest. "I'vejust had a raise, that's all, and we'll celebrate the occasion."Her father tucked the napkin under his chin then looked at herquestioningly."Tell me, Patsy.""Madam Borne sent me to a swell house on Madison Avenue this morning,because all her women were engaged. I dressed the lady's hair inmy best style, Major, and she said it was much more becoming thanJuliette ever made it. Indeed, she wrote a note to Madam, asking herto send me, hereafter, instead of Juliette, and Madam patted my headand said I would be a credit to her, and my wages would be ten dollarsa week, from now on. Ten dollars. Major! As much as you earn yourselfat that miserable bookkeeping!""Sufferin' Moses!" ejaculated the astonished major, staring back intoher twinkling eyes, "if this kapes on, we'll be millionaires, Patsy.""We're millionaires, now." responded Patsy, promptly, "because we'vehealth, and love, and contentment--and enough money to keep us fromworrying. Do you know what I've decided, Major, dear? You shall go tomake that visit to your colonel that you've so long wanted to have.The vacation will do you good, and you can get away all during July,because you haven't rested for five years. I went to see Mr. Conoverthis noon, and he said he'd give you the month willingly, and keep theposition for you when you returned.""What! You spoke to old Conover about me?""This noon. It's all arranged, daddy, and you'll just have a glorioustime with the old colonel. Bless his dear heart, he'll be overjoyed tohave you with him, at last."The major pulled out his handkerchief, blew his nose vigorously, andthen surreptitiously wiped his eyes."Ah, Patsy, Patsy; it's an angel you are, and nothing less at all, atall.""Rubbish, Major. Try your claret, and see if it's right. And eat yourfish before it gets cold. I'll not treat you again, sir, unless youtry to look happy. Why, you seem as glum as old Conover himself!"The major was positively beaming."Would it look bad for me to kiss you, Patsy?""Now?""Now and right here in this very room!""Of course it would. Try and behave, like the gentleman you are, andpay attention to your dinner!"It was a glorious meal. The cost was twenty-five cents a plate, butthe gods never feasted more grandly in Olympus than these two simple,loving souls in that grimy Duggan street restaurant.Over his coffee the major gave a sudden start and looked guiltily intoPatricia's eyes."Now, then," she said, quickly catching the expression, "out with it.""It's a letter," said the major. "It came yesterday, or mayhap the daybefore. I don't just remember.""A letter! And who from?" she cried, surprised."An ould vixen.""And who may that be?""Your mother's sister Jane. I can tell by the emblem on the flap ofthe envelope," said he, drawing a crumpled paper from his breastpocket."Oh, \_that\_ person," said Patsy, with scorn. "Whatever induced her towrite to \_me?\_" "You might read it and find out," suggested the major.Patricia tore open the envelope and scanned the letter. Her eyesblazed."What is it, Mavoureen?""An insult!" she answered, crushing the paper in her hand and thenstuffing it into the pocket of her dress. "Light your pipe, daddy,dear. Here--I'll strike the match."CHAPTER IV.LOUISE MAKES A DISCOVERY."How did you enjoy the reception, Louise?""Very well, mamma. But I made the discovery that my escort. HarryWyndham, is only a poor cousin of the rich Wyndham family, and willnever have a penny he doesn't earn himself.""I knew that," said Mrs. Merrick. "But Harry has the entree into somevery exclusive social circles. I hope you treated him nicely, Louise.He can be of use to us.""Oh, yes, I think I interested him; but he's a very stupid boy. By theway, mamma, I had an adventure last evening, which I have had no timeto tell you of before.""Yes?""It has given me quite a shock. You noticed the maid you ordered tocome from Madam Borne to dress my hair for the reception?""I merely saw her. Was she unsatisfactory?""She was very clever. I never looked prettier, I am sure. The maid isa little, demure thing, very young for such a position, and positivelyhomely and common in appearance. But I hardly noticed her until shedropped a letter from her clothing. It fell just beside me, and I sawthat it was addressed to no less a personage than my rich aunt, MissJane Merrick, at Elmhurst. Curious to know why a hair-dresser shouldbe in correspondence with Aunt Jane, I managed to conceal the letterunder my skirts until the maid was gone. Then I put it away untilafter the reception. It was sealed and stamped, all ready for thepost, but I moistened the flap and easily opened it. Guess what Iread?""I've no idea," replied Mrs. Merrick."Here it is," continued Louise, producing a letter and carefullyunfolding it. "Listen to this, if you please: 'Aunt Jane.' She doesn'teven say 'dear' or 'respected,' you observe."'Your letter to me, asking me to visit you, is almost an insultafter your years of silence and neglect and your refusals to assistmy poor mother when she was in need. Thank God we can do withoutyour friendship and assistance now, for my honored father, MajorGregory Doyle, is very prosperous and earns all we need. I return yourcheck with my compliments. If you are really ill, I am sorry for you,and would go to nurse you were you not able to hire twenty nurses,each of whom would have fully as much love and far more respect foryou than could ever'Your indignant niece,'Patricia Doyle.'"What do you think of that, mamma?'""It's very strange, Louise. This hair-dresser is your own cousin.""So it seems. And she must be poor, or she wouldn't go out as a sortof lady's maid. I remember scolding her severely for pulling my hairat one time, and she was as meek as Moses, and never answered a word.""She has a temper though, as this letter proves," said Mrs. Merrick;"and I admire her for the stand she has taken.""So do I," rejoined Louise with a laugh, "for it removes a rival frommy path. You will notice that Aunt Jane has sent her a check for thesame amount she sent me. Here it is, folded in the letter. Probably myother cousin, the De Graf girl, is likewise invited to Elmhurst? AuntJane wanted us all, to see what we were like, and perhaps to choosebetween us.""Quite likely," said Mrs. Merrick, uneasily watching her daughter'sface."That being the case," continued Louise, "I intend to enter thecompetition. With this child Patricia out of the way, it will be asimple duel with my unknown De Graf cousin for my aunt's favor, andthe excitement will be agreeable even if I am worsted.""There's no danger of that," said her mother, calmly. "And the stakesare high, Louise. I've learned that your Aunt Jane is rated as worth ahalf million dollars.""They shall be mine," said the daughter, with assurance. "Unless,indeed, the De Graf girl is most wonderfully clever. What is hername?""Elizabeth, if I remember rightly. But I am not sure she is yet alive,my dear. I haven't heard of the De Grafs for a dozen years.'""Anyway I shall accept my Aunt Jane's invitation, and make theacceptance as sweet as Patricia Doyle's refusal is sour. Aunt Janewill be simply furious when she gets the little hair-dresser's note.""Will you send it on?""Why not? It's only a question of resealing the envelope and mailingit. And it will be sure to settle Miss Doyle's chances of sharing theinheritance, for good and all.""And the check?""Oh, I shall leave the check inside the envelope. It wouldn't be atall safe to cash it, you know.""But if you took it out Jane would think the girl had kept tit money,after all, and would be even more incensed against her.""No," said Louise, after a moment's thought, "I'll not do a single actof dishonesty that could ever by any chance be traced to my door. Tobe cunning, to be diplomatic, to play the game of life with the bestcards we can draw, is every woman's privilege. But if I can't winhonestly, mater dear, I'll quit the game, for even money can'tcompensate a girl for the loss of her self-respect."Mrs. Merrick cast a fleeting glance at her daughter and smiled.Perhaps the heroics of Louise did not greatly impress her.CHAPTER V.AUNT JANE."Lift me up, Phibbs--no, not that way! Confound your awkwardness--doyou want to break my back? There! That's better. Now the pillow at myhead. Oh--h. What are you blinking at, you old owl?""Are you better this morning, Miss Jane?" asked the attendant, withgrave deference."No; I'm worse.""You look brighter, Miss Jane.""Don't be stupid, Martha Phibbs. I know how I am, better than anydoctor, and I tell you I'm on my last legs.""Anything unusual, Miss?""Of course. I can't be on my last legs regularly, can I?""I hope not, Miss.""What do you mean by that? Are you trying to insult me, now that I'mweak and helpless? Answer me, you gibbering idiot!""I'm sure you'll feel better soon, Miss. Can't I wheel you into thegarden? It's a beautiful day, and quite sunny and warm already.""Be quick about it, then; and don't tire me out with your eternaldoddering. When a thing has to be done, do it. That's my motto.""Yes, Miss Jane."Slowly and with care the old attendant wheeled her mistress's invalidchair through the doorway of the room, along a stately passage,and out upon a broad piazza at the back of the mansion. Here wereextensive and carefully tended gardens, and the balmy morning air wasredolent with the odor of flowers.Jane Merrick sniffed the fragrance with evident enjoyment, and hersharp grey eyes sparkled as she allowed them to roam over the gorgeousexpanse of colors spread out before her."I'll go down, I guess, Phibbs. This may be my last day on earth,and I'll spend an hour with my flowers before I bid them good-byeforever."Phibbs pulled a bell-cord, and a soft faraway jingle was heard. Thenan old man came slowly around the corner of the house. His barehead was quite bald. He wore a short canvas apron and carriedpruning-shears in one hand. Without a word of greeting to his mistressor scarce a glance at her half recumbent form, he mounted the steps ofthe piazza and assisted Phibbs to lift the chair to the ground."How are the roses coming on, James?""Poorly, Miss," he answered, and turning his back returned to his workaround the corner. If he was surly, Miss Jane seemed not to mind it.Her glance even softened a moment as she followed his retreating form.But now she was revelling amongst the flowers, which she seemed tolove passionately. Phibbs wheeled her slowly along the narrow pathsbetween the beds, and she stopped frequently to fondle a blossom orpull away a dead leaf or twig from a bush. The roses were magnificent,in spite of the old gardener's croaking, and the sun was warm andgrateful and the hum of the bees musical and sweet."It's hard to die and leave all this, Phibbs," said the old woman, acatch in her voice. "But it's got to be done.""Not for a while yet, I hope, Miss Jane.""It won't be long, Phibbs. But I must try to live until my niecescome, and I can decide which of them is most worthy to care for theold place when I am gone.""Yes, Miss.""I've heard from two of them, already. They jumped at the bait I heldout quickly enough; but that's only natural. And the letters are verysensible ones, too. Elizabeth DeGraf says she will be glad to come,and thanks me for inviting her. Louise Merrick is glad to come, also,but hopes I am deceived about my health and that she will make me morethan one visit after we become friends. A very proper feeling; but I'mnot deceived, Phibbs. My end's in plain sight.""Yes, Miss Jane.""And somebody's got to have my money and dear Elmhurst when I'mthrough with them. Who will it be, Phibbs?""I'm sure I don't know, Miss.""Nor do I. The money's mine, and I can do what I please with it; andI'm under no obligation to anyone.""Except Kenneth," said a soft voice behind her.Jane Merrick gave a start at the interruption and turned red and angryas, without looking around, she answered:"Stuff and nonsense! I know my duties and my business, Silas Watson.""To be sure," said a little, withered man, passing around the chairand facing the old woman with an humble, deprecating air. He wasclothed in black, and his smooth-shaven, deeply lined face waspleasant of expression and not without power and shrewd intelligence.The eyes, however, were concealed by heavy-rimmed spectacles, and hismanner was somewhat shy and reserved. However, he did not hesitate tospeak frankly to his old friend, nor minded in the least if he arousedher ire."No one knows better than you, dear Miss Jane, her duties andobligations; and no one performs them more religiously. But yourrecent acts, I confess, puzzle me. Why should you choose from a lotof inexperienced, incompetent girls a successor to Thomas Bradley'sfortune, when he especially requested you in his will to look afterany of his relatives, should they need assistance? Kenneth Forbes, hisown nephew, was born after Tom's death, to be sure; but he is alone inthe world now, an orphan, and has had no advantages to help him alongin life since his mother's death eight years ago. I think Tom Bradleymust have had a premonition of what was to come even though his sisterwas not married at the time of his death, and I am sure he would wantyou to help Kenneth now.""He placed me under no obligations to leave the boy any money,"snapped the old woman, white with suppressed wrath, "you know thatwell enough, Silas Watson, for you drew up the will."The old gentleman slowly drew a pattern upon the gravelled walk withthe end of his walking-stick."Yes, I drew up the will," he said, deliberately, "and I remember thathe gave to you, his betrothed bride, all that he possessed--gave itgladly and lovingly, and without reserve. He was very fond of you,Miss Jane. But perhaps his conscience pricked him a bit, after all,for he added the words: 'I shall expect you to look after the welfareof my only relative, my sister. Katherine Bradley--or any of herheirs.' It appears to me, Miss Jane, that that is a distinctobligation. The boy is now sixteen and as fine a fellow as one oftenmeets.""Bah! An imbecile--an awkward, ill-mannered brat who is only fit for astable-boy! I know him, Silas, and I know he'll never amount to a hillof beans. Leave \_him\_ my money? Not if I hadn't a relative on earth!""You misjudge him, Jane. Kenneth is all right if you'll treat himdecently. But he won't stand your abuse and I don't think the less ofhim for that.""Why abuse? Haven't I given him a home and an education, all becauseThomas asked me to look after his relatives? And he's been rebelliousand pig-headed and sullen in return for my kindness, so naturallythere's little love lost between us.""You resented your one obligation, Jane; and although you fulfilled itto the letter you did not in the spirit of Tom Bradley's request. Idon't blame the boy for not liking you.""Sir!""All right, Jane; fly at me if you will," said the little man, with asmile; "but I intend to tell you frankly what I think of your actions,just as long as we remain friends."Her stern brows unbent a trifle."That's why we are friends, Silas; and it's useless to quarrel withyou now that I'm on my last legs. A few days more will end me, I'mpositive; so bear with me a little longer, my friend."He took her withered hand in his and kissed it gently."You're not so very bad, Jane," said he, "and I'm almost sure youwill be with us for a long time to come. But you're more nervous andirritable than usual, I'll admit, and I fear this invasion of yournieces won't be good for you. Are they really coming?""Two of them are, I'm sure, for they've accepted my invitation," shereplied."Here's a letter that just arrived," he said, taking it from hispocket. "Perhaps it contains news from the third niece.""My glasses, Phibbs!" cried Miss Jane, eagerly, and the attendantstarted briskly for the house to get them."What do you know about these girls?" asked the old lawyer curiously."Nothing whatever. I scarcely knew of their existence until you huntedthem out for me and found they were alive. But I'm going to know them,and study them, and the one that's most capable and deserving shallhave my property."Mr. Watson sighed."And Kenneth?" he asked."I'll provide an annuity for the boy, although it's more than hedeserves. When I realized that death was creeping upon me I felt astrange desire to bequeath my fortune to one of my own flesh andblood. Perhaps I didn't treat my brothers and sisters generously inthe old days, Silas.""Perhaps not," he answered."So I'll make amends to one of their children. That is, if any one ofthe three nieces should prove worthy.""I see. But if neither of the three is worthy?""Then I'll leave every cent to charity--except Kenneth's annuity."The lawyer smiled."Let us hope," said he, "that they will prove all you desire. It wouldbreak my heart, Jane, to see Elmhurst turned into a hospital."Phibbs arrived with the spectacles, and Jane Merrick read her letter,her face growing harder with every line she mastered. Then shecrumpled the paper fiercely in both hands, and a moment later smoothedit out carefully and replaced it in the envelope.Silas Watson had watched her silently."Well," said he, at last, "another acceptance?""No, a refusal," said she. "A refusal from the Irishman's daughter,Patricia Doyle.""That's bad," he remarked, but in a tone of relief."I don't see it in that light at all," replied Miss Jane. "The girlis right. It's the sort of letter I'd have written myself, under thecircumstances. I'll write again, Silas, and humble myself, and try toget her to come.""You surprise me!" said the lawyer."I surprise myself," retorted the old woman, "but I mean to know moreof this Patricia Doyle. Perhaps I've found a gold mine, Silas Watson!"CHAPTER VI.THE BOY.Leaving the mistress of Elmhurst among her flowers, Silas Watsonwalked slowly and thoughtfully along the paths until he reached theextreme left wing of the rambling old mansion. Here, half hidden bytangled vines of climbing roses, he came to a flight of steps leadingto an iron-railed balcony, and beyond this was a narrow stairway tothe rooms in the upper part of the wing.Miss Merrick, however ungenerous she might have been to others, hadalways maintained Elmhurst in a fairly lavish manner. There wereplenty of servants to look after the house and gardens, and there weregood horses in the stables. Whenever her health permitted she dined instate each evening in the great dining-room, solitary and dignified,unless on rare occasions her one familiar, Silas Watson, occupied theseat opposite her. "The boy," as he was contemptuously called, wasnever permitted to enter this room. Indeed, it would be difficult todefine exactly Kenneth Forbes' position at Elmhurst. He had livedthere ever since his mother's death, when, a silent and unattractivelad of eight, Mr. Watson had brought him to Jane Merrick and insistedupon her providing a home for Tom Bradley's orphaned nephew.She accepted the obligation reluctantly enough, giving the child asmall room in the left wing, as far removed from her own apartments aspossible, and transferring all details of his care to Misery Agnew,the old housekeeper. Misery endeavored to "do her duty" by the boy,but appreciating the scant courtesy with which he was treated by hermistress, it is not surprising the old woman regarded him merely as adependent and left him mostly to his own devices.Kenneth, even in his first days at Elmhurst, knew that his presencewas disagreeable to Miss Jane, and as the years dragged on he grew shyand retiring, longing to break away from his unpleasant surroundings,but knowing of no other place where he would be more welcome. His onlyreal friend was the lawyer, who neglected no opportunity to visit theboy and chat with him, in his cheery manner. Mr. Watson also arrangedwith the son of the village curate to tutor Kenneth and prepare himfor college; but either the tutor was incompetent or the pupil did notapply himself, for at twenty Kenneth Forbes was very ignorant, indeed,and seemed not to apply himself properly to his books.He was short of stature and thin, with a sad drawn face and mannersthat even his staunch friend, Silas Watson, admitted were awkward andunprepossessing. What he might have been under different conditions orwith different treatment, could only be imagined. Slowly climbing thestairs to the little room Kenneth inhabited, Mr. Watson was forced toconclude, with a sigh of regret, that he could not blame Miss Janefor wishing to find a more desirable heir to her estate than thisgraceless, sullen youth who had been thrust upon her by a thoughtlessrequest contained in the will of her dead lover--a request that sheseemed determined to fulfil literally, as it only required her to"look after" Tom's relatives and did not oblige her to leave Kennethher property.Yet, strange as it may seem, the old lawyer was exceedingly fond ofthe boy, and longed to see him the master of Elmhurst. Sometimes, whenthey were alone, Kenneth forgot his sense of injury and dependence,and spoke so well and with such animation that Mr. Watson wasastonished, and believed that hidden underneath the mask of reservewas another entirely different personality, that in the years to comemight change the entire nature of the neglected youth and win for himthe respect and admiration of the world. But these fits of brightnessand geniality were rare. Only the lawyer had as yet discovered them.Today he found the boy lying listlessly upon the window-seat, an openbook in his hand, but his eyes fixed dreamily upon the grove of hugeelm trees that covered the distant hills."Morning, Ken," said he, briefly, sitting beside his young friend andtaking the book in his own hand. The margins of the printed pages werefairly covered with drawings of every description. The far away treeswere there and the near-by rose gardens. There was a cat spitting atan angry dog, caricatures of old Misery and James, the gardener, andof Aunt Jane and even Silas Watson himself--all so clearly depictedthat the lawyer suddenly wondered if they were not clever, and anevidence of genius. But the boy turned to look at him, and the nextmoment seized the book from his grasp and sent it flying throughthe open window, uttering at the same time a rude exclamation ofimpatience.The lawyer quietly lighted his pipe."Why did you do that, Kenneth?" he asked. "The pictures are cleverenough to be preserved. I did not know you have a talent for drawing."The boy glanced at him, but answered nothing, and the lawyer thoughtbest not to pursue the subject After smoking a moment in silence heremarked:"Your aunt is failing fast." Although no relative, Kenneth had beenaccustomed to speak of Jane Merrick as his aunt.Getting neither word nor look in reply the lawyer presently continued:"I do not think she will live much longer."The boy stared from the window and drummed on the sill with hisfingers."When she dies," said Mr. Watson, in a musing tone, "there will be anew mistress at Elmhurst and you will have to move out."The boy now turned to look at him, enquiringly."You are twenty, and you are not ready for college. You would be of nouse in the commercial world. You have not even the capacity to becomea clerk. What will you do, Kenneth? Where will you go?"The boy shrugged his shoulders."When will Aunt Jane die?" he asked."I hope she will live many days yet. She may die tomorrow.""When she does, I'll answer your question." said the boy, roughly."When I'm turned out of this place--which is part prison and partparadise--I'll do something. I don't know what, and I won't botherabout it till the time comes. But I'll do something.""Could you earn a living?" asked the old lawyer."Perhaps not; but I'll get one. Will I be a beggar?""I don't know. It depends on whether Aunt Jane leaves you anything inher will.""I hope she won't leave me a cent!" cried the boy, with suddenfierceness. "I hate her, and will be glad when she is dead and out ofmy way!""Kenneth--Kenneth, lad!""I hate her!" he persisted, with blazing eyes. "She has insulted me,scorned me, humiliated me every moment since I have known her. I'll beglad to have her die, and I don't want a cent of her miserable money.""Money," remarked the old man, knocking the ashes from his pipe, "isvery necessary to one who is incompetent to earn his salt. And themoney she leaves you--if she really does leave you any--won't beher's, remember, but your Uncle Tom's.""Uncle Tom was good to my father," said the boy, softening."Well, Uncle Tom gave his money to Aunt Jane, whom he had expectedto marry; but he asked her to care for his relatives, and she'lldoubtless give you enough to live on. But the place will go to someone else, and that means you must move on.""Who will have Elmhurst?" asked the boy."One of your aunt's nieces, probably. She has three, it seems, all ofthem young girls, and she has invited them to come here to visit her.""Girls! Girls at Elmhurst?" cried the boy, shrinking back with a lookof terror in his eyes."To be sure. One of the nieces, it seems, refuses to come; but therewill be two of them to scramble for your aunt's affection.""She has none," declared the boy."Or her money, which is the same thing. The one she likes the bestwill get the estate."Kenneth smiled, and with the change of expression his face lightedwonderfully."Poor Aunt!" he said. "Almost I am tempted to be sorry for her. Twogirls--fighting one against the other for Elmhurst--and both fawningbefore a cruel and malicious old woman who could never love anyone butherself.""And her flowers," suggested the lawyer."Oh, yes; and perhaps James. Tell me, why should she love James, whois a mere gardener, and hate me?""James tends the flowers, and the flowers are Jane Merrick's verylife. Isn't that the explanation?""I don't know.""The girls need not worry you, Kenneth. It will be easy for you tokeep out of their way.""When will they come?""Next week, I believe."The boy looked around helplessly, with the air of a caged tiger."Perhaps they won't know I'm here," he said."Perhaps not. I'll tell Misery to bring all your meals to this room,and no one ever comes to this end of the garden. But if they find you,Kenneth, and scare you out of your den, run over to me, and I'll keepyou safe until the girls are gone.""Thank you, Mr. Watson," more graciously than was his wont. "It isn'tthat I'm afraid of girls, you know; but they may want to insult me,just as their aunt does, and I couldn't bear any more cruelty.""I know nothing about them," said the lawyer, "so I can't vouch in anyway for Aunt Jane's nieces. But they are young, and it is probablethey'll be as shy and uncomfortable here at Elmhurst as you areyourself. And after all, Kenneth boy, the most important thing justnow is your own future. What in the world is to become of you?""Oh, \_that\_," answered the boy, relapsing into his sullen mood; "Ican't see that it matters much one way or another. Anyhow, I'll notbother my head about it until the time comes and as far as you'reconcerned, it's none of your business."CHAPTER VII.THE FIRST WARNING.For a day or two Jane Merrick seemed to improve in health. Indeed,Martha Phibbs declared her mistress was better than she had been forweeks. Then, one night, the old attendant was awakened by a scream,and rushed to her mistress' side."What is it, ma'am?" she asked, tremblingly."My leg! I can't move my leg," gasped the mistress of Elmhurst. "Rubit, you old fool! Rub it till you drop, and see if you can bring backthe life to it."Martha rubbed, of course, but the task was useless. Oscar the groomwas sent on horseback for the nearest doctor, who came just as daywas breaking. He gave the old woman a brief examination and shook hishead."It's the first warning," said he; "but nothing to be frightenedabout. That is, for the present.""Is it paralysis?" asked Jane Merrick."Yes; a slight stroke.""But I'll have another?""Perhaps, in time.""How long?""It may be a week--or a month--or a year. Sometimes there isnever another stroke. Don't worry, ma'am. Just lie still and becomfortable.""Huh!" grunted the old woman. But she became more composed and obeyedthe doctor's instructions with unwonted meekness. Silas Watson arrivedduring the forenoon, and pressed her thin hand with real sympathy,for these two were friends despite the great difference in theirtemperaments."Shall I draw your will, Jane?" he asked. "No!" she snapped. "I'm notgoing to die just yet, I assure you. I shall live to carry out myplans, Silas."She did live, and grew better as the days wore on, although she neverrecovered the use of the paralyzed limb.Each day Phibbs drew the invalid chair to the porch and old Jameslifted it to the garden walk, where his mistress might enjoy theflowers he so carefully and skillfully tended. They seldom spoketogether, these two; yet there seemed a strange bond of sympathybetween them.At last the first of July arrived, and Oscar was dispatched to therailway station, four miles distant, to meet Miss Elizabeth DeGraf, the first of the nieces to appear in answer to Jane Merrick'sinvitation.Beth looked very charming and fresh in her new gown, and she greetedher aunt with a calm graciousness that would have amazed the professorto behold. She had observed carefully the grandeur and beauty ofElmhurst, as she drove through the grounds, and instantly decided theplace was worth an effort to win."So, this is Elizabeth, is it?" asked Aunt June, as the girl stoodbefore her for inspection. "You may kiss me, child."Elizabeth advanced, striving to quell the antipathy she felt to kissthe stern featured, old woman, and touched her lips to the wrinkledforehead.Jane Merrick laughed, a bit sneeringly, while Beth drew back, stillcomposed, and looked at her relative enquiringly."Well, what do you think of me?" demanded Aunt Jane, as if embarrassedat the scrutiny she received."Surely, it is too early to ask me that," replied Beth, gently. "I amgoing to try to like you, and my first sight of my new aunt leads meto hope I shall succeed.""Why shouldn't you like me?" cried the old woman. "Why must you try tolike your mother's sister?"Beth flushed. She had promised herself not to become angry ordiscomposed, whatever her aunt might say or do; but before she couldcontrol herself an indignant expression flashed across her face andJane Merrick saw it."There are reasons," said Beth, slowly, "why your name is seldommentioned in my father's family. Until your letter came I scarcelyknew I possessed an aunt. It was your desire we should become betteracquainted, and I am here for that purpose. I hope we shall becomefriends, Aunt Jane, but until then, it is better we should not discussthe past."The woman frowned. It was not difficult for her to read the characterof the child before her, and she knew intuitively that Beth wasstrongly prejudiced against her, but was honestly trying not to allowthat prejudice to influence her. She decided to postpone furtherinterrogations until another time."Your journey has tired you," she said abruptly. "I'll have Miseryshow you to your room."She touched a bell beside her."I'm not tired, but I'll go to my room, if you please," answered Beth,who realized that she had in some way failed to make as favorable animpression as she had hoped. "When may I see you again?""When I send for you," snapped Aunt Jane, as the housekeeper entered."I suppose you know I am a paralytic, and liable to die at any time?""I am very sorry," said Beth, hesitatingly. "You do not seem veryill.""I'm on my last legs. I may not live an hour. But that's none of yourbusiness, I suppose. By the way, I expect your cousin on the afternoontrain."Beth gave a start of surprise."My cousin?" she asked."Yes, Louise Merrick.""Oh!" said Beth, and stopped short."What do you mean by that?" enquired Aunt Jane, with a smile that wasrather malicious."I did not know I had a cousin," said the girl. "That is," correctingherself, "I did not know whether Louise Merrick was alive or not.Mother has mentioned her name once or twice in my presence; but notlately.""Well, she's alive. Very much alive, I believe. And she's coming tovisit me, while you are here. I expect you to be friends.""To be sure," said Beth, nevertheless discomfited at the news."We dine at seven," said Aunt Jane. "I always lunch in my own room,and you may do the same," and with a wave of her thin hand shedismissed the girl, who thoughtfully followed the old housekeeperthrough the halls.It was not going to be an easy task to win this old woman's affection.Already she rebelled at the necessity of undertaking so distasteful aventure and wondered if she had not made a mistake in trying to curbher natural frankness, and to conciliate a creature whose very natureseemed antagonistic to her own. And this new cousin, Louise Merrick,why was she coming to Elmhurst? To compete for the prize Beth hadalready determined to win? In that case she must consider carefullyher line of action, that no rival might deprive her of this greatestate. Beth felt that she could fight savagely for an object she somuch desired. Her very muscles hardened and grew tense at the thoughtof conflict as she walked down the corridor in the wake of old Miserythe housekeeper. She had always resented the sordid life at Cloverton.She had been discontented with her lot since her earliest girlhood,and longed to escape the constant bickerings of her parents and theirvain struggles to obtain enough money to "keep up appearances" anddrive the wolf from the door. And here was an opportunity to win afortune and a home beautiful enough for a royal princess. All that wasnecessary was to gain the esteem of a crabbed, garrulous old woman,who had doubtless but a few more weeks to live. It must be done,in one way or another; but how? How could she out-wit this unknowncousin, and inspire the love of Aunt Jane?"If there's any stuff of the right sort in my nature," decided thegirl, as she entered her pretty bedchamber and threw herself into achair, "I'll find a way to win out. One thing is certain--I'll neveragain have another chance at so fine a fortune, and if I fail to getit I shall deserve to live in poverty forever afterward."Suddenly she noticed the old housekeeper standing before her andregarding her with a kindly interest. In an instant she sprang up,threw her arms around Misery and kissed her furrowed cheek."Thank you for being so kind," said she. "I've never been away fromhome before and you must be a mother to me while I'm at Elmhurst."Old Misery smiled and stroked the girl's glossy head."Bless the child!" she said, delightedly; "of course I'll be a motherto you. You'll need a bit of comforting now and then, my dear, ifyou're going to live with Jane Merrick.""Is she cross?" asked Beth, softly."At times she's a fiend," confided the old housekeeper, in almost awhisper. "But don't you mind her tantrums, or lay 'em to heart, andyou'll get along with her all right.""Thank you," said the girl. "I'll try not to mind.""Do you need anything else, deary?" asked Misery, with a glance aroundthe room."Nothing at all, thank you."The housekeeper nodded and softly withdrew."That was one brilliant move, at any rate," said Beth to herself, asshe laid aside her hat and prepared to unstrap her small trunk. "I'vemade a friend at Elmhurst who will be of use to me; and I shall makemore before long. Come as soon as you like, Cousin Louise! You'll haveto be more clever than I am, if you hope to win Elmhurst."CHAPTER VIII.THE DIPLOMAT.Aunt Jane was in her garden, enjoying the flowers. This was herespecial garden, surrounded by a high-box hedge, and quite distinctfrom the vast expanse of shrubbery and flower-beds which lent so muchto the beauty of the grounds at Elmhurst. Aunt Jane knew and lovedevery inch of her property. She had watched the shrubs personally formany years, and planned all the alterations and the construction ofthe flower-beds which James had so successfully attended to. Eachmorning, when her health permitted, she had inspected the greenhousesand issued her brief orders--brief because her slightest word to theold gardener incurred the fulfillment of her wishes. But this bit ofgarden adjoining her own rooms was her especial pride, and containedthe choicest plants she had been able to secure. So, since she hadbeen confined to her chair, the place had almost attained to thedignity of a private drawing-room, and on bright days she spent manyhours here, delighting to feast her eyes with the rich coloring of theflowers and to inhale their fragrance. For however gruff Jane Merrickmight be to the people with whom she came in contact, she was alwaystender to her beloved flowers, and her nature invariably softened whenin their presence.By and by Oscar, the groom, stepped through an opening in the hedgeand touched his hat."Has my niece arrived?" asked his mistress, sharply."She's on the way, mum," the man answered, grinning. "She stoppedoutside the grounds to pick wild flowers, an' said I was to tell youshe'd walk the rest o' the way.""To pick wild flowers?""That's what she said, mum. She's that fond of 'em she couldn'tresist it. I was to come an' tell you this, mum; an' she'll follow medirectly."Aunt Jane stared at the man sternly, and he turned toward her anunmoved countenance. Oscar had been sent to the station to meet LouiseMerrick, and drive her to Elmhurst; but this strange freak on the partof her guest set the old woman thinking what her object could be. Wildflowers were well enough in their way; but those adjoining the groundsof Elmhurst were very ordinary and unattractive, and Miss Merrick'saunt was expecting her. Perhaps--A sudden light illumined the mystery."See here, Oscar; has this girl been questioning you?""She asked a few questions, mum.""About me?""Some of 'em, if I remember right, mum, was about you.""And you told her I was fond of flowers?""I may have just mentioned that you liked 'em, mum."Aunt Jane gave a scornful snort, and the man responded in a curiousway. He winked slowly and laboriously, still retaining the solemnexpression on his face."You may go, Oscar. Have the girl's luggage placed in her room.""Yes, mum."He touched his hat and then withdrew, leaving Jane Merrick with afrown upon her brow that was not caused by his seeming impertinence.Presently a slight and graceful form darted through the opening in thehedge and approached the chair wherein Jane Merrick reclined."Oh, my dear, dear aunt!" cried Louise. "How glad I am to see you atlast, and how good of you to let me come here!" and she bent over andkissed the stern, unresponsive face with an enthusiasm delightful tobehold."This is Louise, I suppose," said Aunt Jane, stiffly. "You are welcometo Elmhurst.""Tell me how you are," continued the girl, kneeling beside the chairand taking the withered hands gently in her own. "Do you suffer any?And are you getting better, dear aunt, in this beautiful garden withthe birds and the sunshine?""Get up," said the elder woman, roughly. "You're spoiling your gown."Louise laughed gaily."Never mind the gown," she answered. "Tell me about yourself. I'vebeen so anxious since your last letter."Aunt Jane's countenance relaxed a trifle. To speak of her brokenhealth always gave her a sort of grim satisfaction."I'm dying, as you can plainly see," she announced. "My days arenumbered, Louise. If you stay long enough you can gather wild flowersfor my coffin."Louise flushed a trifle. A bunch of butter-cups and forget-me-nots wasfastened to her girdle, and she had placed a few marguerites in herhair."Don't laugh at these poor things!" she said, deprecatingly. "I'm sofond of flowers, and we find none growing wild in the cities, youknow."Jane Merrick looked at her reflectively."How old are you, Louise," she asked."Just seventeen, Aunt.""I had forgotten you are so old as that. Let me see; Elizabeth cannotbe more than fifteen.""Elizabeth?""Elizabeth De Graf, your cousin. She arrived at Elmhurst this morning,and will be your companion while you are here.""That is nice," said Louise."I hope you will be friends.""Why not, Aunt? I haven't known much of my relations in the past, youknow, so it pleases me to find an aunt and a cousin at the same time.I am sure I shall love you both. Let me fix your pillow--you do notseem comfortable. There! Isn't that better?" patting the pillowdeftly. "I'm afraid you have needed more loving care than a paidattendant can give you," glancing at old Martha Phibbs, who stood somepaces away, and lowering her voice that she might not be overheard."But for a time, at least, I mean to be your nurse, and look afteryour wants. You should have sent for me before, Aunt Jane.""Don't trouble yourself; Phibbs knows my ways, and does all that isrequired," said the invalid, rather testily. "Run away, now, Louise.The housekeeper will show you to your room. It's opposite Elizabeth's,and you will do well to make her acquaintance at once. I shall expectyou both to dine with me at seven.""Can't I stay here a little longer?" pleaded Louise. "We haven'tspoken two words together, as yet, and I'm not a bit tired or anxiousto go to my room. What a superb oleander this is! Is it one of yourfavorites, Aunt Jane?""Run away," repeated the woman. "I want to be alone."The girl sighed and kissed her again, stroking the gray hair softlywith her white hand."Very well; I'll go," she said. "But I don't intend to be treated asa strange guest, dear Aunt, for that would drive me to return home atonce. You are my father's eldest sister, and I mean to make you loveme, if you will give me the least chance to do so."She looked around her, enquiringly, and Aunt Jane pointed a bonyfinger at the porch."That is the way. Phibbs will take you to Misery, the housekeeper, andthen return to me. Remember, I dine promptly at seven.""I shall count the minutes," said Louise, and with a laugh and agraceful gesture of adieu, turned to follow Martha into the house.Jane Merrick looked after her with a puzzled expression upon her face."Were she in the least sincere," she muttered, "Louise might prove avery pleasant companion. But she's not sincere; she's coddling me towin my money, and if I don't watch out she'll succeed. The girl's aborn diplomat, and weighed in the balance against sincerity, diplomacywill often tip the scales. I might do worse than to leave Elmhurst toa clever woman. But I don't know Beth yet. I'll wait and see whichgirl is the most desirable, and give them each an equal chance."CHAPTER IX.COUSINS."Come in," called Beth, answering a knock at her door.Louise entered, and with a little cry ran forward and caught Beth inher arms, kissing her in greeting."You must be my new cousin--Cousin Elizabeth--and I'm awfully glad tosee you at last!" she said, holding the younger girl a little away,that she might examine her carefully.Beth did not respond to the caress. She eyed her opponent sharply,for she knew well enough, even in that first moment, that they wereengaged in a struggle for supremacy in Aunt Jane's affections, andthat in the battles to come no quarter could be asked or expected.So they stood at arm's length, facing one another and secretly formingan estimate each of the other's advantages and accomplishments."She's pretty enough, but has no style whatever," was Louise'sconclusion. "Neither has she tact nor self-possession, or even aprepossessing manner. She wears her new gown in a dowdy manner and onecan read her face easily. There's little danger in this quarter, I'msure, so I may as well be friends with the poor child."As for Beth, she saw at once that her "new cousin" was older and moreexperienced in the ways of the world, and therefore liable to provea dangerous antagonist. Slender and graceful of form, attractiveof feature and dainty in manner, Louise must be credited withmany advantages; but against these might be weighed her evidentinsincerity--the volubility and gush that are so often affected tohide one's real nature, and which so shrewd and suspicious a woman asAunt Jane could not fail to readily detect. Altogether, Beth was notgreatly disturbed by her cousin's appearance, and suddenly realizingthat they had been staring at one another rather rudely, she said,pleasantly enough:"Won't you sit down?""Of course; we must get acquainted," replied Louise, gaily, andperched herself cross-legged upon the window-seat, surrounded by amass of cushions."I didn't know you were here, until an hour ago," she continued. "Butas soon as Aunt Jane told me I ran to my room, unpacked and settledthe few traps I brought with me, and here I am--prepared for a goodlong chat and to love you just as dearly as you will let me.""I knew you were coming, but not until this morning," answered Beth,slowly. "Perhaps had I known, I would not have accepted our Aunt'sinvitation.""Ah! Why not?" enquired the other, as if in wonder.Beth hesitated."Have you known Aunt Jane before today?" she asked."No.""Nor I. The letter asking me to visit her was the first I have everreceived from her. Even my mother, her own sister, does not correspondwith her. I was brought up to hate her very name, as a selfish,miserly old woman. But, since she asked me to visit her, we judged shehad softened and might wish to become friendly, and so I accepted theinvitation. I had no idea you were also invited.""But why should you resent my being here?" Louise asked, smiling."Surely, two girls will have a better time in this lonely old placethan one could have alone. For my part, I am delighted to find you atElmhurst.""Thank you," said Beth. "That's a nice thing to say, but I doubt ifit's true. Don't let's beat around the bush. I hate hypocrisy, and ifwe're going to be friends let's be honest with one another from thestart.""Well?" queried Louise, evidently amused."It's plain to me that Aunt Jane has invited us here to choose whichone of us shall inherit her money--and Elmhurst. She's old and feeble,and she hasn't any other relations.""Oh, yes, she has" corrected Louise."You mean Patricia Doyle?""Yes.""What do you know of her?""Nothing at all.""Where does she live?""I haven't the faintest idea."Louise spoke as calmly as if she had not mailed Patricia's defiantletter to Aunt Jane, or discovered her cousin's identity in the littlehair-dresser from Madame Borne's establishment."Has Aunt Jane mentioned her?" continued Beth."Not in my presence.""Then we may conclude she's left out of the arrangement," said Beth,calmly. "And, as I said, Aunt Jane is likely to choose one of us tosucceed her at Elmhurst. I hoped I had it all my own way, but it'sevident I was mistaken. You'll fight for your chance and fight mightyhard!"Louise laughed merrily."How funny!" she exclaimed, after a moment during which Beth frownedat her darkly. "Why, my dear cousin, I don't want Aunt Jane's money.""You don't?""Not a penny of it; nor Elmhurst; nor anything you can possibly layclaim to, my dear. My mother and I are amply provided for, and I amonly here to find rest from my social duties and to get acquaintedwith my dead father's sister. That is all.""Oh!" said Beth, lying back in her chair with a sigh of relief."So it was really a splendid idea of yours to be frank with me at ourfirst meeting," continued Louise, cheerfully; "for it has led to yourlearning the truth, and I am sure you will never again grieve me bysuggesting that I wish to supplant you in Aunt Jane's favor. Now tellme something about yourself and your people. Are you poor?""Poor as poverty," said Beth, gloomily. "My father teaches music, andmother scolds him continually for not being able to earn enough moneyto keep out of debt.""Hasn't Aunt Jane helped you?""We've never seen a cent of her money, although father has tried attimes to borrow enough to help him out of his difficulties.""That's strange. She seems like such a dear kindly old lady," saidLouise, musingly."I think she's horrid," answered Beth, angrily; "but I mustn't let herknow it. I even kissed her, when she asked me to, and it sent a shiverall down my back."Louise laughed with genuine amusement."You must dissemble, Cousin Elizabeth," she advised, "and teach ouraunt to love you. For my part, I am fond of everyone, and it delightsme to fuss around invalids and assist them. I ought to have been atrained nurse, you know; but of course there's no necessity of myearning a living.""I suppose not," said Beth. Then, after a thoughtful silence, sheresumed abruptly; "What's to prevent Aunt Jane leaving you herproperty, even if you are rich, and don't need it? You say you like tocare for invalids, and I don't. Suppose Aunt Jane prefers you to me,and wills you all her money?""Why, that would be beyond my power to prevent," answered Louise, witha little yawn.Beth's face grew hard again."You're deceiving me," she declared, angrily. "You're trying to makeme think you don't want Elmhurst, when you're as anxious to get it asI am.""My dear Elizabeth--by the way, that's an awfully long name; what dothey call you, Lizzie, or Bessie, or--""They call me Beth," sullenly."Then, my dear Beth, let me beg you not to borrow trouble, or to doubtone who wishes to be your friend. Elmhurst would be a perfect boreto me. I wouldn't know what to do with it. I couldn't live in thisout-of-the-way corner of the world, you know.""But suppose she leaves it to you?" persisted Beth. "You wouldn'trefuse it, I imagine."Louise seemed to meditate."Cousin," she said, at length, "I'll make a bargain with you. I can'trefuse to love and pet Aunt Jane, just because she has money and mysweet cousin Beth is anxious to inherit it. But I'll not interfere inany way with your chances, and I'll promise to sing your praises toour aunt persistently. Furthermore, in case she selects me as herheir, I will agree to transfer half of the estate to you--the halfthat consists of Elmhurst.""Is there much more?" asked Beth."I haven't any list of Aunt Jane's possessions, so I don't know. Butyou shall have Elmhurst, if I get it, because the place would be of nouse to me.""It's a magnificent estate," said Beth, looking at her cousindoubtfully."It shall be yours, dear, whatever Aunt Jane decides. See, this is acompact, and I'll seal it with a kiss."She sprang up and, kneeling beside Beth, kissed her fervently."Now shall we be friends?" she asked, lightly. "Now will you abandonall those naughty suspicions and let me love you?"Beth hesitated. The suggestion seemed preposterous. Such generositysavored of play acting, and Louise's manner was too airy to begenuine. Somehow she felt that she was being laughed at by thisslender, graceful girl, who was scarcely older than herself; but shewas too unsophisticated to know how to resent it. Louise insisted uponwarding off her enmity, or at least establishing a truce, and Beth,however suspicious and ungracious, could find no way of rejecting theovertures."Were I in your place," she said, "I would never promise to give up apenny of the inheritance. If I win it, I shall keep it all.""To be sure. I should want you to, my dear.""Then, since we have no cause to quarrel, we may as well becomefriends," continued Beth, her features relaxing a little their setexpression.Louise laughed again, ignoring the other's brusqueness, and was soonchatting away pleasantly upon other subjects and striving to draw Bethout of her natural reserve.The younger girl had no power to resist such fascinations. Louiseknew the big world, and talked of it with charming naivete, andBeth listened rapturously. Such a girl friend it had never been herprivilege to have before, and when her suspicions were forgotten shebecame fairly responsive, and brightened wonderfully.They dressed in time for dinner, and met Aunt Jane and Silas Watson,the lawyer, in the great drawing-room. The old gentleman was veryattentive and courteous during the stately dinner, and did much torelieve the girls' embarrassment. Louise, indeed, seemed quite at homein her new surroundings, and chatted most vivaciously during the meal;but Aunt Jane was strangely silent, and Beth had little to say andseemed awkward and ill at ease.The old lady retired to her own room shortly after dinner, andpresently sent a servant to request Mr. Watson to join her."Silas," she said, when he entered, "what do you think of my nieces?""They are very charming girls," he answered, "although they are atan age when few girls show to good advantage. Why did you not inviteKenneth to dinner, Jane?""The boy?""Yes. They would be more at ease in the society of a young gentlemanmore nearly their own age.""Kenneth is a bear. He is constantly saying disagreeable things. Inother words, he is not gentlemanly, and the girls shall have nothingto do with him.""Very well," said the lawyer, quietly."Which of my nieces do you prefer?" asked the old lady, after a pause."I cannot say, on so short an acquaintance," he answered, withgravity. "Which do you prefer, Jane?""They are equally unsatisfactory," she answered. "I cannot imagineElmhurst belonging to either, Silas." Then she added, with an abruptchange of manner: "You must go to New York for me, at once.""Tonight?""No; tomorrow morning. I must see that other niece--the one who defiesme and refuses to answer my second letter.""Patricia Doyle?""Yes. Find her and argue with her. Tell her I am a crabbed old womanwith a whim to know her, and that I shall not die happy unless shecomes to Elmhurst. Bribe her, threaten her--kidnap her if necessary,Silas; but get her to Elmhurst as quickly as possible.""I'll do my best, Jane. But why are you so anxious?""My time is drawing near, old friend," she replied, less harshly thanusual, "and this matter of my will lies heavily on my conscience. Whatif I should die tonight?"He did not answer."There would be a dozen heirs to fight for my money, and dear oldElmhurst would be sold to strangers," she resumed, with bitterness."But I don't mean to cross over just yet, Silas, even if one limb isdead already. I shall hang on until I get this matter settled, and Ican't settle it properly without seeing all three of my nieces. One ofthese is too hard, and the other too soft. I'll see what Patricia islike.""She may prove even more undesirable," said the lawyer."In that case, I'll pack her back again and choose between these two.But you must fetch her, Silas, that I may know just what I am doing.And you must fetch her at once!""I'll do the best I can, Jane," repeated the old lawyer.CHAPTER X.THE MAN WITH THE BUNDLE.In the harness-room above the stable sat Duncan Muir, the coachman andmost important servant, with the exception of the head gardener, inMiss Merrick's establishment. Duncan, bald-headed but with white andbushy side-whiskers, was engaged in the serious business of oiling andpolishing the state harness, which had not been used for many monthspast. But that did not matter. Thursday was the day for oiling theharness, and so on Thursday he performed the task, never daring toentrust a work so important to a subordinate.In one corner of the little room Kenneth Forbes squatted upon a bench,with an empty pine box held carelessly in his lap. While Duncan workedthe boy was busy with his pencil, but neither had spoken for at leasta half hour.Finally the aged coachman, without looking up, enquired:"What do ye think o' 'em, Kenneth lad?""Think o' whom, Don?""The young leddies.""What young ladies?""Miss Jane's nieces, as Oscar brought from the station yesterday."The boy looked astonished, and leaned over the box in his lap eagerly."Tell me, Don," he said. "I was away with my gun all yesterday, andheard nothing of it.""Why, it seems Miss Jane's invited 'em to make her a visit.""But not yet, Don! Not so soon.""Na'theless, they're here.""How many, Don?""Two, lad. A bonny young thing came on the morning train, an' a nice,wide-awake one by the two o'clock.""Girls?" with an accent of horror."Young females, anyhow," said Donald, polishing a buckle briskly.The boy glared at him fixedly."Will they be running about the place, Don?""Most likely, 'Twould be a shame to shut them up with the poor missusthis glad weather. But why not? They'll be company for ye, Kennethlad.""How long will they stay?""Mabbe for aye. Oscar forbys one or the ither o' 'em will own theplace when Miss Jane gi'es up the ghost."The boy sat silent a moment, thinking upon this speech. Then, with acry that was almost a scream, he dashed the box upon the floor andflew out the door as if crazed, and Donald paused to listen to hisfootsteps clattering down the stairs.Then the old man groaned dismally, shaking his side-whiskers with anegative expression that might have conveyed worlds of meaning to oneable to interpret it. But his eye fell upon the pine box, which hadrolled to his feet, and he stooped to pick it up. Upon the smoothlyplaned side was his own picture, most deftly drawn, showing himengaged in polishing the harness. Every strap and buckle was depictedwith rare fidelity; there was no doubt at all of the sponge and bottleon the stool beside him, or the cloth in his hand. Even his bowspectacles rested upon the bridge of his nose at exactly the rightangle, and his under lip protruded just as it had done since he was alad.Donald was not only deeply impressed by such an exhibition of art; hewas highly gratified at being pictured, and full of wonder that theboy could do such a thing; "wi' a wee pencil an' a bit o' board!" Heturned the box this way and that to admire the sketch, and finallyarose and brought a hatchet, with which he carefully pried the boardaway from the box. Then he carried his treasure to a cupboard, wherehe hid it safely behind a row of tall bottles.Meantime Kenneth had reached the stable, thrown a bridle over the headof a fine sorrel mare, and scorning to use a saddle leaped upon herback and dashed down the lane and out at the rear gate upon the oldturnpike road.His head was whirling with amazement, his heart full of indignation.Girls! Girls at Elmhurst--nieces and guests of the fierce old womanhe so bitterly hated! Then, indeed, his days of peace and quiet wereended. These dreadful creatures would prowl around everywhere; theymight even penetrate the shrubbery to the foot of the stairs leadingto his own retired room; they would destroy his happiness and drivehim mad.For this moody, silent youth had been strangely happy in his lifeat Elmhurst, despite the neglect of the grim old woman who was itsmistress and the fact that no one aside from Lawyer Watson seemed tocare whether he lived or died.Perhaps Donald did. Good old Don was friendly and seldom bothered himby talking. Perhaps old Misery liked him a bit, also. But these wereonly servants, and almost as helpless and dependent as himself.Still, he had been happy. He began to realize it, now that these awfulgirls had come to disturb his peace. The thought filled him with griefand rebellion and resentment; yet there was nothing he could do toalter the fact that Donald's "young females" were already here, andprepared, doubtless, to stay.The sorrel was dashing down the road at a great pace, but the boyclung firmly to his seat and gloried in the breeze that fanned his hotcheeks. Away and away he raced until he reached the crossroads, milesaway, and down this he turned and galloped as recklessly as before.The sun was hot, today, and the sorrel's flanks begun to steam andshow flecks of white upon their glossy surface. He turned again to theleft, entering upon a broad highway that would lead him straight homeat last; but he had almost reached the little village of Elmwood,which was the railway station, before he realized his cruelty to thesplendid mare he bestrode. Then indeed, he fell to a walk, pattingNora's neck affectionately and begging her to forgive him for histhoughtlessness. The mare tossed her head in derision. However shemight sweat and pant, she liked the glorious pace even better than herrider.Through the village he paced moodily, the bridle dangling loosely onthe mare's neck. The people paused to look at him curiously, but hehad neither word nor look for any.He did not know one of them by name, and cared little how much theymight speculate upon his peculiar position at "the big house."Then, riding slowly up the hedge bordered road, his troubles once moreassailed him, and he wondered if there was not some spot upon thebroad earth to which he could fly for retirement until the girls hadleft Elmhurst for good.Nora shied, and he looked up to discover that he had nearly run down apedestrian--a stout little man with a bundle under his arm, who heldup one hand as if to arrest him.Involuntarily he drew rein, and stopped beside the traveler with alook of inquiry."Sorry to trouble you, sir," remarked the little man, in a cheeryvoice, "but I ain't just certain about my way.""Where do you want to go?" asked the boy."To Jane Merrick's place. They call it Elmhurst, I guess.""It's straight ahead," said Kenneth, as the mare walked on. Hisquestioner also started and paced beside him."Far from here?""A mile, perhaps.""They said it was three from the village, but I guess I've come adozen a'ready."The boy did not reply to this. There was nothing offensive in theman's manner. He spoke with an easy familiarity that made it difficultnot to respond with equal frank cordiality, and there was a shrewdexpression upon his wrinkled, smooth-shaven face that stamped him aman who had seen life in many of its phases.Kenneth, who resented the companionship of most people, seemedattracted by the man, and hesitated to gallop on and leave him."Know Jane Merrick?" asked the stranger.The boy nodded."Like her?""I hate her," he said, savagely.The man laughed, a bit uneasily."Then it's the same Jane as ever," he responded, with a shake of hisgrizzled head. "Do you know, I sort o' hoped she'd reformed, and I'dbe glad to see her again. They tell me she's got money."The boy looked at him in surprise."She owns Elmhurst, and has mortgages on a dozen farms around here,and property in New York, and thousands of dollars in the bank," hesaid. "Aunt Jane's rich.""Aunt Jane?" echoed the man, quickly. "What's your name, lad?""Kenneth Forbes."A shake of the head."Don't recollect any Forbeses in the family.""She isn't really my aunt," said the boy, "and she doesn't treat meas an aunt, either; but she's my guardian, and I've always called herAunt, rather than say Miss Merrick.""She's never married, has she?""No. She was engaged to my Uncle Tom, who owned Elmhurst. He waskilled in a railway accident, and then it was found he'd left her allhe had.""I see.""So, when my parents died, Aunt Jane took me for Uncle Tom's sake, andkeeps me out of charity.""I see." Quite soberly, this time.The boy slid off the mare and walked beside the little man, holdingthe bridle over his arm. They did not speak again for some moments.Finally the stranger asked:"Are Jane's sisters living--Julia and Violet?""I don't know. But there are two of her nieces at Elmhurst.""Ha! Who are they?""Girls," with bitterness. "I haven't seen them."The stranger whistled."Don't like girls, I take it?""No; I hate them."Another long pause. Then the boy suddenly turned questioner."You know Aunt--Miss Merrick, sir?""I used to, when we were both younger.""Any relation, sir?""Just a brother, that's all."Kenneth stopped short, and the mare stopped, and the little man, witha whimsical smile at the boy's astonishment, also stopped."I didn't know she had a brother, sir--that is, living.""She had two; but Will's dead, years ago, I'm told. I'm the other.""John Merrick?""That's me. I went west a long time ago; before you were born, Iguess. We don't get much news on the coast, so I sort of lost track ofthe folks back east, and I reckon they lost track of me, for the samereason.""You were the tinsmith?""The same. Bad pennies always return, they say. I've come back to lookup the family and find how many are left. Curious sort of a job, isn'tit.""I don't know. Perhaps it's natural," replied the boy, reflectively."But I'm sorry you came to Aunt Jane first.""Why?""She's in bad health--quite ill, you know--and her temper's dreadful.Perhaps she--she--""I know. But I haven't seen her in years; and, after all, she's mysister. And back at the old home, where I went first, no one knewanything about what had become of the family except Jane. They kepttrack of her because she suddenly became rich, and a great lady, andthat was a surprising thing to happen to a Merrick. We've always beena poor lot, you know."The boy glanced at the bundle, pityingly, and the little man caughtthe look and smiled his sweet, cheery smile."My valise was too heavy to carry," he said; "so I wrapped up a fewthings in case Jane wanted me to stay over night. And that's why Ididn't get a horse at the livery, you know. Somebody'd have to take itback again.""I'm sure she'll ask you to stay, sir. And if she doesn't, you comeout to the stable and let me know, and I'll drive you to town again.Donald--that's the coachman--is my friend, and he'll let me have thehorse if I ask him.""Thank you, lad," returned the man, gratefully. "I thought a littleexercise would do me good, but this three miles has seemed like thirtyto me!""We're here at last," said the boy, turning: into the drive-way."Seeing that you're her brother, sir, I advise you to go right up tothe front door and ring the bell.""I will," said the man."I always go around the back way, myself.""I see."The boy turned away, but in a moment halted again. His interest inMiss Jane's brother John was extraordinary."Another thing," he said, hesitating."Well?""You'd better not say you met me, you know. It wouldn't be a goodintroduction. She hates me as much as I hate her.""Very good, my lad. I'll keep mum."The boy nodded, and turned away to lead Nora to the stable. The manlooked after him a moment, and shook his head, sadly."Poor boy!" he whispered.Then he walked up to the front door and rang the bell.CHAPTER XI.THE MAD GARDENER."This seems to be a lazy place," said Louise, as she stood in thedoorway of Beth's room to bid her good night. "I shall sleep untillate in the morning, for I don't believe Aunt Jane will be onexhibition before noon.""At home I always get up at six o'clock," answered Beth."Six o'clock! Good gracious! What for?""To study my lessons and help get the breakfast.""Don't you keep a maid?""No," said Beth, rather surlily; "we have hard work to keepourselves.""But you must be nearly through with school by this time. I finishedmy education ages ago.""Did you graduate?" asked Beth."No; it wasn't worth while," declared Louise, complacently. "I'm sureI know as much as most girls do, and there are more useful lessons tobe learned from real life than from books.""Good night," said Beth."Good night," answered the older girl, and shut the door behind her.Beth sat for a time moodily thinking. She did not like the way inwhich her cousin assumed superiority over her. The difference intheir ages did not account for the greater worldly wisdom Louisehad acquired, and in much that she said and did Beth recognized ashrewdness and experience that made her feel humbled and, in a way,inferior to her cousin. Nor did she trust the friendship Louiseexpressed for her.Somehow, nothing that the girl said seemed to ring true, and Bethalready, in her mind, accused her of treachery and insincerity.As a matter of fact, however, she failed to understand her cousin.Louise really loved to be nice to people, and to say nice thing's. Itis true she schemed and intrigued to advance her personal welfare andposition in life; but even her schemes were undertaken lightly andcarelessly, and if they failed the girl would be the first to laugh ather disappointment and try to mend her fortunes. If others stood inher way she might not consider them at all; if she pledged her word,it might not always be profitable to keep it; but she liked to be onpleasant terms with everyone, and would be amiable to the last, nomatter what happened. Comedy was her forte, rather than tragedy. Iftragedy entered her life she would probably turn it into ridicule.Wholly without care, whimsical and generous to a degree, if it suitedher mood, Louise Merrick possessed a nature capable of great things,either for good or ill.It was no wonder her unsophisticated country cousin failed tocomprehend her, although Beth's intuition was not greatly at fault.Six o'clock found Beth wide awake, as usual; so she quietly dressedand, taking her book under her arm, started to make her way into thegardens. Despite Louise's cynicism she had no intention of abandoningher studies. She had decided to fit herself for a teacher before AuntJane's invitation had come to her, and this ambition would render itnecessary for her to study hard during vacations.If she became an heiress she would not need to teach, but she was notat all confident of her prospects, and the girl's practical natureprompted her to carry out her plans until she was sure of the future.In the hall she met Phibbs, shuffling along as if in pain."Good morning, miss," said the old servant.Beth looked at her thoughtfully. This was Aunt Jane's special andconfidential attendant."Do your feet hurt you?" she asked."Yes, miss; in the mornin' they's awful bad. It's being on 'em all theday, 'tendin' to Miss Jane, you know. But after a time I gets moreused to the pain, and don't feel it. The mornin's always the worst."She was passing on, but Beth stopped her."Come into my room," she said, and led the way.Martha Phibbs followed reluctantly. Miss Jane might already be awakeand demanding her services, and she could not imagine what the younglady wanted her for.But she entered the room, and Beth went to a box and brought out abottle of lotion."Mother has the same trouble that you complain of," she said,practically, "and here is a remedy that always gives her relief. Ibrought it with me in case I should take long tramps, and get sorefeet."She gently pushed the old woman into a chair, and then, to Phibbs'utter amazement, knelt down and unfastened her shoes and drew off herstockings. A moment later she was rubbing the lotion upon the poorcreature's swollen feet, paying no attention to Martha's horrifiedprotests."There. Now they're sure to feel better," said Beth, pulling the wornand darned stockings upon the woman's feet again. "And you must takethis bottle to your room, and use it every night and morning.""Bless your dear heart!" cried Phibbs, while tears of gratitude stoodin her faded eyes. "I'm sure I feel twenty years younger, a'ready. Butyou shouldn't 'a' done it, miss; indeed you shouldn't.""I'm glad to help you," said Beth, rinsing her hands at the wash standand drying them upon a towel. "It would be cruel to let you sufferwhen I can ease your pain.""But what would Miss Jane say?" wailed old Martha, throwing up herhands in dismay."She'll never know a thing about it. It's our secret, Martha, and I'msure if I ever need a friend you'll do as much for me.""I'll do anything for you, Miss Elizabeth," was the reply, as thewoman took the bottle of lotion and departed.Beth smiled."That was not a bad thought," she said to herself, again starting forthe gardens. "I have made a firm friend and done a kindly action atthe same time--and all while Cousin Louise is fast asleep."The housekeeper let her out at the side door, after Beth had pressedher hand and kissed her good morning."You're looking quite bonny, my dear," said the old woman. "Do youfeel at home, at all, in this strange place?""Not quite, as yet," answered Beth. "But I know I have one good friendhere, and that comforts me."She found a path between high hedges, that wandered away through thegrounds, and along this she strolled until she reached a rose arborwith a comfortable bench.Here she seated herself, looking around her curiously. The placeseemed little frequented, but was kept with scrupulous care. Evenat this hour, a little way off could be heard the "click-click!" ofhedge-shears, and Beth noted how neatly the paths were swept, and howcarefully every rose on the arbor was protected.Elmhurst was a beautiful place. Beth sighed as she wondered if itwould ever be hers. Then she opened her book and began to work.During the next hour the click of the hedge-shears drew nearer, butthe girl did not notice this. In another half hour James himself cameinto view, intent upon his monotonous task. Gradually the motionlessform of the girl and the plodding figure of the gardener drewtogether, until he stood but two yards distant. Then he paused, lookedtoward the arbor, and uttered an exclamation.Beth looked up."Good morning," she said, pleasantly.James stared at her, but made no reply save a slight inclination ofhis head."Am I in your way?" she asked.He turned his back to her, then, and began clipping away as before.Beth sprang up and laid a hand upon his arm, arresting him. Again heturned to stare at her, and in his eyes was a look almost of fear.She drew back."Why won't you speak to me?" enquired the girl, gently. "I'm astranger at Elmhurst, but I want to be your friend. Won't you let me?"To her amazement James threw up his hands, letting the shears clatterto the ground, and with a hoarse cry turned and fled up the path asswiftly as he could go.Beth was really puzzled, but as she stood silently looking after thegardener she heard a soft laugh, and found old Misery beside her."It's just his way, Miss; don't you be scared by anything that Jamesdoes," said the woman. "Why, at times he won't even speak to MissJane.""He isn't dumb, is he?" asked Beth."Lor', no! But he's that odd an' contrary he won't talk to a soul.Never did, since the day Master Tom was killed. James was travellin'with Master Tom, you know, and there was an accident, an' the trainrun off'n the track an' tipped over. James wasn't hurt at all, but hedragged Master Tom out'n the wreck and sat by him until he died. ThenJames brought Master Tom's body back home again; but his mindseemed to have got a shock, in some way, and he never was the sameafterwards. He was powerful fond of young Master Tom. But then, we allwas.""Poor man!" said Beth."After that," resumed Misery, "all that James would do was to lookafter the flowers. Miss Jane, after she came, made him the headgardener, and he's proved a rare good one, too. But James he won'teven talk to Miss Jane, nor even to his old friend Lawyer Watson, whoused to be Master Tom's special chum an' comrade. He does his duty,and obeys all Miss Jane's orders as faithful as can be; but he won'ttalk, an' we've all give up tryin' to make him.""But why should I frighten him?" asked the girl."You tried to make him talk, and you're a stranger. Strangers alwaysaffect James that way. I remember when Miss Jane first came toElmhurst he screamed at the sight of her; but when he found out thatMaster Tom loved her and had given her Elmhurst, James followed heraround like a dog, and did everything she told him to. But breakfastis ready, Miss. I came to call you.""Thank you," said Beth, turning to walk beside the housekeeper.According to Aunt Jane's instructions the breakfast was served in herown room, and presently Louise, dressed in a light silk kimona, camein bearing her tray "to keep her cousin company," she laughinglyannounced."I should have slept an hour longer," she yawned, over her chocolate,"but old Misery--who seems rightly named--insisted on waking me, justthat I might eat. Isn't this a funny establishment?""It's different from everything I'm used to," answered Beth, gravely;"but it seems very pleasant here, and everyone is most kind andattentive.""Now I'll dress," said Louise, "and we'll take a long walk together,and see the place."So it happened that Kenneth clattered down the road on the sorrel marejust a moment before the girls emerged from the house, and while hewas riding off his indignation at their presence at Elmhurst, theywere doing just what his horrified imagination had depicted--that is,penetrating to all parts of the grounds, to every nook in the spaciousold gardens and even to the stables, where Beth endeavored to make afriend of old Donald the coachman.However, the gray-whiskered Scotsman was not to be taken by storm,even by a pretty face. His loyalty to "the boy" induced him to be waryin associating with these strange "young females" and although hewelcomed them to the stable with glum civility he withheld his opinionof them until he should know them better.In their rambles the girls found Kenneth's own stair, and were sittingupon it when Phibbs came to summon Louise to attend upon Aunt Jane.She obeyed with alacrity, for she wished to know more of the queerrelative whose guest she had become."Sit down," said Aunt Jane, very graciously, as the girl entered.Louise leaned over the chair, kissed her and patted her cheekaffectionately, and then shook up the pillows to make them morecomfortable."I want you to talk to me," announced Aunt Jane, "and to tell mesomething of the city and the society in which you live. I've been solong dead to the world that I've lost track of people and things.""Let me dress your hair at the same time," said Louise, pleadingly."It looks really frowsy, and I can talk while I work.""I can't lift my left hand," said the invalid, flushing, "and Phibbsis a stupid ass.""Never mind, I can make it look beautiful in half a jiffy," said thegirl, standing behind the chair and drawing deftly the hairpins fromAunt Jane's scanty grey locks, "and you can't imagine how it pleasesme to fuss over anyone."It was surprising how meekly Aunt Jane submitted to this ordeal, butshe plied the girl with many shrewd questions and Louise, busilyworking in a position where the old woman could not see her face,never hesitated for an answer. She knew all the recent gossip offashionable society, and retailed it glibly. She had met thiscelebrity at a ball and that one at a reception, and she describedthem minutely, realizing that Aunt Jane would never be in a positionto contradict any assertion she might choose to make.Indeed, Aunt Jane was really startled."However did your mother manage to gain an entree into society?" sheasked. "Your father was a poor man and of little account. I know, forhe was my own brother.""He left us a very respectable life insurance," said Louise, demurely,"and my mother had many friends who were glad to introduce us to goodsociety when we were able to afford such a luxury. Father died twelveyears ago, you know, and for several years, while I was at school,mother lived very quietly. Then she decided it was time I made mydebut, but for the last season we have been rather gay, I admit.""Are you rich?" asked Aunt Jane, sharply."Mercy, no!" laughed Louise, who had finished her work and now sat heraunt's feet. "But we have enough for our requirements, and that makesus feel quite independent. By the way, auntie, I want to return thatcheck you sent me. It was awfully good and generous of you, but Ididn't need it, you know, and so I want you to take it back."She drew the slip of paper from her pocket and pressed it into AuntJane's hand."It's quite enough for you to give me this nice treat in the country,"resumed the girl, calmly. "The change from the city will do me a worldof good, and as I wanted to be quiet, and rest I declined all my otherinvitations for the summer to accept yours. Isn't it glorious that wecan get acquainted at last? And I quite love Elmhurst, already!"Aunt Jane was equally surprised and gratified. The return of the checkfor a hundred dollars was very pleasant. She had drawn a similar checkfor each of her three nieces, believing that it would be necessary forher to meet their expenses, and she had considered the expenditure inthe nature of a business transaction. But Patricia had flung one checkin her face, practically, and now Louise had voluntarily returnedanother, because she did not need the money. Really, Jane Merrick wasaccomplishing her purpose for less money than she had expected, andshe had hoarded her wealth for so many years that she disliked tospend any of it foolishly.Louise had read her nature correctly. It had been a little hard toreturn so large a check, but the girl's policy was not to appearbefore Aunt Jane as a poor relation, but rather as a young lady fittedby social education and position to become a gracious mistress ofElmhurst. This she believed would give her a powerful advantage overall competitors.Whether she was right or not in this surmise it is certain that sherose several points in Aunt Jane's estimation during this interview,and when she was dismissed it was so graciously that she told herselfthe money her little plot had cost had been well expended.Afterward Elizabeth was summoned to attend her aunt."I want to be amused. Can you read aloud?" said the invalid."Not very well, I'm afraid. But I'll be glad to try," answered Beth."What do you like?""Select your own book," said Aunt Jane, pointing to a heap of volumesbeside her.The girl hesitated. Louise would doubtless have chosen a romance, orsome light tale sure to interest for the hour, and so amuse the oldlady. But Beth erroneously judged that the aged and infirm love soberand scholarly books, and picked out a treatise that proved ineffablydull and tedious.Aunt Jane sniffed, and then smiled slyly and proceeded to settleherself for a nap. If the girl was a fool, let her be properlypunished.Beth read for an hour, uncertain whether her aunt were intenselyinterested or really asleep. At the end of that dreadful period oldMisery entered and aroused the sleeper without ceremony."What's the matter?" asked Aunt Jane, querrulously, for she resentedbeing disturbed."There's a man to see you, Miss.""Send him about his business!""But--""I won't see him, I tell you!""But he says he's your brother, Miss.""Who?""Your brother."Miss Jane stared as if bewildered."Your brother John, Miss."The invalid sank back upon her cushions with a sigh of resignation."I thought he was dead, long ago; but if he's alive I suppose I'llhave to see him," she said. "Elizabeth, leave the room. Misery, sendthe man here!"CHAPTER XII.UNCLE JOHN GETS ACQUAINTED.Beth went out to find Louise, and discovered her standing near thestables, where a boy was rubbing down the sides of a sorrel mare withwisps of straw."Something has happened," she said to Louise in a troubled voice."What?""A man has arrived who says he is Aunt Jane's brother.""Impossible! Have you seen him?""No; he says he's Aunt Jane's brother John.""Oh; I know. The peddler, or tinker, or something or other whodisappeared years ago. But it doesn't matter.""It may matter a good deal," said practical Beth. "Aunt Jane may leavehim her money.""Why, he's older than she is. I've heard mother say he was the eldestof the family. Aunt Jane wont leave her money to an old man, you maybe sure."Beth felt a little reassured at this, and stood for a moment besideLouise watching the boy. Presently Oscar came to him, and aftertouching his hat respectfully took the mare and led her into thestable. The boy turned away, with his hands in his pockets, andstrolled up a path, unaware that the two dreaded girls had beenobserving him."I wonder who that is," said Beth."We'll find out," returned Louise. "I took him for a stable boy, atfirst. But Oscar seemed to treat him as a superior."She walked into the stable, followed by her cousin, and found thegroom tying the mare."Who was the young man?" she asked."Which young man, Miss?""The one who has just arrived with the horse.""Oh; that's Master Kenneth, Miss," answered Oscar, with a grin."Where did he come from?""Master Kenneth? Why, he lives here.""At the house?""Yes, Miss.""Who is he?""Master Tom's nephew--he as used to own Elmhurst, you know.""Mr. Thomas Bradley?""The same, Miss.""Ah. How long has Master Kenneth lived here?""A good many years. I can't just remember how long.""Thank you, Oscar."The girls walked away, and when they were alone Louise remarked:"Here is a more surprising discovery than Uncle John, Beth. The boyhas a better right than any of us to inherit Elmhurst.""Then why did Aunt Jane send for us?""It's a mystery, dear. Let us try to solve it.""Come; we'll ask the housekeeper," said Beth. "I'm sure old Miserywill tell us all we want to know."So they returned to the house and, with little difficulty, found theold housekeeper."Master Kenneth?" she exclaimed. "Why, he's just Master Tom's nephew,that's all.""Is this his home?" asked Beth."All the home he's got, my dear. His father and mother are both dead,and Miss Jane took him to care for just because she thought Master Tomwould 'a' liked it.""Is she fond of him?" enquired Louise."Fond of the boy? Why, Miss Jane just hates him, for a fact. She won'teven see him, or have him near her. So he keeps to his little room inthe left wing, and eats and sleeps there.""It's strange," remarked Beth, thoughtfully. "Isn't he a nice boy?""We're all very fond of Master Kenneth," replied the housekeeper,simply. "But I'll admit he's a queer lad, and has a bad temper. It maybe due to his lack of bringin' up, you know; for he just runs wild,and old Mr. Chase, who comes from the village to tutor him, is a poorlot, and lets the boy do as he pleases. For that reason he won'tstudy, and he won't work, and I'm sure I don't know whatever willbecome of him, when Miss Jane dies.""Thank you," said Beth, much relieved, and the girls walked away withlighter hearts."There's no danger in that quarter, after all," said Louise, gaily."The boy is a mere hanger-on. You see, Aunt Jane's old sweetheart,Thomas Bradley, left everything to her when he died, and she can do asshe likes with it."After luncheon, which they ate alone and unattended save by the maidSusan, who was old Misery's daughter, the girls walked away tothe rose arbor, where Beth declared they could read or sew quiteundisturbed.But sitting upon the bench they found a little old man, his legsextended, his hands thrust deep into his pockets, and a look of calmmeditation upon his round and placid face. Between his teeth was ablack brier pipe, which he puffed lazily.Beth was for drawing back, but Louise took her arm and drew herforward."Isn't this Uncle John?" she asked.The little man turned his eyes upon them, withdrew his hands from hispockets and his pipe from his mouth, and then bowed profoundly."If you are my nieces, then I am Uncle John," he said, affably. "Sitdown, my dears, and let us get acquainted."Louise smiled, and her rapid survey took in the man's crumpled andsomewhat soiled shirt-front, the frayed black necktie that seemed tohave done years of faithful service, and the thick and dusty cow-hideboots. His clothing was old and much worn, and the thought crossedher mind that Oscar the groom was far neater in appearance than thisnewly-found relative.Beth merely noticed that Uncle John was neither dignified nor imposingin appearance. She sat down beside him--leaving a wide space betweenthem--with a feeling of disappointment that he was "like all the restof the Merricks.""You have just arrived, we hear," remarked Louise."Yes. Walked up from the station this forenoon," said Uncle John."Come to see Jane, you know, but hadn't any idea I'd find two nieces.Hadn't any idea I possessed two nieces, to be honest about it.""I believe you have three," said Louise, in an, amused tone."Three? Who's the other?""Why, Patricia Doyle.""Doyle? Doyle? Don't remember the name.""I believe your sister Violet married a man named Doyle.""So she did. Captain Doyle--or Major Doyle--or some such fellow. Butwhat is your name?""I am Louise Merrick, your brother Will's daughter.""Oh! And you?" turning to Beth."My mother was Julia Merrick," said Beth, not very graciously. "Shemarried Professor DeGraf. I am Elizabeth DeGraf.""Yes, yes," observed Uncle John, nodding his head. "I remember Juliavery well, as a girl. She used to put on a lot of airs, and jaw fatherbecause he wouldn't have the old top-buggy painted every spring. Samenow as ever, I s'pose?"Beth did not reply."And Will's dead, and out of his troubles, I hope," continued UncleJohn, reflectively. "He wrote me once that his wife had nearly drivenhim crazy. Perhaps she murdered him in his sleep--eh, Louise?""Sir," said Louise, much offended, "you are speaking of my mother.""Ah, yes. It's the same one your father spoke of," he answered,unmoved. "But that's neither here nor there. The fact is, I've foundtwo nieces," looking shrewdly from one face into the other, "and Iseem to be in luck, for you're quite pretty and ladylike, my dears.""Thank you," said Louise, rather coldly. "You're a competent judge,sir, I suppose.""Tolerable," he responded, with a chuckle. "So good a judge that I'vekep' single all my life.""Where did you come from?" asked the girl."From out on the coast," tossing his grizzled head toward the west."What brought you back here, after all these years?""Family affection, I guess. Wanted to find out what folks yet belongedto me."An awkward silence followed this, during which Uncle John relightedhis pipe and Beth sat in moody silence. Louise drew a pattern in thegravel with the end of her parasol. This new uncle, she reflected,might become an intolerable bore, if she encouraged his frankfamiliarity."Now that you are here," she said, presently, "what are you going todo?""Nothing, my dear.""Have you any money?"He looked at her with a droll expression."Might have expected that question, my dear," said he; "but it'srather hard to answer. If I say no, you'll be afraid I'll want toborrow a little spendin' money, now an' then; and if I say yes, you'lltake me for a Rockyfeller.""Not exactly," smiled Louise."Well, then, if I figure close I won't have to borrow," he responded,gravely. "And here's Jane, my sister, just rolling in wealth that shedon't know what to do with. And she's invited me to stay a while. Solet's call the money question settled, my dear."Another silence ensued. Louise had satisfied her curiosity concerningher new uncle, and Beth had never had any. There was nothing more tosay, and as Uncle John showed no intention of abandoning the arboredseat, it was evident they must go themselves. Louise was about to risewhen the man remarked:"Jane won't last long"."You think not?" she asked."She says she's half dead a'ready, and I believe it. It's about time,you know. She's let her temper and restless disposition wear her out.Pretty soon she'll blow out, like a candle. All that worries her is tokeep alive until she can decide who to leave her money to. That's whyyou're here, I s'pose, my dears. How do you like being on exhibition,an' goin' through your paces, like a bunch o' trotting hosses, to seewhich is worth the most?""Uncle John," said Beth, "I had hoped I would like you. But if you aregoing to be so very disagreeable, I'll have nothing more to do withyou!"With this she arose and marched up the path, vastly indignant, andLouise marched beside her. At the bend in the walk they glanced back,and saw Uncle John sitting upon the bench all doubled up and shakingwith silent laughter."He's a queer old man," said Beth, flushing; "but he's impudent andhalf a fool.""Don't judge hastily, Beth," replied Louise, reflectively. "I can'tmake up my mind, just yet, whether Uncle John is a fool or not.""Anyhow," snapped Beth, "he's laughing at us.""And that," said her cousin, softly, "is the strongest evidence of hissanity. Beth, my love, Aunt Jane has placed us in a most ridiculousposition."That evening at dinner they met Uncle John again, seated opposite AuntJane in the great dining hall. The mistress of Elmhurst always dressedfor this meal and tonight she wore a rich black silk and had herinvalid chair wheeled to her place at the head of the table. UncleJohn had simply changed his old black necktie for a soiled white one.Otherwise his apparel was the same as before, and his stubby gray hairwas in a sad state of disarray. But his round face wore a cheerfulsmile, nevertheless, and Aunt Jane seemed not to observe anything\_outre\_ in her brother's appearance. And so the meal passed pleasantlyenough.After it was finished Uncle John strolled into the garden to smoke hispipe under the stars and Louise sang a few songs for Aunt Jane in thedimly-lit drawing room. Beth, who was a music teacher's daughter,could not sing at all.It was some time later when John Merrick came to his sister's room tobid her good night."Well," she asked him, "what do you think of the girls?""My nieces?""Yes.""During my lifetime," said the old man, "I've always noticed thatgirls are just girls--and nothing more. Jane, your sex is a puzzlethat ain't worth the trouble solving. You're all alike, and whatlittle I've seen of my nieces convinces me they're regulationfemales--no better nor worse than their kind.""Louise seems a capable girl," declared Aunt Jane, musingly. "I didn'tcare much for her, at first; but she improves on acquaintance. She hasbeen well trained by her mother, and is very ladylike and agreeable.""She's smarter than the other one, but not so honest," said UncleJohn."Beth has no tact at all," replied Aunt Jane. "But then, she's youngerthan Louise.""If you're trying to figure out what they are, and what they are not,"returned the man, "you've got a hard job on your hands, Jane, and likeas not you'll make a mistake in the end. Where's the other niece?Aren't there three of them?""Yes. The other's coming. Silas Watson, my lawyer, has justtelegraphed from New York that he's bringing Patricia back with him.""Had to send for her, eh?""Yes. She's Irish, and if I remember rightly her father is adisgraceful old reprobate, who caused poor Violet no end of worry. Thegirl may be like him, for she wrote me a dreadful letter, scolding mebecause I hadn't kept her parents supplied with money, and refusing tobecome my guest.""But she's changed her mind?""I sent Watson after her, and he's bringing her. I wanted to see whatthe girl is like."Uncle John whistled a few bars of an ancient tune."My advice is," he said, finally, "to let 'em draw cuts for Elmhurst.If you want to leave your money to the best o' the lot, you're as sureof striking it right that way as any other.""Nonsense!" said Jane Merrick, sharply. "I don't want to leave mymoney to the best of the lot.""No?""By no means. I want to leave it to the one I prefer--whether she'sthe best or not.""I see. Jane, I'll repeat my former observation. Your sex is a puzzlethat isn't worth solving. Good night, old girl.""Good night, John."CHAPTER XIII.THE OTHER NIECE.Patricia sat down opposite her Aunt Jane. She still wore her hat andthe gray wrap."Well, here I am," she exclaimed, with a laugh; "but whether I oughtto be here or not I have my doubts."Aunt Jane surveyed her critically."You're a queer little thing," she said, bluntly. "I wonder why I tookso much trouble to get you.""So do I," returned Patsy, her eyes twinkling. "You'll probably besorry for it."Lawyer Watson, who had remained standing, now broke in nervously."I explained to Miss Doyle," said he, "that you were ill, and wantedto see her. And she kindly consented to come to Elmhurst for a fewdays.""You see," said Patsy, "I'd just got Daddy away on his vacation, tovisit his old colonel. I've wanted him to go this three years back,but he couldn't afford it until I got a raise this Spring. He'll havea glorious old time with the colonel, and they'll fish and hunt anddrink whiskey all day, and fight the war all over again every evening.So I was quite by myself when Mr. Watson came to me and wouldn't takeno for his answer.""Why did you object to come here?" asked Aunt Jane."Well, I didn't know you; and I didn't especially want to know you.Not that I bear grudges, understand, although you've been little of afriend to my folks these past years. But you are rich and proud--and Isuspect you're a little cross, Aunt Jane--while we are poor and proudand like to live our lives in our own way.""Are you a working girl?" enquired Miss Merrick."Surely," said Patsy, "and drawing a big lump of salary every Saturdaynight. I'm a hair-dresser, you know--and by the way, Aunt Jane, itpuzzles me to find a certain kink in your hair that I thought I'dinvented myself.""Louise dressed my hair this way," said Miss Merrick, a bit stiffly."Your maid?""My niece, Louise Merrick."Patsy whistled, and then clapped her hand over her mouth and lookedgrave."Is she here?" she asked, a moment later."Yes, and your other cousin, Elizabeth De Graf, is here also.""That's just the trouble," cried Patsy, energetically. "That's why Ididn't want to come, you know.""I don't understand you, Patricia.""Why, it's as plain as the nose on your face, even if I hadn't pumpedMr. Watson until I got the truth out of him. You want us girls herejust to compare us with each other, and pick out the one you likebest.""Well?""The others you'll throw over, and the favorite will get your money.""Haven't I a right to do that?" asked the invalid, in an amazed tone."Perhaps you have. But we may as well understand each other rightnow, Aunt Jane. I won't touch a penny of your money, under anycircumstances.""I don't think you will, Patricia."The girl laughed, with a joyous, infectious merriment that was hard toresist."Stick to that, aunt, and there's no reason we shouldn't be friends,"she said, pleasantly. "I don't mind coming to see you, for it willgive me a bit of a rest and the country is beautiful just now. Morethan that, I believe I shall like you. You've had your own way a longtime, and you've grown crochetty and harsh and disagreeable; but thereare good lines around your mouth and eyes, and your nature's liable tosoften and get sunny again. I'm sure I hope so. So, if you'd like meto stay a few days, I'll take off my things and make myself at home.But I'm out of the race for your money, and I'll pay my way from nowon just as I have always done."Silas Watson watched Aunt Jane's face during this speech with ananxious and half-frightened expression upon his own. No one buthimself had ever dared to talk to Jane Merrick as plainly as thisbefore, and he wondered how she would accept such frankness from ayoung girl.But Patricia's manner was not at all offensive. Her big eyes wereas frank as her words, but they glistened with kindliness and goodnature, and it was evident the girl had no doubt at all of her aunt'sreply, for she straightway begun to take off her hat.The invalid had kept her eyes sternly fastened upon her young nieceever since the beginning of the interview. Now she reached out a handand touched her bell."Misery," she said to the old housekeeper, "show my niece, MissPatricia, to the rose chamber. And see that she is made comfortable.""Thank you," said Patsy, jumping up to go."Make yourself perfectly free of the place," continued Aunt Jane, inan even tone, turning to Patricia, "and have as good a time as youcan. I'm afraid it's rather stupid here for girls, but that can't behelped. Stay as long as you please, and go home whenever you like; butwhile you are here, if you ever feel like chatting with a harshand disagreeable old woman, come to me at any time and you will bewelcome."Patsy, standing before her, looked down into her worn face with apitying expression."Ah! I've been cruel to you," she exclaimed, impulsively, "and Ididn't mean to hurt you at all, Aunt Jane. You must forgive me. It'sjust my blunt Irish way, you see; but if I hadn't been drawn to youfrom the first I wouldn't have said a word--good or bad!""Go now," replied Aunt Jane, turning in her chair rather wearily. "Butcome to me again whenever you like."Patsy nodded, and followed the housekeeper to the rose chamber--theprettiest room old Elmhurst possessed, with broad windows openingdirectly upon the finest part of the garden.Lawyer Watson sat opposite his old friend for some moments inthoughtful silence. "The child is impossible." he said, at last."You think so?" she enquired, moodily."Absolutely. Either of the others would make a better Lady ofElmhurst. Yet I like the little thing, I confess. She quite won my oldheart after I had known her for five minutes. But money would ruinher. She's a child of the people, and ought not to be raised from herproper level. Jane, Jane--you're making a grave mistake in all this.Why don't you do the only right thing in your power, and leaveElmhurst to Kenneth?""You bore me, Silas," she answered, coldly. "The boy is the mostimpossible of all."It was the old protest and the old reply. He had hardly expectedanything different.After a period of thought he asked;"What is this I hear about John Merrick having returned from theWest?""He came yesterday. It was a great surprise to me.""I never knew this brother, I believe.""No; he had gone away before I became acquainted with either you orTom.""What sort of a man is he?""Honest and simple, hard-headed and experienced.""Is he independent?""I believe so; he has never mentioned his affairs to me. But he hasworked hard all his life, he says, and now means to end his dayspeacefully. John is not especially refined in his manner, nor did hehave much of an education; but he seems to be a good deal of a man,for all that. I am very glad he appeared at Elmhurst just at thistime.""You had believed him dead?""Yes. He had passed out of my life completely, and I never knew whatbecame of him.""He must be an eccentric person," said Mr. Watson, with a smile."He is." she acknowledged. "But blood is thicker than water, Silas,and I'm glad brother John is here at last."A little later the lawyer left her and picked his way through thegardens until he came to Kenneth's wing and the stair that led tohis room. Here he paused a moment, finding himself surrounded by aprofound stillness, broken only by the chirping of the birds in theshrubbery. Perhaps Kenneth was not in. He half decided to retracehis steps, but finally mounted the stair softly and stood within thedoorway of the room.The boy and a little stout man were playing chess at a table, and bothwere in a deep study of the game. The boy's back was toward him, butthe man observed the newcomer and gave a nod. Then he dropped his eyesagain to the table.Kenneth was frowning sullenly."You're bound to lose the pawn, whichever way you play," said thelittle man quietly.The boy gave an angry cry, and thrust the table from him, sending thechess-men clattering into a corner. Instantly the little man leanedover and grasped the boy by the collar, and with a sudden jerk landedhim across his own fat knees. Then, while the prisoner screamed andstruggled, the man brought his hand down with a slap that echoedthroughout the room, and continued the operation until Master Kennethhad received a sound spanking.Then he let the boy slip to the floor, from whence he arose slowly andbacked toward the door, scowling and muttering angrily."You broke the bargain, and I kept my word," said Uncle John, calmlytaking his pipe from his pocket and filling it. "The compact was thatif you raised a rough-house, like you did yesterday, and got unruly,that I'd give you a good thrashing. Now, wasn't it?""Yes," acknowledged the boy."Well, that blamed temper o' your'n got away with you again, andyou're well spanked for not heading it off. Pick up the board. Ken, mylad, and let's try it again."The boy hesitated. Then he looked around and saw Lawyer Watson, whohad stood motionless by the doorway, and with a cry that was half asob Kenneth threw himself into his old friend's arms and burst into aflood of tears.Uncle John struck a match, and lighted his pipe."A bargain's a bargain," he observed, composedly."He whipped me!" sobbed the boy. "He whipped me like a child.""Your own fault," said Uncle John. "You wanted me to play a game withyou, and I agreed, providin' you behaved yourself. And you didn't.Now, look here. Do you blame me any?""No," said the boy."No harm's done, is there?""No.""Then stop blubberin', and introduce me to your friend," continuedUncle John. "Name's Watson, ain't it.""Silas Watson, sir, at your service," said the lawyer, smiling. "Andthis must be John Merrick, who I understand has arrived at Elmhurstduring my absence.""Exactly," said Uncle John, and the two men shook hands cordially."Glad to welcome you to Elmhurst, sir," continued the lawyer. "I'veknown it ever since I was a boy, when it belonged to my dear friendThomas Bradley. And I hope you'll love it as much as I do, when youknow it better.""Bradley must have been a fool to give this place to Jane," said UncleJohn, reflectively."He was in love, sir," observed the other, and they both smiled. Thenthe lawyer turned to Kenneth. "How are things going?" he asked. "Havethe girls bothered you much, as yet?""No," said the boy. "I keep out of their way.""That's a good idea. By the bye, sir," turning to John Merrick. "I'vejust brought you a new niece.""Patricia?""She prefers to be called Patsy. A queer little thing; half Irish, youknow.""And half Merrick. That's an odd combination, but the Irish may beable to stand it," said Uncle John. "These nieces are more than Ibargained for. I came to see one relative, and find three more--andall women!""I think you'll like Patsy, anyhow. And so will you, Kenneth."The boy gave an indignant roar."I hate all girls!" he said."You won't hate this one. She's as wild and impulsive as you are, butbetter natured. She'll make a good comrade, although she may box yourears once in a while."The boy turned away sulkily, and began picking up the scatteredchess-men. The two men walked down the stair and strolled togetherthrough the garden."A strange boy," said Uncle John, presently."I'm glad to see you've made friends with him," replied the lawyer,earnestly. "Until now he has had no one to befriend him but me, and attimes he's so unmanageable that it worries me dreadfully.""There's considerable character about the lad," said John Merrick;"but he's been spoiled and allowed to grow up wild, like a weed. He'sgot it in him to make a criminal or a gentleman, whichever way hisnature happens to develop.""He ought to go to a military school," replied Lawyer Watson. "Propertraining would make a man of Kenneth; but I can't induce Jane to spendthe money on him. She gives him food and clothing and lodging--allof the simplest description--but there her generosity ends. Withthousands of dollars lying idle, she won't assist the only nephew ofTom Bradley to secure a proper education.""Jane's queer, too," said that lady's brother, with a sigh. "In fact,Mr. Watson, it's a queer world, and the longer I live in it thequeerer I find it. Once I thought it would be a good idea to regulatethings myself and run the world as it ought to be run; but I gave itup long ago. The world's a stage, they say; but the show ain't alwaysamusing, by a long chalk, and sometimes I wish I didn't have areserved seat."CHAPTER XIV.KENNETH IS FRIGHTENED.Lawyer Watson, unable to direct events at Elmhurst, became a silentspectator of the little comedy being enacted there, and neverregretted that, as Uncle John expressed it, he "had a reserved seat atthe show."Jane Merrick, formerly the most imperious and irrascible of women, hadbecome wonderfully reserved since the arrival of her nieces, and wasevidently making a sincere effort to study their diverse characters.Day by day the invalid's health was failing visibly. She had no morestrokes of paralysis, but her left limb did not recover, and thenumbness was gradually creeping upward toward her heart.Perhaps the old woman appreciated this more fully than anyone else. Atany event, she became more gentle toward Phibbs and Misery, who mostlyattended her, and showed as much consideration as possible for hernieces and her brother. Silas Watson she kept constantly by her side.He was her oldest and most trusted friend, and the only differencesthey had ever had were over the boy Kenneth, whom she stubbornlyrefused to favor.Uncle John speedily became an established fixture at the place. Theservants grew accustomed to seeing him wander aimlessly about thegrounds, his pipe always in his mouth, his hands usually in hispockets. He had a pleasant word always for Donald or Oscar or James,but was not prone to long conversations. Every evening, when heappeared at dinner, he wore his soiled white tie; at other timesthe black one was always in evidence; but other than this his dressunderwent no change. Even Kenneth came to wonder what the bundle hadcontained that Uncle John brought under his arm to Elmhurst.The little man seemed from the first much attracted by his threenieces. Notwithstanding Louise's constant snubs and Beth's haughtysilence he was sure to meet them when they strolled out and try toengage them in conversation. It was hard to resist his simple goodnature, and the girls came in time to accept him as an inevitablecompanion, and Louise mischievously poked fun at him while Bethconscientiously corrected him in his speech and endeavored to improvehis manners. All this seemed very gratifying to Uncle John. He thankedBeth very humbly for her kind attention, and laughed with Louise whenshe ridiculed his pudgy, round form and wondered if his bristly grayhair wouldn't make a good scrubbing brush.Patsy didn't get along very well with her cousins. From the first,when Louise recognized her, with well assumed surprise, as "the girlwho had been sent to dress her hair," Patricia declared that theirstations in life were entirely different."There's no use of our getting mixed up, just because we're cousinsand all visiting Aunt Jane," she said. "One of you will get her money,for I've told her I wouldn't touch a penny of it, and she has told meI wouldn't get the chance. So one of you will be a great lady, while Ishall always earn my own living. I'll not stay long, anyhow; so justforget I'm here, and I'll amuse myself and try not to bother you."Both Beth and Louise considered this very sensible, and took Patriciaat her word. Moreover, Phibbs had related to Beth, whose devotedadherent she was, all of the conversation between Aunt Jane andPatricia, from which the girls learned they had nothing to fear fromtheir cousin's interference. So they let her go her way, and the threeonly met at the state dinners, which Aunt Jane still attended, inspite of her growing weakness.Old Silas Watson, interested as he was in the result, found it hard todecide, after ten days, which of her nieces Jane Merrick most favored.Personally he preferred that Beth should inherit, and frankly told hisold friend that the girl would make the best mistress of Elmhurst.Moreover, all the servants sang Beth's praises, from Misery and Phibbsdown to Oscar and Susan. Of course James the gardener favored no one,as the numerous strangers at Elmhurst kept him in a constant state ofirritation, and his malady seemed even worse than usual. He avoidedeveryone but his mistress, and although his work was now oftenneglected Miss Merrick made no complaint. James' peculiarities werewell understood and aroused nothing but sympathy.Louise, however, had played her cards so well that all Beth's friendswere powerless to eject the elder girl from Aunt Jane's esteem. Louisehad not only returned the check to her aunt, but she came often to sitbeside her and cheer her with a budget of new social gossip, and noone could arrange the pillows so comfortably or stroke the tired headso gently as Louise. And then, she was observing, and called AuntJane's attention to several ways of curtailing the householdexpenditures, which the woman's illness had forced her to neglect.So Miss Merrick asked Louise to look over the weekly accounts, and inthis way came to depend upon her almost as much as she did upon LawyerWatson.As for Patsy, she made no attempt whatever to conciliate her aunt, whoseldom mentioned her name to the others but always brightened visiblywhen the girl came into her presence with her cheery speeches andmerry laughter. She never stayed long, but came and went, like astreak of sunshine, whenever the fancy seized her; and Silas Watson,shrewdly looking on, saw a new light in Jane's eyes as she lookedafter her wayward, irresponsible niece, and wondered if the bargainbetween them, regarding the money, would really hold good.It was all an incomprehensible problem, this matter of theinheritance, and although the lawyer expected daily to be asked todraw up Jane Merrick's will, and had, indeed, prepared several forms,to be used in case of emergency, no word had yet passed her lipsregarding her intentions.Kenneth's life, during this period, was one of genuine misery. Itseemed to his morbid fancy that whatever path he might take, he wassure of running upon one or more of those detestable girls who werevisiting at Elmhurst. Even in Donald's harness-room he was not securefrom interruption, for little Patsy was frequently perched upon thebench there, watching with serious eyes old Donald's motions, andlaughing joyously when in his embarrassment he overturned a can of oilor buckled the wrong straps together.Worse than all, this trying creature would saddle Nora, the sorrelmare, and dash away through the lanes like a tom-boy, leaving himonly old Sam to ride--for Donald would allow no one to use the coachhorses. Sam was tall and boney, and had an unpleasant gait, so thatthe boy felt he was thoroughly justified in hating the girl who sofrequently interfered with his whims.Louise was at first quite interested in Kenneth, and resolved to forcehim to talk and become more sociable.She caught him in a little summer-house one morning, from whence,there being but one entrance, he could not escape, and at once enteredinto conversation."Ah, you are Kenneth Forbes, I suppose," she began, pleasantly. "Iam very glad to make your acquaintance. I am Louise Merrick, MissMerrick's niece, and have come to visit her."The boy shrank back as fur as possible, staring her full in the face,but made no reply."You needn't be afraid of me," continued Louise. "I'm very fond ofboys, and you must be nearly my own age."Still no reply."I suppose you don't know much of girls and are rather shy," shepersisted. "But I want to be friendly and I hope you'll let me.There's so much about this interesting old place that you can tell me,having lived here so many years. Come, I'll sit beside you on thisbench, and we'll have a good talk together.""Go away!" cried the boy, hoarsely, raising his hands as if to wardoff her approach.Louise looked surprised and pained."Why, we are almost cousins," she said. "Cannot we become friends andcomrades?"With a sudden bound he dashed her aside, so rudely that she almostfell, and an instant later he had left the summer house and disappearamong the hedges.Louise laughed at her own discomfiture and gave up the attempt to makethe boy's acquaintance."He's a regular savage," she told Beth, afterward, "and a littlecrazy, too, I suspect.""Never mind," said Beth, philosophically. "He's only a boy, anddoesn't amount to anything, anyway. After Aunt Jane dies he willprobably go somewhere else to live. Don't let us bother about him."Kenneth's one persistent friend was Uncle John. He came every dayto the boy's room to play chess with him, and after that one day'spunishment, which, singularly enough, Kenneth in no way resented, theygot along very nicely together. Uncle John was a shrewd player of thedifficult game, but the boy was quick as a flash to see an advantageand use it against his opponent; so neither was ever sure of winningand the interest in the game was constantly maintained. At eveningalso the little man often came to sit on the stair outside the boy'sroom and smoke his pipe, and frequently they would sit beneath thestars, absorbed in thought and without exchanging a single word.Unfortunately, Louise and Beth soon discovered the boy's secludedretreat, and loved to torment him by entering his own bit of gardenand even ascending the stairs to his little room. He could easilyescape them by running through the numerous upper halls of themansion; but here he was liable to meet others, and his especial dreadwas encountering old Miss Merrick. So he conceived a plan for avoidingthe girls in another way.In the hallway of the left wing, near his door, was a small ladderleading to the second story roof, and a dozen feet from the edge ofthe roof stood an old oak tree, on the further side of a tall hedge.Kenneth managed to carry a plank to the roof, where, after severalattempts, he succeeded in dropping one end into a crotch of the oak,thus connecting the edge of the roof with the tree by means of thenarrow plank. After this, at first sight of the girls in his end ofthe garden, he fled to the roof, ran across the improvised bridge,"shinned" down the tree and, hidden by the hedge, made good hisescape.The girls discovered this plan, and were wicked enough to surprise theboy often and force him to cross the dizzy plank to the tree. Havingfrightened him away they would laugh and stroll on, highly amused atthe evident fear they aroused in the only boy about the place.Patricia, who was not in the other girls' secret, knew nothing of thislittle comedy and really disturbed Kenneth least of the three. But heseemed to avoid her as much as he did the others.She sooned learned from Oscar that the boy loved to ride as well asshe did, and once or twice she met him on a lonely road perched on topof big Sam. This led her to suspect she had thoughtlessly deprived himof his regular mount. So one morning she said to the groom:"Doesn't Kenneth usually ride Nora?""Yes, Miss," answered the man."Then I'd better take Sam this morning," she decided.But the groom demurred."You won't like Sam, Miss," he said, "and he gets ugly at times andacts bad. Master Kenneth won't use Nora today, I'm sure."She hesitated."I think I'll ask him," said she, after a moment, and turned away intothe garden, anxious to have this plausible opportunity to speak to thelonely boy.CHAPTER XV.PATSY MEETS WITH AN ACCIDENT."Get out of here!" shouted the boy, angrily, as Patsy appeared at thefoot of his stair."I won't!" she answered indignantly. "I've come to speak to you aboutthe mare, and you'll just treat me decently or I'll know the reasonwhy!"But he didn't wait to hear this explanation. He saw her advancing upthe stairs, and fled in his usual hasty manner to the hall and up theladder to the roof.Patsy stepped back into the garden, vexed at his flight, and the nextinstant she saw him appear, upon the sloping roof and start to rundown the plank.Even as she looked the boy slipped, fell headlong, and slid swiftlydownward. In a moment he was over the edge, clutching wildly at theplank, which was a foot or more beyond his reach. Headforemost hedove into space, but the clutching hand found something at last--theprojecting hook of an old eaves-trough that had long since beenremoved--and to this he clung fast in spite of the jerk of hisarrested body, which threatened to tear away his grip.But his plight was desperate, nevertheless. He was dangling in space,the hard pavement thirty feet below him, with no possible way ofpulling himself up to the roof again. And the hook was so small thatthere was no place for his other hand. The only way he could clingto it at all was to grasp his wrist with the free hand as a partialrelief from the strain upon his arm."Hold fast!" called Patsy. "I'm coming."She sprang up the steps, through the boy's room and into the hallway.There she quickly perceived the ladder, and mounted it to the roof.Taking in the situation at a glance she ran with steady steps downthe sloping roof to where the plank lay, and stepped out upon it farenough to see the boy dangling beside her. Then she decided instantlywhat to do."Hang on!" she called, and returning to the roof dragged the end ofthe plank to a position directly over the hook. Then she lay flat uponit, an arm on either side of the plank, and reaching down seized oneof the boy's wrists firmly in each hand."Now, then," said she, "let go the hook.""If I do," answered the boy, his white face upturned to hers, "I'lldrag you down with me.""No you won't. I'm very strong, and I'm sure I can save you. Let go,"she said, imperatively."I'm not afraid to die," replied the boy, his voice full ofbitterness. "Take away your hands, and I'll drop."But Patsy gripped him more firmly than ever."Don't be a fool!" she cried. "There's no danger whatever, if you dojust what I tell you."His eyes met hers in a mute appeal; but suddenly he gained confidence,and resolved to trust her. In any event, he could not cling to thehook much longer.He released his hold, and swung in mid-air just beneath the plank,where the girl lay holding him by his wrists."Now, then," she said, quietly, "when I lift you up, grab the edges ofthe plank."Patricia's strength was equal to her courage, and under the excitementof that desperate moment she did what few other girls of her sizecould ever have accomplished. She drew the boy up until his eagerhands caught the edges of the plank, and gripped it firmly. Then shereleased him and crept a little back toward the roof."Now swing your legs up and you're safe!" she cried.He tried to obey, but his strength was failing him, and he could do nomore than touch the plank with his toes."Once more," called the girl.This time she caught his feet as they swung upward, and drew his legsaround the plank."Can you climb up, now?" she asked, anxiously."I'll try," he panted.The plank upon which this little tragedy was being enacted was in fullview of the small garden where Aunt Jane loved to sit in her chair andenjoy the flowers and the sunshine. She could not see Kenneth's wingat all, but she could see the elevated plank leading from the roof tothe oak tree, and for several days had been puzzled by its appearanceand wondered for what purpose it was there.Today, as she sat talking with John Merrick and Silas Watson, shesuddenly gave a cry of surprise, and following her eyes the two mensaw Kenneth step out upon the roof, fall, and slide over the edge.For a moment all three remained motionless, seized with fear andconsternation, and then they saw Patsy appear and run down to theplank.This they watched her move, and saw her lie down upon it."She's trying to save him--he must be caught somewhere!" cried thelawyer, and both men started at full speed to reach the spot by theround-about paths through the garden.Aunt Jane sat still and watched. Suddenly the form of the boy swunginto view beneath the plank, dangling from the girl's outstretchedarms. The woman caught her breath, wondering what would happen next.Patricia drew him up, until he seized the plank with his hands. Thenthe girl crept back a little, and as the boy swung his feet upward shecaught them and twined his legs over the plank.And now came the supreme struggle. The girl could do little more tohelp him. He must manage to clamber upon the top of the plank himself.Ordinarily Kenneth might have done this easily; but now his nerveswere all unstrung, and he was half exhausted by the strain of the pastfew minutes. Almost he did it; but not quite. The next effort would beeven weaker. But now Patricia walked out upon the plank and Aunt Janesaw her lean down, grasp the boy's collar and drag him into a positionof safety."Bravely done!" she murmured, but even as the sound came from her lipsthe girl upon the bridge seemed in the exertion of the struggle tolose her balance. She threw out her arms, leaned sidewise, and thenfell headlong into the chasm and disappeared from view.Aunt Jane's agonized scream brought Phibbs running to her side. Ata glance she saw that her mistress had fainted, and looking hastilyaround to discover the cause she observed the boy crawl slowly acrossthe plank, reach the tree, and slide down its trunk to pass out ofview behind the high hedge."Drat the boy!" growled the old servant, angrily, "he'll be the deathof Miss Jane, yet."CHAPTER XVI.GOOD RESULTS.Uncle John could not run so swiftly as the lawyer, but he brokethrough a gap in the hedge and arrived at a point just beneath theplank at the same time that Silas Watson did.One glance showed them the boy safely perched on top of the plank,but the girl was bending backward. She threw out her arms in a vainendeavor to save herself, and with a low cry toppled and plungedswiftly toward the ground.There was little time for the men to consider their actions.Involuntarily they tried to catch Patricia, whose body struck themsharply, felling them to the ground, and then bounded against thehedge and back to the pavement.When, half dazed, they scrambled to their feet, the girl laymotionless before them, a stream of red blood welling from a deep cutin her forhead, her eyes closed as if in sleep.A moment more and the boy was kneeling beside her, striving to staythe bleeding with his handkerchief."Do something! For God's sake try to do something," he wailed,piteously. "Can't you see she's killed herself to save me?"Uncle John knelt down and took the still form in his arms."Quiet, my lad," he said. "She isn't dead. Get Nora, and fetch thedoctor as soon as you can."The boy was gone instantly, his agony relieved by the chance ofaction, and followed by the lawyer, Uncle John carried his niece tothe rose chamber and laid her upon her white bed.Misery met them, then, and following her came Louise and Beth, full ofhorror and pity for the victim of the dreadful accident.Jane Merrick had promptly recovered consciousness, for fainting spellswere foreign to her nature. Her first words to Phibbs, who was bendingover her, were:"Is she dead?""Who, Miss Jane?""Patricia.""I don't know, Miss Jane. Why should she be dead?""Run, you idiot! Run at once and find out. Ask my brother--askanyone--if Patricia is dead!"And so Phibbs came to the rose chamber and found the little groupbending over the girl's unconscious form."Is she dead, sir? Miss Jane wants to know," said the old servant, inawe-struck tones."No," answered Uncle John, gravely. "She isn't dead, I'm sure; but Ican't tell how badly she is hurt. One of her legs--the right one--isbroken, I know, for I felt it as I carried the child in my arms; butwe must wait until the doctor comes before I can tell more."Misery was something of a nurse, it seemed, and with the assistance ofLouise, who proved most helpful in the emergency, she bathed thewound in the girl's forehead and bandaged it as well as she was able.Between them the women also removed Patricia's clothing and got herinto bed, where she lay white and still unconscious, but breathing sosoftly that they knew she was yet alive.The doctor was not long in arriving, for Kenneth forced him to leapupon Nora's back and race away to Elmhurst, while the boy followed asswiftly as he could on the doctor's sober cob.Dr. Eliel was only a country practitioner, but his varied experiencesthrough many years had given him a practical knowledge of surgery,and after a careful examination of Patricia's injuries he was able todeclare that she would make a fine recovery."Her leg is fractured, and she's badly bruised," he reported to AuntJane, who sent for him as soon as he could leave the sick room. "But Ido not think she has suffered any internal injuries, and the wound onher forehead is a mere nothing. So, with good care, I expect the younglady to get along nicely.""Do everything you can for her," said the woman, earnestly. "You shallbe well paid, Dr. Eliel."Before Patricia recovered her senses the doctor had sewn up herforehead and set the fractured limb, so that she suffered little painfrom the first.Louise and Beth hovered over her constantly, ministering to everypossible want and filled with tenderest sympathy for their injuredcousin. The accident seemed to draw them out of their selfishness andpetty intrigues and discovered in them the true womanly qualities thathad lurked beneath the surface.Patsy was not allowed to talk, but she smiled gratefully at hercousins, and the three girls seemed suddenly drawn nearer togetherthan any of them would have thought possible a few hours before.The boy paced constantly up and down outside Patricia's door, beggingeveryone who left the room, for news of the girl's condition. All hisreserve and fear of women seemed to have melted away as if by magic.Even Beth and Louise were questioned eagerly, and they, having learnedthe story of Patricia's brave rescue of the boy, were very gentle withhim and took pains not to frighten or offend him.Toward evening Louise asked Patricia if she would see Kenneth for amoment, and the girl nodded a ready assent.He came in awkward and trembling, glancing fearfully at the bandagedforehead and the still white face. But Patricia managed to smilereassuringly, and held out a little hand for him to take. The boygrasped it in both his own, and held it for several minutes while hestood motionless beside her, his wide eyes fixed intently upon herown.Then Louise sent him away, and he went to his room and wept profusely,and then quieted down into a sort of dull stupor.The next morning Uncle John dragged him away from Patricia's door andforced him to play chess. The boy lost every game, being inattentiveand absorbed in thought, until finally Uncle John gave up the attemptto amuse him and settled himself on the top stair for a quiet smoke.The boy turned to the table, and took a sheet of paper from thedrawer. For an hour, perhaps, neither of these curious friends spokea word, but at the end of that time Uncle John arose and knocked theashes from his pipe. Kenneth did not notice him. The man approachedthe table and looked over the boy's shoulder, uttering an exclamationof surprise. Upon the paper appeared a cleverly drawn pencil sketchof Patricia lying in her bed, a faint smile upon her face and her bigblue eyes turned pleasantly upon a shadowy form that stood beside herholding her hand. The likeness was admirable, and if there were faultsin the perspective and composition Uncle John did not recognize them.He gave a low whistle and turned thoughtfully away, and the youngartist was so absorbed that he did not even look up.Strolling away to the stables, Uncle John met old Donald, whoenquired:"How is Miss Patsy this morning, sir?" It was the name she had given,and preferred to be called by."She's doing finely," said Uncle John."A brave girl, sir!""Yes, Donald.""And the boy?""Why, he seems changed, in some way, Donald. Not so nervous and wildas usual, you know. I've just left him drawing a picture. Curious. Agood picture, too.""Ah, he can do that, sir, as well as a real artist.""Have you known him to draw, before this?""Why, he's always at it, sir, in his quieter moods. I've got a raregood likeness o' myself, as he did long ago, in the harness-room.""May I see it?""With pleasure, sir."Donald led the way to the harness-room, and took from the cupboard theprecious board he had so carefully preserved.Uncle John glanced at it and laughed aloud. He could well appreciatethe humor of the sketch, which Donald never had understood, and thecaricature was as clever as it was amusing. He handed the treasureback to Donald and went away even more thoughtful than before.A few days later a large package arrived at Elmhurst addressed toKenneth Forbes, and Oscar carried it at once to the boy's room, whosat for an hour looking at it in silent amazement. Then he carefullyunwrapped it, and found it to contain a portable easel, a quantity ofcanvas and drawing-paper, paints and oils of every description(mostly all unknown to him) and pencils, brushes and water colors inprofusion.Kenneth's heart bounded with joy. Here was wealth, indeed, greaterthan he had ever hoped for. He puzzled his brain for weeks to discoverhow this fairy gift had ever come to him, but he was happier in itspossession than he had ever been before in all his life.Patricia improved rapidly. Had it not been for the broken leg shewould have been out of the house in a week, as good as ever; butbroken limbs take time to heal, and Dr. Eliel would not permit thegirl to leave her bed until ten days had passed.Meantime everyone delighted to attend her. Louise and Beth sat withher for hours, reading or working, for the rose chamber was cheery andpleasant, and its big windows opened upon the prettiest part of thegardens. The two girls were even yet suspicious of one another, eachstriving to win an advantage with Aunt Jane; but neither had theslightest fear that Patricia would ever interfere with their plans. Sothey allowed their natural inclinations to pet and admire the heroineof the hour full sway, and Patsy responded so sweetly and frankly totheir advances that they came to love her dearly, and wondered whythey had not discovered from the first how lovable their Irish cousincould be.Kenneth, also came daily to the sick room for a visit, and Patsy hada way of drawing the boy out and making him talk that was reallyirresistible. After his fairy gift arrived he could not help tellingthe girls all about it and then he brought the things down anddisplayed them, and promised Patsy he would make a picture of thegarden for her.Then, after the girl got better, he brought his easel down to herroom, where she could watch him work, and began upon the picture,while the cousins joined him in speculations as to who the mysteriousdonor could he."At first," said Kenneth, "I thought it was Mr. Watson, for he's alwaybeen very good to me; but he says he knows nothing about it. Then Ithough it might be Uncle John; but Uncle John is too poor to affordsuch an expensive present.""I don't believe he has a penny in the world," said Louise, who sat bywith some needle-work."All he owns," remarked Beth, with a laugh, "is an extra necktie,slightly damaged.""But he's a dear old man," said Patsy, loyally, "and I'm sure he wouldhave given all those things to Kenneth had he been able.""Then who was it?" asked the boy."Why, Aunt Jane, to be sure," declared Patsy.The boy scowled, and shook his head."She wouldn't do anything to please me, even to save her life," hegrowled. "She hates me, I know that well enough.""Oh, no; I'm sure she doesn't," said Patsy. "Aunt Jane has a heapof good in her; but you've got to dig for it, like you do for gold.'Twould be just like her to make you this present and keep it asecret.""If she really did it," replied the boy, slowly, "and it seems as ifshe is the only one. I know who could afford such a gift, it stands toreason that either Uncle John or Mr. Watson asked her to, and she didit to please them. I've lived here for years, and she has never spokena kindly word to me or done me a kindly act. It isn't likely she'dbegin now, is it?"Unable to make a reassuring reply, Patsy remained silent, and the boywent on with his work. He first outlined the picture in pencil, andthen filled it in with water color. They all expressed admiration forthe drawing; but the color effect was so horrible that even Patsyfound no words to praise it, and the boy in a fit of sudden anger torethe thing to shreds and so destroyed it."But I must have my picture, anyhow," said the girl. "Make it in penand ink or pencil, Ken. and I'm sure it will be beautiful.""You need instruction, to do water color properly," suggested Louise."Then I can never do it," he replied, bitterly. But he adopted Patsy'ssuggestion and sketched the garden very prettily in pen and ink.By the time the second picture was completed Patsy had receivedpermission to leave her room, which she did in Aunt Jane's second-bestwheel chair.Her first trip was to Aunt Jane's own private garden, where theinvalid, who had not seen her niece since the accident, had asked herto come.Patsy wanted Kenneth to wheel her, but the boy, with a touch of hisold surly demeanor, promptly refused to meet Jane Merrick face toface. So Beth wheeled the chair and Louise walked by Patsy's side, andsoon the three nieces reached their aunt's retreat.Aunt Jane was not in an especially amiable mood."Well, girl, how do you like being a fool?" she demanded, as Patsy'schair came to a stand just opposite her own."It feels so natural that I don't mind it," replied Patsy, laughing."You might have killed yourself, and all for nothing," continued theold woman, querulously.Patsy looked at her pityingly. Her aunt's face had aged greatly in thetwo weeks, and the thin gray hair seemed now almost white."Are you feeling better, dear?" asked the girl."I shall never be better," said Jane Merrick, sternly. "The end is notfar off now.""Oh, I'm sorry to hear you say that!" said Patsy; "but I hope it isnot true. Why, here are we four newly found relations all beginning toget acquainted, and to love one another, and we can't have our littleparty broken up, auntie dear.""Five of us--five relations," cried Uncle John, coming around thecorner of the hedge. "Don't I count, Patsy, you rogue? Why you'relooking as bright and as bonny as can be. I wouldn't be surprised ifyou could toddle.""Not yet," she answered, cheerfully. "But I'm doing finely, UncleJohn, and it won't be long before I can get about as well as ever.""And to think," said Aunt Jane, bitterly, "that all this trouble wascaused by that miserable boy! If I knew where to send him he'd notstay at Elmhurst a day longer.""Why, he's my best friend, aunt," announced Patsy, quietly. "I don'tthink I could be happy at Elmhurst without Kenneth.""He has quite reformed," said Louise, "and seems like a very niceboy.""He's a little queer, yet, at times," added Beth, "but not a bit rude,as he used to be."Aunt Jane looked from one to the other in amazement. No one hadspoken so kindly of the boy before in years. And Uncle John, with athoughtful look on his face, said slowly:"The fact is, Jane, you've never given the boy a chance. On thecontrary, you nearly ruined him by making a hermit of him and givinghim no schooling to speak of and no society except that of servants.He was as wild as a hawk when I first came, but these girls are justthe sort of companions he needs, to soften him and make him a man.I've no doubt he'll come out all right, in the end.""Perhaps you'd like to adopt him yourself, John," sneered the woman,furious at this praise of the one person she so greatly disliked.Her brother drew his hands from his pockets, looked around in ahelpless and embarrassed way, and then tried fumblingly to fill hispipe."I ain't in the adopting business, Jane," he answered meekly. "And ifI was," with a quaint smile, "I'd adopt one or two of these nieces o'mine, instead of Tom Bradley's nephew. If Bradley hadn't seen you,Jane, and loved your pretty face when you were young, Kenneth Forbeswould now be the owner of Elmhurst. Did you ever think of that?"Did she ever think of it? Why, it was this very fact that made the boyodious to her. The woman grew white with rage."John Merrick, leave my presence.""All right, Jane."He stopped to light his pipe, and then slowly walked away, leaving anembarrassed group behind him.Patsy, however, was equal to the occasion. She began at once tochatter about Dr. Eliel, and the scar that would always show on herforehead; and how surprised the Major, her father, would be when hereturned from the visit to his colonel and found his daughter had beenthrough the wars herself, and bore the evidence of honorable wounds.Louise gracefully assisted her cousin to draw Aunt Jane into a moregenial mood, and between them they presently succeeded. The interviewthat had begun so unfortunately ended quite pleasantly, and whenPatricia returned to her room her aunt bade her adieu almost tenderly."In fact," said Louise to Beth, in the privacy of the latter'schamber, "I'm getting rather worried over Aunt Jane's evident weaknessfor our Cousin Patsy. Once or twice today I caught a look in her eyewhen she looked at Patsy that she has never given either you or me.The Irish girl may get the money yet.""Nonsense," said Beth. "She has said she wouldn't accept a penny ofit, and I'm positive she'll keep her word."CHAPTER XVII.AUNT JANE'S HEIRESS."Silas," said Aunt Jane to her lawyer, the next morning after herinterview with Patsy, "I'm ready to have you draw up my will."Mr. Watson gave a start of astonishment. In his own mind he hadarrived at the conclusion that the will would never be executed, andto have Miss Merrick thus suddenly declare her decision was enough tostartle even the lawyer's natural reserve."Very well, Jane," he said, briefly.They were alone in the invalid's morning room, Phibbs having beenasked to retire."There is no use disguising the fact, Silas, that I grow weaker everyday, and the numbness is creeping nearer and nearer to my heart," saidMiss Merrick, in her usual even tones. "It is folly for me to triflewith these few days of grace yet allowed me, and I have fully made upmy mind as to the disposition of my property.""Yes?" he said, enquiringly, and drew from his pocket a pencil andpaper."I shall leave to my niece Louise five thousand dollars.""Yes, Jane," jotting down the memorandum."And to Elizabeth a like sum."The lawyer seemed disappointed. He tapped the pencil against histeeth, musingly, for a moment, and then wrote down the amount."Also to my brother, John Merrick, the sum of five thousand dollars,"she resumed."To your brother?""Yes. That should be enough to take care of him as long as he lives.He seems quite simple in his tastes, and he is an old man."The lawyer wrote it down."All my other remaining property, both real and personal, I shallleave to my niece, Patricia Doyle.""Jane!""Did you hear me?""Yes.""Then do as I bid you, Silas Watson."He leaned back in his chair and looked at her thoughtfully."I am not only your lawyer, Jane; I am also your friend andcounsellor. Do you realize what this bequest means?" he asked, gently."It means that Patricia will inherit Elmhurst--and a fortune besides.Why not, Silas? I liked the child from the first. She's frank and openand brave, and will do credit to my judgment.""She is very young and unsophisticated," said the lawyer, "and of allyour nieces she will least appreciate your generosity.""You are to be my executor, and manage the estate until the girl comesof age. You will see that she is properly educated and fitted for herstation in life. As for appreciation, or gratitude, I don't care asnap of my finger for such fol-de-rol."The lawyer sighed."But the boy, Jane? You seem to have forgotten him," he said."Drat the boy! I've done enough for him already.""Wouldn't Tom like you to provide for Kenneth in some way, howeverhumbly?"She glared at him angrily."How do you know what Tom would like, after all these years?" sheasked, sternly. "And how should I know, either? The money is mine, andthe boy is nothing to me. Let him shift for himself.""There is a great deal of money, Jane," declared the lawyer,impressively. "We have been fortunate in our investments, and you haveused but little of your ample income. To spare fifty thousand dollarsto Kenneth, who is Tom's sole remaining relative, would be no hardshipto Patricia. Indeed, she would scarcely miss it.""You remind me of something, Silas," she said, looking at him withfriendly eyes. "Make a memorandum of twenty thousand dollars to SilasWatson. You have been very faithful to my interests and have helpedmaterially to increase my fortune.""Thank you, Jane."He wrote down the amount as calmly as he had done the others."And the boy?" he asked, persistently.Aunt Jane sighed wearily, and leaned against her pillows."Give the boy two thousand," she said."Make it ten, Jane.""I'll make it five, and not a penny more," she rejoined. "Now leaveme, and prepare the paper at once. I want to sign it today, ifpossible."He bowed gravely, and left the room.Toward evening the lawyer came again, bringing with him a notary fromthe village. Dr. Eliel, who had come to visit Patricia, was alsocalled into Jane Merrick's room, and after she had carefully read thepaper in their presence the mistress of Elmhurst affixed her signatureto the document which transferred the great estate to the little Irishgirl, and the notary and the doctor solemnly witnessed it and retired."Now, Silas," said the old woman, with a sigh of intense relief, "Ican die in peace."Singularly enough, the signing of the will seemed not to be the endfor Jane Merrick, but the beginning of an era of unusual comfort. Onthe following morning she awakened brighter than usual, having passeda good night, freed from the worries and anxieties that had beset herfor weeks. She felt more like her old self than at any time since theparalysis had overtaken her, and passed the morning most enjoyablyin her sunshiney garden. Here Patricia was also brought in her wheelchair by Beth, who then left the two invalids together.They conversed genially enough, for a time, until an unfortunateremark of Aunt Jane's which seemed to asperse her father's characteraroused Patricia's ire. Then she loosened her tongue, and in hervoluable Irish way berated her aunt until poor Phibbs stood aghast atsuch temerity, and even Mr. Watson, who arrived to enquire after hisclient and friend, was filled with amazement.He cast a significant look at Miss Merrick, who answered it in herusual emphatic way."Patricia is quite right, Silas," she declared, "and I deserve allthat she has said. If the girl were fond enough of me to defend me asheartily as she does her father, I would be very proud, indeed."Patricia cooled at once, and regarded her aunt with a sunny smile."Forgive me!" she begged. "I know you did not mean it, and I was wrongto talk to you in such a way."So harmony was restored, and Mr. Watson wondered more and more atthis strange perversion of the old woman's character. Heretofore anyopposition had aroused in her intense rage and a fierce antagonism,but now she seemed delighted to have Patsy fly at her, and excused thegirl's temper instead of resenting it.But Patsy was a little ashamed of herself this morning, realizingperhaps that Aunt Jane had been trying to vex her, just to enjoy herindignant speeches; and she also realized the fact that her aunt wasold and suffering, and not wholly responsible for her aggravating andsomewhat malicious observations. So she firmly resolved not to be soreadily entrapped again, and was so bright and cheery during the nexthour that Aunt Jane smiled more than once, and at one time actuallylaughed at her niece's witty repartee.After that it became the daily program for Patsy to spend her morningsin Aunt Jane's little garden, and although they sometimes clashed,and, as Phibbs told Beth, "had dreadful fights," they both enjoyedthese hours very much.The two girls became rather uneasy during the days their cousin spentin the society of Aunt Jane. Even the dreadful accounts they receivedfrom Phibbs failed wholly to reassure them, and Louise redoubled hersolicitious attentions to her aunt in order to offset the influencePatricia seemed to be gaining over her.Louise had also become, by this time, the managing housekeeper ofthe establishment, and it was certain that Aunt Jane looked upon hereldest and most competent niece with much favor.Beth, with all her friends to sing her praises, seemed to make lessheadway with her aunt than either of the others, and gradually shesank into a state of real despondency."I've done the best I could," she wrote her mother, "but I'm not asclever as Louise nor as amusing as Patricia; so Aunt Jane pays littleattention to me. She's a dreadful old woman, and I can't bring myselfto appear to like her. That probably accounts for my failure; but Imay as well stay on here until something happens."In a fortnight more Patricia abandoned her chair and took to crutches,on which she hobbled everywhere as actively as the others walked. Sheaffected her cousins' society more, from this time, and Aunt Jane'ssociety less, for she had come to be fond of the two girls who hadnursed her so tenderly, and it was natural that a young girl wouldprefer to be with those of her own age rather than a crabbed old womanlike Aunt Jane.Kenneth also now became Patsy's faithful companion, for the boy hadlost his former bashfulness and fear of girls, and had grown to feelat ease even in the society of Beth and Louise. The four had manyexcursions and picnics into the country together; but Kenneth andPatsy were recognized as especial chums, and the other girls did notinterfere in their friendship except to tease them, occasionally, in agood natured way.The boy's old acquaintances could hardly recognize him as the sameperson they had known before Patricia's adventure on the plank. Hisfits of gloomy abstraction and violent bursts of temper had alikevanished, or only prevailed at brief intervals. Nor was he longer rudeand unmannerly to those with whom he came in contact. Awkward he stillwas, and lacking in many graces that education and good society canalone confer; but he was trying hard to be, as he confided to oldUncle John, "like other people," and succeeded in adapting himselfvery well to his new circumstances.Although he had no teacher, as yet, he had begun to understand colora little, and succeeded in finishing one or two water-color sketcheswhich Patsy, who knew nothing at all of such things, pronounced"wonderfully fine." Of course the boy blushed with pleasure and wasencouraged to still greater effort.The girl was also responsible for Kenneth's sudden advancement in thehousehold at Elmhurst.One day she said calmly to Aunt Jane:"I've invited Kenneth to dinner this evening."The woman flew angry in an instant."Who gave you such authority?" she demanded."No one. I just took it," said Patsy, saucily."He shall not come," declared Aunt Jane, sternly. "I'll have nointerference from you, Miss, with my household arrangements. Phibbs,call Louise!"Patsy's brow grew dark. Presently Louise appeared."Instruct the servants to forbid that boy to enter my dining room thisevening," she said to Louise."Also, Louise," said Patsy, "tell them not to lay a plate for me, andask Oscar to be ready with the wagon at five o'clock. I'm going home."Louise hesitated, and looked from Miss Jane to Patsy, and back again.They were glaring upon each other like two gorgons.Then she burst into laughter; she could not help it, the sight was tooridiculous. A moment later Patsy was laughing, too, and then Aunt Janeallowed a grim smile to cross her features."Never mind, Louise," she said, with remarkable cheerfulness; "We'llcompromise matters.""How?" asked Patsy."By putting a plate for Kenneth," said her aunt, cooly. "I imagine Ican stand his society for one evening."So the matter was arranged to Patricia's satisfaction, and the boycame to dinner, trembling and unhappy at first, but soon placed atease by the encouragements of the three girls. Indeed, he behaved sowell, in the main, and was so gentle and unobstrusive, that Aunt Janelooked at him with surprise, and favored him with one or two speecheswhich he answered modestly and well.Patsy was radiant with delight, and the next day Aunt Jane remarkedcasually that she did not object to the boy's presence at dinner, atall, and he could come whenever he liked.This arrangement gave great pleasure to both Uncle John and Mr.Watson, the latter of whom was often present at the "state dinner,"and both men congratulated Patsy upon the distinct victory she hadwon. No more was said about her leaving Elmhurst. The Major wrote thathe was having a splendid time with the colonel, and begged for anextension of his vacation, to which Patsy readily agreed, she beingstill unable on account of her limb to return to her work at MadamBorne's.And so the days glided pleasantly by, and August came to find a happycompany of young folks at old Elmhurst, with Aunt Jane wonderfullyimproved in health and Uncle John beaming complacently upon everyonehe chanced to meet.CHAPTER XVIII.PATRICIA SPEAKS FRANKLY.It was Lawyer Watson's suggestion that she was being unjust to Bethand Louise, in encouraging them to hope they might inherit Elmhurst,that finally decided Aunt Jane to end all misunderstandings and informher nieces of the fact that she had made a final disposition of herproperty.So one morning she sent word asking them all into her room, and whenthe nieces appeared they found Uncle John and the lawyer alreadyin their aunt's presence. There was an air of impressive formalitypervading the room, although Miss Merrick's brother, at least, was asignorant as her nieces of the reason why they had been summoned.Patsy came in last, hobbling actively on her crutches, although theleg was now nearly recovered, and seated herself somewhat in the rearof the apartment.Aunt Jane looked into one expectant face after another with curiousinterest, and then broke the silence by saying, gravely, but in moregentle tones than she was accustomed to use:"I believe, young ladies, that you have understood from the first mystrongest reason for inviting you to visit Elmhurst this summer. Iam old, and must soon pass away, and instead of leaving you andyour parents, who would be my legitimate heirs, to squabble over myproperty when I am gone, I decided to excute a will bequeathing myestate to some one who would take proper care of it and maintain it ina creditable manner. I had no personal acquaintance with any of you,but judged that one out of the three might serve my purpose, andtherefore invited you all here."By this time the hearts of Louise and Beth were fluttering withexcitement, and even Patsy looked interested. Uncle John sat a littleapart, watching them with an amused smile upon his face, and thelawyer sat silent with his eyes fixed upon a pattern in the rug."In arriving at a decision, which I may say I have succeeded indoing," continued Aunt Jane, calmly, "I do not claim to have actedwith either wisdom or discernment. I have simply followed my own whim,as I have the right to do, and selected the niece I prefer to becomemy heiress. You cannot accuse of injustice, because none of you had aright to expect anything of me; but I will say this, that I am wellpleased with all three of you, and now wish that I had taken pains toform your acquaintance earlier in life. You might have cheered my oldage and rendered it less lonely and dull.""Well said, Jane," remarked Uncle John, nodding his head approvingly.She did not notice the interruption, but presently continued:"Some days ago I asked my lawyer, Mr. Watson, to draw up my will. Itwas at once prepared and signed, and now stands as my last will andtestament. I have given to you, Louise, the sum of five thousanddollars."Louise laughed nervously, and threw out her hands with an indifferentgesture."Many thanks, Aunt," she said, lightly."To you, Beth," continued Miss Merrick, "I have given the same sum."Beth's heart sank, and tears forced themselves into her eyes in spiteof her efforts to restrain them. She said nothing.Aunt Jane turned to her brother."I have also provided for you, John, in the sum of five thousanddollars.""Me!" he exclaimed, astounded. "Why, suguration, Jane, I don't--""Silence!" she cried, sternly. "I expect neither thanks nor protests.If you take care of the money, John, it will last you as long as youlive."Uncle John laughed. He doubled up in his chair and rocked back andforth, shaking his little round body as if he had met with the mostamusing thing that had ever happened in his life. Aunt Jane staredat him, while Louise and Beth looked their astonishment, but Patsy'sclear laughter rang above Uncle John's gasping chuckles."I hope, dear Uncle," said she, mischievously, "that when poor AuntJane is gone you'll be able to buy a new necktie."He looked at her whimsically, and wiped the tears from his eyes."Thank you, Jane," said the little man to his sister. "It's a lot ofmoney, and I'll be proud to own it.""Why did you laugh." demanded Aunt Jane."I just happened to think that our old Dad once said I'd never beworth a dollar in all my life. What would he say now, Jane, if he knewI stood good to have five thousand--if I can manage to outlive you?"She turned from him with an expression of scorn."In addition to these bequests," said she, "I have left five thousandto the boy and twenty thousand to Mr. Watson. The remainder of theproperty will go to Patricia."For a moment the room was intensely still. Then Patricia said, withquiet determination:"You may as well make another will, Aunt. I'll not touch a penny ofyour money.""Why not?" asked the woman, almost fiercely."You have been kind to me, and you mean well," said Patricia. "I wouldrather not tell you my reasons.""I demand to know them!""Ah, aunt; can't you understand, without my speaking?""No," said the other; but a flush crossed her pale cheek,nevertheless.Patsy arose and stumped to a position directly in front of JaneMerrick, where she rested on her crutches. Her eyes were bright andfull of indignation, and her plain little face was so white that everyfreckle showed distinctly."There was a time, years ago," she began in a low voice, "when youwere very rich and your sister Violet, my mother, was very poor. Herhealth was bad, and she had me to care for, while my father was veryill with a fever. She was proud, too, and for herself she would neverhave begged a penny of anyone; but for my sake she asked her richsister to loan her a little money to tide her over her period of want.What did you do, Jane Merrick, you who lived in a beautiful mansion,and had more money than you could use? You insulted her, telling hershe belonged to a family of beggars, and that none of them couldwheedle your money away from you!""It was true," retorted the elder woman, stubbornly. "They were afterme like a drove of wolves--every Merrick of them all--and they wouldhave ruined me if I had let them bleed me as they wished.""So far as my mother is concerned, that's a lie," said Patsy, quietly."She never appealed to you but that once, but worked as bravely as shecould to earn money in her own poor way. The result was that she died,and I was left to the care of strangers until my father was wellenough to support me."She paused, and again the room seemed unnaturally still."I'm sorry, girl," said Aunt Jane, at last, in trembling tones. "I waswrong. I see it now, and I am sorry I refused Violet.""Then I forgive you!" said Patsy, impulsively. "I forgive you all,Aunt Jane; for through your own selfishness you cut yourself off fromall your family--from all who might have loved you--and you have livedall these years a solitary and loveless life. There'll be no grudgeof mine to follow you to the grave, Aunt Jane. But," her voicehardening, "I'll never touch a penny of the money that was denied mypoor dead mother. Thank God the old Dad and I are independent, and canearn our own living."Uncle John came to where Patsy stood and put both arms around her,pressing her--crutches and all--close to his breast. Then he releasedher, and without a word stalked from the room."Leave me, now," said Aunt Jane, in a husky voice. "I want time tothink."Patricia hobbled forward, placed one hand caressingly upon the grayhead, and then bent and kissed Aunt Jane's withered cheek."That's right," she whispered. "Think it over, dear. It's all pastand done, now, and I'm sorry I had to hurt you. But--not a penny,aunt--remember, not a penny will I take!"Then she left the room, followed by Louise and Beth, both of whom wereglad to be alone that they might conquer their bitter disappointment.Louise, however, managed to accept the matter philosophically, as thefollowing extract from her letter to her mother will prove:"After all, it isn't so bad as it might be, mater, dear," she wrote."I'll get five thousand, at the very worst, and that will help us onour way considerably. But I am quite sure that Patsy means just whatshe says, and that she will yet induce Aunt Jane to alter her will. Inthat case I believe the estate will either be divided between Beth andme, or I will get it all. Anyway, I shall stay here and play my bestcards until the game is finished."CHAPTER XIX.DUPLICITY.Aunt Jane had a bad night, as might have been expected after hertrials of the previous day.She sent for Patricia early in the forenoon, and when the girl arrivedshe was almost shocked by the change in her aunt's appearance. Theinvalid's face seemed drawn and gray, and she lay upon her cushionsbreathing heavily and without any appearance of vitality or strength.Even the sharpness and piercing quality of her hard gray eyes waslacking and the glance she cast at her niece was rather pleading thandefiant."I want you to reconsider your decision of yesterday, Patricia," shebegun."Don't ask me to do that, aunt," replied the girl, firmly. "My mind isfully made up.""I have made mistakes, I know," continued the woman feebly; "but Iwant to do the right thing, at last.""Then I will show you how," said Patricia, quickly. "You mustn't thinkme impertinent, aunt, for I don't mean to be so at all. But tell me;why did you wish to leave me your money?""Because your nature is quite like my own, child, and I admire yourindependence and spirit.""But my cousins are much more deserving," said she, thoughtfully."Louise is very sweet and amiable, and loves you more than I do, whileBeth is the most sensible and practical girl I have ever known.""It may be so," returned Aunt Jane, impatiently; "but I have left eacha legacy, Patricia, and you alone are my choice for the mistress ofElmhurst. I told you yesterday I should not try to be just. I mean toleave my property according to my personal desire, and no one shallhinder me." This last with a spark of her old vigor."But that is quite wrong, aunt, and if you desire me to inherit yourwealth you will be disappointed. A moment ago you said you wished todo the right thing, at last. Don't you know what that is?""Perhaps you will tell me," said Aunt Jane, curiously."With pleasure," returned Patsy. "Mr. Bradley left you this propertybecause he loved you, and love blinded him to all sense of justice.Such an estate should not have passed into the hands of aliens becauseof a lover's whim. He should have considered his own flesh and blood.""There was no one but his sister, who at that time was not married andhad no son," explained Aunt Jane, calmly. "But he did not forget herand asked me to look after Katherine Bradley in case she or her heirsever needed help. I have done so. When his mother died, I had the boybrought here, and he has lived here ever since.""But the property ought to be his," said Patricia, earnestly. "Itwould please me beyond measure to have you make your will in hisfavor, and you would be doing the right thing at last.""I won't," said Aunt Jane, angrily."It would also be considerate and just to the memory of Mr. Bradley,"continued the girl. "What's going to became of Kenneth?""I have left him five thousand," said the woman."Not enough to educate him properly," replied Patsy, with a shake ofher head. "Why, the boy might become a famous artist, if he had goodmasters; and a person with an artistic temperament, such as his,should have enough money to be independent of his art."Aunt Jane coughed, unsympathetically."The boy is nothing to me," she said."But he ought to have Elmhurst, at least," pleaded the girl. "Won'tyou leave it to him, Aunt Jane?""No.""Then do as you please," cried Patsy, flying angry in her turn. "As amatter of justice, the place should never have been yours, and I won'taccept a dollar of the money if I starve to death!""Think of your father," suggested Aunt Jane, cunningly."Ah, I've done that," said the girl, "and I know how many comforts Icould buy for the dear Major. Also I'd like to go to a girl's college,like Smith or Wellesley, and get a proper education. But not with yourmoney, Aunt Jane. It would burn my fingers. Always I would think thatif you had not been hard and miserly this same money would have savedmy mother's life. No! I loathe your money. Keep it or throw it to thedogs, if you won't give it to the boy it belongs to. But don't youdare to will your selfish hoard to me.""Let us change the subject, Patricia.""Will you change your will?""No."."Then I won't talk to you. I'm angry and hurt, and if I stay here I'llsay things I shall be sorry for."With these words she marched out of the room, her cheeks flaming, andAunt Jane looked after her with admiring eyes."She's right," she whispered to herself. "It's just as I'd do underthe same circumstances!"This interview was but the beginning of a series that lasted duringthe next fortnight, during which time the invalid persisted in sendingfor Patricia and fighting the same fight over and over again. Alwaysthe girl pleaded for Kenneth to inherit, and declared she would notaccept the money and Elmhurst; and always Aunt Jane stubbornly refusedto consider the boy and tried to tempt the girl with pictures of theluxury and pleasure that riches would bring her.The interviews were generally short and spirited, however, and duringthe intervals Patsy associated more than ever with her cousins, bothof whom grew really fond of her.They fully believed Patricia when she declared she would never acceptthe inheritance, and although neither Beth nor Louise could understandsuch foolish sentimentality they were equally overjoyed at the girl'sstand and the firmness with which she maintained it. With Patsy out ofthe field it was quite possible the estate would be divided betweenher cousins, or even go entire to one or the other of them; and thishope constantly buoyed their spirits and filled their days withinterest as they watched the fight between their aunt and theircousin.Patricia never told them she was pleading so hard for the boy. Itwould only pain her cousins and make them think she was disloyal totheir interests; but she lost no opportunity when with her Aunt Janeof praising Kenneth and proving his ability, and finally she seemed towin her point.Aunt Jane was really worn out with the constant squabbling with herfavorite niece. She had taken a turn for the worse, too, and began todecline rapidly. So, her natural cunning and determination to have herown way enhanced by her illness, the woman decided to deceive Patriciaand enjoy her few remaining days in peace."Suppose," she said to Mr. Watson, "my present will stands, and aftermy death the estate becomes the property of Patricia. Can she refuseit?""Not legally," returned the lawyer. "It would remain in her name,but under my control, during her minority. When she became of age,however, she could transfer it as she might choose.""By that time she will have gained more sense," declared Aunt Jane,much pleased with this aspect of the case, "and it isn't reasonablethat having enjoyed a fortune for a time any girl would throw it away.I'll stick to my point, Silas, but I'll try to make Patricia believeshe has won me over."Therefore, the very next time that the girl pleaded with her to makeKenneth her heir, she said, with a clever assumption of resignation:"Very well, Patricia; you shall have your way. My only desire, child,is to please you, as you well know, and if you long to see Kenneth theowner of Elmhurst I will have a new will drawn in his favor."Patricia could scarcely believe her ears."Do you really mean it, aunt?" she asked, flushing red with pleasure."I mean exactly what I say, and now let us cease all bickerings, mydear, and my few remaining days will be peaceful and happy."Patricia thanked her aunt with eager words, and said, as indeed shefelt, that she could almost love Aunt Jane for her final, if dilatory,act of justice.Mr. Watson chanced to enter the room at that moment, and the girlcried out:"Tell him, aunt! Let him get the paper ready at once.""There is no reason for haste," said Aunt Jane, meeting; the lawyer'squestioning gaze with some embarrassment.Silas Watson was an honorable and upright man, and his client'sfrequent doubtful methods had in past years met his severe censure.Yet he had once promised his dead friend, Tom Bradley, that he wouldserve Jane Merrick faithfully. He had striven to do so, bearing withher faults of character when he found that he could not correct them.His influence over her had never been very strong, however, and he hadlearned that it was the most easy as well as satisfactory method tobow to her iron will.Her recent questionings had prepared him for some act of duplicity,but he had by no means understood her present object, nor did she meanthat he should. So she answered his questioning look by saying:"I have promised Patricia that you shall draw a new will, leavingall my estate to Kenneth Forbes, except for the bequests that arementioned in the present paper."The lawyer regarded her with amazement. Then his brow darkened, for hethought she was playing with the girl, and was not sincere."Tell him to draw up the paper right away, aunt!" begged Patricia,with sparkling eyes."As soon as you can, Silas," said the invalid."And, aunt, can't you spare a little more to Louise and Beth? It wouldmake them so happy.""Double the amount I had allowed to each of them," the woman commandedher lawyer."Can it all be ready to sign tonight?" asked Patsy, excitedly."I'll try, my dear," replied the old lawyer, gravely. Then he turnedto Jane Merrick."Are you in earnest?" he asked.Patsy's heart suddenly sank."Yes," was the reply. "I am tired of opposing this child's wishes.What do I care what becomes of my money, when I am gone? All that Idesire is to have my remaining days peaceful."The girl spring forward and kissed her rapturously."They shall be, aunt!" she cried. "I promise it."CHAPTER XX.IN THE GARDEN.From this hour Patsy devoted herself untiringly to Aunt Jane, andfilled her days with as much sunshine as her merry ways and happynature could confer. Yet there was one thing that rendered her uneasy:the paper that Lawyer Watson had so promptly drawn had never yet beensigned and witnessed. Her aunt had allowed her to read it, saying shewished the girl to know she had acted in good faith, and Patsy had nofault at all to find with the document. But Aunt Jane was tired, anddeferred signing it that evening. The next day no witnesses could besecured, and so another postponement followed, and upon one pretext oranother the matter was put off until Patricia became suspicious.Noting this, Aunt Jane decided to complete her act of deception.She signed the will in the girl's presence, with Oscar and Susan towitness her signature. Lawyer Watson was not present on this occasion,and as soon as Patsy had left her Miss Merrick tore off the signaturesand burned them, wrote "void" in bold letters across the face of thepaper, and then, it being rendered of no value, she enclosed it in alarge yellow envelope, sealed it, and that evening handed the envelopeto Mr. Watson with the request that it be not opened until after herdeath.Patricia, in her delight, whispered to the lawyer that the paperwas really signed, and he was well pleased and guarded the supposedtreasure carefully. The girl also took occasion to inform both Bethand Louise that a new will had been made in which they both profitedlargely, but she kept the secret of who the real heir was, and bothher cousins grew to believe they would share equally in the entireproperty.So now an air of harmony settled upon Elmhurst, and Uncle Johnjoined the others in admiration of the girl who had conquered thestubbornness of her stern old aunt and proved herself so unselfish andtrue.One morning Aunt Jane had Phibbs wheel her into her little garden, asusual, and busied herself examining the flowers and plants of whichshe had always been so fond."James has been neglecting his work, lately," she said, sharply, toher attendant."He's very queer, ma'am," replied old Martha, "ever since the youngladies an' Master John came to Elmhurst. Strangers he never couldabide, as you know, and he runs and hides himself as soon as he seesany of 'em about.""Poor James!" said Miss Merrick, recalling her old gardener'sinfirmity. "But he must not neglect my flowers in this way, or theywill be ruined.""He isn't so afraid of Master John," went on Phibbs, reflectively, "ashe is of the young ladies. Sometimes Master John talks to James,in his quiet way, and I've noticed he listens to him quiterespectively--like he always does to you, Miss Jane.""Go and find James, and ask him to step here," commanded the mistress,"and then guard the opening in the hedge, and see that none of mynieces appear to bother him."Phibbs obediently started upon her errand, and came upon James in thetool-house, at the end of the big garden. He was working among hisflower pots and seemed in a quieter mood than usual.Phibbs delivered her message, and the gardener at once startedto obey. He crossed the garden unobserved and entered the littleenclosure where Miss Jane's chair stood. The invalid was leaning backon her cushions, but her eyes were wide open and staring."I've come, Miss," said James; and then, getting; no reply, he lookedinto her face. A gleam of sunlight filtered through the bushes andfell aslant Jane Merrick's eyes; but not a lash quivered.James gave a scream that rang through the air and silenced even thebirds. Then, shrieking like the madman he was, he bounded away throughthe hedge, sending old Martha whirling into a rose-bush, and fled asif a thousand fiends were at his heels.John Merrick and Mr. Watson, who were not far off, aroused by thebloodcurdling screams, ran toward Aunt Jane's garden, and saw in aglance what had happened."Poor Jane," whispered the brother, bending over to tenderly close thestaring eyes, "her fate has overtaken her unawares.""Better so," said the lawyer, gently. "She has found Peace at last."Together they wheeled her back into her chamber, and called the womento care for their dead mistress.CHAPTER XXI.READING THE WILL.Aunt Jane's funeral was extremely simple and quiet. The woman hadmade no friends during her long residence in the neighborhood, havingisolated herself at "the big house" and refused to communicate in anyway with the families living near by. Therefore, although her deathundoubtedly aroused much interest and comment, no one cared to bepresent at the obsequies.So the minister came from Elmwood, and being unable to say much thatwas good or bad of "the woman who had departed from this vale oftears," he confined his remarks to generalities and made them as briefas possible. Then the body was borne to the little graveyard a mileaway, followed by the state carriage, containing the three niecesand Kenneth; the drag with Silas Watson and Uncle John, the formerdriving; and then came the Elmhurst carryall with the servants. Jamesdid not join these last; nor did he appear at the house afterthat dreadful scene in the garden. He had a little room over thetool-house, which Jane Merrick had had prepared for him years ago, andhere he locked himself in day and night, stealthily emerging but tosecure the food Susan carried and placed before his door.No one minded James much, for all the inmates of Elhurst were undersevere and exciting strain in the days preceding the funeral.The girls wept a little, but it was more on account of the solemnityfollowing the shadow of death than for any great affection they boretheir aunt. Patsy, indeed, tried to deliver a tribute to Aunt Jane'smemory; but it was not an emphatic success."I'm sure she had a good heart," said the girl, "and if she had livedmore with her own family and cultivated her friends she would havebeen much less hard and selfish. At the last, you know, she was quitegentle.""I hadn't noticed it," remarked Beth."Oh, I did. And she made a new will, after that awful one she told usof, and tried to be just and fair to all""I'm glad to hear that" said Louise. "Tell us, Patsy, what does thewill say? You must know all about it.""Mr. Watson is going to read it, after the funeral," replied the girl,"and then you will know as much about it as I do. I mustn't tellsecrets, my dear."So Louise and Beth waited in much nervous excitement for the finalrealization of their hopes or fears, and during the drive to thecemetery there was little conversation in the state carriage.Kenneth's sensitive nature was greatly affected by the death of thewoman who had played so important a part in the brief story of hislife, and the awe it inspired rendered him gloomy and silent. LawyerWatson had once warned him that Miss Merrick's death might make him anoutcast, and he felt the insecurity of his present position.But Patsy, believing he would soon know of his good fortune, watchedhim curiously during the ride, and beamed upon him as frequently asher own low spirits would permit."You know, Ken," she reminded him, "that whatever happens we arealways to remain friends.""Of course," replied the boy, briefly.The girl had thrown aside her crutches, by this time, and planned toreturn to her work immediately after the funeral.The brief services at the cemetery being concluded, the littlecavalcade returned to Elmhurst, where luncheon was awaiting them.Then Mr. Watson brought into the drawing room the tin box containingthe important Elmhurst papers in his possession, and having requestedall present to be seated he said:"In order to clear up the uncertainty that at present existsconcerning Miss Merrick's last will and testament, I will now proceedto read to you the document, which will afterward be properly probatedaccording to law."There was no need to request their attention. An intense stillnesspervaded the room.The lawyer calmly unlocked the tin box and drew out the sealed yellowenvelope which Miss Merrick had recently given him. Patsy's heart wasbeating with eager expectancy. She watched the lawyer break the seal,draw out the paper and then turn red and angry. He hesitated a moment,and then thrust the useless document into its enclosure and cast itaside."Is anything wrong?" asked the girl in a low whisper, which was yetdistinctly heard by all.Mr. Watson seemed amazed. Jane Merrick's deceitful trickery,discovered so soon after her death, was almost horrible for him tocontemplate. He had borne much from this erratic woman, but had neverbelieved her capable of such an act.So he said, in irritable tones:"Miss Merrick gave me this document a few days ago, leading me tobelieve it was her last will. I had prepared it under her instructionand understood that it was properly signed. But she has herself tornoff and destroyed the signature and marked the paper 'void,' so thatthe will previously made is the only one that is valid.""What do you mean?" cried Patsy, in amazement. "Isn't Kenneth toinherit Elmhurst, after all?""Me! Me inherit?" exclaimed the boy."That is what she promised me," declared Patsy, while tears ofindignation stood in her eyes, "I saw her sign it, myself, and if shehas fooled me and destroyed the signature she's nothing but an oldfraud--and I'm glad she's dead!"With this she threw herself, sobbing, upon a sofa, and Louise andBeth, shocked to learn that after all their cousin had conspiredagainst them, forebore any attempt to comfort her.But Uncle John, fully as indignant as Patricia, came to her side andlaid a hand tenderly on the girl's head."Never mind, little one." he said. "Jane was always cruel andtreacherous by nature, and we might have expected she'd deceive herfriends even in death. But you did the best you could, Patsy, dear,and it can't be helped now."Meantime the lawyer had been fumbling in the box, and now drew out thegenuine will."Give me your attention, please," said he.Patsy sat up and glared at him."I won't take a cent of it!" she exclaimed."Be silent!" demanded the lawyer, sternly. "You have all, I believe,been told by Miss Merrick of the terms of this will, which is properlysigned and attested. But it is my duty to read it again, frombeginning to end, and I will do so."Uncle John smiled when his bequest was mentioned, and Beth frowned.Louise, however, showed no sign of disappointment. There had been amiserable scramble for this inheritance, she reflected, and she wasglad the struggle was over. The five thousand dollars would come inhandy, after all, and it was that much more than she had expected tohave before she received Aunt Jane's invitation. Perhaps she and hermother would use part of it for a European trip, if their future plansseemed to warrant it."As far as I am concerned," said Patsy, defiantly, "you may as welltear up this will, too. I won't have that shameful old woman's money.""That is a matter the law does not allow you to decide," returned thelawyer, calmly. "You will note the fact that I am the sole executor ofthe estate, and must care for it in your interests until you are ofage. Then it will he turned over to you to do as you please with.""Can I give it away, if I want to?""Certainly. It is now yours without recourse, and although you cannotdispose of it until you are of legal age, there will be nothing thento prevent your transfering it to whomsoever you please. I calledMiss Merrick's attention to this fact when you refused to accept thelegacy.""What did she say?""That you would be more wise then, and would probably decide to keepit."Patsy turned impulsively to the boy."Kenneth," she said, "I faithfully promise, in the presence of thesewitnesses, to give you Elmhurst and all Aunt Jane's money as soon as Iam of age.""Good for you, Patsy," said Uncle John.The boy seemed bewildered."I don't want the money--really I don't!" he protested. "The fivethousand she left me will be enough. But I'd like to live here atElmhurst for a time, until it's sold or some one else comes to live inthe house!""It's yours," said Patsy, with a grand air. "You can live hereforever."Mr. Watson seemed puzzled."If that is your wish, Miss Patricia," bowing gravely in herdirection, "I will see that it is carried out. Although I am, inthis matter, your executor, I shall defer to your wishes as much aspossible.""Thank you," she said and then, after a moment's reflection, sheadded: "Can't you give to Louise and Beth the ten thousand dollarsthey were to have under the other will, instead of the five thousandeach that this one gives them?""I will consider that matter," he replied; "perhaps it can bearranged."Patsy's cousins opened their eyes at this, and began to regard herwith more friendly glances. To have ten thousand each instead offive would be a very nice thing, indeed, and Miss Patricia Doylehad evidently become a young lady whose friendship it would pay tocultivate. If she intended to throw away the inheritance, a portion ofit might fall to their share.They were expressing to Patsy their gratitude when old Donald suddenlyappeared in the doorway and beckoned to Uncle John."Will you please come to see James, sir?" he asked. "The poor fellow'sdying."CHAPTER XXII.JAMES TELLS A STRANGE STORY.Uncle John followed the coachman up the stairs to the little roomabove the tool-house, where the old man had managed to crawl after oldSam had given him a vicious kick in the chest."Is he dead?" he asked."No, sir; but mortally hurt, I'm thinkin'. It must have happened whilewe were at the funeral."He opened the door, outside which Susan and Oscar watched withfrightened faces, and led John Merrick into the room.James lay upon his bed with closed eyes. His shirt, above the breast,was reeking with blood."The doctor should be sent for," said Uncle John."He'll be here soon, for one of the stable boys rode to fetch him. ButI thought you ought to know at once, sir.""Quite right, Donald."As they stood there the wounded man moved and opened his eyes, lookingfrom one to the other of them wonderingly. Finally he smiled."Ah, it's Donald," he said."Yes, old friend," answered the coachman. "And this is Mr. John.""Mr. John? Mr. John? I don't quite remember you, sir," with a slightshake of the gray head. "And Donald, lad, you've grown wonderful old,somehow.""It's the years, Jeemes," was the reply. "The years make us all old,sooner or later."The gardener seemed puzzled, and examined his companions morecarefully. He did not seem to be suffering any pain. Finally hesighed."The dreams confuse me," he said, as if to explain something. "I can'talways separate them, the dreams from the real. Have I been sick,Donald?""Yes, lad. You're sick now."The gardener closed his eyes, and lay silent."Do you think he's sane?" whispered Uncle John."I do, sir. He's sane for the first time in years."James looked at them again, and slowly raised his hand to wipe thedamp from his forehead."About Master Tom," he said, falteringly. "Master Tom's dead, ain'the?""Yes, Jeemes.""That was real, then, an' no dream. I mind it all, now--the shriek ofthe whistle, the crash, and the screams of the dying. Have I told youabout it, Donald?""No, lad.""It all happened before we knew it. I was on one side the car andMaster Tom on the other. My side was on top, when I came to myself,and Master Tom was buried in the rubbish. God knows how I got him out,but I did. Donald, the poor master's side was crushed in, and bothlegs splintered. I knew at once he was dying, when I carried him tothe grass and laid him down; and he knew it, too. Yes, the master knewhe was done; and him so young and happy, and just about to be marriedto--to--the name escapes me, lad!"His voice sank to a low mumble, and he closed his eyes wearily.The watchers at his side stood still and waited. It might be thatdeath had overtaken the poor fellow. But no; he moved again, andopened his eyes, continuing his speech in a stronger tone."It was hard work to get the paper for Master Tom," he said; "but heswore he must have it before he died. I ran all the way to the stationhouse and back--a mile or more--and brought the paper and a pen andink, besides. It was but a telegraph blank--all I could find. Naughtbut a telegraph blank, lad."Again his voice trailed away into a mumbling whisper, but now UncleJohn and Donald looked into one another's eyes with sudden interest."He mustn't die yet!" said the little man; and the coachman leanedover the wounded form and said, distinctly:"Yes, lad; I'm listening.""To be sure," said James, brightening a bit. "So I held the paper forhim, and the brakeman supported Master Tom's poor body, and he wroteout the will as clear as may be.""The will!""Sure enough; Master Tom's last will. Isn't my name on it, too, whereI signed it? And the conductor's beside it, for the poor brakemandidn't dare let him go? Of course. Who should sign the will withMaster Tom but me--his old servant and friend? Am I right, Donald?""Yes, lad.""'Now,' says Master Tom, 'take it to Lawyer Watson, James, and bid himcare for it. And give my love to Jane--that's the name, Donald; theone I thought I'd forgot--'and now lay me back and let me die.' Hisvery words, Donald. And we laid him back and he died. And he died.Poor Master Tom. Poor, poor young Master. And him to--be married--ina--""The paper, James!" cried Uncle John, recalling the dying man to thepresent. "What became of it?""Sir, I do not know you," answered James, suspiciously. "The paper'sfor Lawyer Watson. It's he alone shall have it.""Here I am, James," cried the lawyer, thrusting the others aside andadvancing to the bed. "Give me the paper. Where is it? I am LawyerWatson!"The gardener laughed--a horrible, croaking laugh that ended with agasp of pain."\_You\_ Lawyer Watson?" he cried, a moment later, in taunting tones."Why, you old fool, Si Watson's as young as Master Tom--as young as Iam! You--\_you\_ Lawyer Watson! Ha, ha, ha!""Where is the paper?" demanded the lawyer fiercely.James stared at him an instant, and then suddenly collapsed and fellback inert upon the bed."Have you heard all?" asked John Merrick, laying his hand on thelawyer's shoulder."Yes; I followed you here as soon as I could. Tom Bradley made anotherwill, as he lay dying. I must have it, Mr. Merrick.""Then you must find it yourself," said Donald gravely, "for James isdead."The doctor, arriving a few minutes later, verified the statement.It was evident that the old gardener, for years insane, had been soinfluenced by Miss Merrick's death that he had wandered intothe stables where he received his death blow. When he regainedconsciousness the mania had vanished, and in a shadowy way he couldremember and repeat that last scene of the tragedy that had deprivedhim of his reason. The story was logical enough, and both Mr. Watsonand John Merrick believed it."Tom Bradley was a level-headed fellow until he fell in love with yoursister," said the lawyer to his companion. "But after that he wouldnot listen to reason, and perhaps he had a premonition of his ownsudden death, for he made a will bequeathing all he possessed to hissweetheart. I drew up the will myself, and argued against the folly ofit; but he had his own way. Afterward, in the face of death, I believehe became more sensible, and altered his will.""Yet James' story may all be the effect of a disordered mind," saidUncle John."I do not think, so; but unless he has destroyed the paper in hismadness, we shall he able to find it among his possessions."With this idea in mind, Mr. Watson ordered the servants to remove thegardener's body to a room in the carriage-house, and as soon as thiswas done he set to work to search for the paper, assisted by JohnMerrick."It was a telegraph blank, he said.""Yes.""Then we cannot mistake it, if we find any papers at all," declaredthe lawyer.The most likely places in James' room for anything to be hidden were asmall closet, in which were shelves loaded with odds and ends, and anold clothes-chest that was concealed underneath the bed.This last was first examined, but found to contain merely anassortment of old clothing. Having tossed these in a heap upon thefloor the lawyer begun an examination of the closet, the shelvespromising well because of several bundles of papers they contained.While busy over these, he heard Uncle John say, quietly:"I've got it."The lawyer bounded from the closet. The little man had been searchingthe pockets of the clothing taken from the chest, and from a fadedvelvet coat he drew out the telegraph blank."Is it the will?" asked the lawyer, eagerly."Read it yourself," said Uncle John.Mr. Watson put on his glasses."Yes; this is Tom Bradley's handwriting, sure enough. The will isbrief, but it will hold good in law. Listen: I bequeath to JaneMerrick, my affianced bride, the possession and use of my estateduring the term of her life. On her death all such possessions, withtheir accrument, shall be transferred to my sister, Katherine Bradley,if she then survives, to have and to hold by her heirs and assigneesforever. But should she die without issue previous to the death ofJane Merrick, I then appoint my friend and attorney, Silas Watson, todistribute the property among such organized and worthy charities ashe may select.' That is all.""Quite enough," said Uncle John, nodding approval."And it is properly signed and witnessed. The estate is Kenneth's,sir, after all, for he is the sole heir of his mother. KatherineBradley Forbes. Hurrah!" ended the lawyer, waving the yellow paperabove his head."Hurrah!" echoed Uncle John, gleefully; and the two men shook hands.CHAPTER XXIII.PATSY ADOPTS AN UNCLE.Uncle John and Mr. Watson did not appear at dinner, being closeted inthe former's room. This meal, however, was no longer a state function,being served by the old servants as a mere matter of routine. Indeed,the arrangements of the household had been considerably changed by thedeath of its mistress, and without any real head to direct themthe servants were patiently awaiting the advent of a new master ormistress. It did not seem clear to them yet whether Miss Patricia orLawyer Watson was to take charge of Elmhurst: but there were few tearsshed for Jane Merrick, and the new regime could not fail to be animprovement over the last.At dinner the young folks chatted together in a friendly and eagermanner concerning the events of the day. They knew of old James'unfortunate end, but being unaware of its import gave it but passingattention. The main subject of conversation was Aunt Jane's surprisingact in annulling her last will and forcing Patricia to accept theinheritance when she did not want it. Kenneth, being at his ease whenalone with the three cousins, protested that it would not be rightfor Patsy to give him all the estate. But, as she was so generous,he would accept enough of his Uncle Tom's money to educate him as anartist and provide for himself an humble home. Louise and Beth, havingat last full knowledge of their cousin's desire to increase theirbequests, were openly very grateful for her good will; althoughsecretly they could not fail to resent Patsy's choice of the boy asthe proper heir of his uncle's fortune. The balance of power seemed tobe in Patricia's hands, however; so it would be folly at this junctureto offend her.Altogether, they were all better provided for than they had fearedwould be the case; so the little party spent a pleasant evening andseparated early, Beth and Louise to go to their rooms and canvassquietly the events of the day, and the boy to take a long strollthrough the country lanes to cool his bewildered brain. Patsy wrote along letter to the major, telling him she would be home in three days,and then she went to bed and slept peacefully.After breakfast they were all again summoned to the drawing-room, totheir great surprise. Lawyer Watson and Uncle John were there, lookingas grave as the important occasion demanded, and the former at onceproceeded to relate the scene in James' room, his story of the deathof Thomas Bradley, and the subsequent finding of the will."This will, which has just been recovered," continued the lawyer,impressively, "was made subsequent to the one under which JaneMerrick inherited, and therefore supercedes it. Miss Jane had, asyou perceive, a perfect right to the use of the estate during herlifetime, but no right whatever to will a penny of it to anyone. Mr.Bradley having provided for that most fully. For this reason the willI read to you yesterday is of no effect, and Kenneth Forbes inheritsfrom his uncle, through his mother, all of the estate."Blank looks followed Mr. Watson's statement."Good-by to my five thousand," said Uncle John, with his chucklinglaugh. "But I'm much obliged to Jane, nevertheless.""Don't we get anything at all?" asked Beth, with quivering lip."No, my dear," answered the lawyer, gently. "Your aunt owned nothingto give you."Patsy laughed. She felt wonderfully relieved."Wasn't I the grand lady, though, with all the fortune I never had?"she cried merrily. "But 'twas really fine to be rich for a day, andtoss the money around as if I didn't have to dress ten heads of hairin ten hours to earn my bread and butter."Louise smiled."It was all a great farce," she said. "I shall take the afternoontrain to the city. What an old fraud our dear Aunt Jane was! And howfoolish of me to return her hundred dollar check.""I used mine," said Beth, bitterly. "It's all I'll ever get, itseems." And then the thought of the Professor and his debts overcameher and she burst, into tears.The boy sat doubled within his chair, so overcome by the extraordinaryfortune that had overtaken him that he could not speak, nor think evenclearly as yet.Patsy tried to comfort Beth."Never mind, dear," said she. "We're no worse off than before wecame, are we? And we've had a nice vacation. Let's forget alldisappointments and be grateful to Aunt Jane's memory. As far as sheknew, she tried to be good to us.""I'm going home today," said Beth, angrily drying her eyes."We'll all go home," said Patsy, cheerfully."For my part," remarked Uncle John, in a grave voice, "I have nohome."Patsy ran up and put her arm around his neck."Poor Uncle John!" she cried. "Why, you're worse off than any of us.What's going to become of you, I wonder?""I'm wondering that myself," said the little man, meekly."Ah! You can stay here," said the boy, suddenly arousing from hisapathy."No," replied Uncle John, "the Merricks are out of Elmhurst now, andit returns to its rightful owners. You owe me nothing, my lad.""But I like you," said Kenneth, "and you're old and homeless. Stay atElmhurst, and you shall always be welcome."Uncle John seemed greatly affected, and wrung the boy's handearnestly. But he shook his head."I've wandered all my life," he said. "I can wander yet.""See here," exclaimed Patsy. "We're all three your nieces, and we'lltake care of you between us. Won't we, girls?"Louise smiled rather scornfully, and Beth scowled."My mother and I live so simply in our little flat," said one, "thatwe really haven't extra room to keep a cat. But we shall be glad toassist Uncle John as far as we are able.""Father can hardly support his own family," said the other; "but Iwill talk to my mother about Uncle John when I get home, and see whatshe says.""Oh, you don't need to, indeed!" cried Patsy, in great indignation."Uncle John is my dear mother's brother, and he's to come and livewith the Major and me, as long as he cares to. There's room and tospare, Uncle," turning to him and clasping his hand, "and a joyfulwelcome into the bargain. No, no! say nothing at all, sir! Come youshall, if I have to drag you; and if you act naughty I'll send for theMajor to punish you!"Uncle John's eyes were moist. He looked on Patsy most affectionatelyand cast a wink at Lawyer Watson, who stood silently by."Thank you, my dear," said he; "but where's the money to come from?""Money? Bah!" she said. "Doesn't the Major earn a heap with hisbookkeeping, and haven't I had a raise lately? Why, we'll be as snugand contented as pigs in clover. Can you get ready to come with metoday, Uncle John?""Yes," he said slowly. "I'll be ready, Patsy."So the exodus from Elmhurst took place that very day, and Bethtravelled in one direction, while Louise, Patsy and Uncle John tookthe train for New York. Louise had a seat in the parlor car, but Patsylaughed at such extravagance."It's so much easier than walking," she said to Uncle John, "that thecommon car is good enough," and the old man readily agreed with her.Kenneth and Mr. Watson came to the station to see them off, and theyparted with many mutual expressions of friendship and good will.Louise, especially, pressed an urgent invitation upon the new masterof Elmhurst to visit her mother in New York, and he said he hoped tosee all the girls again. They were really like cousins to him, by thistime. And after they were all gone he rode home on Nora's back quitedisconsolate, in spite of his wonderful fortune.The lawyer, who had consented to stay at the mansion for a time, thatthe boy might not be lonely, had already mapped put a plan for theyoung heir's advancement. As he rode beside Kenneth he said:"You ought to travel, and visit the art centers of Europe, and I shalltry to find a competent tutor to go with you.""Can't you go yourself?" asked the boy.The lawyer hesitated."I'm getting old, and my clients are few and unimportant, aside fromthe Elmhurst interests," he said. "Perhaps I can manage to go abroadwith you.""I'd like that," declared the boy. "And we'd stop in New York,wouldn't we, for a time?""Of course. Do you want to visit New York especially?""Yes.""It's rather a stupid city," said the lawyer, doubtfully."That may be," answered the boy. "But Patsy will be there, you know."CHAPTER XXIV.HOME AGAIN.The Major was at the station to meet them. Uncle John had shylysuggested a telegram, and Patsy had decided they could stand theexpense for the pleasure of seeing the old Dad an hour sooner.The girl caught sight of him outside the gates, his face red andbeaming as a poppy in bloom and his snowy moustache bristling witheagerness. At once she dropped her bundles and flew to the Major'sarms, leaving the little man in her wake to rescue her belongings andfollow after.He could hardly see Patsy at all, the Major wrapped her in such anample embrace; but bye and bye she escaped to get her breath, and thenher eyes fell upon the meek form holding her bundles."Oh, Dad," she cried, "here's Uncle John, who has come to live withus; and if you don't love him as much as I do I'll make your lifemiserable!""On which account," said the Major, grasping the little man's handmost cordially, "I'll love Uncle John like my own brother. Andsurely," he added, his voice falling tenderly, "my dear Violet'sbrother must be my own. Welcome, sir, now and always, to our littlehome. It's modest, sir; but wherever Patsy is the sun is sure toshine.""I can believe that," said Uncle John, with a nod and smile.They boarded a car for the long ride up town, and as soon as they wereseated Patsy demanded the story of the Major's adventures with hiscolonel, and the old fellow rattled away with the eagerness of aboy, telling every detail in the most whimsical manner, and findingsomething humorous in every incident."Oh, but it was grand, Patsy!" he exclaimed, "and the Colonel wept onmy neck when we parted and stained the collar of me best coat, and hegive me a bottle of whiskey that would make a teetotaler roll his eyesin ecstacy. 'Twas the time of my life.""And you're a dozen years younger, Major!" she cried, laughing, "andfit to dig into work like a pig in clover."His face grew grave."But how about the money, Patsy dear?" he asked. "Did you get nothingout of Jane Merrick's estate?""Not a nickle, Dad. 'Twas the best joke you ever knew. I fought withAunt Jane like a pirate and it quite won her heart. When she died sheleft me all she had in the world.""Look at that, now!" said the Major, wonderingly."Which turned out to be nothing at all," continued Patsy. "For anotherwill was found, made by Mr. Thomas Bradley, which gave the money tohis own nephew after Aunt Jane died. Did you ever?""Wonderful!" said the Major, with a sigh."So I was rich for half a day, and then poor as ever.""It didn't hurt you, did it?" asked the Major. "You weren't vexed withdisappointment, were you, Patsy?""Not at all, Daddy.""Then don't mind it, child. Like as not the money would be theruination of us all. Eh, sir?" appealing to Uncle John."To be sure," said the little man. "Jane left five thousand to me,also, which I didn't get. But I'm not sorry at all.""Quite right, sir," approved the Major, sympathetically, "althoughit's easier not to expect anything at all, than to set your heart on athing and then not get it. In your case, it won't matter. Our house isyours, and there's plenty and to spare.""Thank you," said Uncle John, his face grave but his eyes merry."Oh, Major!" cried Patsy, suddenly. "There's Danny Reeves'srestaurant. Let's get off and have our dinner now; I'm as hungry as abear."So they stopped the car and descended, lugging all the parcels intothe little restaurant, where they were piled into a chair while theproprietor and the waiters all gathered around Patsy to welcome herhome.My, how her eyes sparkled! She fairly danced for joy, and ordered thedinner with reckless disregard of the bill."Ah, but it's good to be back," said the little Bohemian, gleefully."The big house at Elmhurst was grand and stately, Major, but therewasn't an ounce of love in the cupboard.""Wasn't I there. Patsy?" asked Uncle John, reproachfully."True, but now you're here; and our love, Uncle, has nothing to dowith Elmhurst. I'll bet a penny you liked it as little as I did.""You'd win," admitted the little man."And now," said the girl to the smiling waiter, "a bottle of redCalifornia wine for Uncle John and the Major, and two real cigars.We'll be merry tonight if it bankrupts the Doyle family entirely."But, after a merry meal and a good one, there was no bill at all whenit was called for.Danny Reeves himself came instead, and made a nice little speech,saying that Patsy had always brought good luck to the place, and thisdinner was his treat to welcome her home.So the Major thanked him with gracious dignity and Patsy kissed Dannyon his right cheek, and then they went away happy and content to findthe little rooms up the second flight of the old tenement."It's no palace," said Patsy, entering to throw down the bundles assoon as the Major unlocked the door, "but there's a cricket in thehearth, and it's your home, Uncle John, as well as ours."Uncle John looked around curiously. The place was so plain after thecomparative luxury of Elmhurst, and especially of the rose chamberPatsy had occupied, that the old man could not fail to marvel at thegirl's ecstatic joy to find herself in the old tenement again. Therewas one good sized living-room, with an ancient rag-carpet partiallycovering the floor, a sheet-iron stove, a sofa, a table and three orfour old-fashioned chairs that had probably come from a second-handdealer.Opening from this were two closet-like rooms containing each a bed anda chair, with a wash-basin on a bracket shelf. On the wails were afew colored prints from the Sunday newspapers and one large and finephotograph of a grizzled old soldier that Uncle John at once decidedmust represent "the Colonel."Having noted these details, Patsy's uncle smoothed back his stubbygray hair with a reflective and half puzzled gesture."It's cozy enough, my child; and I thank you for my welcome," said he."But may I enquire where on earth you expect to stow me in this ratherlimited establishment?""Where? Have you no eyes, then?" she asked, in astonishment. "It's thefinest sofa in the world, Uncle John, and you'll sleep there like atop, with the dear Colonel's own picture looking down at you to keepyou safe and give you happy dreams. Where, indeed!""Ah; I see," said Uncle John."And you can wash in my chamber," added the Major, with a grand air,"and hang your clothes on the spare hooks behind my door.""I haven't many," said Uncle John, looking thoughtfully at his redbundle.The Major coughed and turned the lamp a little higher."You'll find the air fine, and the neighborhood respectable," he said,to turn the subject. "Our modest apartments are cool in summer andwarm in winter, and remarkably reasonable in price. Patsy gets ourbreakfast on the stove yonder, and we buy our lunches down town, wherewe work, and then dine at Danny Reeves's place. A model home, sir, anda happy one, as I hope you'll find it.""I'm sure to be happy here," said Uncle John, taking out his pipe."May I smoke?""Of course; but don't spoil the lace curtains, dear," answered Patsy,mischievously. And then, turning to her father, she exclaimed: "Oh,daddy! What will the Uncle do all the day while we're at work?""That's as he may choose," said the Major, courteously."Couldn't we get him a job?" asked Patsy, wistfully. "Not wherethere'll be much work, you know, for the Uncle is old. But just tokeep him out of mischief, and busy. He can't hang around all day andbe happy, I suppose.""I'll look around," answered the Major, briskly, as if such a "job"was the easiest thing in the world to procure. "And meantime--""Meantime," said Uncle John, smiling at them, "I'll look aroundmyself.""To be sure," agreed the Major. "Between the two of us and Patsy, weought to have no trouble at all."There was a moment of thoughtful silence after this, and then Patsysaid:"You know it won't matter, Uncle John, if you don't work. There'lleasy be enough for all, with the Major's wages and my own.""By the bye," added the Major, "if you have any money about you, whichis just possible, sir, of course, you'd better turn it over to Patsyto keep, and let her make you an allowance. That's the way I do--it'svery satisfactory.""The Major's extravagant," exclaimed Patsy; "and if he has money hewants to treat every man he meets."Uncle John shook his head, reproachfully, at the Major."A very bad habit, sir," he said."I acknowledge it, Mr. Merrick," responded the Major. "But Patsy isfast curing me. And, after all, it's a wicked city to be carrying afat pocketbook around in, as I've often observed.""My pocketbook is not exactly fat," remarked Uncle John."But you've money, sir, for I marked you squandering it on the train,"said Patsy, severely. "So out with it, and we'll count up, and see howmuch of an allowance I can make you 'till you get the job."Uncle John laughed and drew his chair up to the table. Then he emptiedhis trousers' pockets upon the cloth, and Patsy gravely separated thekeys and jackknife from the coins and proceeded to count the money."Seven dollars and forty-two cents," she announced. "Any more?"Uncle John hesitated a moment, and then drew from an inner pocket ofhis coat a thin wallet. From this, when she had received it from hishand, the girl abstracted two ten and one five dollar bills, all crispand new."Good gracious!" she cried, delightedly. "All this wealth, and youpleading poverty?""I never said I was a pauper," returned Uncle John, complacently."You couldn't, and be truthful, sir," declared the girl. "Why, thiswill last for ages, and I'll put it away safe and be liberal withyour allowance. Let me see," pushing the coins about with her slenderfingers, "you just keep the forty-two cents, Uncle John. It'll do forcar-fare and a bit of lunch now and then, and when you get broke youcan come to me.""He smokes," observed the Major, significantly."Bah! a pipe," said Patsy. "And Bull Durham is only five cents a bag,and a bag ought to last a week. And every Saturday night, sir, youshall have a cigar after dinner, with the Major. It's it our regularpractice.""Thank you, Patsy," said Uncle John, meekly, and gathered up hisforty-two cents."You've now a home, and a manager, sir, with money in the bank ofPatsy & Company, Limited," announced the Major. "You ought to be verycontented, sir.""I am," replied Uncle John.CHAPTER XXVUNCLE JOHN ACTS QUEERLY.When Patsy and the Major had both departed for work on Monday morningUncle John boarded a car and rode downtown also. He might haveaccompanied them part of the way, but feared Patsey might think himextravagant if she found him so soon breaking into the working fund offorty-two cents, which she charged him to be careful of.He seemed to be in no hurry, for it was early yet, and few of thelower Broadway establishments were open. To pass the time he turnedinto a small restaurant and had coffee and a plate of cakes, in spiteof the fact that Patsy had so recently prepared coffee over thesheet-iron stove and brought some hot buns from a near-by bakery. Hewas not especially hungry; but in sipping the coffee and nibbling thecakes he passed the best part of an hour.He smiled when he paid out twenty-five cents of his slender store forthe refreshment. With five cents for car-fare he had now but twelvecents left of the forty-two Patsy had given him! Talk about theMajor's extravagance: it could not be compared to Uncle John's.Another hour was spent in looking in at the shop windows. Then,suddenly noting the time. Uncle John started down the street at aswinging pace, and presently paused before a building upon which wasa sign, reading: "Isham, Marvin & Co., Bankers and Brokers." Aprosperous looking place, it seemed, with a host of clerks busilyworking in the various departments. Uncle John walked in, although theuniformed official at the door eyed him suspiciously."Mr. Marvin in?" he inquired, pleasantly."Not arrived yet," said the official, who wore a big star upon hisbreast."I'll wait," announced Uncle John, and sat down upon a leather-coveredbench.The official strutted up and down, watching the customers who enteredthe bank or departed, and keeping a sharp watch on the little man uponthe bench.Another hour passed.Presently Uncle John jumped up and approached the official."Hasn't Mr. Marvin arrived yet?" he enquired, sharply."An hour ago," was the reply."Then why didn't you let me know? I want to see him.""He's busy mornings. Has to look over the mail. He can't see you yet.""Well, he will see me, and right away. Tell him John Merrick is here.""Your card, sir.""I haven't any. My name will do."The official hesitated, and glanced at the little man's seedy garb andcountryfied air. But something in the angry glance of the shrewdeye made him fear he had made a mistake. He opened a small door anddisappeared.In a moment the door burst open to allow egress to a big, red-beardedman in his shirtsleeves, who glanced around briefly and then rushed atUncle John and shook both his hands cordially."My dear Mr. Merrick!" he exclaimed, "I'm delighted and honored to seeyou here. Come to my room at once. A great surprise and pleasure, sir!Thomas, I'm engaged!"This last was directed at the head of the amazed porter, who, as thedoor slammed in his face, nodded solemnly and remarked:"Fooled ag'in, and I might 'a' known it. Drat these 'ere billionaires!Why don't they dress like decent people?"Uncle John had been advised by Patsy where to go for a good cheapluncheon; but he did not heed her admonition. Instead, he rode in acarriage beside the banker to a splendid club, where he was servedwith the finest dishes the chef could provide on short notice.Moreover, Mr. Marvin introduced him to several substantial gentlemenas "Mr. John Merrick, of Portland"; and each one bowed profoundly anddeclared he was "highly honored."Yet Uncle John seemed in no way elated by this reception. He retainedhis simple manner, although his face was more grave than Patsy hadoften seen it; and he talked with easy familiarity of preferred stocksand amalgamated interests and invested, securities and many otherqueer things that the banker seemed to understand fully and to listento with respectful deference.Then they returned to the bank for another long session together, andthere was quite an eager bustle among the clerks as they stretchedtheir necks to get a glimpse of Mr. Marvin's companion."It's John Merrick" passed from mouth to mouth, and the uniformedofficial strutted from one window to another, saying:"I showed him in myself. And he came into the bank as quiet like asanyone else would."But he didn't go away quietly, you may be sure. Mr. Marvin and Mr.Isham both escorted their famous client to the door, where the Marvincarriage had been ordered to be in readiness for Mr. Merrick'sservice.But Uncle John waived it aside disdainfully."I'll walk," he said. "There are some other errands to attend to."So they shook his hand and reminded him of a future appointment andlet him go his way. In a moment the great Broadway crowd had swallowedup John Merrick, and five minutes later he was thoughtfully gazinginto a shop window again.By and bye he bethought himself of the time, and took a cab uptown. Hehad more than the twelve cents in his pocket, now, besides the checkbook which was carefully hidden away in an inside pocket; so the costof the cab did not worry him. He dismissed the vehicle near an uptowncorner and started to walk hastily toward Danny Reeves's restaurant, ablock away, Patsy was standing in the doorway, anxiously watching forhim."Oh, Uncle John," she cried, as he strolled "I've been really worriedabout you; it's such a big city, and you a stranger. Do you knowyou're ten minutes late?""I'm sorry," he said, humbly; "but it's a long way here fromdowntown.""Didn't you take a car?""No, my dear.""Why, you foolish old Uncle! Come in at once. The Major has beenterribly excited over you, and swore you should not be allowed towander through the streets without someone to look after you. But whatcould we do?""I'm all right," declared Uncle John, cordially shaking hands withPatsy's father. "Have you had a good day?""Fine," said the Major. "They'd missed me at the office, and were gladto have me back. And what do you think? I've got a raise.""Really?" said Uncle John, seeing it was expected of him."For a fact. It's Patsy's doing, I've no doubt. She wheedled the firminto giving me a vacation, and now they're to pay me twelve a weekinstead of ten.""Is that enough?" asked Uncle John, doubtfully."More than enough, sir. I'm getting old, and can't earn as much as ayounger man. But I'm pretty tough, and mean to hold onto that twelve aweek as long as possible.""What pay do you get, Patsy?" asked Uncle John."Almost as much as Daddy. We're dreadfully rich, Uncle John; so youneedn't worry if you don't strike a job yourself all at once.""Any luck today, sir," asked the Major, tucking a napkin under hischin and beginning on the soup.Uncle John shook his head."Of course not," said Patsy, quickly. "It's too early, as yet. Don'thurry, Uncle John. Except that it'll keep you busy, there's no needfor you to work at all.""You're older than I am," suggested the Major, "and that makes itharder to break in. But there's no hurry, as Patsy says."Uncle John did not seem to be worrying over his idleness. He kept onquestioning his brother-in-law and his niece about their labors, andafterward related to them the sights he had seen in the shop windows.Of course he could not eat much after the feast he had had atluncheon, and this disturbed Patsy a little. She insisted he wastired, and carried her men away to the tenement rooms as soon aspossible, where she installed them at the table to play cribbage untilbed-time.The next day Uncle John seemed to be busy enough, although of coursePatsy could not know what he was doing. He visited a real-estateoffice, for one thing, and then telephoned Isham, Marvin & Co. andissued a string of orders in a voice not nearly so meek and mild asit was when he was in Patsy's presence. Whatever he had undertakenrequired time, for all during the week he left the tenement directlythe Major and his daughter had gone to the city, and bustled aboutuntil it was time to meet them for dinner at the restaurant. But hewas happy and in good spirits and enjoyed his evening game of cribbagewith the Major exceedingly."You must be nearly bankrupt, by this time," said Patsy on Tuesdayevening."It's an expensive city to live in," sighed Uncle John.She gave him fifty cents of his money, then, and on Friday fifty centsmore."After a time," she said, "you'll manage to get along with less. It'salways harder to economize at first.""How about the bills?" he inquired. "Don't I pay my share of them?""Your expenses are nothing at all," declared the Major, with a wave ofhis hand."But my dinners at Danny Reeves' place must cost a lot," protestedUncle John."Surely not; Patsy has managed all that for a trifle, and the pleasureof your company more than repays us for the bit of expense."On Saturday night there was a pint of red wine for the two men, andthen the weekly cigars were brought--very inexpensive ones, to besure. The first whiff he took made Uncle John cough; but the Majorsmoked so gracefully and with such evident pleasure that hisbrother-in-law clung manfully to the cigar, and succeeded in consumingit to the end."Tomorrow is the day of rest," announced Patsy, "so we'll all go for anice walk in the parks after breakfast.""And we sleep 'till eight o'clock, don't we, Patsy?" asked the Major."Of course.""And the eggs for breakfast?""I've bought them already, three for a nickle. You don't care for morethan one, do you, Uncle John?""No, my dear.""It's our Sunday morning extra--an egg apiece. The Major is so fond ofthem.""And so am I, Patsy.""And now we'll have our cribbage and get to bed early. Heigho! butSunday's a great day for folks that work."CHAPTER XXVI.A BUNCH OF KEYS.Uncle John did not sleep well. Perhaps he had a guilty conscience.Anyway, he tossed about a good deal on the sofa-bed in theliving-room, and wore himself out to such an extent that when Patsygot up at eight o'clock her uncle had fallen into his first soundsleep.She never disturbed him until she had made the fire and cooked thecoffee and boiled the three white eggs. By this time the Major wasdressed and shaved, and he aroused Uncle John and bade him hurry intothe closet and make his toilet, "so that Patsy could put the house torights."Uncle John obeyed eagerly, and was ready as soon as the Major hadbrought the smoking rolls from the bakery. Ah, but it was a merrybreakfast; and a delicious one into the bargain. Uncle John seemedhungry, and looked at the empty egg-shells regretfully."Next time, Patsy," he said, "you must buy six eggs.""Look at his recklessness!" cried Patsy, laughing. "You're just as badas the Major, every bit. If you men hadn't me for a guardian you'd bein the poorhouse in a month.""But we have you, my dear," said Uncle John, smiling into her dancingeyes; "so we won't complain at one egg instead of two."Just then someone pounded on the door, and the girl ran to open it.There was a messenger boy outside, looking smart and neat in hisblue-and-gold uniform, and he touched his cap politely to the girl."Miss Patricia Doyle?""That's me.""A parcel for you. Sign here, please."Patsy signed, bothering her head the while to know what the littlepackage contained and who could have sent it. Then the boy was gone,and she came back slowly to the breakfast table, with the thing in herhand."What is it, Patsy?" asked the Major, curiously."I'm dying to know, myself," said the girl.Uncle John finished his coffee, looking unconcerned."A good way is to open it," remarked the Major.It was a very neat package, wrapped in fine paper and sealed with redwax. Patsy turned it over once or twice, and then broke the wax anduntied the cord.A bunch of keys fell out first--seven of them, strung on a purpleribbon--and then a flat, impressive looking letter was discovered.The Major stared open-mouthed. Uncle John leaned back in his chair andwatched the girl's face."There's a mistake," said Patsy, quite bewildered. Then she read hername upon the wrapper, quite plainly written, and shook her head."It's for me, all right. But what does it mean?""Why not read the letter?" suggested the Major.So she opened the big envelope and unfolded the stiff paper and readas follows:"Miss Patricia Doyle, Becker's Flats, Duggan Street, New York. DearMiss Doyle: An esteemed client of our house, who desires to remainunknown, has placed at your disposal the furnished apartments 'D,'at 3708 Willing Square, for the period of three years, or as longthereafter as you may care to retain them. Our client begs you toconsider everything the apartments contain as your own, and to useit freely as it may please you. All rentals and rates are paid inadvance, and you are expected to take possession at once. Moreover,our firm is commanded to serve you in any and every way you mayrequire, and it will be our greatest pleasure to be of use to you. Thekeys to the apartments are enclosed herewith."Most respectfully,"Isham, Marvin & Co."Having read this to the end, in a weak voice and with many pauses,Miss Patricia Doyle sat down in her chair with strange abruptness andstared blankly at her father. The Major stared back. So did UncleJohn, when her eyes roved toward his face.Patricia turned the keys over, and jingled them. Then she referred tothe letter again."Apartments D, at 3708 Willing Square. Where's that?"The Major shook his head. So did Uncle John."Might look in a directory" suggested the latter, uncertainly."Of course," added the Major."But what does it all mean?" demanded Patsy, with sudden fierceness."Is it a joke? Isham, Marvin & Co., the great bankers! What do I knowof them, or they of me?""That isn't the point," observed the Major, reflectively. "Who's theirunknown and mysterious client? That's the question.""To be sure," said Uncle John. "They're only the agents. You must havea fairy godmother, Patsy."She laughed at the idea, and shook her head."They don't exist in these days, Uncle John. But the whole thing mustbe a joke, and nothing more.""We'll discover that," asserted the Major, shrewdly scrutinizingthe letter, which he had taken from Patsy's hands. "It surely looksgenuine enough, on the face of it. I've seen the bank letter-headbefore, and this is no forgery, you can take my word. Get your thingson, Patsy. Instead of walking in the park we'll hunt up WillingSquare, and we'll take the keys with us.""A very good idea," said Uncle John. "I'd like to go with you, if Imay.""Of course you may," answered the girl. "You're one of the family now,Uncle John, and you must help us to unravel the mystery."The Major took off his carpet slippers and pulled on his boots, whilePatricia was getting ready for the walk. Uncle John wandered aroundthe room aimlessly for a time, and then took off his black tie and puton the white one.Patsy noticed this, when she came out of her closet, and laughedmerrily."You mustn't be getting excited, Uncle John, until we see how thiswonderful adventure turns out." she said. "But I really must wash andiron that necktie for you, if you're going to wear it on Sundays.""Not a bad idea," said the Major. "But come, are we all ready?"They walked down the rickety steps very gravely and sedately, Patsyjingling the keys as they went, and made their way to the corner drugstore, where the Major searched in the directory for Willing Square.To his surprise it proved to be only a few blocks away."But it's in the dead swell neighborhood," he explained, "where I haveno occasion to visit. We can walk it in five minutes."Patsy hesitated."Really, it's no use going, Dad," she protested. "It isn't in reasonthat I'd have a place presented me in a dead swell neighborhood. Now,is it?""We'll have to go, just the same," said Uncle John. "I couldn't sleepa wink tonight if we didn't find out what this all means.""True enough," agreed the Major. "Come along, Patsy; it's this way."Willing Square was not very big, but it was beautiful with flowers andwell tended and 3708 proved to be a handsome building with a whitemarble front, situated directly on a corner. The Major examined itcritically from the sidewalk, and decided it contained six suites ofapartments, three on each side."D must be the second floor to the right." he said, "and that's a finelocation, sure enough."A porter appeared at the front door, which stood open, and examinedthe group upon the sidewalk with evident curiosity.Patsy walked up to him, and ignoring the big gold figures over theentrance she enquired:"Is this 3708 Willing Square?""Yes, Miss," answered the porter; "are you Miss Doyle?""I am," she answered, surprised."One flight up, Miss, and turn to the right," he continued, promptly;and then he winked over the girl's head at Uncle John, who frowned soterribly that the man drew aside and disappeared abruptly. The Majorand Patsy were staring at one another, however, and did not see thisby-play."Let's go up," said the Major, in a husky voice, and proceeded tomount the stairs.Patsy followed close behind, and then came Uncle John. One flight upthey paused at a door marked "D", upon the panel of which was a rackbearing a card printed with the word "Doyle.""Well, well!" gasped the Major. "Who'd have thought it, at all atall!"Patsy, with trembling fingers, put a key in the lock, and after one ortwo efforts opened the door.The sun was shining brilliantly into a tiny reception hall, furnishedmost luxuriously.The Major placed his hat on the rack, and Uncle John followed suit.No one spoke a word as they marched in humble procession into theliving-room, their feet pressing without sound into the thick rugs.Everything here was fresh and new, but selected with excellent tasteand careful attention to detail. Not a thing; was lacking, from thepretty upright piano to the enameled clock ticking upon the mantel.The dining-room was a picture, indeed, with stained-glass windowscasting their soft lights through the draperies and the side-boardshining with silver and glass. There was a cellarette in one corner,the Major noticed, and it was well stocked.Beyond was a pantry with well filled shelves and then thekitchen--this last filled with every article that could possiblybe needed. In a store-room were enough provisions to stock agrocery-store and Patsy noted with amazement that there was ice in therefrigerator, with cream and milk and butter cooling beside it.They felt now as if they were intruding in some fairy domain. It wasall exquisite, though rather tiny; but such luxury was as far removedfrom the dingy rooms they had occupied as could well be imagined. TheMajor coughed and ahemmed continually; Patsy ah'd and oh'd and seemedhalf frightened; Uncle John walked after them silently, but with apleased smile that was almost childish upon his round and rugged face.Across the hall were three chambers, each with a separate bath, whileone had a pretty dressing-room added."This will be Patsy's room," said the Major, with a vast amount ofdignity."Of course," said Uncle John. "The pins on the cushion spell'Patricia,' don't they?""So they do!" cried Patsy, greatly delighted."And this room," continued the Major, passing into the next, "will bemine. There are fine battle-scenes on the wall; and I declare, there'sjust the place for the colonel's photograph over the dresser!""Cigars, too," said Patsy, opening a little cabinet; "but 'twill be ashame to smoke in this palace.""Then I won't live here!" declared the Major, stoutly, but no oneheeded him."Here is Uncle John's room," exclaimed the girl, entering the thirdchamber."Mine?" enquired Uncle John in mild surprise."Sure, sir; you're one of the family, and I'm glad it's as good as theMajor's, every bit."Uncle John's eyes twinkled."I hope the bed is soft," he remarked, pressing it critically."It's as good as the old sofa, any day," said Patsy, indignantly.Just then a bell tinkled, and after looking at one another in silentconsternation for a moment, the Major tiptoed stealthily to the frontdoor, followed by the others."What'll we do?" asked Patsy, in distress."Better open it," suggested Uncle John, calmly.The Major did so, and there was a little maid bowing and smilingoutside. She entered at once, closing the door behind her, and bowedagain."This is my new mistress, I suppose," she said, looking at Patsy. "Iam your servant, Miss Patricia."Patsy gasped and stared at her. The maid was not much older than shewas, but she looked pleasant and intelligent and in keeping with therooms. She wore a gray dress with white collar and white apron andcap, and seemed so dainty and sweet that the Major and Uncle Johnapproved her at once.Patsy sat down, from sheer lack of strength to stand up."Who hired you, then?" she asked."A gentleman from the bank," was the reply. "I'm Mary, if you please,Miss. And my wages are all arranged for in advance, so there will benothing for you to pay," said the little maid."Can you cook?" asked Patsy, curiously."Yes, Miss," with a smile. "The dinner will be ready at one o'clock.""Oh; you've been here before, then?""Two days, Miss, getting ready for you.""And where will you sleep?""I've a little room beyond the kitchen. Didn't you see it, MissPatricia?""No, Mary.""Anything more at present, Miss Patricia?""No, Mary."The maid bowed again, and disappeared toward the kitchen, leaving anawe-struck group behind her.The Major whistled softly. Uncle John seemed quite unconcerned. Patsytook out her handkerchief. The tears \_would\_ come in spite of herefforts."I--I--I'm going to have a good cry," she sobbed, and rushed into theliving-room to throw herself flat upon the divan."It's all right," said the Major, answering Uncle John's startledlook; "the cry will do her good. I've half a mind to join her myself."But he didn't. He followed Uncle John into the tatter's room andsmoked one of the newly-discovered cigars while the elder man lay backin an easy chair and silently puffed his pipe.By and bye Patsy joined them, no longer crying but radiant with glee."Tell me, Daddy," said she, perching on the arm of the Major's chair,"who gave me all this, do you think?""Not me," answered the Major, positively. "I couldn't do it on twelvea week, anyhow at all.""And you robbed me of all my money when I came to town," said UncleJohn."Stop joking," said the girl. "There's no doubt this place is intendedfor us, is there?""None at all," declared the Major. "It's ours for three years, and nota penny to pay.""Well, then, do you think it's Kenneth?"The Major shook his head."I don't know the lad." he said, "and he might be equal to it,although I doubt it. But he can't touch his money till he comesof age, and it isn't likely his lawyer guardian would allow suchextravagances.""Then who can it be?""I can't imagine.""It doesn't seem to matter," remarked Uncle John, lighting a freshpipe. "You're not supposed to ask questions, I take it, but to enjoyyour new home as much as you can.""Ex--actly!" agreed the Major."I've been thinking," continued Uncle John, "that I'm not exactly fitfor all this style, Patsy. I'll have to get a new suit of clothes tomatch my new quarters. Will you give me back ten dollars of that moneyto buy 'em with?""I suppose I'll have to," she answered, thoughtfully."We'll have to go back to Becker's flats to pack up our traps," saidthe Major, "so we might as well go now.""I hate to leave here for a single moment," replied the girl."Why?""I'm afraid it will all disappear again.""Nonsense!" said Uncle John. "For my part, I haven't any traps, soI'll stay here and guard the treasure till you return.""Dinner is served, Miss Patricia," said the small maid, appearing inthe doorway."Then let's dine!" cried Patsy, clapping her hands gleefully; "andafterward the Major and I will make our last visit to Becker's flats."CHAPTER XXVII.LOUISE MAKES A DISCOVERY.Uncle John did not stay to guard the treasure, after all, for he knewvery well it would not disappear.As soon as Patsy and the Major had departed for Becker's flats, hetook his own hat from the rack and walked away to hunt up anotherniece, Miss Louise Merrick, whose address he had casually obtainedfrom Patsy a day or two before.It was near by, and he soon found the place--a pretty flat in afashionable building, although not so exclusive a residence districtas Willing Square.Up three flights he rode in the elevator, and then rang softly at thedoor which here the card of Mrs. Merrick.A maid opened it and looked at him enquiringly."Are the ladies in?" he asked."I'll see. Your card, sir?""I haven't any."She half closed the door."Any name, then?""Yes, John Merrick."She closed the door entirely, and was gone several minutes. Then shecame back and ushered him through the parlor into a small rear room.Mrs. Merrick arose from her chair by the window and advanced to meethim."You are John Merrick?" she enquired."Your husband's brother, ma'am," he replied."How do you do, Uncle John?" called Louise, from the sofa. "Excuse mygetting up, won't you? And where in the world have you come from?"Mrs. Merrick sat down again."Won't you take a chair?" she said, stiffly."I believe I will," returned Uncle John. "I just came to make a call,you know.""Louise has told me of you," said the lady. "It was very unfortunatethat your sister's death deprived you of a home. An absurd thing,altogether, that fiasco of Jane Merrick's.""True," he agreed."But I might have expected it, knowing the woman's character as Idid."Uncle John wondered what Jane's character had to do with the findingof Tom Bradley's last will; but he said nothing."Where are you living?" asked Louise."Not anywhere, exactly," he answered, "although Patsy has offered mea home and I've been sleeping on a sofa in her living-room, the pastweek.""I advise you to stay with the Doyles," said Mrs. Merrick, quickly."We haven't even a sofa to offer you here, our flat is so small;otherwise we would be glad to be of some help to you. Have you foundwork?""I haven't tried to, yet, ma'am.""It will be hard to get, at your age, of course. But that is a matterin which we cannot assist you.""Oh, I'm not looking for help, ma'am."She glanced at his worn clothing and soiled white necktie, and smiled."But we want to do something for you," said Louise. "Now," sitting upand regarding him gravely, "I'm going to tell you a state secret. Weare living, in this luxurious way, on the principal of my father'slife insurance. At our present rate of expenditure we figure that themoney will last us two years and nine months longer. By that time Ishall be comfortably married or we will go bankrupt--as the fatesdecide. Do you understand the situation?""Perfectly. It's very simple," said the old man."And rather uncertain, isn't it? But in spite of this, we are betterable to help you than any of your other relatives. The Doyles arehard-working folks, and very poor. Beth says that Professor De Graf isover head and ears in debt and earns less every year, so he can't becounted upon. In all the Merrick tribe the only tangible thing is myfather's life insurance, which I believe you once helped him to pay apremium on.""I'd forgotten that," said Uncle John."Well, we haven't. We don't want to appear ungenerous in your eyes.Some day we may need help ourselves. But just now we can't offer you ahome, and, as mother says, you'd better stay with the Doyles. We havetalked of making you a small allowance; but that may not be necessary.When you need assistance you must come to us, and we'll do whatever wecan, as long as our money lasts. Won't that be the better way?"Uncle John was silent for a moment. Then he asked:"Why have you thought it necessary to assist me?"Louise seemed surprised."You are old and seemed to be without means," she answered, "and thatfive thousand Aunt Jane left to you turned out to be a myth. But tellme, have you money, Uncle John?""Enough for my present needs," he said, smiling.Mrs. Merrick seemed greatly relieved."Then there is no need of our trying to be generous," she said, "and Iam glad of that on all accounts.""I just called for a little visit," said Uncle John. "It seemedunfriendly not to hunt you up, when I was in town.""I'm glad you did," replied Mrs. Merrick, glancing at the clock. "ButLouise expects a young gentleman to call upon her in a few minutes,and perhaps you can drop in again; another Sunday, for instance.""Perhaps so," said Uncle John, rising with a red face. "I'll see.""Good bye, Uncle," exclaimed Louise, rising to take his hand. "Don'tfeel that we've hurried you away, but come in again, whenever you feellike it.""Thank you, my dear," he said, and went away.Louise approached the open window, that led to a broad balcony. Thepeople in the next flat--young Mr. Isham, the son of the greatbanker, and his wife--were sitting on the balcony, overlooking thestreet, but Louise decided to glance over the rail to discover if theyoung gentleman she so eagerly awaited chanced to be in sight.As she did so Mr. Isham cried in great excitement:"There he is, Myra--that's him!" and pointed toward the sidewalk."Whom?" enquired Mrs. Isham, calmly."Why John Merrick! John Merrick, of Portland, Oregon.""And who is John Merrick?" asked the lady."One of the richest men in the world, and the best client our househas. Isn't he a queer looking fellow? And dresses like a tramp. Buthe's worth from eighty to ninety millions, at least, and controls mostof the canning and tin-plate industries of America. I wonder whatbrought him into this neighborhood?"Louise drew back from the window, pale and trembling. Then she caughtup a shawl and rushed from the room. Uncle John must be overtaken andbrought back, at all hazards.The elevator was coming down, fortunately, and she descended quicklyand reached the street, where she peered eagerly up and down for theround, plump figure of the little millionaire. But by some strangechance he had already turned a corner and disappeared.While she hesitated the young man came briskly up, swinging his cane."Why, Miss Louise," he said in some surprise, "were you, by goodchance, waiting for me?""No, indeed," she answered, with a laugh; "I've been saying good-byeto my rich uncle, John Merrick, of Portland, who has just called.""John Merrick, the tin-plate magnate? Is he your uncle?""My father's own brother," she answered, gaily. "Come upstairs,please. Mother will be glad to see you!"CHAPTER XXVIII.PATSY LOSES HER JOB.Uncle John reached Willing Square before Patsy and her fatherreturned, but soon afterward they arrived in an antiquated carriagesurrounded by innumerable bundles."The driver's a friend of mine," explained the Major, "and he moved usfor fifty cents, which is less than half price. We didn't bring a bitof the furniture or beds, for there's no place here to put them; butas the rent at Becker's flat is paid to the first of next month, we'llhave plenty of time to auction 'em all off."The rest of the day was spent most delightfully in establishingthemselves in the new home. It didn't take the girl long to put herfew belongings into the closets and drawers, but there were a thousandlittle things to examine in the rooms and she made some importantdiscovery at every turn."Daddy," she said, impressively, "it must have cost a big fortune tofurnish these little rooms. They're full of very expensive things, andnone of the grand houses Madam Borne has sent me to is any finer thanours. I'm sure the place is too good for us, who are working people.Do you think we ought to stay here?""The Doyles," answered the Major, very seriously, "are one of thegreatest and most aristocratic families in all Ireland, which is themost aristocratic country in the world. If I only had our pedigree Icould prove it to you easily. There's nothing too good for an Irishgentleman, even if he condescends to bookkeeping to supply theimmediate necessities of life; and as you're me own daughter,Patricia, though a Merrick on your poor sainted mother's side, you'reentitled to all you can get honestly. Am I right, Uncle John, or do Iflatter myself?"Uncle John stroked the girl's head softly."You are quite right," he said. "There is nothing too good for abrave, honest girl who's heart is in the right place.""And that's Patsy," declared the Major, as if the question werefinally settled.On Monday morning Mary had a dainty breakfast all ready for them atseven o'clock, and Patsy and her father departed with light hearts fortheir work. Uncle John rode part way down town with them."I'm going to buy my new suit, today, and a new necktie," he said."Don't let them rob you," was Patsy's parting injunction. "Is yourmoney all safe? And if you buy a ten dollar suit of clothes the dealerought to throw in the necktie to bind the bargain. And see thatthey're all wool, Uncle John.""What, the neckties?""No, the clothes. Good-bye, and don't be late to dinner. Mary mightscold.""I'll remember. Good-bye, my dear."Patsy was almost singing for joy when she walked into Madam Borne'shair-dressing establishment."Don't take off your things," said the Madam, sharply, "Your servicesare no longer required."Patsy looked at her in amazement. Doubtless she hadn't heard aright."I have another girl in your place," continued Madam Borne, "so I'llbid you good morning."Patsy's heart was beating fast."Do you mean I'm discharged?" she asked, with a catch in her voice."That's it precisely.""Have I done anything wrong, Madam?""It isn't that," said Madam, pettishly. "I simply do not require yourservices. You are paid up to Saturday night, and I owe you nothing.Now, run along."Patsy stood looking at her and wondering what to do. To lose thisplace was certainly a great calamity."You'll give me a testimonial, won't you, Madam?" she asked,falteringly."I don't give testimonials," was the reply."Do run away, child; I'm very busy this morning."Patsy went away, all her happiness turned to bitter grief. What wouldthe Major say, and what were they to do without her wages? Then sheremembered Willing Square, and was a little comforted. Money was notas necessary now as it had been before.Nevertheless, she applied to one or two hair-dressers for employment,and met with abrupt refusals. They had all the help they needed. Soshe decided to go back home and think it over, before taking furtheraction.It was nearly ten o'clock when she fitted her pass-key into the carveddoor of Apartment D, and when she entered the pretty living-room shefound an elderly lady seated there, who arose to greet her."Miss Doyle?" enquired the lady."Yes, ma'am," said Patsy."I am Mrs. Wilson, and I have been engaged to give you privateinstruction from ten to twelve every morning."Patsy plumped down upon a chair and looked her amazement."May I ask who engaged you?" she ventured to enquire."A gentleman from the bank of Isham, Marvin & Co. made thearrangement. May I take off my things?""If you please," said the girl, quietly. Evidently this explained whyMadam Borne had discharged her so heartlessly. The gentleman fromIsham, Marvin & Co. had doubtless interviewed the Madam and told herwhat to do. And then, knowing she would be at liberty, he had sent herthis private instructor.The girl felt that the conduct of her life had been taken out of herown hands entirely, and that she was now being guided and cared for byher unknown friend and benefactor. And although she was inclined toresent the loss of her independence, at first, her judgment told herit would not only be wise but to her great advantage to submit.She found Mrs. Wilson a charming and cultivated lady, who proved sogracious and kindly that the girl felt quite at ease in her presence.She soon discovered how woefully ignorant Patsy was, and arranged acourse of instruction that would be of most benefit to her."I have been asked to prepare you to enter a girls' college," shesaid, "and if you are attentive and studious I shall easily accomplishthe task."Patsy invited her to stay to luncheon, which Mary served in the cosydining-room, and then Mrs. Wilson departed and left her alone to thinkover this new example of her unknown friend's thoughtful care.At three o'clock the door-bell rang and Mary ushered in anotherstrange person--a pretty, fair-haired young lady, this time, who saidshe was to give Miss Doyle lessons on the piano.Patsy was delighted. It was the one accomplishment she most longed toacquire, and she entered into the first lesson with an eagerness thatmade her teacher smile approvingly.Meantime the Major was having his own surprises. At the office themanager met him on his arrival and called him into his private room."Major Doyle," said he, "it is with great regret that we part withyou, for you have served our house most faithfully."The Major was nonplussed."But," continued the manager, "our bankers, Messers. Isham, Marvin& Co., have asked us to spare you for them, as they have a placerequiring a man of your abilities where you can do much better thanwith us. Take this card, sir, and step over to the bankers and enquirefor Mr. Marvin. I congratulate you, Major Doyle, on your advancement,which I admit is fully deserved."The Major seemed dazed. Like a man walking in a dream he made his wayto the great banking house, and sent in the card to Mr. Marvin.That gentleman greeted him most cordially."We want you to act as special auditor of accounts," said he. "It is aplace of much responsibility, but your duties will not be arduous. Youwill occupy Private Office No. 11, and your hours are only from 10to 12 each morning. After that you will be at liberty. The salary,I regret to say, is not commensurate with your value, being merelytwenty-four hundred a year; but as you will have part of the day toyourself you will doubtless be able to supplement that sum in otherways. Is this satisfactory, sir?""Quite so," answered the Major. Twenty-four hundred a year! And onlytwo hours' work! Quite satisfactory, indeed!His little office was very cosy, too; and the work of auditing theaccounts of the most important customers of the house requiredaccuracy but no amount of labor. It was an ideal occupation for a manof his years and limited training.He stayed in the office until two o'clock that day, in order to getfully acquainted with the details of his work. Then he closed hisdesk, went to luncheon, which he enjoyed amazingly, and then decidedto return to Willing Square and await Patsy's return from MadamBorne's.As he let himself in he heard an awkward drumming and strumming on thepiano, and peering slyly through the opening in the portierre he wasstartled to find Patsy herself making the dreadful noise, while apretty girl sat beside her directing the movements of her fingers.The Major watched for several minutes, in silent but amazedexultation; then he tiptoed softly to his room to smoke a cigar andwait until his daughter was at liberty to hear his great news andexplain her own adventures.When Uncle John came home to dinner he found father and daughterseated happily together in a loving embrace, their faces wreathed withecstatic smiles that were wonderful to behold.Uncle John was radiant in a brand new pepper-and-salt suit of clothesthat fitted his little round form perfectly. Patsy marvelled that hecould get such a handsome outfit for the money, for Uncle John had onnew linen and a new hat and even a red-bordered handkerchief for thecoat pocket--besides the necktie, and the necktie was of fine silk andin the latest fashion.The transformation was complete, and Uncle John had suddenly become aneminently respectable old gentleman, with very little to criticise inhis appearance."Do I match the flat, now?" he asked."To a dot!" declared Patsy. "So come to dinner, for it's ready andwaiting, and the Major and I have some wonderful fairy tales to tellyou."CHAPTER XXIX.THE MAJOR DEMANDS AN EXPLANATION.That was a happy week, indeed. Patsy devoted all her spare time to herlessons, but the house itself demanded no little attention. She wouldnot let Mary dust the ornaments or arrange the rooms at all, butlovingly performed those duties herself, and soon became an idealhousekeeper, as Uncle John approvingly remarked.And as she flitted from room to room she sang such merry songs that itwas a delight to hear her, and the Major was sure to get home from thecity in time to listen to the strumming of the piano at three o'clock,from the recess of his own snug chamber.Uncle John went to the city every morning, and at first thisoccasioned no remark. Patsy was too occupied to pay much attention toher uncle's coming and going, and the Major was indifferent, beingbusy admiring Patsy's happiness and congratulating himself on his owngood fortune.The position at the bank had raised the good man's importance severalnotches. The clerks treated him with fine consideration and the headsof the firm were cordial and most pleasant. His fine, soldierly figureand kindly, white-moustached face, conferred a certain dignity uponhis employers, which they seemed to respect and appreciate.It was on Wednesday that the Major encountered the name of JohnMerrick on the books. The account was an enormous one, running intomillions in stocks and securities. The Major smiled."That's Uncle John's name," he reflected. "It would please him to knowhe had a namesake so rich as this one."The next day he noted that John Merrick's holdings were mostly inwestern canning industries and tin-plate factories, and again herecollected that Uncle John had once been a tinsmith. The connectionwas rather curious.But it was not until Saturday morning that the truth dawned upon him,and struck him like a blow from a sledge-hammer.He had occasion to visit Mr. Marvin's private office, but being toldthat the gentleman was engaged with an important customer, he lingeredoutside the door, waiting.Presently the door was partly opened."Don't forget to sell two thousand of the Continental stock tomorrow,"he heard a familiar voice say."I'll not forget, Mr. Merrick," answered the banker."And buy that property on Bleeker street at the price offered. It's afair proposition, and I need the land.""Very well, Mr. Merrick. Would it not be better for me to send thesepapers by a messenger to your house?""No; I'll take them myself. No one will rob me." And then the doorswung open and, chuckling in his usual whimsical fashion, Uncle Johncame out, wearing his salt-and-pepper suit and stuffing; a bundle ofpapers into his inside pocket.The Major stared at him haughtily, but made no attempt to openlyrecognize the man. Uncle John gave a start, laughed, and then walkedaway briskly, throwing a hasty "good-bye" to the obsequious banker,who followed him out, bowing low.The Major returned to his office with a grave face, and sat for thebest part of three hours in a brown study. Then he took his hat andwent home.Patsy asked anxiously if anything had happened, when she saw his face;but the Major shook his head.Uncle John arrived just in time for dinner, in a very genial mood,and he and Patsy kept up a lively conversation at the table while theMajor looked stern every time he caught the little man's eye.But Uncle John never minded. He was not even as meek and humble asusual, but laughed and chatted with the freedom of a boy just out ofschool, which made Patsy think the new clothes had improved him inmore ways than one.When dinner was over the Major led them into the sitting-room, turnedup the lights, and then confronted the little man with a determinedand majestic air."Sir," said he, "give an account of yourself.""Eh?""John Merrick, millionaire and impostor, who came into my family underfalse pretenses and won our love and friendship when we didn't knowit, give an account of yourself!"Patsy laughed."What are you up to, Daddy?" she demanded. "What has Uncle John beendoing?""Deceiving us, my dear.""Nonsense," said Uncle John, lighting his old briar pipe, "you've beendeceiving yourselves.""Didn't you convey the impression that you were poor?" demanded theMajor, sternly."No.""Didn't you let Patsy take away your thirty-two dollars and forty-twocents, thinking it was all you had?""Yes.""Aren't you worth millions and millions of dollars--so many that youcan't count them yourself?""Perhaps.""Then, sir," concluded the Major, mopping the perspiration from hisforehead and sitting down limply in his chair, "what do you mean byit?"Patsy stood pale and trembling, her round eyes fixed upon her uncle'scomposed face."Uncle John!" she faltered."Yes, my dear.""Is it all true? Are you so very rich?""Yes, my dear.""And it's you that gave me this house, and--and everything else--andgot the Major his fine job, and me discharged, and--and--""Of course, Patsy. Why not?""Oh, Uncle John!"She threw herself into his arms, sobbing happily as he clasped herlittle form to his bosom. And the Major coughed and blew his nose, andmuttered unintelligible words into his handkerchief. Then Patsy sprangup and rushed upon her father, crying;"Oh, Daddy! Aren't you glad it's Uncle John?""I have still to hear his explanation," said the Major.Uncle John beamed upon them. Perhaps he had never been so happy beforein all his life."I'm willing to explain," he said, lighting his pipe again andsettling himself in his chair. "But my story is a simple one, dearfriends, and not nearly so wonderful as you may imagine. My father hada big family that kept him poor, and I was a tinsmith with little workto be had in the village where we lived. So I started west, working myway from town to town, until I got to Portland, Oregon."There was work in plenty there, making the tin cans in which salmonand other fish is packed, and as I was industrious I soon had a shopof my own, and supplied cans to the packers. The shop grew to bea great factory, employing hundreds of men. Then I bought up thefactories of my competitors, so as to control the market, and as Iused so much tin-plate I became interested in the manufacture of thisproduct, and invested a good deal of money in the production andperfection of American tin. My factories were now scattered all alongthe coast, even to California, where I made the cans for the greatquantities of canned fruits they ship from that section every year.Of course the business made me rich, and I bought real estate with myextra money, and doubled my fortune again and again."I never married, for all my heart was in the business, and I thoughtof nothing else. But a while ago a big consolidation of the canningindustries was effected, and the active management I resigned to otherhands, because I had grown old, and had too much money already."It was then that I remembered the family, and went back quietly tothe village where I was born. They were all dead or scattered,I found; but because Jane had inherited a fortune in some way Idiscovered where she lived and went to see her. I suppose it wasbecause my clothes were old and shabby that Jane concluded I was apoor man and needed assistance; and I didn't take the trouble toundeceive her."I also found my three nieces at Elmhurst, and it struck me it wouldbe a good time to study their characters; for like Jane I had afortune to leave behind me, and I was curious to find out which girlwas the most deserving. No one suspected my disguise. I don't usuallywear such poor clothes, you know; but I have grown to be careless ofdress in the west, and finding that I was supposed to be a poor man Iclung to that old suit like grim death to a grasshopper.""It was very wicked of you," said Patsy, soberly, from her father'slap."As it turned out," continued the little man, "Jane's desire to leaveher money to her nieces amounted to nothing, for the money wasn'thers. But I must say it was kind of her to put me down for fivethousand dollars--now, wasn't it?"The Major grinned."And that's the whole story, my friends. After Jane's death youoffered me a home--the best you had to give--and I accepted it. I hadto come to New York anyway, you know, for Isham, Marvin & Co. havebeen my bankers for years, and there was considerable business totransact with them. I think that's all, isn't it?""Then this house is yours?" said Patsy, wonderingly."No, my dear; the whole block belongs to you and here's the deed forit," drawing a package of papers from his pocket. "It's a very goodproperty, Patsy, and the rents you get from the other five flats willbe a fortune in themselves."For a time the three sat in silence. Then the girl whispered, softly:"Why are you so good to me, Uncle John?""Just because I like you, Patsy, and you are my niece.""And the other nieces?""Well, I don't mean they shall wait for my death to be made happy,"answered Uncle John. "Here's a paper that gives to Louise's mother theuse of a hundred thousand dollars, as long as she lives. After thatLouise will have the money to do as she pleases with.""How fine!" cried Patsy, clapping her hands joyfully."And here's another paper that gives Professor De Graf the use ofanother hundred thousand. Beth is to have it when he dies. She's asensible girl, and will take good care of it.""Indeed she will!" said Patsy."And now," said Uncle John, "I want to know if I can keep my littleroom in your apartments, Patsy; or if you'd prefer me to find anotherboarding place.""Your home is here as long as you live, Uncle John. I never meant topart with you, when I thought you poor, and I'll not desert you nowthat I know you're rich.""Well said, Patsy!" cried the Major.And Uncle John smiled and kissed the girl and then lighted his pipeagain, for it had gone out.

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