Frank Baum

# Aunt Jane's Nieces at Millville

CHAPTER I.UNCLE JOHN'S FARM."How did I happen to own a farm?" asked Uncle John, interrupting hissoup long enough to fix an inquiring glance upon Major Doyle, whosat opposite."By virtue of circumstance, my dear sir," replied the Major, composedly."It's a part of my duty, in attending to those affairs you won't lookafther yourself, to lend certain sums of your money to needy andambitious young men who want a start in life.""Oh, Uncle! Do you do that?" exclaimed Miss Patricia Doyle, who satbetween her uncle and father and kept an active eye upon both."So the Major says," answered Uncle John, dryly."And it's true," asserted the other. "He's assisted three or four scoreyoung men to start in business in the last year, to my certainknowledge, by lending them sums ranging from one to three thousanddollars. And it's the most wasteful and extravagant charity I everheard of.""But I'm so glad!" cried Patsy, clapping her hands with a delightedgesture. "It's a splendid way to do good--to help young men to get astart in life. Without capital, you know, many a young fellow wouldnever get his foot on the first round of the ladder.""And many will never get it there in any event," declared the Major,with a shake of his grizzled head. "More than half the rascals that Johnhelps go to the dogs entirely, and hang us up for all they've borrowed.""I told you to help \_deserving\_ young men," remarked Uncle John, with ascowl at his brother-in-law."And how can I tell whether they're desarving or not?" retorted MajorDoyle, fiercely. "Do ye want me to become a sleuth, or engage detectivesto track the objects of your erroneous philanthropy? I just have to forma judgment an' take me chances; and whin a poor devil goes wrong Icharge your account with the loss.""But some of them must succeed," ventured Patsy, in a conciliatory tone."Some do," said John Merrick; "and that repays me for all my trouble.""All \_your\_ throuble, sir?" queried the Major; "you mane all \_my\_throuble--well, and your money. And a heap of throuble that confoundedfarm has cost me, with one thing and another.""What of it?" retorted the little round faced millionaire, leaning backin his chair and staring fixedly at the other. "That's what I employyou for.""Now, now, gentlemen!" cried Patsy, earnestly. "I'll have no businessconversation at the table. You know my rules well enough.""This isn't business," asserted the Major."Of course not," agreed Uncle John, mildly. "No one has any businessowning a farm. How did it happen. Major?"The old soldier had already forgotten his grievance. He quarreledpersistently with his wealthy employer and brother-in-law--whom hefairly adored--to prevent the possibility (as he often confided toPatsy) of his falling down and worshiping him. John Merrick was amulti-millionaire, to be sure; but there were palliating circumstancesthat almost excused him. He had been so busily occupied in industry thathe never noticed how his wealth was piling up until he discovered it byaccident. Then he promptly retired, "to give the other fellows achance," and he now devoted his life to simple acts of charity and thewelfare and entertainment of his three nieces. He had rescued MajorDoyle and his daughter from a lowly condition and placed the former inthe great banking house of Isham, Marvin & Company, where John Merrick'svast interests were protected and his income wisely managed. He hadgiven Patsy this cosy little apartment house at 3708 Willing Square andmade his home with her, from which circumstance she had come to berecognized as his favorite niece.John Merrick was sixty years old. He was short, stout and chubby-faced,with snow-white hair, mild blue eyes and an invariably cheery smile.Simple in his tastes, modest and retiring, lacking the education andrefinements of polite society, but shrewd and experienced in the affairsof the world, the little man found his greatest enjoyment in the familycircle that he had been instrumental in founding. Being no longerabsorbed in business, he had come to detest its every detail, and soallowed his bankers to care for his fortune and his brother-in-law todisburse his income, while he himself strove to enjoy life in a shy andboyish fashion that was as unusual in a man of his wealth as it wasadmirable. He had never married.Patricia was the apple of Uncle John's eye, and the one goddessenshrined in her doting father's heart. Glancing at her, as she sat hereat table in her plain muslin gown, a stranger would be tempted to wonderwhy. She was red-haired, freckled as a robin's egg, pug-nosed andwide-mouthed. But her blue eyes were beautiful, and they sparkled with acombination of saucy mischief and kindly consideration for others thatlent her face an indescribable charm.Everyone loved Patsy Doyle, and people would gaze longer at hersmiling-lips and dancing eyes than upon many a more handsome but lessattractive face. She was nearly seventeen years old, not very tall, andher form, to speak charitably, was more neat than slender."A while ago," said the Major, resuming the conversation as he carvedthe roast, "a young fellow came to me who had invented a new sort ofpump to inflate rubber tires. He wanted capital to patent the pump andput it on the market. The thing looked pretty good, John; so I lent hima thousand of your money.""Quite right," returned Uncle John, nodding."But pretty soon he came back with a sad tale. He was in a bad fix.Another fellow was contesting his patent and fighting hard to head himoff. It would take a lot of money to fight back--three thousand, atleast. But he was decent about it, after all. His father had left him alittle farm at Millville. He couldn't say what it was worth, but therewere sixty acres and some good buildings, and he would deed it to you assecurity if you would let him have three thousand more.""So you took the farm and gave him the money?""I did, sir. Perhaps I am to blame; but I liked the young fellow'slooks. He was clean-cut and frank, and believed in his pump. I did more.At the climax of the struggle I gave another thousand, making fivethousand in all.""Well?""It's gone, John; and you've got the farm. The other fellows were tooclever for my young friend, Joseph Wegg, and knocked out his patent.""I'm so sorry!" said Patsy, sympathetically.The Major coughed."It's not an unusual tale, my dear; especially when John advances themoney," he replied."What became of the young man?" asked the girl."He's a competent chauffeur, and so he went to work driving anautomobile.""Where is Millville?" inquired Uncle John, thoughtfully."Somewhere at the north of the State, I believe.""Have you investigated the farm at all?""I looked up a real estate dealer living at Millville, and wrote himabout the Wegg farm. He said if any one wanted the place very badly itmight sell for three thousand dollars.""Humph!""But his best information was to the effect that no one wanted it atall."Patsy laughed."Poor Uncle John!" she said.The little man, however, was serious. For a time he ate with greatdeliberation and revolved an interesting thought in his mind."Years ago." said he, "I lived in a country town; and I love the smellof the meadows and the hum of the bees in the orchards. Any orchards atmy farm, Major?""Don't know, sir.""Pretty soon," continued Uncle John, "it's going to be dreadfully hot inNew York, and we'll have to get away.""Seashore's the place," remarked the Major. "Atlantic City, orSwampscott, or--""Rubbish!" growled the other man, impatiently. "The girls and I havejust come from Europe. We've had enough sea to last us all \_this\_season, at least. What we pine for is country life--pure milk, appletrees and new mown hay.""We, Uncle?" said Patsy."Yes, my dear. A couple of months on the farm will do all of my niecesgood. Beth is still with Louise, you know, and they must find the citydeadly dull, just now. The farm's the thing. And the Major can run up tosee us for a couple of weeks in the hot weather, and we'll all have aglorious, lazy time.""And we can take Mary along to do the cooking," suggested Patsy,entering into the idea enthusiastically."And eat in our shirt-sleeves!" said Uncle John, with a glowing face."And have a cow and some pigs!" cried the girl."Pah!" said the Major, scornfully. "You talk as if it were a real farm,instead of a place no one would have as a gift."Uncle John looked sober again."Anyone live on the place, Major?" he inquired."I believe not. It's gone to ruin and decay the last few years.""But it could be put into shape?""Perhaps so; at an expense that will add to your loss.""Never mind that.""If you want farm life, why don't you rent a respectable farm?" demandedthe Major."No; this is my farm. I own it, and it's my bounded duty to live on it,"said Uncle John, stubbornly. "Write to that real estate fellow atMillville tomorrow and tell him to have the place fixed up and put intoship-shape order as quickly as possible. Tell him to buy some cows andpigs and chickens, and hire a man to look after them. Also a horse andbuggy, some saddle horses----""Go slow, John. Don't leave such a job to a country real estate dealer.If I remember right the fellow wrote like a blacksmith. If you wanthorses and rigs, let Hutchinson send you down the right sort, with anexperienced groom and stable hands. But I'm not sure there will be aplace to put them.""Oh, Uncle!" exclaimed Patsy; "don't let us have all those luxuries. Letus live a simple life on the farm, and not degrade its charms by addingcity fixin's. The cow and the chickens are all right, but let's cut outthe horses until we get there. Don't you know, dear, that a bigestablishment means lots of servants, and servants mean worry andstrife? I want to let down the bars for the cow when she moos, and milkher myself.""It takes a skilled mechanic to milk a cow," objected the Major."But Patsy's right!" cried her uncle, with conviction. "We don't wantany frills at all. Just tell your man, Major, to put the place into goodliving condition.""Patrichia," softly remarked the Major, with an admiring glance at hissmall daughter, "has more sinse in her frizzled head than both of us puttogether.""If she hadn't more than you," retorted Uncle John, with a grin, "I'dput a candle inside her noodle and call her a Jack-Lantern."CHAPTER II.THE AGENT.The Major hunted up the real estate dealer's former letter as soon as hereached his office next morning. The printed letter-head, somewhatblurred, because too much ink had been used, read as follows: Marshall McMahon McNutt, Real Estate Dealer & Horses to Pasture by the week or month. Also Plymouth Rock Hens & Road Commissioner Agent for Radley's Lives of the Saints Insurance and Watermelons My Specialty Millville, Mount County, N.Y.The Major shook his head doubtfully as he read the above announcement;but Mr. McNutt was the only known person to whom he could appeal tocarry out John Merrick's orders. So he dictated the following letter:\_Dear Sir\_:\_Mr. John Merrick, the present owner of the Wegg farm at Millville,desires to spend his summer vacation on the premises, and thereforerequests you to have the house and grounds put in first-class shape assoon as possible, and to notify me directly the work is done. Have thehouse thoroughly cleaned, the grass mowed around it and the barns andoutbuildings repaired wherever it may be necessary. You are alsoinstructed to procure for Mr. Merrick's use a good Jersey cow, some pigsand a dozen or so barnyard fowls. As several ladies will accompany theowner and reside with him on the place, he would like you to report whatnecessary furniture, if any, will be required for their comfort. Sendyour bill to me and it will receive prompt attention\_.After several days this reply came:\_Mister Doyle you must be crazy as a loon. Send me fifty cold dollars asan evvidence of good fayth and I wull see what can be done. Old Hucks islivin on the place yit do you want him to git out or what? Yours fer asquare deal Marshall McMahon McNutt\_."John," said the Major, exhibiting this letter, "you're on the wrongtack. The man is justified in thinking we're crazy. Give up this ideaand think of something else to bother me."But the new proprietor of the Wegg farm was obdurate. During the pastweek he had indulged in sundry sly purchases, which had been shipped, inhis name to Chazy Junction, the nearest railway station to Millville.Therefore, the "die had been cast," as far as Mr. Merrick was concerned,for the purchases were by this time at the farm, awaiting him, and hecould not back out without sacrificing them. They included a set ofgardening tools, several hammocks, croquet and tennis sets, and aremarkable collection of fishing tackle, which the sporting-goods manhad declared fitted to catch anything that swam, from a whale to aminnow. Also, Uncle John decided to dress the part of a rural gentleman,and ordered his tailor to prepare a corduroy fishing costume, a suit ofwhite flannel, one of khaki, and some old-fashioned blue jean overalls,with apron front, which, when made to order by the obliging tailor, costabout eighteen dollars a suit. To forego the farm meant to forego allthese luxuries, and Mr. Merrick was unequal to the sacrifice. Why, onlythat same morning he had bought a charming cottage piano and shipped itto the Junction for Patsy's use. That seemed to settle the matterdefinitely. To be balked of his summer vacation on his own farm was athing Mr. Merrick would not countenance for a moment."Give me that letter, Major," he said; "I'll run this enterprisemyself."The Major resigned with a sigh of relief.Uncle John promptly sent the real estate agent a draft for five hundreddollars, with instructions to get the farm in shape for occupancy at theearliest possible day."If Old Hucks is a farm hand and a bachelor," he wrote, "let him staytill I come and look him over. If he's a married man and has a family,chuck him out at once. I'm sure you are a man of good taste andjudgment. Look over the furniture in the house and telegraph me whatcondition it is in. Everything about the place must be made cozy andcomfortable, but I wish to avoid an appearance of vulgarity orextravagance."The answer to this was a characteristic telegram:\_Furniture on the bum, like everything else. Will do the best I can.McNutt\_.Uncle John did not display this discouraging report to Patsy or herfather. A little thought on the matter decided him to rectify thedeficiencies, in so far as it lay in his power. He visited a largeestablishment making a specialty of "furnishing homes complete," andordered a new kitchen outfit, including a modern range, a mission styleoutfit for a dining-room, dainty summer furniture for the five chambersto be occupied by his three nieces, the Major and himself, and a varietyof lawn benches, chairs, etc."Look after the details," he said to the dealer. "Don't neglect anythingthat is pretty or useful.""I won't, sir," replied the man, who knew his customer was "the greatJohn Merrick," who could furnish a city "complete," if he wished to, andnot count the cost.Everything was to be shipped in haste to the Junction, and Uncle Johnwrote McNutt to have it delivered promptly to the farm and put in order."As soon as things are in shape," he wrote, "wire me to that effect andI'll come down. But don't let any grass grow under your feet. I'm a manwho requires prompt service."The days were already getting uncomfortably warm, and the little man wasnervously anxious to see his farm. So were the nieces, for that matter,who were always interested in the things that interested their eccentricuncle. Besides Patricia Doyle, whom we have already introduced, thesenieces were Miss Louise Merrick, who had just celebrated her eighteenthbirthday, and Miss Elizabeth--or "Beth"--De Graf, now well past fifteen.Beth lived in a small town in Ohio, but was then visiting her citycousin Louise, so that both girls were not only available but eager toaccompany Uncle John to his new domain and assist him to enjoy hissummer outing.CHAPTER III.MILLVILLE HEARS EXCITING NEWS.Millville is rather difficult to locate on the map, for the railroadsfound it impossible to run a line there, \_Chazy\_ Junction, the neareststation, is several miles away, and the wagon road ascends the foothillsevery step of the distance. Finally you pass between Mount Parnassus(whoever named it that?) and Little Bill Hill and find yourself on analmost level plateau some four miles in diameter, with a placid lake inthe center and a fringe of tall pines around the edge. At the South,where tower the northern sentries of the Adirondacks, a stream calledLittle Bill Creek comes splashing and dashing over the rocks to forceits way noisily into the lake. When it emerges again it is humble andsedate, and flows smoothly to Hooker's Falls, from whence it soon joinsa tributary that leads it to far away Champlain.Millville is built where the Little Bill rushes into the lake. The oldmill, with its race and sluice-gates, still grinds wearily the scantydole of grain fed into its hoppers and Silas Caldwell takes his toll andearns his modest living just as his father did before him and "LittleBill" Thompson did before him.Above the mill a rickety wooden bridge spans the stream, for here thehighway from Chary Junction reaches the village of Millville and passesthe wooden structures grouped on either side its main street on the wayto Thompson's Crossing, nine miles farther along. The town boastsexactly eleven buildings, not counting the mill, which, being on theother side of the Little Bill, can hardly be called a part of Millvilleproper. Cotting's Store contains the postoffice and telephone booth, andis naturally the central point of interest. Seth Davis' blacksmith shopcomes next; Widow Clark's Emporium for the sale of candy, stationery andcigars adjoins that; McNutt's office and dwelling combined is next, andthen Thorne's Livery and Feed Stables. You must understand they are notset close together, but each has a little ground of its own. On theother side of the street is the hardware store, with farm machineryoccupying the broad platform before it, and then the Millville House, atwo-storied "hotel" with a shed-like wing for the billiard-room and cardtables. Nib Corkins' drug store, jewelry store and music store combined(with sewing machines for a "side line"), is the last of the "businessestablishments," and the other three buildings are dwellings occupied bySam Cotting, Seth Davis and Nick Thorne.Dick Pearson's farm house is scarcely a quarter of a mile up thehighway, but it isn't in Millville, for all that. There's a cross lanejust beyond Pearson's, leading east and west, and a mile to westward isthe Wegg Farm, in the wildest part of the foothills.It is a poor farming country around Millville. Strangers often wonderhow the little shops of the town earn a living for their proprietors;but it doesn't require a great deal to enable these simple folk to live.The tourist seldom penetrates these inaccessible foothills; the roadsare too rough and primitive for automobiles; so Millville is shamefullyneglected, and civilization halted there some half a century ago.However, there was a genuine sensation in store for this isolatedhamlet, and it was the more welcome because anything in the way of asensation had for many years avoided the neighborhood.Marshall McMahon McNutt, or, as he was more familiarly called by thosefew who respected him most highly, "Marsh" McNutt (and sundry otherappellations by those who respected him not at all), became therecipient of a letter from New York announcing the intention of acertain John Merrick, the new owner of the Wegg Farm, to spend thesummer on the place. McNutt was an undersized man of about forty, with abeardless face, scraggly buff-colored hair, and eyes that were big,light blue and remarkably protruding. The stare of those eyes wasimpenetrable, because observers found it embarrassing to look at them."Mac's" friends had a trick of looking away when they spoke to him, butchildren gazed fascinated at the expressionless blue eyeballs andregarded their owner with awe.The "real estate agent" was considered an enterprising man by hisneighbors and a "poor stick" by his wife. He had gone to school atThompson's Crossing in his younger days; had a call to preach, butfailed because he "couldn't get religion"; inherited a farm from hisuncle and married Sam Cotting's sister, whose tongue and temper were sosharp that everyone marveled at the man's temerity in acquiring them.Finally he had lost one foot in a mowing machine, and the accidentdestroyed his further usefulness to the extent of inducing him toabandon the farm and move into town. Here he endeavored to findsomething to do to eke out his meagre income; so he raised "thoroughbredPlymouth Rocks," selling eggs for hatching to the farmers; doctored sickhorses and pastured them in the lot back of his barn, the rear end ofwhich was devoted to "watermelons in season"; sold subscription books tofarmers who came to the mill or the village store; was elected "roadcommissioner" and bossed the neighbors when they had to work out theirpoll-tax, and turned his hand to any other affairs that offered apenny's recompense. The "real estate business" was what Seth Davislabeled "a blobbering bluff," for no property had changed hands in theneighborhood in a score of years, except the lot back of the mill, whichwas traded for a yoke of oxen, and the Wegg farm, which had been soldwithout the agent's knowledge or consent.The only surprising thing about the sale of the Wegg farm was thatanyone would buy it. Captain Wegg had died three years before, and hisson Joe wandered south to Albany, worked his way through a technicalschool and then disappeared in the mazes of New York. So the homesteadseemed abandoned altogether, except for the Huckses.When Captain Wegg died Old Hucks, his hired man, and Hucks' blind wifeNora were the only dependents on the place, and the ancient couple hadnaturally remained there when Joe scorned his inheritance and ran away.After the sale they had no authority to remain but were under nocompulsion to move out, so they clung to their old quarters.When McNutt was handed his letter by the postmaster and storekeeper hestared at its contents in a bewildered way that roused the loungers toamused laughter."What's up, Peggy?" called Nick Thorne from his seat on the counter."Somebody gone off'n me hooks an' left ye a fortun'?""Peggy" was one of McNutt's most popular nicknames, acquired because hewore a short length of pine where his absent foot should have been."Not quite," was the agent's slow reply; "but here's the blamedestfunniest communicate a man ever got! It's from some critter that knowsthe man what bought the Wegg farm.""Let's hear it," remarked Cotting, the store-keeper, a fat individualwith a bald head, who was counting matches from a shelf into the publicmatch-box. He allowed "the boys" just twenty free matches a day.So the agent read the letter in an uncertain halting voice, and when hehad finished it the little group stared at one another for a time inthoughtful silence."Wall, I'll be plunked," finally exclaimed the blacksmith. "Looks likethe feller's rich, don't it?""Ef he's rich, what the tarnation blazes is he comin' here for?"demanded Nib Corkins, the dandy of the town. "I was over t' Huntingdonlas' year, 'n' seen how the rich folks live. Boys, this h'ain't no placefor a man with money.""That depends," responded Cotting, gravely. "I'm sure we'd all be betteroff if we had a few real bloods here to squander their substance.""Well, here's a perposal to squander, all right," said McNutt. "But thequestion is, Does he know what he's runnin' up agin', and what it'llcost to do all the idiotic things as he says?""Prob'ly not," answered the storekeeper."It's the best built farm house 'round thest parts," announced themiller, who had been silent until now. "Old Wegg were a sea-cap'n once,an' rich. He dumped a lot o' money inter that place, an' never got itout agin', nuther.""'Course not. Sixty acres o' cobble-stone don't pay much divvydends,that I ever hearn tell on," replied Seth."There's some good fruit, though," continued Caldwell, "an' the berriesallus paid the taxes an' left a little besides. Ol' Hucks gits alongall right.""Jest lives, 'n' that's all.""Well, thet's enough," said the miller. "It's about all any of us do,ain't it?""Do ye take it this 'ere Merrick's goin' to farm, er what?" asked Nib,speculatively."I take it he's plumb crazy," retorted the agent, rubbing the fringe ofhair behind his ears. "One thing's certain boys, I don't do nuthin'foolish till I see the color of his money.""Make him send you ten dollars in advance," suggested Seth."Make him send fifty," amended the store-keeper. "You can't buy a cow,an' pigs, an' chickens, an' make repairs on much less.""By jinks, I will!" cried McNutt, slapping his leg for emphasis. "I'llstrike him fer a cool fifty, an' if the feller don't pay he kin go toblazes. Them's my sentiments, boys, an' I'll stand by 'em!"The others regarded him admiringly, so the energetic little man stumpedaway to indite his characteristic letter to Major Doyle.If the first communication had startled the little village, the secondfairly plunged it into a panic of excitement. Peggy's hand trembled ashe held out the five hundred dollar draft and glared from it to hiscronies with a white face."Suff'rin' Jehu!" gasped Nick Thorne. "Is it good?"The paper was passed reverently around, and examined with a successionof dubious head-shakes."Send for Bob West," suggested Cotting. "He's seen more o' that sort o'money than any of us."The widow Clarke's boy, who was present, ran breathlessly to fetch thehardware dealer, who answered the summons when he learned that PeggyMcNutt had received a "check" for five hundred dollars.West was a tall, lean man with shrewd eyes covered by horn spectaclesand a stubby gray mustache. He was the potentate of the town and reputedto be worth, at a conservative estimate, in the neighborhood of tenthousand dollars--"er more, fer that matter; fer Bob ain't tellin' hisbusiness to nobody." Hardware and implements were acknowledged to bepaying merchandise, and West lent money on farm mortgages, besides. Hewas a quiet man, had a good library in his comfortable rooms over thestore, and took the only New York paper that found its way intoMillville. After a glance at the remittance he said:"It's a draft on Isham, Marvin & Company, the New York bankers. Good asgold, McNutt. Where did you get it?""A lunitic named John Merrick, him that's bought the Cap'n Wegg farm,sent it on. Here's his letter, Bob."The hardware dealer read it carefully and gave a low whistle."There may be more than one John Merrick," he said, thoughtfully. "ButI've heard of one who is many times a millionaire and a power in thefinancial world. What will you do for him, McNutt, to expend this moneyproperly?""Bless't if I know!" answered the man, his eyes bulging with a helplesslook. "What 'n thunder \_kin\_ I do, Bob?"West smiled."I don't wish to interfere in business matters," said he, "but it isplainly evident that the new owner wishes the farm house put into suchshape that it will be comfortable for a man accustomed to modernluxuries. You don't know much about such things, Mac, and Mr. Merrickhas made a blunder in employing your services in such a delicate matter.But do the best you can. Ride across to the Wegg place and look it over.Then get Taft, the carpenter, to fix up whatever is necessary. I'll sellyou the lumber and nails, and you've got more money than you canprobably use. Telegraph Mr. Merrick frankly how you find things; butremember the report must not be based upon your own mode of life butupon that of a man of wealth and refinement. Especially he must beposted about the condition of the furniture, which I can guess isill-suited to his needs.""How 'bout Hucks?" asked the agent.They all hung eagerly on West's reply, for Old Hucks was a generalfavorite. The fact that the old retainer of the Weggs had a blind wifeto whom he was tenderly devoted made the proposition of his leaving thefarm one of intense interest. Old Hucks and his patient wife had notbeen so much "hired help" as a part of the Wegg establishment, and itwas doubtful if they had ever received any wages. It was certain thatHucks had not a dollar in the world at the present time, and if turnedout of their old home the ancient couple must either starve or go to thepoorhouse."Say nothing further about Old Hucks or his wife to Mr. Merrick,"advised West, gravely. "When the owner comes he will need servants, andHucks is a very capable old fellow. Let that problem rest until the timecomes for solution. If the old folks are to be turned out, make JohnMerrick do it; it will put the responsibility on his shoulders.""By dum, yer right, Bob!" exclaimed McNutt. slapping the counter withhis usual impulsiveness. "I'll do the best I kin for the rich man, an'let the poor man alone."After an examination of the farm house and other buildings (which seemedin his eyes almost palatial), and a conference with Alonzo Taft, thecarpenter, the agent began to feel that his task was going to prove aneasy one. He purchased a fine Jersey cow of Will Johnson, sold his ownflock of Plymouth Rocks at a high price to Mr. Merrick, and hired NedLong to work around the yard and help Hucks mow the grass and "clean up"generally.But now his real trouble and bewilderment began. A carload of newfurniture and "fixin's" was sidetracked at the junction, and McNutt wasordered to get it unloaded and carted to the farm without delay. Therewere four hay-rack loads of the "truck," altogether, and when it was alldumped into the big empty barn at the Wegg farm the poor agent had noidea what to do with it."See here," said Nick Thorne, who had done the hauling, "you've got tolet a woman inter this deal, Peggy.""That's what my wife says, gum-twist her.""Keep yer ol' woman out'n it. She'd spile a rotten apple.""Who then, Nick?""Why, school-teacher's the right one, I guess. They've got a vacationnow, an' likely she'll come over here an' put things to rights. Peggy,that air new furniture's the rambunctionest stuff thet ever come interthese parts, an' it'll make the ol' house bloom like a rose in Spring.But folks like us hain't got no call to tech it. You fetchschool-teacher."Peggy sighed. He was keeping track of his time and charging John Merrickat the rate of two dollars a day, being firmly resolved to "make haywhile the sun was shining" and absorb as much of the money placed in hishands as possible. To let "school-teacher" into this deal and be obligedto pay her wages was an undesirable thing to do; yet he reflected thatit might be wise to adopt Nick Thorne's suggestion.So next morning he drove the liveryman's sorrel mare out to Thompson'sCrossing, where the brick school-house stood on one corner and WillThompson's residence on another. A mile away could be seen the spires ofthe little church at Hooker's Falls.McNutt hitched his horse to Thompson's post, walked up the neat pebbledpath and knocked at the door."Ethel in?" he asked of the sad-faced woman who, after some delay,answered his summons."She's in the garden, weedin'.""I'll go 'round," said the agent.The garden was a bower of roses. Among them stood a slender girl in achecked gingham, tying vines to a trellis."Morn'n', Ethel," said the visitor.The girl smiled at him. She was not very pretty, because her face waslong and wan, and her nose a bit one-sided. But her golden hair sparkledin the sun like a mass of spun gold, and the smile was winning in itsunconscious sweetness. Surely, such attractions were enough for a merecountry girl.Ethel Thompson had, however, another claim to distinction. She had been"eddicated," as her neighbors acknowledged in awed tones, and "took adiploma from a college school at Troy." Young as she was, Ethel hadtaught school for two years, and might have a life tenure if she caredto retain the position. As he looked at her neat gown and noted thegrace and ease of her movements the agent acknowledged that he hadreally "come to the right shop" to untangle his perplexing difficulties."New folks is comin' to the Cap'n Wegg farm," he announced, as abeginning.She turned and looked at him queerly."Has Joe sold the place?" she asked."Near a year ago. Some fool rich man has bought it and is comin' downhere to spend his summer vacation, he says. Here, read his letters.They'll explain it better 'n I can."Her hand trembled a little as she took the letters McNutt pulled fromhis pocket. Then she sat upon a bench and read them all through. By thattime she had regained her composure."The gentleman is somewhat eccentric," she remarked; "but he will makeno mistake in coming to this delightful place, if he wishes quietand rest.""Don't know what he's after, I'm sure," replied the man. "But he's sentdown enough furniture an' truck to stock a hotel, an' I want to know efyou'll go over an' put it in the rooms, an' straighten things out.""Me!""Why, yes. You've lived in cities some, an' know how citified things go.Con-twist it, Ethel, there's things in the bunch that neither I ner NickThorne ever hearn tell of, much less knowin' what they're used for."The girl laughed."When are the folks coming?" she asked."When I git things in shape. They've sent some money down to pay ferwhat's done, so you won't have to work fer nuthin'.""I will, though," responded the girl, in a cheery tone. "It will delightme to handle pretty things. Are Nora and Tom still there?""Oh, yes. I had orders to turn the Huckses out, ye see; but I didn't doit.""I'm glad of that," she returned, brightly "Perhaps we may arrange it sothey can stay. Old Nora's a dear.""But she's blind.""She knows every inch of the Wegg house, and does her work morethoroughly than many who can see. When do you want me, Peggy?""Soon's you kin come.""Then I'll be over tomorrow morning."At that moment a wild roar, like that of a beast, came from the house.The sad faced woman ran down a passage; a door slammed, and then all wasquiet again.McNutt hitched uneasily from the wooden foot to the good one."How's ol' Will?" he enquired, in a low voice."Grandfather's about as usual," replied the girl, with trainedcomposure."Still crazy as a bedbug?""At times he becomes a bit violent; but those attacks never last long.""Don't s'pose I could see him?" ventured the agent, still in hesitatingtones."Oh, no; he has seen no visitor since Captain Wegg died.""Well, good-bye, Ethel. See you at the farm in the mornin'."The girl sat for a long time after McNutt had driven away, seeminglylost in revery."Poor Joe!" she sighed, at last. "Poor, foolish Joe. I wonder what hasbecome of him?"CHAPTER IV.ETHEL MAKES PREPARATION.The Wegg homestead stood near the edge of a thin forest of pines throughwhich Little Bill Creek wound noisily on its way to the lake. At theleft was a slope on which grew a neglected orchard of apple and peartrees, their trunks rough and gnarled by the struggle to outlive manysevere winters. There was a rude, rocky lane in front, separated fromthe yard by a fence of split pine rails, but the ground surrounding thehouse was rich enough to grow a profusion of June grass.The farm was of very little value. Back of the yard was a fairly goodberry patch, but aside from that some two acres of corn and a smallstrip of timothy represented all that was fertile of the sixty acres theplace contained.But the house itself was the most imposing dwelling for many milesaround. Just why that silent old sea-dog, Jonas Wegg, had come into thissecluded wilderness to locate was a problem the Millville people hadnever yet solved. Certainly it was with no idea of successfully farmingthe land he had acquired, for half of it was stony and half covered bypine forest. But the house he constructed was the wonder of thecountry-side in its day. It was a big, two-story building, the lowerhalf being "jest cobblestones," as the neighbors sneeringly remarked,while the upper half was "decent pine lumber." The lower floor of thismain building consisted of a single room with a great cobble-stonefireplace in the center of the rear wall and narrow, prison-like windowsat the front and sides. There was a small porch in front, with a greatentrance door of carved dark wood of a foreign look, which the Captainhad brought from some port in Massachusetts. A stair in one corner ofthe big living room led to the second story, where four largebed-chambers were arranged. These had once been plastered and papered,but the wall-paper had all faded into dull, neutral tints and in one ofthe rooms a big patch of plaster had fallen away from the ceiling,showing the bare lath. Only one of the upstairs rooms had ever beenfurnished, and it now contained a corded wooden bedstead, a cheap pinetable and one broken-legged chair. Indeed, the main building, which Ihave briefly described, had not been in use for many years. Sometimes,when Captain Wegg was alive, he would build a log fire in the greatfireplace on a winter's evening and sit before it in silent mood untilfar into the night. And once, when his young wife had first occupied thenew house, the big room had acquired a fairly cosy and comfortableappearance. But it had always been sparsely furnished, and most of thedecadent furniture that now littered it was useless and unlovely.The big wooden lean-to at the back, and the right wing, were at thistime the only really habitable parts of the mansion. The lean-to had anentrance from the living room, but Old Hucks and Nora his wife used theback door entirely. It consisted of a large and cheerful kitchen and tworooms off it, one used as a store room and the other as a sleepingchamber for the aged couple.The right wing was also constructed of cobble-stone, and had formerlybeen Captain Wegg's own chamber. After his death his only child, Joe,then a boy of sixteen, had taken possession of his father's room; butafter a day or two he had suddenly quitted the house where he was bornand plunged into the great outside world--to seek his fortune, it wassaid. Decidedly there was no future for the boy here; in the citieslurks opportunity.When Ethel Thompson arrived in the early morning that followed herinterview with McNutt she rode her pony through the gap in the railfence, across the June grass, and around to the back door. On a benchbeside the pump an old woman sat shelling peas. Her form was thin buterect and her hair snowy white. She moved with alertness, and as thegirl dismounted and approached her she raised her head and turned apleasant face with deep-set, sightless gray eyes upon her visitor."Good morning, Ethel, dear," she said. "I knew the pony's whinney.You're up early today.""Good morning, Nora," responded the schoolteacher, advancing to kiss thewithered cheek. "Are you pretty well?""In body, dear. In mind both Tom 'n' me's pretty bad. I s'pose wecouldn't 'a 'spected to stay here in peace forever; but the blow's comesuddin-like, an' it hurts us.""Where is Tom?""In the barn, lookin' over all the won'erful things the rich nabob hassent here. He says most things has strips o' wood nailed over 'em; butsome hasn't; an' Tom looks 'em over keerful an' then tells me 'bout 'em.He's gone to take another look at a won'erful new cook-stove, so's hekin describe it to me right pertickler.""Is he worried, Nora?""We's both worried, Ethel. Our time's come, an' no mistake. Peggy McNuttsays as he had real orders to turn Hucks out if he was a married man;an' there's no disclaimin' he's married, is there? Peggy's a kind man,an' tol' us to keep stayin' 'til the nabobs arrove. Then I guess we'llgit our walkin'-papers, mighty quick.""I'm not sure of that," said the girl, thoughtfully. "They must behard-hearted, indeed, to turn you out into the world; and you are bothcapable people, and would serve the city folks faithfully and well.""It's my eyes," replied the other, in a simple, matter-of-fact tone."Hucks might wait on the nabobs all right, but they won't tol'rate ablind woman a minute, I'm sure. An' Hucks 'd ruther be with me in thepoor-house than to let me go alone.""Right y' air, Nora girl!" cried a merry voice, and as the blind womanlooked up with a smile Ethel turned around to face "Old Hucks."A tall man, but much bent at the shoulders and limping in one leg froman old hurt aggravated by rheumatism. His form was as gnarled as thetree-trunks in the apple-orchard, and twisted almost as fantastically.But the head, uplifted from the stooped shoulders and held a little toone side, was remarkable enough to attract attention. It had scantywhite locks and a fringe of white whiskers under the chin, and theseframed a smiling face and features that were extremely winning inexpression. No one could remember ever seeing Old Hucks when he was notsmiling, and the expression was neither set nor inane, but so cheery andbright that you were tempted to smile with him, without knowing why. Fordress he wore a much patched pair of woolen trousers and a "hickory"shirt of faded blue, with rough top boots and a dilapidated straw hatthat looked as if it might have outlived several generations.As Ethel greeted the man she looked him over carefully and sighed at theresult; for certainly, as far as personal appearances went, he seemed asunlikely a person to serve a "nabob" as could well be imagined. But thegirl knew Thomas' good points, and remembering them, took courage."If the worst comes," she said, brightly, "you are both to come to us tolive. I've arranged all that with grandmother, you know. But I'm notmuch afraid of your being obliged to leave here. From all accounts thisMr. Merrick is a generous and free-hearted man, and I've discovered thatstrangers are not likely to be fearsome when you come to know them. Theunknown always makes us childishly nervous, you see, and then we forgetit's wrong to borrow trouble.""True's gospil," said Old Hucks. "To know my Nora is to love her.Ev'body loves Nora. An' the good Lord He's took'n care o' us so long, itseems like a sort o' sacrelidge to feel that all thet pretty furn'turein the barn spells on'y poor-house to us. Eh, Ethel?"McNutt arrived just then, with big Ned Long, Lon Taft the carpenter, andWidow Clark, that lady having agreed to "help with the cleanin'." Shedidn't usually "work out," but was impelled to this task as much throughcuriosity to see the new furniture as from desire to secure the wages.At once the crowd invaded the living room, and after a glance aroundEthel ordered every bit of the furniture, with the exception of twoantique but comfortable horse-hair sofas, carried away to the barn andstored in the loft. It did not take long to clear the big room, and thenthe Widow Clark swept out and began to scrub the floor and woodwork,while school-teacher took her men into the right wing and made anotherclearing of its traps.This room interested the girl very much. In it Joe was born and frailMrs. Wegg and her silent husband had both passed away. It had two broadFrench windows with sash doors opening on to a little porch of its ownwhich was covered thickly with honeysuckle vines. A cupboard was builtinto a niche of the thick cobble-stone wall, but it was locked and thekey was missing.Upstairs the girl had the rubbish removed for the first time in ageneration. The corded bedstead in the north room was sent to join itsfellows in the barn loft, and Ned Long swept everything clean inreadiness for the scrubbers.Then, while Widow Clark and Nora cleaned industriously--for the blindwoman insisted on helping and did almost as much work as hercompanion--the "men folks" proceeded to the barn and under theschool-teacher's directions uncrated the new furniture and opened thebales of rugs and matting. Lon Taft was building new steps to the frontporch, but Old Hucks and Ned and McNutt reverently unpacked the "truck"and set each piece carefully aside. How they marveled at the enameledbeds and colored wicker furniture, the easy chairs for lounging, thedainty dressers and all the innumerable pretty things discovered inboxes, bales and barrels, you may well imagine. Even Ethel was amazedand delighted at the thoughtfulness of the dealer in includingeverything that might be useful or ornamental in a summer home.The next few days were indeed busy ones, for the girl enteredenthusiastically upon her task to transform the old house, and with thematerial John Merrick had so amply provided she succeeded admirably. Thelittle maid was country bred, but having seen glimpses of city life andpossessing much native good taste, she arranged the rooms so charminglythat they would admit of scant improvement. The big living room mustserve as a dining room as well as parlor; but so spacious was it thatsuch an arrangement proved easy. No especial furniture for the livingroom had been provided, but by stealing a few chairs and odd pieces fromthe ample supply provided for the bedrooms, adding the two quaint sofasand the upright piano and spreading the rugs in an artistic fashion,Ethel managed to make the "parlor part" of the room appear very cosy.The dining corner had a round table and high-backed chairs finished inweathered oak, and when all was in order the effect was notinharmonious. Some inspiration had induced Mr. Merrick to send down abatch of eighteen framed pictures, procured at a bargain but from areliable dealer. He thought they might "help out," and Ethel knew theywould, for the walls of the old house were quite bare of ornament. Shemade them go as far as possible, and Old Hucks, by this time thoroughlybewildered, hung them where she dictated and made laughable attempts todescribe the subjects to blind Nora.A telegram, telephoned over from the junction, announced the proposedarrival of the party on Thursday morning, and the school-teacher wassure that everything would be in readiness at that time. The paint onLon's repairs would be dry, the grass in the front yard was closelycropped, and the little bed of flowers between the corn-crib and thewood-shed was blooming finely. The cow was in the stable, the pigs inthe shed, and the Plymouth Rocks strutted over the yard with an absurdassumption of pride.Wednesday Ethel took Old Hucks over to Millville and bought for him fromSam Cotting a new suit of dark gray "store clothes," together withshirts, shoes and underwear. She made McNutt pay the bill with JohnMerrick's money, agreeing to explain the case to "the nabob" herself,and back up the agent in the unauthorized expenditure. Nora had a newgingham dress, too, which the girl had herself provided, and on Thursdaymorning Ethel was at the Wegg farm bright and early to see the oldcouple properly attired to receive their new master. She also put a lasttouch to the pretty furniture and placed vases of her own roses andsweet peas here and there, to render the place homelike and to welcomethe expected arrivals."If they don't like it," said the girl, smiling, "they're rather hard toplease.""They're sure to like it, dear," answered old Nora, touching withsensitive fingers the flowers, the books and the opened piano. "If theydon't, they're heretics an' sinners, an' there's no good in 'emwhatever."Then the little school-teacher bade good-bye to Hucks and his wife, toldthem to keep brave hearts, and rode her pony cross-lots toThompson's Crossing.CHAPTER V.THE ARRIVAL OF THE NABOBS."Well," said Uncle John, looking out of the car window, "we're nearlythere."He didn't look the millionaire, or nabob, or anything else but a modestlittle man full of joy at getting into the country. His clothing was notdistinctive of wealth, his hands were hard and roughened by years oftoil, and his necktie had a plebeian trick of sliding under his leftear. Uncle John was just a plain, simple, good-hearted fellow before heacquired riches, and the possession of millions had in no way alteredhis nature.The three nieces and himself were the only passengers in the coach,aside from rosy-cheeked Mary, Patricia's cook. Finding that the road didnot run a sleeper to Chazy Junction, Mr. Merrick had ordered oneattached to the train for his especial use; but he did not allow evenPatsy to suspect this extravagance."It seems to me," observed Beth, as she peered out while the trainpuffed up the steep grade, "as if we'd arrived at the heart of awilderness, where farms are likely to be as scarce as Egyptian temples.""The truth is," replied her uncle, with a cheerful smile, "that none ofus has an idea where we're going, or what that farm of mine looks like.We're explorers, like Stanley in mid-Africa. That's the beauty of thisexcursion.""I'm glad I didn't bring any party dresses," said dainty Louise, shakingher blonde head with a doubting expression toward the rockcovered hills."Why, you might need them for hay-rides," remarked Patsy, with a laugh;"that is, if any hay grows in this land of quarries."The train stopped with a jerk, started with another jerk, and stoppedagain with a third that made them catch their breaths and hold fast tothe seats."Chazy Junction, seh," said the colored porter, entering in haste toseize their bags.They alighted on a small wooden platform and their hand baggage wasdeposited beside them. Their trunks were being tumbled off a carfar ahead.Then the whistle screamed, the train gave a jerk and proceeded on itsway, and Uncle John, his nieces and their maid, found themselvesconfronting a solitary man in shirtsleeves, who yawned languidly, thrusthis hands in his pockets and stared at the strangers unmoved.It was six o'clock. The July sun was set in a clear sky, but the air wascool and pleasant. Uncle John glanced around with the eye of a practicedtraveler. Back of the station was a huddle of frame buildings set in ahollow. The station-tender was the only person in sight."Isn't there a carriage to meet us?" asked Louise, in a slightly frigidtone."Seems not," replied her uncle. Then he addressed the native. "Can youtell us, sir, where Millville is?" he asked."Sev'n mile up the road.""Thank you kindly. Is there any carriage to be had?"The man smiled sardonically."Kerridges," he said, "don't grow in these parts. I take it you be theparty fer the Wegg farm.""You're right," said Mr. Merrick. "I'm glad we are getting acquainted.Folks all well?""Pretty fair.""Now, sir, we want some breakfast, to begin with, and then some way toget to my farm.""Peggy orter 'a' looked after you," remarked the man, eyeing the daintygowns of the young ladies reflectively."Who's Peggy?""That's McNutt, the man you hired to do things.""Ah, yes; he surely ought to have sent some sort of a team to meet us,"agreed Uncle John. "What's that group of houses yonder?""Thet's the Junction.""Any hotel?""Sure.""And a livery stable?""'Course there is.""Then we'll get along," said Uncle John, assuming a sudden brisk manner."Just keep your eye on our baggage till we get back, my good fellow.There are no people to interfere with it, but some bears or tigers mightcome out of the hills and eat it up. Now, girls, away we go!"Uncle John's nieces were not so greatly dismayed at this experience asmight have been expected. They had recently accompanied their erraticrelative on a European trip and had learned to be patient underdifficulties.A quarter of a mile down the dusty road they came to the hotel, adismal, unclean looking place that smelled of stale beer. Uncle Johnrouted out the proprietor."Folks up?" he inquired."Long ago," said the man."Get us some boiled eggs, bread and butter and plenty of freshmilk--right away," ordered Mr. Merrick. "The quicker it comes the moreI'll pay you. Bring a table out here on the porch and we'll eat in theopen air. Where's the livery stable--eh? Oh, I see. Now, step lively, myman, and your fortune's made. I'll add a quarter of a dollar for everyfive minutes you save us in time."The fellow stared, then woke up with a start and disappeared within."By gum, I'll bet a hen it's thet air nabob!" he muttered.Leaving his girls and Mary to sit on the wooden benches of the porchUncle John crossed the road to the livery stable, where he discovered aman and a boy engaged in cleaning the half dozen sorry looking nags theestablishment contained. A three-seated democrat wagon was engaged tocarry the party to the Wegg farm at Millville, and a rickety lumberwagon would take the baggage. The liveryman recognized his customer assoon as the Wegg farm was mentioned, and determined to "do the city guyup brown.""Road's bad an' up hill, an' my time's vallyble," he said in a surlyvoice. "I'll hev to charge ye three dollars.""For what?" asked Uncle John, quietly."Fer the two teams to Millville.""Get them harnessed right away, load up the baggage, and have thedemocrat at the hotel in twenty minutes. Here's five dollars, and ifyou'll look pleasant you may keep the change.""Blame my thick skull!" muttered the livery-man, as he watched thelittle man depart. "What a cussed fool I were not to say four dollarsinstead o' three!"But he called to his boy to hurry up, and in the stipulated time theteams were ready.Uncle John and his nieces were just finishing their eggs, which werefresh and delicious. The milk was also a revelation. Through the windowsof the hotel several frowsy looking women and an open mouthed boy werestaring hard at the unconscious city folk.Even Louise was in a mood for laughter as they mounted to the high seatsof the democrat. The glorious air, the clear sunshine and a satisfactoryif simple breakfast had put them all in a good humor with the world.They stopped at the station for their hand baggage, and saw that thetrunks were properly loaded on the lumber wagon. Then, slowly, theystarted to mount the long hill that began its incline just acrossthe tracks."Sure this is the way?" inquired Uncle John, perched beside the driver."I were horned here," answered the man, conclusively."That seems to settle it. Pretty big hill, that one ahead of us.""It's the Little Bill. When we cross it, we're at Millville."Seven miles of desolate country could not dampen the spirits of thegirls. Secretly each one was confident that Uncle John's unknown farmwould prove to be impossible, and that in a day or so at the latest theywould retrace their steps. But in the meantime the adventure was noveland interesting, and they were prepared to accept the inevitable withall graciousness.When, after the long climb up the hill, they saw the quaint mill and thetown lying just across rushing Little Bill Creek; when from theirelevation they beheld the placid lake half hidden by its stately pinesand gazed up the rugged and picturesque foot-hills to the greatmountains beyond, then indeed they drew in deep breaths and began, asPatsy exclaimed, to be "glad they came.""That Millville?" asked Uncle John, eagerly."Yes, sir.""And which of those houses belongs to the Wegg farm?""Ye can't see the Wegg house from here; the pines hide it," said theman, urging his horses into a trot as they approached the bridge."Pretty good farm?" inquired Uncle John, hopefully."Worst in the county," was the disconcerting reply. "Half rocks an' halftrees. Ol' Cap'n Wegg wasn't no farmer. He were a sea-cap'n; so it's nowonder he got took in when he bought the place."Uncle John sighed."I've just bought it myself," he observed."There's a ol' addige," said the man, grinning, "'bout a fool an' hismoney. The house is a hunker; but w'at's the use of a house withouta farm?""What is a 'hunker,' please?" inquired Louise, curiously.The liveryman ventured no reply, perhaps because he was guiding hishorses over the rickety bridge."Want to stop at the village?" he asked."No; drive on to the farm."The scene was so rude and at the same time so picturesque that itimpressed them all very agreeably. Perhaps they were the more delightedbecause they had expected nothing admirable in this all but forsakenspot. They did not notice the people who stared after them as theyrattled through the village, or they would have seen Uncle John's"agent" in front of his office, his round eyes fairly bulging fromhis head.It had never occurred to McNutt to be at the Junction to welcome hispatron. He had followed his instructions and set Mr. Merrick's house inorder, and there he considered that his duty ended. He would, of course,call on the nabob, presently, and render an account of the money hehad received.Sam Cotting, the store-keeper, gazed after the livery team with a sourcountenance, he resented the fact that five big-boxes of groceries hadbeen forwarded from the city to the Wegg farm. "What'n thunder's the usehavin' city folks here, ef they don't buy nothin'?" he asked the boys;and they agreed it was no use at all.Proceeding at a smart trot the horses came to the Pearson farm, wherethey turned into the Jane at the left and straightway subsided to a slowwalk, the wheels bumping and jolting over the stony way."What's this?" exclaimed Uncle John, who had narrowly escaped biting histongue through and through. "Why did you turn down here?""It's the road," returned the driver, with a chuckle; "it's thecobble-stone lane to yer farm, an' the farm's 'bout the same sort o'land as the lane."For a few moments the passengers maintained a dismal silence."The country's lovely," said Patsy, glancing at the panorama as theymounted a slight elevation."Are you sure, Uncle, that there is a house, or any place of refuge, onyour farm?" asked Louise, in a mischievous tone."Why, there's a rumor of a house, and the rumor says it's a hunker,"replied Mr. Merrick, in a voice that betrayed a slight uneasiness."Doubtless the house matches the farm," said Beth, calmly. "I imagine ithas two rooms and a leaky roof. But never mind, girls. This has been apleasant trip, and we can seek shelter elsewhere if the worst comes tothe worst.""I guess the worst has come a'ready," observed the driver; "for thehouse is by odds the best part o' the Wegg farm. It's big enough fer ahotel, an' cost a lot o' money in its day. Seems like the lunatics allcrowd to thet place--fust ol' Cap'n Wegg wasted of his substance on it,an' now----"He paused, perhaps fearing he might become personal in his remarks, andUncle John coughed while the girls shrieked with laughter.Expecting nothing, they were amazed when they passed the orchard and thegroup of pines that had concealed the house and suddenly drew up besidethe old-fashioned stile built into the rail fence. Every eye wasinstantly upon the quaint, roomy mansion, the grassy sward extendingbetween it and the road, and the cosy and home-like setting of theoutbuildings."Here's Wegg's," said the liveryman."Oh, Uncle," cried Beth; "how lovely!"Louise's pretty face was wreathed with smiles. Patsy drew in a longbreath and scrambled out of the high seat.On the corner of the front porch stood Nora, arrayed in her neat graygown and a cap. Her face was composed, but she felt herself tremblinga little.Old Hucks came slowly down the steps to greet the company. Never in hismemory had his dress been so immaculate. The queer old fellow seemed toappreciate this as he raised his smiling face from the stooped shouldersand poised it on one side like a sparrow."Welcome home, sir," he said to Uncle John. "I'm Hucks, sir; ThomasHucks," and without more words he proceeded to remove the satchels fromthe wagon."Ah, yes," returned Mr. Merrick, cheered by the welcome and the smile ofthe old man. "I'd forgotten about you, but I'm glad you're here.""And that is my wife Nora, on the porch. She's the housekeeper, sir."And then, lowering his voice so that only the girls and Uncle John couldhear, he added simply: "She's blind."Patsy walked straight up to the eager, pathetic figure of the woman andtook her hand in a warm clasp."I'm Patricia, Nora," she said, "and I'm sure we shall be friends."Beth followed her cousin's lead."And I am Beth, Nora. Will you remember me?""Surely, miss; by your voice," returned the old woman, beamingdelightedly at these evidences of kindliness."Here is another, Nora," said their cousin, in gentle tones. "I amLouise.""Three young and pretty girls, Nora; and as good as they are pretty,"announced Uncle John, proudly. "Will you show us in, Thomas, or willyour wife?""Nora will take the young ladies to their rooms, sir.""Not now, Uncle!" they all protested, in nearly identical words; andLouise added: "Let us drink in the delights of this pretty picturebefore we shut ourselves up in the stuffy rooms. I hope they'vebeen aired."Patsy ran to a chicken-coop on the side lawn, where a fussy hen wascalling to her children that strangers had arrived. Beth exclaimed atthe honeysuckle vines and Louise sank into a rustic chair with a sighof content."I'm so glad you brought us here. Uncle," she said. "What a surprise itis to find the place so pretty!"They could hear the rush of the Little Bill in the wood behind them anda soft breeze stirred the pines and wafted their fragrance to thenostrils of the new arrivals. Uncle John squatted on the shady steps andfairly beamed upon the rustic scene spread out before him. Patsy had nowthrown aside her hat and jacket and lay outstretched upon the coolgrass, while the chickens eyed her with evident suspicion. Beth waspicking a bouquet of honeysuckles, just because they were so sweetand homely."I'm almost sure I sent some hammocks and a croquet set," remarked UncleJohn."They're here, sir," said Old Hucks, who had watched each one with hispersistent smile and now stood awaiting his new master's commands. "Butwe didn't know jest where ye wanted 'em put."Mary came out. She had taken off her things and donned her white apron."The house is quite wonderful, Mr. Merrick," she said. "There iseverything we can possibly need, and all as neat as wax."The report stirred the girls to explore. They all trooped into the bigliving room and were at once captivated by its charm. Nora led themupstairs to their chambers, finding the way as unerringly as if shepossessed perfect vision, and here a new chorus of delight was evoked."The blue room is mine!" cried Louise."Mine is the pink room," said Beth."And I choose the white room," declared Patsy. "The Major's is justnext, and it will please him because it is all green and gold. But wherewill Uncle John room?""The master will use the right wing," said old Nora, who had listenedwith real pleasure to the exclamations of delight. "It were Cap'n Wegg'sroom, ye know, an' we've fitted it all new."Indeed, Uncle John was at that moment inspecting his apartment, and hesighed contentedly as he congratulated himself upon his foresight insending down the furnishings on the chance of their being needed. Theyhad effected a complete transformation of the old house.But who had arranged everything? Surely the perfect taste and daintytouch evidenced everywhere was not to be attributed to blind Nora. Thelittle man was thoughtful as he turned to Old Hucks."Who did it, Thomas?" he asked."Miss Ethel, sir; the school-ma'am.""Oh. A city girl?""No, sir. Crazy Will Thompson's granddaughter. She lives 'bout nine mileaway.""Is she here now?""Went home this mornin', sir. It were a great pleasure to her, she said,an' she hoped as how you'd like everything, an' be happy here."Undo John nodded."We must call on that girl," he remarked. "We owe her a good deal, Iimagine, and she's entitled to our grateful thanks."CHAPTER VI.PEGGY PRESENTS HIS BILL.Millville waited in agonized suspense for three days for tangibleevidence that "the nabob was in their midst," as Nib Corkins poeticallyexpressed it; but the city folks seemed glued to the farm and no one ofthem had yet appeared in the village. As a matter of fact, Patsy andUncle John were enthusiastically fishing in the Little Bill, far up inthe pine woods, and having "the time of their lives" in spite of theirscant success in capturing trout. Old Hucks could go out beforebreakfast and bring in an ample supply of speckled beauties for Mary tofry; but Uncle John's splendid outfit seemed scorned by the finny folk,and after getting her dress torn in sundry places and a hook in thefleshy part of her arm Patsy learned to seek shelter behind a treewhenever her uncle cast his fly. But they reveled in the woods, andwould lie on the bank for hours listening to the murmur of the brook andthe songs of the birds.The temper of the other two girls was different. Beth De Graf hadbrought along an archery outfit, and she set up her target on the amplegreen the day following her arrival. Here she practiced persistently,shooting at sixty yards with much skill. But occasionally, when Louisetired of her novel and her cushions in the hammock, the two girls wouldplay tennis or croquet together--Beth invariably winning.Such delightful laziness could brook no interference for the first daysof their arrival, and it was not until Peggy McNutt ventured over onMonday morning for a settlement with Mr. Merrick that any from thelittle world around them dared intrude upon the dwellers at theWegg farm.Although the agent had been late in starting from Millville and NickThorne's sorrel mare had walked every step of the way, Peggy was obligedto wait in the yard a good half hour for the "nabob" to finish hisbreakfast. During that time he tried to decide which of the twostatements of accounts that he had prepared he was most justified inpresenting. He had learned from the liveryman at the Junction that Mr.Merrick had paid five dollars for a trip that was usually made for two,and also that the extravagant man had paid seventy-five cents more toLucky Todd, the hotel keeper, than his bill came to. The knowledge ofsuch reckless expenditures had fortified little McNutt in "marking up"the account of the money he had received, and instead of charging twodollars a day for his own services, as he had at first intended, he putthem down at three dollars a day--and made the days stretch as much aspossible. Also he charged a round commission on the wages of Lon Taftand Ned Long, and doubled the liveryman's bill for hauling the goodsover from the Junction. Ethel Thompson had refused to accept any paymentfor what she had done, but Peggy bravely charged it up at good roundfigures. When the bill was made out and figured up it left him amagnificent surplus for his private account; but at the last his heartfailed him, and he made out another bill more modest in its extortions.He had brought them both along, though, one in each pocket, vacillatingbetween them as he thought first of the Merrick millions and then of therighteous anger he might incur. By the time Uncle John came out to him,smiling and cordial, he had not thoroughly made up his mind whichaccount to present."I must thank you for carrying out my orders so intelligently," beganthe millionaire. "Without your assistance I might have found things inbad shape, I fear."McNutt was reassured. The nabob would stand for bill No. 1, without adoubt."I tried fer to do my best, sir," he said."And you did very well," was the reply. "I hope you kept yourexpenditures well within bounds?"The agent's heart sank at the question and the shrewd, alert look thataccompanied it. Even millionaires do not allow themselves to beswindled, if they can help it. Bill No. 2 would be stiff enough; hemight even have to knock a few dollars off from that."Most things is high in Millville," he faltered, "an' wages has gone upjest terr'ble. The boys don't seem to wanter do nuthin' withoutbig pay.""That is the case everywhere," responded Mr. Merrick, thoughtfully; "andbetween us, McNutt, I'm glad wages are better in these prosperous times.The man who works by the day should be well paid, for he has to pay wellfor his living. Adequately paid labor is the foundation of allprosperity."Peggy smiled cheerfully. He was glad he had had the forethought to bringBill No. 1 along with him."Hosses is high, too," he remarked, complacently, "an' lumber an' nailsis up. As fer the live-stock I bought fer ye, I found I had to pay likesixty for it.""I suppose they overcharged you because a city man wanted the animals.But of course you would not allow me to be robbed.""Oh, 'course not, Mr. Merrick!""And that nag in the stable is a sorry old beast."Peggy was in despair. Why in the world hadn't he charged for "thebeast"? As it was now too late to add it to the bill he replied,grudgingly:"The hoss you mention belongs to the place, sir. It went with the farm,'long o' Old Hucks an' Nora.""I'm glad you reminded me of those people," said Uncle John, seriously."Tell me their history."Louise sauntered from the house, at this juncture, and sank gracefullyupon the grass at her uncle's feet. She carried a book, but did notopen it."Ain't much to tell, sir, 'bout them folks," replied the agent. "Cap'nWegg brung the Huckses with him when he settled here. Wegg were asea-cap'n, ye see, an' when he retired he Wanted to git as far from thesea's he could.""That was strange. A sailor usually loves to be near salt water all hisdays," observed Uncle John."Wall, Wegg he were diff'rent. He come here when I were a boy, bringin'a sad-faced young woman an' Ol' Hucks an' Nora. I s'pose Hucks were asailor, too, though he never says nuthin' 'bout that. The Cap'n boughtthis no'count farm an' had this house built on it--a proceedin' that, efI do say it, struck ev'rybody as cur'ous.""It \_was\_ curious," agreed Mr. Merrick."But the cur'ous'est thing was thet he didn't make no 'tempt at farmin'.Folks said he had money to burn, fer he loaded it into this fool housean' then sot down an' smoked all day an' looked glum. Ol' Hucks plantedthe berry patch an' looked arter the orchard an' the stock; but Cap'nWegg on'y smoked an' sulked. People at Millville was glad to leave himalone, an' the on'y friend he ever had were crazy Will Thompson.""Crazy?""As a loon." The agent hitched uneasily on the lawn bench, where he wasseated, and then continued, hastily: "But thet ain't neither here nerthere. A baby was born arter a time, an' while he was young thesad-faced mother sickened an' died. Cap'n Wegg give her a decent fun'ralan' went right on smokin' his pipe an' sulkin', same as ever. Thenhe--he--died," rather lamely, "an' Joe--thet's the boy--bein' then aboutsixteen, dug out 'n' run away. We hain't seen him sense.""Nice boy?" asked Uncle John."Joe were pretty well liked here, though he had a bit o' his dad'ssulkiness. He 'n' Ethel Thompson--crazy Will's gran'daughter--seemedlike to make up together; but even she don't know what drav himoff--'nless it were the Cap'n's suddint death--ner where he went to."Uncle John seemed thoughtful, but asked no more questions, and McNuttappeared to be relieved that he refrained. But the bill ought to beforthcoming now, and the agent gave a guilty start as hispatron remarked:"I want to settle with you for what you have done. I'm willing to pay aliberal price, you understand, but I won't submit to being robbedoutrageously by you or any of your Millville people."This was said so sternly that it sent McNutt into an ague of terror. Hefumbled for the smallest bill, tremblingly placed it in Mr. Merrick'shand, and then with a thrill of despair realized he had presented thedreadful No. 1!"It's--it's--a--'count of what I spent out," he stammered.Uncle John ran his eye over the bill."What are Plymouth Rocks?" he demanded."He--hens, sir.""Hens at a dollar apiece?""Thoroughbreds, sir. Extry fine stock. I raised 'em myself.""H-m. You've charged them twice.""Eh?""Here's an item: 'Twelve Plymouth Rocks, twelve dollars;' and fartherdown: 'Twelve Plymouth Rocks, eighteen dollars.'""Oh, yes; o' course. Ye see, I sold you a dozen first, of the dollarkind. Then I thought as how, bein' fine young birds, you'd be temptedfer to eat 'em, an' a dozen don't go fur on the table. So I up an' soldye another dozen, extry ol' stock an' remarkable high-bred, fer adollar-an'-a-half each. Which is dirt cheap because they's too old toeat an' jest right fer layers.""Are they here?""Every one of 'em.""Very good. I'm glad to have them. The cow seems reasonably priced, fora Jersey.""It is. Jest extror'nary!" exclaimed Peggy, reassured."And your people have all done work of an unusual character in apainstaking manner. I am very much pleased. There seems to be a hundredand forty dollars my due, remaining from the five hundred I sent you.""Here it is, sir," responded McNutt, taking the money from hispocket-book. In another place he had more money, which he had intendedto pay if the smaller bill had been presented.Uncle John took the money."You are an honest fellow, McNutt," said he. "I hadn't expected a dollarback, for folks usually take advantage of a stranger if he gives themhalf a chance. So I thank you for your honesty as well as for yourservices. Good morning."The agent was thoroughly ashamed of himself. To be "sech a duffer" as toreturn that money, when by means of a little strategy he might have keptit, made him feel both humiliated and indignant. A hundred and fortydollars; When would he have a chance to get such a windfall again? Pah!he was a fool--to copy his identical thoughts: "a gol dumblithering idjit!"All the way home he reflected dismally upon his lack of businessforesight, and strove to plan ways to get money "out'n thet easy mark.""Didn't the man rob you, Uncle?" asked Louise, when the agent haddisappeared."Yes, dear; but I wouldn't give him the satisfaction of knowing Irealized it.""That was what I thought. By the way, that Wegg history seems bothromantic and unusual," she said, musingly. "Don't you scent some mysteryin what the man said of it?""Mystery!" cried Uncle John. "Lordy, no, Louise. You've been readin' toomany novels. Romances don't grow in parts like these.""But I think this is where they are most likely to grow, Uncle,"persisted the girl, "just consider. A retired sea captain hides inland,with no companions but a grinning sailor and his blind housekeeper--except his pale wife, of course; and she is described as sad andunhappy. Who was she, do you think?""I don't think," said Uncle John, smiling and patting the fair check ofhis niece. "And it don't matter who she was.""I'm sure it does. It is the key to the whole mystery. Even her babycould not cheer the poor thing's broken heart. Even the fine house theCaptain built failed to interest her. She pined away and died, and----""And that finished the romance, Louise.""Oh, no; that added to its interest. The boy grew up in this dismalplace and brooded on his mother's wrongs. His stern, sulky old fatherdied suddenly. Was he murdered?" in a low voice; "did the son revengehis mother's wrongs?""Figglepiff, Louise! You're getting theatric--and so early in themorning, too! Want to saddle my new farm with a murder, do you? Well,it's rubbish. Joe Wegg ran away from here to get busy in the world.Major Doyle helped him with my money, in exchange for this farm, whichthe boy was sensible to get rid of--although I'm glad it's now mine. TheMajor liked Joe Wegg, and says he's a clean-cut, fine young feller. He'san inventor, too, even if an unlucky one, and I've no doubt he'll makehis way in the world and become a good citizen."With these words Uncle John arose and sauntered around to the barn, tolook at the litter of new pigs that just then served to interest andamuse him. The girl remained seated upon the grass, her hands claspedover her knee and a look of deep retrospection upon her face.CHAPTER VII.LOUISE SCENTS A MYSTERY.Louise Merrick was the eldest of Uncle John's nieces, having just passedher eighteenth birthday. In the city she was devoted to the requirementsof fashionable society and--urged thereto by her worldly-mindedmother--led a mere butterfly existence. Her two cousins frankly agreedthat Louise was shallow, insincere and inclined to be affected; but ofthe three girls she displayed the most equable and pleasant dispositionand under the most trying circumstances was composed and charming inmanner. For this reason she was an agreeable companion, and men usuallyadmired her graceful figure and her piquant, pretty face with its crownof fluffy blonde hair and winning expression. There was a rumor that shewas engaged to be married to Arthur Weldon, a young man of position inthe city; but Uncle John ignored the possibility of losing one of hischerished nieces and declared that Louise was still too young to thinkof marriage.When away from her frivolous mother and the inconsequent homeenvironments the girl was more unaffected and natural in her ways, andher faults were doubtless more the result of education than ofnatural tendency.One thing was indisputable, however: Louise Merrick was a clever girl,possessing a quick intellect and a keen insight into the character ofothers. Her apparent shallowness was a blind of the same character asher assumed graciousness, and while she would have been more lovablewithout any pretence or sham she could not have been Louise Merrick andallow others to read her as she actually was. Patsy and Beth thoughtthey knew her, and admired or liked rather than loved their cousin.Uncle John thought he knew her, too, and was very proud of his eldestniece in spite of some discovered qualities that were not whollyadmirable.An extensive course of light literature, not void of "detectivestories," had at this moment primed Louise with its influence to theextent of inducing her to scent a mystery in the history of CaptainWegg. The plain folks around Millville might speculate listlessly uponthe "queer doin's" at the farm, and never get anywhere near the truth.Indeed, the strange occurrences she had just heard were nearly forgottenin the community, and soon would be forgotten altogether--unless thequick ear of a young girl had caught the clue so long ignored.At first she scarcely appreciated the importance of the undertaking. Itoccurred to her that an effort to read to the bottom of the seacaptain's romance would be a charming diversion while she resided atMillville, and in undertaking the task she laughingly accused herself ofbecoming an amateur detective--an occupation that promised to bethrilling and delightful.Warned, however, by the rebuff she had met with from Uncle John, thegirl decided not to confide either her suspicions or her proposedinvestigation to anyone for the present, but to keep her own counseluntil she could surprise them all with the denouement or requiredassistance to complete her work.Inspired by the cleverness and fascination of this idea, Louise set towork to tabulate the information she had received thus far, noting the;element of mystery each fact evolved. First, Captain Wegg must have beena rich man in order to build this house, maintain two servants and livefor years in comfort without any income from his barren farm lands. Whatbecame of his money after his death? Why was his only son obliged to flyto the cities in order to obtain a livelihood? Secondly, the Captain, asurly and silent man, had brought hither--perhaps by force--a youngwoman as his wife who was so unhappy that she pined away and died. Whowas this woman? What had rendered her so unhappy and despairing?Thirdly, the Captain's only friend had been a crazy man named WillThompson. Was he crazy before the Captain's death, or had he becomecrazed at that time, some terrible tragedy unhinging his mind?Fourthly, the granddaughter of Thompson, Ethel, and the son of CaptainWegg had been in love with each other, and people expected they wouldmarry in time. But at his father's sudden death the boy fled and lefthis sweetheart without a word. Why--unless something had occurred thatrendered their marriage impossible?In the fifth place there was Old Hucks and his blind wife to beconsidered. What did they know about their old master's secret history?What tragic memories lurked beneath the man's perpetual smile and thewoman's composed and sightless face?Surely there was enough here to excite the curiosity and warrant aneffort to untangle the mystery. And as instruments to the end there wereseveral people available who could be of use to her; McNutt, the agent,who evidently knew more than he had cared to tell; Old Hucks and hiswife and Ethel Thompson, the school-teacher. There might be others, butone or another of these four must know the truth, and it would be herpleasant duty to obtain a full disclosure. So she was anxious to beginher investigations at once.When her uncle returned from his visit to the pigs Louise said to him:"I've been thinking, dear, that we ought to call upon that young ladywho arranged our rooms, and thank her for her kindness.""That's true," he replied."Can't we drive over to Thompson's this morning, Uncle?""Beth and Patsy have planned a tramp to the lake, and a row afterwater-lilies.""Then let us make our call together. We can invite the girl to come hereand spend a day with us, when Patsy and Beth will be able to meet her.""That's a good idea, Louise. I was wondering what I'd do this morning.Tell Old Hucks to get the nag harnessed."The girl ran eagerly upon her errand. Old Hucks seemed surprised, and acurious expression showed for an instant through his smile. But heturned without a word to harness the horse.Louise stood watching him."Your fingers are quite nimble, Thomas, considering the fact that youwere once a sailor," she said."But sailors have to be nimble, miss," he returned, buckling a strapunmoved. "Who tol' ye I were once a sea-farin' man?""I guessed it."As he appeared indisposed to say more on the subject she asked: "Did yousail with Captain Wegg?""Partly, miss. Dan's already now. Don't jerk the bit, fer his mouth'stender an' it makes him balky. Ef he balks jest let him rest a time, an'then speak to him. Dan ain't vicious; he's jest ornery."She climbed into the dilapidated old buggy and took the reins. Dangroaned and ambled slowly around to where Uncle John stood awaitinghis niece."Let me drive, Uncle," she said; "I understand Dan.""Well, I don't," returned Uncle John, in his whimsical way, as hemounted to the seat beside her. "I don't understand how he's happened tolive since the landing of Columbus, or what he's good for, or whysomeone don't knock him on the head."Dan turned his long, lean face as if to give the speaker a reproachfullook; then he groaned again, leaned forward, and drew the buggy slowlyinto the stony lane."Do you know where the Thompsons live?" inquired Uncle John."No. Whoa, Dan!"That was the best thing the nag did. He knew how to whoa."Thomas!" called Uncle John, turning in his seat; and at the summons OldHucks came from the barn and approached them. "How do you get to MissThompson's place?""Miss Ethel's?" Another fleeting expression of surprise."Yes; we're going over to thank her for her kindness to us.""I--I'm 'most sure as she'll be here soon to call, sir. And--perhaps yououghtn't to--to go to--Thompson's," stammered Hucks, glancing up at themwith his bright, elusive smile."Well, we're going, anyhow," growled Mr. Merrick."Then turn left at the main road an' keep straight ahead to Thompson's.Ye can't miss it, sir. Brick schoolhouse on the other corner.""Thank you, Thomas. Drive on, Louise."CHAPTER VIII.THE LITTLE SCHOOL-MA'AM.Dan balked only twice on the journey, but even this moderate rebellionso annoyed Uncle John that he declared he would walk back rather thanride behind this "mulish antiquity" again.When they came to the Thompson dwelling it at first sight seemeddeserted. A knock on the front door failed to produce any response."Perhaps they're away from home," suggested Louise."There's a path around to the back," said Uncle John. "Let's explore inthat direction."They made their way leisurely toward the rear and had almost passed thehouse, when a deep roar broke the stillness. It was succeeded byanother, and another, like the bellowing of a mad bull, and theintruders stopped short and Louise clung to her uncle in sudden panic."Be still, Will! Stop, I say--stop!"A sharp crack, as of a lash, accompanied the words, and a moan or twowas followed by absolute silence.Uncle John and Louise looked at one another with startled eyes."He must be worse," said the old gentleman, mopping his forehead with ahandkerchief.With one accord they started softly to retrace their steps when a newsound halted them again. It was a clear, fresh young voice singing aplaintive ditty in a nonchalant, careless tone."That's Ethel, I'm sure," exclaimed Louise, grasping her uncle's arm."Well, what shall we do?" he demanded."Mr.--the crazy man seems quiet now," she whispered. "Let us find thegirl, if we can."So again they traversed the path and this time came to the pretty gardenbehind the house. Ethel was tending a flower bed. She wore her ginghamdress and a sunbonnet, and, kneeling in the path, stretched out her slimbrown arm to uproot the weeds. But the crunching of the gravel arousedher attention, and, observing her visitors, she sprang up and hastenedtoward them.Louise introduced her uncle and herself in her most pleasant andgracious way, and the school teacher led them to a garden bench andbegged them to be seated."The day is lovely," she said, "and I always find my garden morecheerful than the house. Grandfather's illness makes the houseunpleasant for strangers, too."Louise was surprised at this frank reference, and Uncle John coughed tohide his embarrassment."I--I hope the invalid is--is improving," he said, doubtful whether heshould say anything on the delicate subject or not."He is always the same, sir," was the quiet response. "I suppose theyhave told you that grandfather is a madman? Our great trouble is wellknown in this neighborhood.""He is not dangerous. I suppose?" hazarded Uncle John, remembering thebrutal bellowing."Oh, not at all. He is fully paralyzed from his waist down, poorgrandfather, and can do no harm to anyone. But often his outbreaks areunpleasant to listen to," continued the girl, deprecatingly, as ifsuddenly conscious that they had overheard the recent uproar."Has he been--this way--for long?" inquired Louise."His mind has been erratic and unbalanced since I can remember,"answered Ethel, calmly, "but he first became violent at the time CaptainWegg died, some three years ago. Grandfather was very fond of theCaptain, and happened to be with him at the time of his sudden death.The shock drove him mad.""Was he paralyzed before that time?" asked Louise, earnestly."No; but the paralysis followed almost immediately. The doctor says thata blood vessel which burst in the brain is responsible for bothafflictions."The pause that followed was growing awkward when Uncle John said, withan evident effort to change the subject:"This is a fine old homestead.""It is, indeed," responded Ethel, brightly, "and it enjoys thedistinction of being one of the first houses built in the foothills. Mygreat-grandfather was really the first settler in these parts andoriginally located his cabin where the mill now stands. 'Little BillThompson,' he was called, for he was a small, wiry man--very differentfrom grandfather, who in his prime was a powerful man of over six feet.Little Bill Hill and Little Bill Creek were named after this pioneergreat-grandsire, who was quite successful raising flocks of sheep on theplateau. Before he died he built this house, preferring the location tohis first one.""The garden is beautiful," said Louise, enthusiastically. "And do youteach in the little brick school-house across the way?""Yes. Grandfather built it years ago, without dreaming I would everteach there. Now the county supports the school and pays me my salary.""How long have you taught?""For two years. It is necessary, now that grandfather is disabled. Hehas a small income remaining, however, and with what I earn we get alongvery nicely.""It was very good of you to assist in getting our house ready for us,"said Louise. "We might have found things in sorry condition but for yourkindness.""Oh, I enjoyed the work, I assure you," replied Ethel. "As it is myvacation, it was a real pleasure to me to have something to do. But Ifear my arrangement of your pretty furniture was very ungraceful.""We haven't altered a single thing," declared Louise. "You must havefound it a tedious task, unpacking and getting everything in shape.""Tom and Nora were good help, because they are fond of me and seem tounderstand my wishes; and Peggy McNutt brought me some men to do thelifting and rough work," explained Ethel."Have you known Hucks and his wife long?" asked Uncle John."Since I can remember, sir. They came here many years ago, with CaptainWegg.""And has Thomas always smiled?" Louise inquired."Always," was the laughing reply. "It's an odd expression--isn't it?--todwell forever on a man's face. But Tom is never angry, or hurt orexcited by anything, so there is no reason he should not smile. At thetime of Captain Wegg's death and poor grandfather's terrible affliction,Old Hucks kept right on smiling, the same as ever; and perhaps hispleasant face helped to cheer us all."Louise drew a long breath."Then the smile is a mask," she said, "and is assumed to conceal theman's real feelings.""I do not think so," Ethel answered, thoughtfully. "The smile ishabitual, and dominates any other expression his features might becapable of; but that it is assumed I do not believe. Thomas is asimple-minded, honest-hearted old fellow, and to face the worldsmilingly is a part of his religion. I am sure he has nothing toconceal, and his devotion to his blind wife is very beautiful.""But Nora--how long has she been blind?""Perhaps all her life; I cannot tell how long. Yet it is wonderful howperfectly she finds her way without the aid of sight. Captain Wegg usedto say she was the best housekeeper he ever knew.""Did not his wife keep house for him, when she was alive?""I do not remember her.""They say she was most unhappy."Ethel dropped her eyes and did not reply."How about Cap'n Wegg?" asked Uncle John. "Did you like him? You see,we're mighty curious about the family, because we've acquired their oldhome, and are bound to be interested in the people that used tolive there.""That is natural," remarked the little school teacher, with a sigh."Captain Wegg was always kind to me; but the neighbors as a rule thoughthim moody and bad-tempered." After a pause she added: "He was not askind to his son as to me. But I think his life was an unhappy one, andwe have no right to reprove his memory too severely for his faults.""What made him unhappy?" asked Louise, quickly.Ethel smiled into her eager face."No one has solved that problem, they say. The Captain was as silent ashe was morose."The detective instinct was alive in Louise. She hazarded a startlingquery:"Who killed Captain Wegg?" she demanded, suddenly.Another smile preceded the reply."A dreadful foe called heart disease. But come; let me show you mygarden. There are no such roses as these for miles around."Louise was confident she had made progress. Ethel had admitted severalthings that lent countenance to the suspicions already aroused; butperhaps this simple country girl had never imagined the tragedy that hadbeen enacted at her very door.She cordially urged Ethel Thompson to spend a day with them at the farm,and Uncle John, who was pleased with the modesty and frankness of thefair-haired little school teacher, earnestly seconded the invitation.Then he thought of going home, and the thought reminded him of Dan."Do you know," he inquired, "where I could buy a decent horse?"The girl looked thoughtful a moment; then glanced up with a brightsmile."Will you buy one off me?" she asked."Willingly, my dear, if you've an animal to sell.""It's--it's our Joe. He was grandfather's favorite colt when his troublecame upon him. We have no use for him now, for I always ride or drive mypony. And grandmother says he's eating his head off to no purpose; sowe'd like to sell him. If you will come to the barn I'll introduceyou to him."Joe proved on inspection to be an excellent horse, if appearances wereto be trusted, and Ethel assured Mr. Merrick that the steed was bothgentle and intelligent."Do you use that surrey?" inquired Uncle John, pointing to a neatvehicle that seemed to be nearly new."Very seldom, sir. Grandmother would like to sell it with the horse.""It's exactly what I need," declared Mr. Merrick. "How much for Joe andhis harness, and the surrey?""I'll go and ask what grandmother wants."She returned after a few minutes, stating a figure that made Uncle Johnlift his brows with a comical expression."A hundred dollars! Do you take me for a brigand, little girl? I knowwhat horses are worth, for I've bought plenty of 'em. Your Joe seemssound as a dollar, and he's just in his prime. A hundred and fifty isdirt cheap for him, and the surrey will be worth at least seventy-five.Put in the harness at twenty-five, and I'll give you two-fifty for theoutfit, and not a cent more or less. Eh?""No, indeed," said Ethel. "We could not get more than a hundred dollarsfrom anyone else around here.""Because your neighbors are countrymen, and can't afford a properinvestment. So when they buy at all they only give about half what athing is actually worth. But I'll be honest with you. The price I offeris a good deal less than I'd have to pay in the city--Hutchinson wouldcharge me five hundred, at least--and I need just what you've got tosell. What do you say, Miss Ethel?""The price is one hundred dollars, Mr. Merrick.""I won't pay it. Let me talk with your grandmother.""She does not see anyone, sir."Louise looked up sharply, scenting another clue."Isn't she well, dear?" she asked in smooth tones."She looks after grandfather, and helps Aunt Lucy with the housework.""Well, come, Louise; we'll go home," said Uncle John, sadly. "I'd hopedto be able to drive this fine fellow back, but Dan'll have to groan an'balk all the way to the farm."Ethel smiled."Better buy at my price, Mr. Merrick," she suggested."Tell you what I'll do," he said, pausing. "I'll split the difference.Take two hundred and well call it a bargain.""But I cannot do that, sir.""It will help pay you for the hard work of fixing up the house," herejoined, pleadingly. "Your bill wasn't half enough.""My bill?" wonderingly."The one I paid McNutt for your services.""I made no charge, sir. I could not accept anything for a bit ofassistance to a neighbor.""Oh! Then McNutt got it, did he?""I'm awfully sorry, Mr. Merrick. I told Peggy I would not acceptpayment.""H-m. Never mind. We're not going to quarrel, little neighbor. May Ihitch Joe to the surrey?""If you like. I'll help you."Uncle John led Joe from his stall and together they harnessed the horseto the surrey. The girl knew better than the man how to buckle thestraps properly, while Louise stood by helplessly and watched theperformance.Then Uncle John went for old Dan, whom he led, rickety buggy and all,into the Thompson stable."I'll send Hucks over to get him, although we might as well knock him inthe head," he said as he unharnessed the ancient steed. "Now then,Louise, hop in.""You'll be sure to come over Thursday, for the day, Miss Thompson?"asked Louise, taking Joe's reins from her uncle's hands."I'll not forget such a delightful engagement, be sure."Uncle John had his pocketbook out, and now he wadded up some bills andthrust them into the little school teacher's hand."Drive ahead, Louise," he called. "Good morning, my dear. See you onThursday."As the vehicle rolled out of the yard and turned into the highway, Ethelunrolled the bills with trembling fingers."If he has dared--!" she began, but paused abruptly with a smile ofcontent.The rich man had given her exactly one hundred dollars.CHAPTER IX.THE LIVES OF THE SAINTS.On Wednesday afternoon McNutt drove the sad-eyed sorrel mare over to theWegg farm again. He had been racking his brain for a way to get moremoney out of the nabob, for the idea had become a veritable passion withhim and now occupied all his thoughts.That very morning an inspiration had come to him. Among otheroccupations he had at one time adopted that of a book-agent, and by dintof persistent energy had sold numerous copies of "Radford's Lives of theSaints" to the surrounding farmers. They had cost him ninety cents acopy and he had sold them at three dollars each, netting a fine profitin return for his labor. The books were printed upon cheap paper,fearfully illustrated with blurred cuts, but the covers were bound inbright red with gold lettering. Through misunderstandings three of thesecopies had come back to him, the subscribers refusing to accept them;and so thorough had been his canvassing that there remained no otheravailable customers for the saintly works. So Peggy had kept them on ashelf in his "office" for several years, and now, when his eye chancedto light upon them, he gave a snort of triumph and pounced upon themeagerly. Mr. Merrick was a newcomer. Without doubt he could be inducedto buy a copy of Radford's Lives.An hour later McNutt was on his mission, the three copies, which hadbeen carefully dusted, reclining on the buggy seat beside him. Arrivedat the Wegg farm, he drove up to the stile and alighted.Louise was reading in the hammock, and merely glanced at the little man,who solemnly stumped around to the back door with the three red volumestucked underneath his arm. He had brought them all along to make hiserrand "look like business.""Where's the nabob?" he asked blind Nora."What's that, Mr. McNutt?" she inquired, as if puzzled. She knew hisvoice, as she did that of nearly everyone with whom she had ever beenbrought in contact."Why, the nabob; the boss; Mr. Merrick.""Oh. He's in the barn with Tom, I guess."McNutt entered the barn. Uncle John was seated upon an overturned pailwatching Old Hucks oil Joe's harness. The agent approached him with adeferential bow."Sir," said he, "you'll 'scuse my comin' agin so soon to be a-botherin';but I hev here three copies of Radford's famis wucks on the Lives o' theSaints, in a edishun dee looks----""A what?""A edishun dee looks, which means extry fine. It's a great book an'they's all out'n print 'cept these three, which I hain't no doubt manyfolks would be glad to give their weight in gold fer, an' some over.""Stand out of the light, McNutt."The agent shifted his position."Them books, sir----""Oh, take 'em away.""What!""I don't read novels."McNutt scratched his head, perplexed at the rebuff. His "dee looks"speech had usually resulted in a sale. An idea flashed across hisbrain--perhaps evolved by the scratching."The young lady, sir--""Oh, the girls are loaded with books," growled the nabob.The agent became desperate."But the young lady in the hammick, sir, as I jest now left, says totell ye she wants one o' these books mighty bad, an' hopes you'll buy itfor her eddificationing.""Oh; she does, eh?""Mighty bad, sir."Uncle John watched Thomas polish a buckle."Is it a moral work?" he asked."Nuthin' could be moraler, sir. All 'bout the lives o'--""How much is it?""Comes pretty high, sir. Three dollars. But it's--""Here. Take your money and get out. You're interrupting me.""Very sorry, sir. Much obleeged, sir. Where'll I leave the book?""Throw it in the manger."McNutt selected a volume that had a broken corner and laid it carefullyon the edge of the oat-bin. Then he put his money in his pocket andturned away."Morn'n' to ye, Mr. Merrick.""Stop a bit," said Uncle John, suddenly.The agent stopped."I believe I paid you ten dollars for Miss Ethel Thompson's services. Isthat correct?""Ye--yes, Mr. Merrick."McNutt's heart was in his shoes and he looked guiltily at his accuser,the pale blue eyes bulging fearfully."Very well; see that she gets it.""Of course, Mr. Merrick.""And at once. You may go."McNutt stumped from the barn. He felt that a dreadful catastrophe hadovertaken him. Scarcely could he restrain the impulse to sob aloud. Tendollars!--Ten dollars gone to the dogs as the result of his visit to thenabob that morning! To lose ten dollars in order to gain three was verybad business policy. McNutt reflected bitterly that he would have beenbetter off had he stayed at home. He ought to have been contented withwhat he had already made, and the severe manner the nabob had used inaddressing him told the agent plainly that he need not expect furtherpickings from this source.In the midst of his despair the comforting thought that Ethel wouldsurely refuse the money came to sustain him; so he recovered somewhathis former spirits. As he turned the corner of the house he observedLouise still reading in the hammock.In some ways McNutt was a genius. He did not neglect opportunities."Here's my las' chance at these idjits," he muttered, "an' I'll learnthet nabob what it costs, to make Marsh McNutt stand out'n his light."Then he hastened over to the hammock."'Scuse me, miss," said he, in his most ingratiating voice. "Is yeruncle 'round anywheres?""Isn't he in the barn?" asked the girl, looking up."Can't find him, high ner low. But he ordered a book of me t'otherday--'Radford's Lives o' the Saints'--an' perhaps you'll take it an' payme the money, so's I kin go home."Louise gazed at the man musingly. He was one of the people she intendedto pump for information concerning the mystery of Captain Wegg, and shemust be gracious to him in order to win his good-will and induce him tospeak freely. With this thought in mind she drew out her purseand asked:"How much were you to be paid for the book?""Three dollars, miss.""Here is the money, then. Tell me--your name is McNutt, isn't it?--howlong have you lived in this place?""All my life, miss. Thank 'e, miss. Good day to ye, miss."He placed the book in the hammock beside her."Don't go, please." said the girl. "I'd like you to tell me somethingabout Captain Wegg, and of his poor wife who died, and--""Nuther time, miss, I'll be glad to. Ye'll find me in my orfice, anytime. Jest now I'm in the dumdest hurry ye ever knew. Good day to ye,miss," he repeated, and stumped quickly to the buggy awaiting him. Nextmoment he had seized the reins and was urging the sorrel mare along thestony lane at her best pace.Louise was both astonished and disappointed, but after a little thoughtshe looked after the departing agent with a shrewd smile."He's afraid to talk," she murmured, "and that only confirms mysuspicions that he knows more than he cares to tell."Meantime McNutt was doing his best to get away from the premises beforethe discovery was made that he had sold two "Lives of the Saints" to onefamily. That there might be future consequences to follow his deceptionnever occurred to him; only the immediate necessity for escapeoccupied his mind.Nor were his fears altogether groundless. Turning his head from time totime for a glance behind, he had seen Mr. Merrick come from the barnwith a red book in his hand and approach the hammock, whereupon theyoung lady arose and exhibited a second book. Then they both dropped thebooks and ran into the lane and began shouting for him to stop--theman's voice sounding especially indignant and imperative.But McNutt chose to be deaf. He did not look around again, and wascongratulating himself that he would soon be out of earshot when asudden apparition ahead caused the mare to halt abruptly. It also causedthe cold chills to run down the agent's back. Beth and Patsy had steppedinto the lane from a field, being on their way home from theirdaily walk."They're calling to you, sir," said Patsy to the agent. "Didn't you hearthem?""I--I'm a little deaf, miss," stammered McNutt, who recognized the youngladies as Mr. Merrick's nieces."I think they wish you to go back," remarked Beth, thoughtfully watchingthe frantic waves of Uncle John's chubby arms and Louise's energeticbeckonings. They were too far off to be heard plainly, but their actionsmight surely be understood.McNutt with reluctance looked over his shoulder, and a second shudderwent through him."I hain't got time to go back," he said, as an inspiration came to him;"but I guess you kin do jest as well. This book here," picking up thelast of the three from the seat, "I offered to sell yer uncle fer fivedollars; but he wanted it fer four. I ain't no haggler, you understan',so I jest driv away. Now Mr. Merrick has changed his mind an' is willin'to give five fer it; but there ain't nuthin' small about me. Ef yougals'll jest give me the four dollars ye kin take the book to yer uncle,with my compliments; an' I won't hev t' go back. I'm in adrea'ful hurry."Patsy laughed at the little man's excited manner."Fortunately I have some money with me," she said; "but you may as welltake the five dollars, for unless Uncle had been willing to pay it hewould not have called you back.""I think so, myself, miss," he rejoined, taking the money and handingher the volume.Uncle John and Louise, glaring at the distant group, saw the third redbook change hands, and in answer to their renewed cries and gesturesPatsy waved the "Lives of the Saints" at them reassuringly and came onat a brisk walk, followed by Beth.McNutt slapped the sorrel with the ends of the reins so energeticallythat the mare broke into a trot, and before the girls had come withinspeaking distance of their uncle, the agent was well out of sight andexulting in the possession of eleven dollars to pay for his morning'swork. Even if Ethel accepted that ten, he reflected, he would still be adollar ahead. But he was sure she would tell him to keep it; and he'd"jest like to see thet air nabob git a penny back agin."Meantime Uncle John's wrath, which was always an effervescent qualitywith the little gentleman, had changed to wonder when he saw his niecesapproaching with the third red-and-gold book. Louise was leaning againstthe rail fence and laughing hysterically, and suddenly a merry smileappeared and spread over her uncle's round face as he said:"Did you ever hear of such an audacious swindle in all your born days?""What will you do, Uncle?" asked the girl, wiping the tears of merrimentfrom her eyes. "Have the man arrested?""Of course not, my dear. It's worth the money just to learn what talentsthe fellow possesses. Tell me, Patsy," he continued, as the other niecesjoined them, "what did you pay for your book?""Five dollars. Uncle. He said--""Never mind what he said, my dear. It's all right. I wanted it to add tomy collection. So far I've got three 'Lives of the Saints'--and I'mthankful they're not cats, or there'd be nine lives for me toaccumulate."CHAPTER X.THE MYSTERY DEEPENS.Ethel Thompson came over the next day, as she had promised, and thesweet-faced, gentle school-mistress won the hearts of Uncle John's threenieces without an effort. She was the eldest of them all, but herretired country life had kept her fresh and natural, and Ethel seemed nomore mature than the younger girls except in a certain gravity thatearly responsibility had thrust upon her.Together the four laughing, light-hearted maids wandered through thepines, where the little school-ma'am showed them many pretty nooks andmossy banks that the others had not yet discovered. By following anunsuspected path, they cut across the wooded hills to the waterfall,where Little Bill Creek made a plunge of twenty feet into a rocky basinbelow. In spite of the bubbles, the water here showed clear as crystal,and the girls admiringly christened it the "Champagne Cup." They shedtheir shoes and stockings and waded in the pool, enjoying the sport withshrieks of merry laughter--more because they were happy than that therewas anything to laugh at.Afterward they traced the stream down to a lovely glade a half mileabove Millville, where Ethel informed them the annual Sunday-schoolpicnic was always held, and then trailed across the rocky plateau to thefarm. By the time they reached home their appetites were well sharpenedfor Mary's excellent luncheon, and the afternoon was devoted to restunder the shady pines that grew beside the house.It was now, when they felt thoroughly acquainted and at ease in oneanother's society, that the girls indulged in talks concerning events intheir past, and Ethel was greatly interested in the nieces' recital oftheir recent trip abroad with Uncle John. They also spoke frankly oftheir old life together at Elmhurst, where Aunt Jane, who was UncleJohn's sister, had congregated her three nieces for the purpose ofchoosing from among them one to inherit her vast estates. It seemed nosource of regret to any of them that a boy, Kenneth Forbes, had finallysucceeded to Aunt Jane's property, and this may be explained by the factthat Uncle John had at that interesting juncture appeared to take chargeof the nieces. It was quite evident that the eccentric but kindly oldfellow had succeeded in making these three girls as happy as theirdispositions would allow them to be.After the most interesting phases of their personal history had beendiscussed, the nieces began, perhaps unconsciously, to draw from Ethelher own story. It was simple enough, and derived its interest mainlyfrom the fact that it concerned their new friend. Her parents had bothpassed away while she was young, and Ethel had always lived with herfather's father, big Will Thompson, a man reputed very well-to-do forthis section, and an energetic farmer from his youth.Old Will had always been accused of being unsociable and consideringhimself above the neighboring farmers; and it was true that Bob West,the implement dealer, was his only associate before Captain Weggarrived. A casual acquaintance with the Millville people might easilyexplain this.With the advent of the Weggs, however, a strong friendship seemed tospring up between the retired sea captain and the bluff, erratic oldfarmer, which lasted until the fatal day when one died and the otherbecame a paralytic and a maniac."We have always thought," said Ethel, "that the shock of the Captain'sdeath unsettled my grandfather's mind. They had been sitting quietly inCaptain Wegg's room one evening, as they were accustomed to do, whenthere was a sudden fall and a cry. Thomas ran in at once, and foundgrandfather raving over the Captain's dead body. The old seaman hadheart disease, it seems, and had often declared he would die suddenly.It was a great blow to us all, but especially to Joe."Her voice softened at this last remark, and Patsy exclaimed,impulsively:"Tell us about Joe Wegg. Did you like him?""Yes," said Ethel, simply; "we were naturally thrown much together inour childhood, and became staunch friends. Grandpa often took me withhim on his visits to the Weggs, and sometimes, but not often, theCaptain would bring Joe to see us. He was a quiet, thoughtful boy; muchlike his mother, I imagine; but for some reason he had conceived anintense dislike for his father and an open hatred for this part of thecountry, where he was born. Aside from these morbid notions, Joe washealthy-minded and frank and genuine. Had he been educated in any otheratmosphere than the gloomy one of the Wegg household I am sure Joe'scharacter would have been wholly admirable, and I have never blamed theboy much for his peculiarities. Captain Wegg would not permit him to goto school, but himself attended to such instructions as Joe couldacquire at home, and this was so meager and the boy so ambitious that Ithink it was one cause of his discontent. I remember, when I was sent toschool at Troy, that Joe sobbed for days because he could not have thesame advantages. He used to tell me wonderful stories of what he wouldaccomplish if he could only get out into the world."When he implored his father to let him go away, Captain Wegg used toassure Joe that he would some day be rich, and there was no need of hispreparing himself for either a business or a profession; but that didnot satisfy Joe's ambition, as you may imagine. And, when the end came,scarcely a dollar of money could be found among the Captain'spossessions, and no other property than this farm; so it is evident hedeceived his son for some selfish purpose."Joe was at last free, and the only thing I reproach him for is goingaway without a word to me or any of his friends. I heard, indirectly, ofhis working his way through a technical school, for he was always crazyabout mechanics, and then he went to New York and I lost all furthertrace of him.""What do you suppose became of Captain Wegg's money?" asked Louise."I've no idea. It is a singular thing that most of my grandfather'ssavings disappeared at the same time. On account of his mental conditionhe can never tell us what became of his little fortune; but luckily thereturns from the farm, which we rent on shares, and my own salary asteacher of the district school, enable us to live quite comfortably,although we must be economical.""Why, it's really a romance!" cried Patsy, who had listened eagerly."There are many romances in real life," added Beth, in herundemonstrative way.Louise said nothing, but her heart was throbbing with excitementengendered by the tale, which so strongly corroborated the suspicionsshe had begun to entertain. When Ethel had gone home Louise stilldeliberated upon this fascinating mystery, and her resolve grew to forcesome sort of an explanation from the smiling lips of Old Hucks. For thesole available witness of that fatal night's tragedy, when one strongman died and another was driven mad, was Thomas Hucks. The old servitorwas also in a position to know much of the causes leading up to thecatastrophe, he having been the confidential retainer of Captain Weggfor many years. Hucks must speak; but the girl was wise enough torealize that he would not do so unless urged by coaxing or forced bystrategy. There was doubtless good reason why the old man had remainedsilent for three years. Her plan was to win his confidence. Interest himin Joe's welfare, and then the truth must come out.The frankly related story of Ethel had supplied Louise with the motivefor the crime, for that a crime had been committed she was now doublysure. Captain Wegg had money; old Will Thompson had money; both werewell-to-do men. In a retired country district, where there were nobanks, it was reasonable to suppose they kept large sums of money onhand, and the knowledge of this fact had tempted some one to a dreadfuldeed. Captain Wegg had been killed and old Thompson perhaps injured by ablow upon the head from which he had never recovered. Any suspicion thefair young detective may have entertained that Thompson himself hadkilled his friend was eradicated by the fact that he had been robbed atthe same time.Louise had originally undertaken her investigation through curiosity anda desire to amuse herself by unveiling the mystery. Now she began toreflect that she was an instrument of justice, for a discovery of thetruth might restore a fortune to poor Joe Wegg, now struggling with theworld, and put sweet Ethel Thompson in a position where the necessityfor her to teach school would be abolished. This thought added a strongimpulse to her determination to succeed.Sunday afternoon the girl took blind Nora for a long drive through thecountry, taking pains to explain to her all the points of interest theycame to, and delighting the old woman with her bright chatter. Louisehad been kind to Nora from the beginning, and her soft, sympatheticvoice had quite won the poor creature's heart.On the way home, in the delightful summer twilight, the girl dexterouslyled the conversation toward Nora's past history."Was Thomas a sailor when you married him?" she asked."Yes, miss. He were bos'n on Cap'n Wegg's schooner the 'Lively Kate,'an' I were livin' with Miss Mary, as come to be Mrs. Wegg arterward.""Oh, I see. And were you blind then, Nora?""No, miss. I went blind arter our great trouble come to us.""Trouble? Oh, I'm so sorry, dear. What was it?"The old woman was silent for a time. Then she said:"I'd better not mention it, I guess. Thomas likes to forgit, an' when Igets cryin' an' nervous he knows I've been thinkin' 'bout theold trouble."Louise was disappointed, but changed the subject adroitly."And Miss Mary, who was afterward Mrs. Wegg. Did you love her, Nora?""Indeed I did, child.""What was she like?""She were gentle, an' sweet, an' the mos' beautiful creetur inall--in--in the place where we lived. An' her fambily was that proud an'aristocratic thet no one could tech 'em with a ten-foot pole.""I see. Did she love Captain Wegg?""Nat'rally, sense she married of him, an' fit all her fambily to do it.An' the Cap'n were thet proud o' her thet he thought the world lay inher sweet eyes.""Oh. I had an idea he didn't treat her well," remarked the girl,soberly."That's wrong," declared Nora, promptly. "Arter the trouble come--fer itcome to the Weggs as well as to Tom an' me--the Cap'n sort o' lost heartto see his Mary cry day arter day an' never be comforted. He were hardhit himself, ye see, an' that made it a gloomy house, an' no mistake.""Do you mean after you moved here, to the farm?""Yes, deary.""I hear Captain Wegg was very fond of Ethel's grandfather," continuedLouise, trying to find an opening to penetrate old Nora's reserve."They was good friends always," was the brief reply."Did they ever quarrel, Nora?""Never that I knows of.""And what do you suppose became of their money?" asked the girl."I don't know, child. Air we gettin' near home?""We are quite near, now. I wish you would open your heart to me, andtell me about that great trouble, Nora. I might be able to comfort youin some way."The blind woman shook her head."There's no comfort but in forgettin'," she said; "an' the way to forgitain't to talk about it."The unsatisfactory result of this conversation did not discourageLouise, although she was sorry to meet with no better success. Graduallyshe was learning the inside history of the Weggs. When she discoveredwhat that "great trouble" had been she would secure an important clue inthe mystery, she was sure. Nora might some time be induced to speak morefreely, and it was possible she might get the desired information fromOld Hucks. She would try, anyway.A dozen theories might be constructed to account for this "greattrouble." The one that Louise finally favored was that Captain Wegg hadbeen guilty of some crime on the high seas in which his boatswain, OldHucks, was likewise implicated. They were obliged to abandon the sea andfly to some out-of-the-way corner inland, where they could be safelyhidden and their whereabouts never discovered. It was the knowledge ofthis crime, she conjectured, that had ruined sweet Mrs. Wegg's life andmade her weep day after day until her guilty husband became surly andsilent and unsociable.Louise now began to cultivate Thomas, but her progress was slow. Patsyseemed to be the old man's favorite, and for some reason he became glumand uncommunicative whenever Louise was around. The girl suspected thatNora had told her husband of the recent conversation, in spite of herassertion that she wished to avoid all reference to their great trouble.CHAPTER XI.THREE AMATEUR DETECTIVES.Puzzling her brain what to do next, Louise suddenly decided to confideher secret to her two cousins. Not that she considered them capable of agreater success than she could herself accomplish, but they might provevaluable assistants in the capacity of lieutenants. She had greatrespect for Beth's calm judgment and keen intuitions, and Patsy had away of accomplishing difficult things with ease.The two girls listened to Louise with expressions of mingled wonder andamusement while she confided to them her first suspicions that CaptainWegg had been murdered, and then the bits of information she hadgathered to strengthen the surmise and assure her she was justified inher efforts to untangle the web of mystery."You see, my dears," she explained, impressively, as the three loungedupon the grass in the shade of the right wing of the house, "there is avery interesting story about these people that ought to guide usdirectly to a solution of the puzzle. A roving sea captain marries agirl of good family in spite of the opposition of her relatives. Hisboatswain, a confidential servant, marries the girl's maid. The nextthing we know is that a 'great trouble' causes them to flee--doubtlesssome crime committed by the captain. It may have been robbery, orperhaps piracy on the high seas; who knows? Anyhow, he steals away tothis forsaken spot, far from the sea or the railroads, and builds a finehouse on a worthless farm, showing that he has money, but thatretirement is his main object. Here the Weggs make no friends: but thewife cries her eyes out until she dies miserably, leaving a son to thetender mercies of a wicked father. So fearful is he of discovery that hewill not allow the boy to go to school, but tries to educatehim himself.""Probably the captain's real name was not Wegg, at all," suggestedPatsy, entering into the spirit of the relation."Probably not, dear. He would assume some name, of course, so that itmight be more difficult to trace him," answered Louise. "But now--markme well, girls!--a Nemesis was on the track of this wicked sinner. Aftermany years the man Captain Wegg had wronged, or stolen from, orsomething, discovered his enemy's hiding place. He promptly killed theCaptain, and probably recovered the money, for it's gone. Old Thompson,Ethel's grandfather, happened to be present. The murderer also took hismoney, and--""Oh, Louise! That isn't reasonable," objected Beth, who had beenfollowing the story carefully."Why not?""Because you are making the wronged party as wicked as the man whowronged him. When the avenger found his enemy he might force him to giveup his ill-gotten gains; I agree with you there; but he wouldn't beliable to rob old Thompson, I'm sure.""Beth is right," said Patsy, stoutly."But old Thompson lost his money at the same time, you know; at leasthis money could never be found afterward. And I'm sure he was dealt someblow on the head that made him crazy," answered Louise, positively.They thought that over."I believe I can explain it, girls," said Beth, presently. "The avengerfound Captain Wegg, all right--just as Louise has said--and when hefound him he demanded a restitution of his money, threatening to sendthe criminal to jail. That would be very natural, wouldn't it? Well,Captain Wegg had spent a good deal of the money, and couldn't pay it allback; so Ethel's grandfather, being his friend, offered to makeup thebalance himself rather than see his friend go to prison. That accountsfor the disappearance of all the money.""If that is so," observed Patsy, "I don't see why the man, having gothis money back, should murder one and knock the other on the head."It way a puzzle, they all acknowledged, and after discussing the matterfrom every conceivable standpoint they were no nearer an explanation.That's the way with mysteries; they're often hard to understand."The only thing that occurs to me as being sensible," said Louise,finally, "is that after the money was paid over they got into a quarrel.Then the avenger lost his temper and committed the murders.""This talk about an avenger is all guess work," asserted Beth, calmly."I don't believe the facts point to an avenger at all.""But the old crime--the great trouble--""Oh, we'll allow all that," returned Beth; "and I don't say that anavenger wouldn't be the nicest person to exact retribution from thewicked captain. But avengers don't always turn up, in real life, whenthey ought to, girls; so we mustn't be too sure that one turned up inthis case.""But now else can you account for the captain's murder?" objectedLouise."Well, some one else might know he had money, and that Ethel'sgrandfather had money, too," was the reply. "Suppose the robbery andmurder had nothing to do with the old crime at all, but that themurderer knew this to be a deserted place where he could make a goodhaul without being discovered. The two old men sat in the right wing,quite unsuspicious, when----""When in walks Mr. Murderer, chokes the captain, knocks his friend onthe brain-box, and makes off with the money!" continued Patsy,gleefully. "Oh, girls, I'm sure we've got it right this time."Louise reflected a moment."This country is almost a wilderness," she mused, aloud, "and fewstrangers ever come here. Besides, a stranger would not know positivelythat these two men had money. If we abandon the idea of an avenger, andfollow Beth's clue, then the murderer is still right here in Millville,and unsuspected by any of his neighbors.""Oh, Louise!" with startled glances over their shoulders."Let us be sensible, reasoning girls; not silly things trying to figureout possible romances," continued Louise, with a pretty and impressiveassumption of dignity. "Do you know, I feel that some angel ofretribution has guided us to this lonely farmhouse and put the idea intomy head to discover and expose a dreadful crime.""Succotash!" cried Patsy, irrelevantly. "You're romancing this minute,Louise. The way you figure things out I wouldn't be surprised if youaccused me, or Uncle John, any time during the next half hour. Adoptingyour last supposition, for the sake of argument, I'm interested to knowwhat inhabitant of sleepy old Millville you suspect.""Don't get flighty, Patricia," admonished Beth. "This is a seriousmatter, and Louise is in earnest. If we're going to help her we mustn'ttalk rubbish. Now, it isn't a bad suggestion that we ought to looknearer home for the key to this mystery. There's old Hucks.""Hucks!""To be sure. No one knew so well as he the money affairs of the two menwho were robbed.""I'm ashamed of you," said Patsy."And the man's smile is a mask!" exclaimed Louise."Oh, no!" protested Patsy."My dear, no person who ever lived could smile every minute, winter andsummer, rain or shine, day and night, and always have a reason forthe smile.""Of course not," agreed Beth. "Old Hucks is a curious character. Irealized that when I had known him five minutes.""But he's poor," urged Patsy, in defense of the old man. "He hasn't apenny in the world, and McNutt told me if we turned Thomas and Nora awaythey'd have to go to the poorhouse.""That is no argument at all," said Louise, calmly. "If we consider thefact that Old Hucks may be a miser, and have a craving for money withoutany desire to spend it, then we are pretty close to a reason why heshould bide his time and then murder his old master to obtain the richeshe coveted. Mind you, I don't say Hucks is guilty, but it is our duty toconsider this phase of the question.""And then," added Beth, "if Hucks should prove to be a miser, it is easyto guess he would hide his wealth where he could secretly gloat over it,and still continue to pose as a pauper.""I don't believe it," said Patsy, stoutly."You'll never make a successful detective if you allow your personalfeelings to influence you," returned Louise. "I, too, sincerely hopethat Thomas is innocent; but we are not justified in acquitting himuntil we have made a careful investigation and watched his actions.""I'm quite sure he's connected with the mystery in some way," said Beth."It will do no harm to watch Old Hucks, as Louise suggests.""And you might try to pump him, Patsy, and see if you can get him totalk of the murder. Some careless remark might give us just the clue weneed and guide us to the real criminal. That would free Thomas from allsuspicion, you see.""But why do you ask me to do this?" demanded Patsy. "Thomas and I aregood friends, and I'd feel like a traitor to try to get him to confessa murder.""If he is innocent, you have done no harm," said her eldest cousin; "andif he is guilty you don't want him for your friend.""He likes you, dear," added Beth, "and perhaps he will tell you franklyall we want to know. There's another person, though, Louise, who mighttell us something.""Who is that?""The little man with the golf-ball eyes; McNutt.""Now, there's some sense in suspecting him," exclaimed Patsy. "We knowhe's a robber, already, and a man who is clever enough to sell UncleJohn three 'Lives of the Saints' would stick at nothing, I'm sure.""He hasn't enough courage to commit a great crime," observed Beth."But he may be able to give us some information," Louise asserted; "so Ipropose we walk over to the town tomorrow morning and interview him."This was promptly agreed to, for even Patsy, the least enthusiasticdetective of the three, was eager to find some sort of a solution of theWegg mystery. Meantime they decided to watch Old Hucks very carefully.Beth happened to be present when Uncle John paid Thomas his weekly wagethat evening, and was interested to notice how the old man's handtrembled with eagerness as he took the money."How much are you accustomed to receive?" Uncle John had asked."Nothing 'tall, sir, since Cap'n Wegg died," was the reply. "We was gladenough to have a home, Nora an' me, 'thout 'spectin' wages.""And there was no one here for you to serve," mused Uncle John. "But inCaptain Wegg's day, how much did he give you?"Thomas hesitated, and his smile wavered an instant."My old master was also my old friend," said he, in a low voice; "an' Iast him fer little money because my needs were little.""Well, the conditions are now different," remarked Uncle John,carelessly; "and while you are in my employ you shall have your wagesregularly. Will ten dollars a week be satisfactory?""Oh, sir!""And five for Nora.""You are too good, sir. I--I--""Never mind, Thomas. If you want more at any time let me know."It was then, as the old man took the fifteen dollars extended to him,that Beth noted a flash in the mild blue eyes and a trembling of thehorny hands. Hucks was very glad to get the money; there was littledoubt of that.She spoke of this incident to Louise, and the following morning theytested the man again. All three girls being present, Beth tendered OldHucks two dollars, saying it was intended as a slight mark of herappreciation of his attention. Thomas demurred at first, but on beingurged took the money with the same eager gesture he had beforedisplayed. Louise followed with a donation of a like sum, and Patsy gavethe old man still another two dollar bill. This generosity so amazed himthat tears stood in his eyes as he tried to thank them all. It wasnoticed that the smile did not give way even to the tears, although itwas tinged with a pathetic expression that proved wonderfully affecting.He concealed the offerings with a stealthy motion, as if ashamed of hisweakness in accepting them, and then hurried away to his work."Well," said Louise, when they were alone, "is Thomas a miser or not?""He clutched the money almost as if he loved it," observed Beth, in amusing and slightly regretful tone."But think how poor he has been," pleaded Patsy, "and how destitute bothhe and Nora are yet. Can we blame him for being glad to earn somethingsubstantial at last?"Somehow that did not seem to explain fully the old man's behavior, andthe girl who had championed him sighed and then gave a sudden shiver asshe remembered the awful suspicion that had fallen upon this strangeindividual. If the proof must be accepted that Hucks had miserlyinstincts, had not Beth accidentally stumbled upon a solution of thewhole mystery?But Patsy would not believe it. If Thomas' open countenance lied, it washard to put faith in any one.CHAPTER XII.THE BAITING OF PEGGY M'NUTT.By this time the three nieces were so thoroughly impressed with theimportance of the task they had undertaken that more ordinary thingsfailed to interest them. Louise longed to solve the mystery. Beth wantedto punish the wrongdoers. Patsy yearned to exonerate the friends whomshe imagined unjustly accused. Therefore the triple alliance fordetective purposes was a strong one.By mutual agreement they kept the matter secret from Uncle John, forthey realized what a triumph it would be to surprise the old gentlemanwith proofs of their cleverness. To confide in him now would mean toinvite no end of ridicule or good natured raillery, for Uncle John hadnot a grain of imagination or romance in his nature and would be unableto comprehend the delights of this secret investigation.Because he was in the dark the significant looks and unnatural gravityof his nieces in the succeeding days puzzled the poor man greatly."What's wrong, girls?" he would ask. "Aren't you happy here? Do you missanything you'd like? Is it too quiet and dull at Millville to suit you?""Oh, no!" they would exclaim. "We are having a splendid time, and wouldnot leave the farm for anything."And he often noticed them grouped in isolated places and conversing inlow, eager tones that proved "something was up." He felt somewhatgrieved that he was not their confidant, since these girls and theirloyal affection for him constituted the chief joy of his life. When heput on his regulation fishing costume and carried his expensive rod andreel, his landing net and creel to the brook for a day's sport, he couldno longer induce one of his girls to accompany him. Even Patsy pleadedlaughingly that she had certain "fish to fry" that were not to be foundin the brook.Soon the three nieces made their proposed visit to McNutt, their ideabeing to pump that individual until he was dry of any information hemight possess concerning the Wegg mystery. They tramped over to thevillage after breakfast one morning and found the agent seated on theporch before his little "office," by which name the front room of hiscottage was dignified. He was dressed in faded overalls, a checked shirtand a broad-brimmed cheap straw hat. His "off foot," as he called itwith grim humor, was painted green and his other foot was bare and mighthave been improved in color. Both these extremities rested on the railof the porch, while McNutt smoked a corncob pipe and stared at hisapproaching visitors with his disconcerting, protruding eyes."Good morning, Mr. McNutt," said Louise, pleasantly. "We've come to seeif you have any books to sell."The agent drew a long breath. He had at first believed they had come toreproach him for his cruel deception; for although his conscience waswholly dormant, he had at times been a bit uneasy concerning hisremarkable book trade."Uncle is making a collection of the 'Lives of the Saints.'" announcedPatsy, demurely. "At present he has but three varieties of this work,one with several pages missing, another printed partly upside down, anda third with a broken corner. He is anxious to secure some furthervariations of the 'dee looks' Lives, if you can supply them."Peggy's eyes couldn't stare any harder, so they just stared."I--I hain't got no more on hand," he stammered, fairly nonplussed bythe remarkable statement."No more? Oh, how sad. How disappointed we are," said Beth."We were depending so much on you. Mr. McNutt," added Louise, in a toneof gentle reproach.McNutt wiggled the toes of his good foot and regarded them reflectively.These city folks were surely the "easiest marks" he had evercome across."Ef ye could wait a few days," he began, hopefully, "I might----""Oh, no; we can't possibly wait a single minute," declared Patsy."Unless Uncle can get the Saints right away he will lose interest in thecollection, and then he won't care for them at all."McNutt sighed dismally. Here was a chance to make good money by fleecingthe lambs, yet he was absolutely unable to take advantage of it."Ye--ye couldn't use any duck eggs, could ye?" he said, a sudden thoughtseeming to furnish him with a brilliant idea."Duck eggs?""I got the dum-twistedest, extry fine lot o' duck eggs ye ever seen.""But what can we do with duck eggs?" inquired Beth, wonderingly, whilePatsy and Louise tried hard not to shriek with laughter."W'y, set 'em under a hen, an' hatch 'em out.""Sir," said Beth, "I strongly disapprove of such deceptions. It seems tome that making a poor hen hatch out ducks, under the delusion that theyare chickens, is one of the most cruel and treacherous acts thathumanity can be guilty of. Imagine the poor thing's feelings when herchildren take to water! I'm surprised you could suggest such a wickeduse for duck eggs."McNutt wiggled his toes again, desperately."Can't use any sas'frass roots, can ye?""No, indeed; all we crave is the 'Lives of the Saints.'""Don't want to buy no land?""What have you got to sell?""Nuth'n, jest now. But ef ye'll buy I kin git 'most anything.""Don't go to any trouble on our account, sir; we are quite content withour splendid farm.""Shoo! Thet ain't no good.""Captain Wegg thought it was," answered Louise, quickly seizing thisopening. "Otherwise he would not have built so good a house upon it.""The Cap'n were plumb crazy," declared the agent, emphatically. "Hedidn't want ter farm when he come here; he jest wanted to hide."The girls exchanged quick glances of intelligence."Why?""Why?" repeated McNutt. "Thet's a thing what's puzzled us fer years,miss. Some thinks Wegg were a piret; some thinks he kidnaped thet prettywife o' his'n an' took her money; some thinks he tried to rob ol' WillThompson, an' Will killed him an' then went crazy hisself. There's allsorts o' thinks goin' 'round; but who \_knows\_?""Don't you, Mr. McNutt?"The agent was flattered by the question. As he had said, the Weggs hadformed the chief topic of conversation in Millville for years, and noone had a more vivid interest in their history than Marshall McMahonMcNutt. He enjoyed gossiping about the Weggs almost as much as he didselling books."I never thought I had no call to stick my nose inter other folksesprivit doin's," he said, after a few puffs at the corncob pipe. "Butthey kain't hide much from Marsh McNutt, when he has his eyes open."Patsy wondered if he could possibly close them. The eyelids seemed to beshy and retiring."I seen what I seen," continued the little man, glancing impressively athis attentive audience. "I seen Cap'n Wegg livin' without workin', ferhe never lifted a hand to do even a chore. I seen him jest settin''round an' smokin' his pipe an' a glowerin' like a devil on ev'ryonethet come near. Say, once he ordered me off'n his premises--me!""What a dreadful man," said Patsy. "Did he buy any 'Lives of theSaints?'""Not a Life. He made poor Ol' Hucks fetch an' carry fer him ev'ryblessid minnit, an' never paid him no wages.""Are you sure?" asked Louise."Sure as shootin'. Hucks hain't never been seen to spend a cent in allthe years he's been here.""Hasn't he sold berries and fruit since the Captain's death?""Jest 'nough to pay the taxes, which ain't much. Ye see, young Joe wereaway an' couldn't raise the tax money, so Ol' Hucks had to. But how theygot enough ter live on, him an' Nora, beats me.""Perhaps Captain Wegg left some money," suggested Patsy."No; when Joe an' Hucks ransacked the house arter the Cap'n's death theycouldn't find a dollar. Cur'ous. Plenty o' money till he died, 'n' thennot a red cent. Curiouser yet. Ol' Will Thompson's savin's dis'peared,too, an' never could be located to this day.""Were they robbed, do you suppose?" asked Louise."Nat'rally. But who done it? Not Ol' Hucks, fer he's too honest, an'hasn't showed the color of a nickel sense. Not Joe; 'cause he had toborrer five dollars of Bob West to git to the city with. Who then?""Perhaps," said Louise, slowly, "some burglar did it.""Ain't no burglers 'round these parts.""I suppose not. Only book agents," remarked Beth.McNutt flushed."Do ye mean as I did it?" he demanded, angrily. "Do ye mean as I killedCap'n Wegg an' druv 01' Will crazy, an' robbed the house?"His features were fairly contorted, and his colorless eyes rolledfearfully."If you did," said Beth, coolly, "you would be sure to deny it.""I kin prove a alybi," answered the little man, calming down somewhat."I kin prove my ol' woman had me locked up in the chicken-coop thetnight 'cause I wouldn't split a lot o' cordwood thet were full o'knots." He cast a half fearful glance over his shoulder toward theinterior of the cottage. "Next day I split 'em," he added, mildly."Perhaps," said Louise, again, "someone who knew Captain Wegg in thedays before he came here followed him to his retreat and robbed andmurdered him.""Now ye've hit the nail on the head!" cried the agent, slapping his fatthigh energetically. "Thet's what I allus claimed, even when Bob Westjest shook his head an' smiled sort o' superior like.""Who is Bob West?" asked Louise, with interest."He's our implement man, an' hardware dealer. Bob were the on'y one o'the Millville folks thet could git along with Cap'n Wegg, an' even hedidn't manage to be any special friend. Bob's rich, ye know. Rich asblazes. Folks do say he's wuth ten thousan' dollars; but it don't setBob up any. He jest minds his business an' goes on sellin' plows an'harvesters to the farmers an' takin' notes fer 'em.""And you say he knew Captain Wegg well?" inquired Patsy."Better 'n' most folks 'round here did. Once er twicet a year the Cap'n'd go to Bob's office an' set around an' smoke his pipe. Sometimes Bobwould go to the farm an' spend an' ev'nin'; but not often. Ol' WillThompson might be said to be the on'y friend the Cap'n reallyhankered fer.""I'd like to meet Mr. West," said Louise, casting a shrewd look at hercousins. For here was another clue unearthed."He's in his store now." remarked McNutt, "Last buildin' on the left. Yecan't miss it.""Thank you. Good morning, sir.""Can't use any buttermilk er Dutch cheese?""No, thank you."McNutt stared after them disconsolately. These girls represented so muchmoney that ought to be in his pockets, and they were, moreover,"innercent as turtle doves"; but he could think of no way to pluck theirgolden quills or even to arrest their flight."Well, let 'em go," he muttered. "This thing ain't ended yit."CHAPTER XIII.BOB WEST, HARDWARE DEALER.A few steps down the little street brought the girls to the hardwarestore, quite the most imposing building in town. They crossed the broadplatform on which stood samples of heavy farm machinery and entered awell-stocked room where many articles of hardware and house furnishingswere neatly and systematically arranged.The place seemed deserted, for at that time of day no country peoplewere at Millville; but on passing down the aisle the visitor approacheda little office built at the rear of the store. Behind the desk Bob Westsat upon his high stool, gravely regarding his unusual customers overthe rims of his spectacles."Good morning," said Louise, taking the lead. "Have you a stew pan?"The merchant left the office and silently walked behind the counter."Large or small, miss?" he then asked.The girls became interested in stew pans, which they were scarcely ableto recognize by their official name. Mr. West offered no comment as theymade their selection."Can you send this to the Wegg farm?" asked Louise, opening her purse tomake payment.West smiled."I have no means of delivering goods," said he; "but if you can wait aday or two I may catch some farmer going that way who will consentto take it.""Oh. Didn't Captain Wegg purchase his supplies in the village?" askedthe girl."Some of them. But it is our custom here to take goods that we purchasehome with us. As yet Millville is scarcely large enough to require adelivery wagon."The nieces laughed pleasantly, and Beth said:"Are you an old inhabitant, Mr. West?""I have been here thirty-five years.""Then you knew Captain Wegg?" Louise ventured."Very well."The answer was so frank and free from embarrassment that his questionerhesitated. Here was a man distinctly superior to the others they hadinterviewed, a man of keen intellect and worldly knowledge, who would beinstantly on his guard if he suspected they were cross-examining him. SoLouise, with her usual tact, decided to speak plainly."We have been much interested in the history of the Wegg family," sheremarked, easily; "and perhaps it is natural for us to speculateconcerning the characters of our predecessors. It was so odd thatCaptain Wegg should build so good a house on such a poor farm.""Yes.""And he was a sea captain, who retired far from the sea, which he musthave loved.""To be sure.""It made him dissatisfied, they say, as well as surly and unsociable;but he stuck it out even after his poor wife died, and until the day ofthe murder.""Murder?" in a tone of mild surprise."Was it not murder?" she asked, quickly.He gave his shoulders a quiet shrug."The physician pronounced it heart disease, I believe.""What physician?""Eh? Why, one who was fishing in the neighborhood for trout, and stayingat the hotel. Old Dr. Jackson was in Huntington at the time, Iremember."The girls exchanged significant glances, and West noted them and smiledagain."That murder theory is a new one to me," he said; "but I see now why itoriginated. The employment of a strolling physician would give color tothe suspicion.""What do you think, sir?" asked Patsy, who had been watching the man'sexpression closely."I? What do I think? Why, that Captain Wegg died from heart disease, ashe had often told me he was sure to do in time.""Then what made old Mr. Thompson go mad?" inquired Beth."The shock of his friend's sudden death. He had been mentally unbalancedfor some time previous--not quite mad, you understand, but showing byhis actions at times that his brain was affected.""Can you explain what became of their money?" asked Louise, abruptly.West gave a start, but collected himself in an instant and covered theaction with another shrug."I cannot say what become of their money," he answered.It struck both Beth and Louise that his tone indicated he would not,rather than that he could not say. Before they had time to ask anotherquestioned he continued:"Will you take the saucepan with you, then, or shall I try to send it ina day or so?""We will take it, if you please," answered Louise. But as he wrapped itinto a neat parcel she made one more effort."What sort of a young man was Joseph Wegg?""Joe? A mere boy, untried and unsettled. A bright boy, in his way, andambitious to have a part in the big world. He's there now, I believe."He spoke with an air of relief, and handed Louise the parcel."Thank you, young ladies. Pray call again if I can be of service toyou," he added, in a brisker tone.They had no recourse but to walk out, which they did without furtherwords. Indeed, they were all three silent until they had left thevillage far behind and were half way to the farm.Then Patsy said, inquiringly:"Well, girls?""We have progressed," announced Louise, seriously."In what way?""Several things are impressed upon my mind," replied the girl. "One isMcNutt's absurd indignation when he thought we hinted that he was themurderer.""What do you make of that?" queried Patsy."It suggests that he knows something of the murder, even if he ishimself wholly innocent. His alibi is another absurdity.""Then that exonerated Old Hucks," said Patsy, relieved."Oh, not at all. Hucks may have committed the deed and McNutt knowsabout it. Or they might have been partners in the crime.""What else have you learned, Louise?" asked Beth."That the man West knows what became of the money.""He seems like a very respectable man," asserted Patsy."Outwardly, yes; but I don't like the cold, calculating expression inhis eyes. He is the rich man of this neighborhood. Do you suppose heacquired a fortune honestly in this forsaken district, where everyoneelse is poor as a church mouse?""Seems to me," said Patsy, discontentedly, "that the plot thickens, asthey say in novels. If we interview many more people we shall findourselves suspecting an army.""Not at all, my dear," replied Louise, coldly. "From our presentknowledge the murder lies between the unknown avenger and Hucks, withthe possibility that McNutt is implicated. This avenger may be thestranger who posed as a physician and said Captain Wegg died of heartdisease, in order to prevent the simple people from suspecting a murder.His fishing was all a blind. Perhaps McNutt was his accomplice. Thatstaring scarecrow would do anything for money. And then we come to therobbery. If Hucks did the murder he took the money, and perhaps West,the hardware dealer, knows this. Or West may have arrived at the houseafter the mysterious stranger committed the deed, and robbed the twomen himself.""And perhaps he didn't," said Patsy, skeptically. "Do you know, girls,I'd like to find Joe Wegg. He could put us right, I'm sure.""Joe!""Yes. Why don't we suspect him of something? Or Ethel; or old Nora?""Do be sensible, Patsy," said Beth, impatiently.But Louise walked on a way in silence. Presently she remarked:"I'm glad you mentioned Joe Wegg. The boy gives me an idea that mayreconcile many conflicting suspicions.""In what way, Louise?""I'll tell you when I've thought it out," she replied.CHAPTER XIV.THE MAJOR IS PUZZLED.Ethel came frequently to visit the girls at the Wegg farm, and at suchtimes Uncle John treated her with the same affectionate consideration hebestowed upon his nieces, and made her so cordially welcome that thelittle school teacher felt entirely at her ease. The girls did notconfide to Ethel their investigation of the Wegg mystery, but in allother matters gave her their full confidence. Together they madeexcursions to the Falls, to the natural caves on the rocky hill calledMount Parnassus, or rowed on the lake, or walked or drove, as the moodseized them. But mostly they loved the shade of the pines and the broadgreen beside the quaint mansion Captain Wegg had built, and which nowcontained all the elements of a modern summer home.Once Louise asked Ethel, casually, if she knew what "great trouble" hadcome to Hucks and his wife in their early life, but the girl franklyanswered that the old people had never referred to anything of the kindin her presence.Finally a telegram announced the arrival of Major Doyle to join theparty at the farm. Patsy was in the seventh heaven of delight, and droveJoe over to the Junction to meet her father on the arrival of themorning train.The Major was a prime favorite with all the party and his coming infusednew life into the household. He was the type of educated, polished,open-hearted Irish gentleman it is always a delight to meet, and UncleJohn beamed upon his brother-in-law in a way that betokened a heartywelcome. It was a source of much satisfaction to lug the Major over thefarm and prove to him how wise Mr. Merrick had been in deciding to spendthe summer on his own property; and the Major freely acknowledged thathe had been in error and the place was as charming as anyone could wish.It was a great treat to the grizzled old warrior to find himself in thecountry, away from every responsibility of work, and he promised himselfa fortnight of absolute rest, with the recreation of beholding hisbeloved Patsy as often as he pleased.Of course, the girl would tell her father about the Wegg mystery, forPatsy had a habit of telling him everything; therefore the cousinsdecided to take the Major freely into their confidence, so as to obtainthe benefit of his opinion. That could not be done the first day, ofcourse, for on that day Uncle John insisted on displaying the farm andafterward carrying the Major a willing prisoner to watch him fish in thebrook. But on the following morning the girls surrounded Patsy's fatherand with solemn faces recounted their suspicions, the important cluesthey had unearthed, and their earnest desire to right the great wrongthat had been done by apprehending the criminal.The Major smoked his after breakfast cigar and listened attentively. Thestory, told consecutively, was quite impressive. In spite of his longexperience in buffeting the world, the old soldier's heart was still assimple as that of a child, and the recital awakened his sympathiesat once."'Tis evident, me children," said he, in his quaint way, "that you'veshtumbled on the inside of a crime that doesn't show on the outside.Many of the things you mention are so plain that he who runs may read;but I've remarked that it's just the things ye don't suspect in reallife that prove to be the most important.""That is true, Major," commented Louise. "At first it was just to amuseourselves that we became amateur detectives, but the developments are sostartling and serious that we now consider it our duty to uncover thewhole dreadful crime, in the interests of justice.""Just so," he said, nodding."But I'm sure Old Hucks is innocent!" declared Patsy, emphatically."Then he is," asserted the Major; "for Patsy's always right, even whenshe's wrong. I've had me eye on that man Hucks already, for he's themerriest faced villain I ever encountered. Do you say he's shy withyou girls?""He seems afraid of us, or suspicious, and won't let us talk to him,"answered Beth."Leave him to me," proposed the Major, turning a stern face buttwinkling eyes upon the group. "'Twill be my task to detect him. Leavehim to me, young women, an' I'll put the thumb-screws on him inshort order."Here was the sort of energetic confederate they had longed for. TheMajor's assurance of co-operation was welcome indeed, and while heentered heartily into their campaign he agreed that no mention of theaffair ought to reach Uncle John's ears until the case was complete andthey could call upon the authorities to arrest the criminal."It's me humble opinion," he remarked, "that the interesting individualyou call the 'avenger' was put on the trail by someone here--eitherThomas Hucks, or the timber-toed book agent, or the respectable hardwareman. Being invited to come and do his worst, he passed himself as adocther on a fishing excursion, and having with deliberate intentmurthered Captain Wegg, got himself called by the coroner to testifythat the victim died of heart disease. A very pretty bit ofscoundrelism; eh, me dears?""But the robber--who do you think he was?" asked Louise."That I've still to discover. You inform me that Hucks is eager formoney and acts like a miser. I've seen the time I was eager for moneymeself, and there's not a miserly hair on me bald head. But exceptionsprove the rule. I'll watch our smiling Thomas and make a report later."Within half an hour he was telling Hucks a funny story and slapping theold man upon the back as familiarly as if he had known him for years. Hefound an opportunity that same day to give Thomas a dollar in return fora slight service, and was amazed at the eagerness with which the coinwas clutched and the earnestness of the thanks expressed. It really didseem as if the man was fond of money. But when the Major tried to drawHucks into speaking of his past history and of Captain Wegg's singularlife and death, the old fellow became reserved at once and evaded theinquiries most skillfully.That night, as the Major strolled in the orchard to smoke his last cigarafter all the others had retired to bed, he noticed Hucks leave the backdoor of the lean-to with a parcel under his arm and pass hurriedlyaround the barn. After a little hesitation he decided to follow the man,and crept stealthily along in the shadow of the trees and buildingsuntil he found himself at the edge of the berry-patch that was in therear of the outbuildings. But there he paused irresolutely, for Thomashad completely disappeared.The Major was puzzled, but decided to watch for the man's return. So hetook a position where he could watch the rear door of the house andsmoked patiently for nearly an hour before Hucks returned and lethimself quietly in.He said nothing to the girls next day of this mysterious proceeding, buton the following night again took his station in the orchard to watch.Sure enough, as soon as the house was quiet the old servant came outwith a bundle underneath his arm; but this time he led his blind wife bythe other hand.The Major gave a low whistle and threw away his cigar. The night was sodark that he had little difficulty in following the aged pair closelyenough to keep their shadowy forms in sight, without the risk of beingdiscovered. They passed around the barn and along a path that ledthrough the raspberry bushes back of the yard. There were several acresof these bushes, and just now they were full-leaved and almost shoulderhigh. The path wound this way and that, and branched in severaldirections. Twice the Major thought he had lost his quarry, but wasguided aright by their soft footfalls. The ground dipped here and there,and as they entered one of the hollows Major Doyle was startled toobserve the twinkle of a dim light ahead. A minute later he saw theoutlines of a little frame building, and within this Old Hucks and Norapresently disappeared.CHAPTER XV.THE MAN IN HIDING.Cautiously the Major approached the cabin, which seemed to have beenbuilt as a place for the berry pickers to assemble and pack their fruit.It was constructed of rough boards and had a little window in the sidenearest the dwelling house and a door on the opposite side.Creeping near to the window the Major obtained a clear view of theinterior. Upon a dilapidated wicker settee, which had one end proppedwith a box, partially reclined the form of a man whose right arm was insplints and supported by a sling, while his head was covered withplasters and bandages. The man's back was toward the window, but fromhis slender form and its graceful poise the Major imagined him young.Old Nora held the left hand of this mysterious person in a warm clasp,bending now and then to press a kiss upon it, while Hucks busied himselfopening the parcel he had brought and arranging various articles of foodon a rickety stand at the head of the couch. The old man's smile wasmore benevolent and cheery than ever, and his actions denoted thatstrange, suppressed eagerness the Major had marked when he had takenthe money.The three spoke little, and in tones so low that the spy outside thewindow failed to catch them. Soon the injured man began to eat, feedinghimself laboriously with his left hand. But his hunger was quicklysatisfied, and then he lay back wearily upon his pillows, while Noratenderly spread a coverlet over him.After this the old couple did not linger long. Hucks poured some waterfrom a jug into a tumbler, glanced around the little room to see thateverything was in order, and then--after he and Nora had both kissed thebandaged forehead--blew out the candle and retired.The Major crouched low in the berry bushes until the couple had passedby; then he rose and thoughtfully followed after them.Whatever Patsy's father might have thought of the Wegg farm mysterybefore, this adventure convinced him that the girls were not altogetherfoolish in imagining a romance connected with the place. And,notwithstanding Patsy's loyal defense of Old Hucks, he was evidentlytangled up in the affair to a large extent, and could explain if hechose much that was now puzzling the girl detectives.After careful thought the Major decided to confide in Uncle John, atthis juncture, rather than in the nieces; since the latest developmentswere more fitted for a man's interference.By good fortune the girls had an engagement the next day, and set outtogether in the surrey to visit Ethel Thompson and lunch with her in therose bower, which was the pride of the little school teacher's garden.As soon as they were gone the Major hunted up Uncle John and said:"Come with me, sir.""I won't," was the brisk reply; "I'm going fishing, and whoever wishesmy society must come with me.""You'll not catch anything fishing, but you're very liable to catchsomething if you follow my lead," said the Major, meaningly."What's up, Gregory?""I'm not sure what it is, John." And then he carefully explained hisdiscovery that an injured man was occupying the cabin in the berrypatch, and seemed to be the object of the Hucks' tender care."It's the secrecy of the thing that astounds me most, sir," he added."If all was open and above board, I'd think little enough of it."Uncle John's kindly interest was at once aroused, and he proposed thatthey go directly to the cabin and interview the man in hiding. Hucksbeing at the time busy in the barn, the two men sauntered into the berrypatch without being observed, and then walked briskly along the windingpaths until they sighted the building.Pausing at the window, they saw the man still reclining upon his cot,and holding in his left hand a book--one of Patsy's, the Majorobserved--which he was quietly engaged in reading. Then they movedaround to the door, which Uncle John pushed open.Without hesitation, the two men entered and stood gazing down upon thestrange occupant of the place."Good morning," said Mr. Merrick, while the Major nodded a greeting.The man half arose, moving stiffly."Pardon me, sirs," he said, rather startled at the interruption; "Iregret that I am physically unable to receive you with more courtesy."The Major gazed into the partially bandaged face with a glimmer ofawakening recognition."H-m! Ha! If I'm not mistaken," said he, "it's Joseph Wegg.""Oh; is it?" asked Uncle John, looking upon the young man curiously."What's happened to you, Joseph?""Just an automobile accident, sir. The steering gear broke, and we wentover an embankment.""I see.""Are you Mr. Merrick, sir.""Yes.""I owe you an apology for intruding upon your premises in this way, andbeg you to forgive the seeming impertinence. But I've been ratherunlucky of late, sir, and without this refuge I don't know what wouldhave become of me. I will explain, if you will permit me."Uncle John nodded."After I had squandered the money you paid me, through Major Doyle, forthis farm, in a vain endeavor to protect a patent I had secured, I wasforced to become a chauffeur to earn my livelihood. I understandautomobiles, you know, and obtained employment with a wealthy man whoconsidered me a mere part of his machine. When the accident occurred,through no fault of mine, I was, fortunately, the only person injured;but my employer was so incensed over the damage to his automobile thathe never even sent to inquire whether I lived or died. At a charityhospital they tried to mend my breaks and tinker up my anatomy. Myshoulder-blade was shattered, my arm broken in three places, and fourribs were crashed in. The wounds in my head are mere abrasions of thescalp, and not serious. But it has taken me a long time to mend, and thecrowded, stuffy hospital got on my nerves and worried me. Beingpenniless and friendless, I wrote to Thomas and asked him if he couldfind a way to get me to the old farm, for I never imagined you wouldyourself take possession of the deserted place you had bought."Thomas and Nora have cared for me since I was born, you know, and theold man was greatly distressed by the knowledge of my sad condition. Hedid not tell me you were here, for fear I would hesitate to come, but hesent me the money you had given him and Nora for wages, together withall that the young ladies had kindly given him. I was thus enabled toleave the hospital, which I had come to detest, and journey to my oldhome. I arrived at the Junction on a night train, and Thomas met me withyour surrey, drove me here under cover of darkness, and concealed me inthis out-of-the-way place, hoping you would not discover me."I regret that I was thus foisted upon you, believe me, sir; but, beinghere, I have no means of getting away again. Thomas Hucks has had littleworldly experience, and cannot realize the full extent of the impositionhe has practiced. He feeds me from your table, and is hoarding up hismoney for me against the time I shall have recovered sufficiently toleave. I think that is the full explanation, Mr. Merrick."Again Uncle John nodded."How are you?" he asked."Doing finely, sir. I can walk a little, and my appetite is improving.The doctors said my shoulder would never be very strong again, but I'mbeginning to hope they were mistaken. My ribs seem all right, and inanother ten days I shall remove the splints from my arm.""You have no medical attendance?""Not since I left the hospital. But I imagine this pure, bracing air isbetter for me than a dozen doctors," was the cheerful reply."And what are your future plans?"The young man smiled. He was little more than a boy, but his questionernoticed that he had a fine manly face and his eye was clear andsteadfast."Nothing further than to get to work again as soon as I am able toundertake it," he said.Uncle John looked thoughtfully, and drummed with his finger upon thelittle table."Joseph," he remarked, presently, "I bought this farm at a pricealtogether too small, considering its value."The boy flushed."Please do not say that!" he exclaimed, hastily. "I am well aware that Ivirtually robbed you, and my only excuse is that I believed I would winmy fight and be able to redeem the place. But that is over now, and youmust not think that because I am ill and helpless I am an objectof charity.""Phoo!" said the little man; "aren't you accepting charity from OldHucks?""But he stands as a second father to me. He is an old retainer of myfamily, and one of my ambitions is to secure a home for him and Nora intheir old age. No; I do not feel at all embarrassed in accepting moneyor assistance from Thomas.""Young man," said Uncle John, sternly, "one of the follies of youth isthe idea of being independent of the good-will of your fellow-creatures.Every person who lives is dependent on some other person for somethingor other, and I'll not allow you to make a fool of yourself by refusingto let me take you in hand. Your brain is affected--""It is not!""You are mentally unbalanced, and need a guardian. That's me. You arehelpless and cannot resist, so you're my prisoner. Dare to defy me, dareto oppose my wishes in any way, and I'll have you put in astraight-jacket and confined in a padded cell. Understand me, sir?"Joseph Wegg looked into the little man's round face until the tearsfilled his own eyes and blurred his vision."Won't you protect me, Major Doyle?" he asked, weakly."Not I," said the Major, stoutly. "This brother-in-law of mine, whoconnected himself with me without asking permission, is a perfect demonwhen 'roused, and I'll not meddle with any opposition to his desires. Ifyou value your life and happiness, Joseph Wegg, you'll accept Mr.Merrick as a guardian until he resigns of his own accord, and then it'slikely you'll wish he hadn't.""I don't deserve----" began the young man, brokenly; but Uncle Johnquickly interrupted him."No one deserves anything," said he; "but everyone gets something orother, nevertheless, in this vale of tears. If you'll kindly rememberthat you've no right to express an opinion in the presence of yourguardian, we'll get along better together. Now, then, you're going toleave here, because the place is not comfortable. My guests fill everyroom in my house, so you can't go there. But the hotel in Millville is acheerful-looking place, and I've noticed some vine-covered windows thatindicate pleasant and sunny rooms. Major, go and tell Hucks to hitchthat groaning, balky Daniel to the ancient buggy, and then to drive thisyoung man over to the hotel. We'll walk."The Major started at once, and Uncle John continued: "I don't knowwhether this arrangement suits you or not, Joseph, but it suits me; and,as a matter of fact, it's none of your business. Feel able to takea ride?"The boy smiled, gratefully."Yes, indeed, Mr. Merrick," said he, and was shrewd enough not toventure a word of thanks.CHAPTER XVI.A MATTER OF SPECULATION.Old Hucks, still smiling, but dreadfully nervous over the discovery ofJoe, and Mr. Merrick's sudden activity in the boy's behalf, speedilyharnessed Daniel and induced the reluctant steed to amble down the pathto the cabin. Leaning on Uncle John's arm, the invalid walked to thebuggy and was assisted to mount to the seat beside Thomas. Then awaythey started, and, although Dan obeyed Hucks more willingly than anyother driver, the Major and Uncle John walked 'cross-lots and reachedthe hotel a good fifteen minutes in advance of the equipage.The Millville Hotel depended almost entirely for patronage upon thecommercial travelers who visited the place periodically to sell goods tothe merchants, and these did not come too often, because trade was neververy energetic and orders never very large. Bob West boarded at thehotel, and so did Ned Long, a "farm hand," who did sundry odd jobs foranyone who needed him, and helped pay his "keep" by working for Mrs.Kebble when not otherwise engaged.Mrs. Kebble was the landlady, and a famous cook. Kate Kebble, aslatternly girl of sixteen, helped her mother do the work and waited onthe table. Chet Kebble, the landlord, was a silent old man, withbilly-goat whiskers and one stray eye, which, being constructed ofglass, usually assumed a slanting gaze and refused to follow thedirection of its fellow. Chet minded the billiard-room, which was mostlypatronized Saturday nights, and did a meager business in fire insurance;but he was "so eternal lazy an' shifless," as Mrs. Kebble sharplyasserted, that he was considered more a "hanger-on" of the establishmentthan its recognized head.The little rooms of the hotel were plainly furnished but maintained withexceptional neatness.The one in the east corner of the second floor met with the approval ofUncle John and the Major, and was promptly engaged. It was cheerful andsunny, with outlooks on the lake and the village, and contained a loungeas well as the bed.When the invalid arrived, he was assisted to this apartment andinstalled as its permanent occupant."Any baggage?" asked Mr. Merrick."There's a small trunk lying at the Junction," said Joe; "but itcontains little of importance.""Well, make yourself at home, my boy, and get well at your leisure,"remarked Uncle John. "Mrs. Kebble has promised to look after you, andthe Major and I will stop in now and then and see how you progress."Then he went out, engaged Nick Thorne to go to the Junction for theboy's trunk, and selected several things at the store that he thoughtmight be useful to the invalid. Afterward he marched home again besidethe Major, feeling very well pleased with his morning's work.When the girls reached home late in the afternoon, they were thrown intoa state of great excitement by the news, briefly related by their uncle,that Joseph Wegg had returned to Millville "considerably smashed" by anautomobile accident, and was now stopping at the village hotelfor repairs.They refrained from making remarks upon the incident until they werealone, when the secret council of three decided to make Joe Wegg'sacquaintance as soon as possible, to discover what light the young manmight be able to throw upon the great mystery."Do you know, girls," said Louise, impressively, "it almost seems as iffate had sent Joe Wegg here to be an instrument in the detection of themurderer and robber of his poor father.""If Joe knew about it, why didn't he track the villain down himself?"inquired Patsy."Perhaps he hasn't suspected the truth," said Beth. "Often those who areclosely concerned with such tragedies do not observe the evidences ofcrime as clearly as outsiders.""Where did you get that information?" demanded Patsy."From one of Anna Doyle Oppenheim's detective stories," answered Beth,seriously. "I've been reading up on such things, lately.""Detective stories," said Louise, reflectively, "are only useful inteaching us to observe the evidences of crime. This case, for example,is so intricate and unusual that only by careful thought, and followingeach thread of evidence to its end, can we hope to bring the criminalto justice.""That seems to me conceited," observed Miss Doyle, composedly."Detective stories don't have to stick to facts; or, rather, they canmake the facts to be whatever they please. So I don't consider them asuseful as they are ornamental. And this isn't a novel, girls; it'smostly suspicion and slander.""You don't seem able to be in earnest about anything," objected Beth,turning a little red."But I try to be." said Patricia."We are straying from the subject now under discussion," remarkedLouise. "I must say that I feel greatly encouraged by the suddenappearance of the Wegg boy. He may know something of his father's formerassociates that will enable us to determine the object of the murder andwho accomplished it.""Captain Wegg was killed over three years ago," suggested Miss Doyle,recovering easily from her rebuff. "By this time the murderer may havedied or moved to Madagascar.""He is probably living within our reach, never suspecting that justiceis about to overtake him," asserted Louise. "We must certainly go tocall upon this Wegg boy, and draw from him such information as we can. Iam almost certain that the end is in sight.""We haven't any positive proof at all, yet," observed Patsy, musingly."We have plenty of circumstantial evidence," returned Beth. "There isonly one way to explain the facts we have already learned, and thetheory we have built up will be a hard one to overthrow. The flight ofCaptain Wegg to this place, his unhappy wife, the great trouble that oldNora has hinted at, the--""The great trouble ought to come first," declared Louise. "It is thefoundation upon which rest all the mysterious occurrences following, andonce we have learned what the great trouble was, the rest will beplain sailing.""I agree with you," said Beth; "and perhaps Joseph Wegg will be able totell us what the trouble was that ruined the lives of his parents, aswell as of Old Hucks and his wife, and caused them all to flee here tohide themselves."It was not until the following morning that the Major found anopportunity to give the confederates a solemn wink to indicate he hadnews to confide to them. They gathered eagerly on the lawn, and he toldthem of the finding of Joe Wegg in the isolated cabin, and how oldThomas and Nora, loving the boy as well as if he had been their ownchild, had sacrificed everything to assist him in his extremity."So ye see, my avenging angels, that ye run off the track in the Hucksmatter," he added, smiling at their bewildered faces.Patsy was delighted at this refutation of the slanderous suspicions thatThomas was a miser and his smiling face a mask to hide his innatevillainy. The other girls were somewhat depressed by the overthrow ofone of their pet theories, and reluctantly admitted that if Hucks hadbeen the robber of his master and old Will Thompson, he would not havestriven so eagerly to get enough money to send to Joe Wegg. But theypointed out that the old servant was surely hiding his knowledge ofCaptain Wegg's past, and could not be induced to clear up that portionof the mystery which he had full knowledge of. So, while he might bepersonally innocent of the murder or robbery, both Beth and Louise wereconfident he was attempting to shield the real criminal."But who is the real criminal?" inquired Patsy."Let us consider," answer Louise, with the calm, businesslike tone sheadopted in these matters. "There is the strolling physician, whom wecall the Unknown Avenger, for one. A second suspect is the man McNutt,whose nature is so perverted that he would stick at nothing. The thirdsuspicious individual is Mr. Bob West.""Oh, Louise! Mr. West is so respectable, and so prosperous," exclaimedPatsy."It's a far jump from McNutt to West," added Beth."Leaving out Hucks," continued Louise, her eyes sparkling with thedelightful excitement of maintaining her theories against odds, "hereare three people who might have been concerned in the robbery or murder.Two of them are under our hands; perhaps Joseph Wegg may be able to tellus where to find the third."They pleaded so hard with the Major to take them to call upon theinjured youth that very day, that the old gentleman consented, and,without telling Uncle John of their plans, they drove to Millville inthe afternoon and alighted at the hotel.The Major went first to the boy's room, and found him not only verycomfortable, but bright and cheerful in mood."At this rate, sir," he said, smilingly, "I shall be able to dischargemy guardian in quick time. I'm twice the man I was yesterday.""I've brought some young ladies to call upon you," announced the Major."Will you see them?"Joe flushed at first, remembering his plastered skull and maimedcondition. But he could not well refuse to receive his callers, whom heguessed to be the three girls Old Hucks had praised to him so highly."It will give me great pleasure, sir," he replied.An invalid is usually of interest to women, so it is no wonder that thethree young ladies were at once attracted by the bright-faced boy, whoreclined upon his couch before the vine-covered windows. They thought ofEthel, too, and did not marvel that the girl grieved over the loss ofthis friend of her childhood.Joe had to recount the adventure with the automobile, which led to hisinjuries, and afterward give an account of his life at the hospital.That led, naturally, to the timely assistance rendered him by thefaithful Thomas, so that Louise was able to broach the subject nearesther heart."We have been greatly interested in your old servants--whom we acquiredwith the farm, it seems--and all of us admire their simplicity andsincerity," she began."Nora is a dear," added Beth."And Thomas is so cheerful that his smile is enough to vanquish anyattack of the blues," said Patsy."The Hucks are the right sort, and no mistake," declared the Major,taking his cue from the others.This praise evidently delighted the boy. They could have found no moredirect way to win his confidence."Nora was my mother's maid from the time she was a mere girl," said he;"and Thomas sailed with my father many years before I was born."They were a little surprised to hear him speak so frankly. But Louisedecided to take advantage of the opening afforded her."Nora has told us that some great trouble came to them years ago--atrouble that also affected your own parents. But they do not wish totalk about it to us."His face clouded."No, indeed," said he. "Their loving old hearts have never recoveredfrom the blow. Would you like to know their history? It is a sad story,and pitiful; but I am sure you would understand and appreciate my oldfriends better after hearing it."Their hearts fairly jumped with joy. Would they like to hear the story?Was it not this very clue which they had been blindly groping for toenable them to solve the mystery of the Wegg crime? The boy marked theirinterest, and began his story at once, while the hearts of the threegirls sang-gladly: "At last--at last!"CHAPTER XVII.JOE TELLS OF "THE GREAT TROUBLE.""As a young man, my father was a successful sea captain," said the boy,"and, before he was thirty, owned a considerable interest in the ship hesailed. Thomas Hucks was his boatswain,--an honest and able seaman inwhom my father became much interested. Hucks was married, and his wifewas an attendant in the employ of Hugh Carter, a wealthy ship chandlerof Edmunton, the port from which my fathers ship sailed. Thomas had somedifficulty in enjoying his wife's society when on shore, because oldCarter did not want him hanging around the house; so Captain Wegggood-naturedly offered to intercede for him."Carter was a gruff and disagreeable man, and, although my father hadbeen a good customer, he refused his request and threatened to dischargeNora, which he did. This made Captain Wegg angry, and he called uponMary Carter, whose especial attendant Nora had been, to ask her to takethe girl back. Mary was a mild young lady, who dared not oppose herfather; but the result of the interview was that the sea captain andMary Carter fell mutually in love. During the next two or three years,whenever the ship was in port, the lovers frequently met by stealth atthe cottage of Mrs. Hucks, a little place Thomas had rented. Here myfather and mother were finally married."Meantime Nora had a son, a fine young chap, I've heard; and presentlymy mother, who had a little fortune of her own, plucked up enoughcourage to leave her father's roof, and took up her abode in a prettyvilla on the edge of a bluff overlooking the sea. Nora came to live withher again, bringing her child, and the two women were company for oneanother while their husbands were at sea."In course of time my mother had two children, a girl and a boy, andbecause the Hucks boy was considerably older than they, he took care ofthem, to a great extent, and the three youngsters were always together.Their favorite playground was on the beach, at the foot of the bluff,and before young Tom was ten years old he could swim like a duck, andmanage a boat remarkably well. The Wegg children, having something oftheir mother's timid nature, perhaps, were not so adventurous, but theyseldom hesitated to go wherever Tom led them."One day, while my mother was slightly ill and Nora was attending toher, Tom disobeyed the commands that had been given him, and took hisyounger companions out on the ocean for a ride in his boat. No one knowshow far they went, or exactly what happened to them; but a sudden squallsprang up, and the children being missed, my mother insisted, ill as shewas, in running down to the shore to search for her darlings. Bravingthe wind and drenched by rain, the two mothers stood side by side,peering into the gloom, while brave men dared the waves to search forthe missing ones. The body of the girl was first washed ashore, and mymother rocked the lifeless form in her arms until her dead son was laidbeside her. Then young Tom's body was recovered, and the horrorwas complete."When my father arrived, three days later, he not only found himselfbereaved of the two children he had loved so tenderly, but his youngwife was raving with brain fever, and likely to follow her babies to thegrave. During that terrible time, Nora, who could not forget that it washer own adventurous son who had led all three children to their death,went suddenly blind--from grief, the doctors said."My father pulled his wife back to life by dint of careful nursing; butwhenever she looked at the sea she would scream with horror; so itbecame necessary to take her where the cruel sound of the breakers couldnever reach her ears. I think the grief of Thomas and Nora was scarcelyless than that of my own parents, and both men had suffered so severelythat they were willing to abandon the sea and devote their lives tocomforting their poor wives. Captain Wegg sold all his interests and hiswife's villa, and brought the money here, where he established a homeamid entirely different surroundings. He was devoted to my mother, Ihave heard, and when she died, soon after my birth, the Captain seemedto lose all further interest in life, and grew morose and unsociablewith all his fellow-creatures."That, young ladies, is the story of what Thomas and Nora call their'great trouble'; and I think it is rightly named, because it destroyedthe happiness of two families. I was born long after the tragedy, butits shadow has saddened even my own life."When the boy had finished, his voice trembling with emotion as heuttered the last words, his auditors were much affected by the sad tale.Patsy was positively weeping, and the Major blew his nose vigorously andadvised his daughter to "dry up an' be sinsible." Beth's great eyesstared compassionately at the young fellow, and even Louise for themoment allowed her sympathy to outweigh the disappointment and chagrinof seeing her carefully constructed theory of crime topple over like thehouse of cards it was. There was now no avenger to be discovered,because there had been nothing to avenge. The simple yet pathetic storyaccounted for all the mystery that, in her imagination, enveloped thelife and death of Captain Wegg. But--stay!"How did your father die?" she asked, softly."Through a heart trouble, from which he had suffered for years, andwhich had obliged him to lead a very quiet life," was the reply. "Thatwas one of the things which, after my mother's death, helped to sour hisdisposition. He could not return to the sea again, because he was toldthat any sudden excitement was likely to carry him off; and, indeed,that was exactly what happened.""How is that, sir?" asked the Major."It is more difficult to explain than the first of the story," repliedthe boy, thoughtfully gazing through the window; "perhaps because I donot understand it so well. Our simple life here never made much of aninroad into my father's modest fortune; for our wants were few; butCaptain Wegg was a poor man of business, having been a sailor during allhis active life. His only intimate friend--an honest, bluff old farmernamed Will Thompson--was as childish regarding money matters as myfather, but had a passion for investments, and induced my father to joinsome of his schemes. Mr. Thompson's mind was somewhat erratic at times,but keen in some ways, nevertheless. Fearing to trust his judgmententirely, my father chose to lean upon the wisdom and experience of ashrewd merchant of Millville, named Robert West.""The hardware dealer?" asked Louise, impulsively."Yes; I see you have met him," replied Joseph Wegg, with a smile at theeager, pretty face of his visitor. "Bob West was a prosperous man andvery careful about his own investments; so he became a sort of businessadviser to my father and Mr. Thompson, and arbitrated any differences ofopinion they might have. For several years, due to West's good offices,the two oddly mated friends were successful in their ventures, and addedto their capital. Finally West came to them himself with a proposition.He had discovered a chance to make a good deal of money by purchasing anextensive pine forest near Almaquo, just across the border in Canada.West had taken an option on the property, when he found by accident thatthe Pierce-Lane Lumber Company was anxious to get hold of the tract andcut the timber on a royalty that would enable the owners to double theirinvestment.""Howld on a jiffy!" cried the Major, excitedly. "Did I understand you tosay the Pierce-Lane Lumber Company?""That was the firm, sir. I used to overhear my father and Will Thompsontalking about this matter; but I must admit my knowledge is somewhatimperfect, because I never was allowed to ask questions. I rememberlearning the fact that West had not enough money to swing his option,and so urged his friends to join him. Relying upon West's judgment, theyput all their little fortunes into the deal, although Thompson grumbledat doing so, because he claimed he had another investment that wasbetter, and this matter of West's would prevent him from undertaking it.The Almaquo tract was purchased, and a contract made with the lumbercompany to cut the timber and pay them a royalty of so much a thousandfeet. Yet, although the prospects for profit seemed so good, I know thatfor some reason both my father and Thompson were dissatisfied with thedeal, and this may be accounted for by the fact that every penny oftheir money was tied up in one investment. West used to come to thehouse and argue with them that the property was safe as the Bank ofEngland, and then old Will would tell him how much more he could havemade out of another investment he had in mind; so that a coolness grewup between West and the others that gradually led to their estrangement."I can well remember the evening when Bob West's pretty financial bubbleburst. Thompson and my father were sitting together in the right wing,smoking solemnly, and exchanging a few words, as was their custom, whenWest arrived with a while face, and a newspaper under his arm. I was inthe next room, lying half asleep upon the sofa, when I heard West crydespairingly: 'Ruined--ruined--ruined!' I crept to the half-openeddoor, then, and looked in. Both men were staring, open-mouthed andhalf-dazed, at West, who was explaining in a trembling voice that aterrible forest fire had swept through the Almaquo section and wiped outevery tree upon the property. He had the full account in the newspaper,and had begun reading it, when my father uttered a low moan and tumbledoff his chair to the floor."Will Thompson gave a wild cry and knelt beside him."'My God! he's dead, Bob,--he's dead!--and you've killed him with yourgood news!' he screamed, already raving; and then Old Hucks ran in justin time to prevent the madman from throttling West, for his fingers wereeven then twined around Bob's throat. There was a desperate struggle,and I remember that, scared as I was, I joined Thomas in trying to pullThompson off his prey. But suddenly old Will threw up his arms andtoppled backward, still raving like a demon, but unable to move his bodyfrom the waist downward. West helped us to put him in bed, and said hewas paralyzed, which afterward proved to be the truth. Also, his mindwas forever gone; and I think it was father's death that did that,rather than the loss of his money."They were all staring, white-faced, at the speaker. Most of the mysterywas being cleared away; indeed, there was now little of mysteryremaining at all."West hurried after a doctor," continued Joe, who was almost as muchabsorbed in his story as were his listeners, and spoke in a reflective,musing way, "and he succeeded in finding one who was stopping for a fewdays at the hotel. Poor Bob was very kind to us in our trouble, and Inever heard him mention a word about his own losses, which must havebeen severe. After the funeral was over, and I found I had nothing toinherit but the farm, I decided to go to the city and make my way there,as I had long wished to do. West gave me a little money to start me onmy way, and the rest of my story is not very interesting to anybody.Major Doyle knows something of it, after the time when I got through mytechnical school by working as a servant to pay for my instruction. I'ma failure in life, so far, young ladies; but if you'll not bear thatagainst me I'll try to do better in the future.""Good!" cried the Major, approvingly, as he took the boy's left hand inboth his own and pressed it. "You're developing the right spirit,Joseph, me lad, and we'll think no more about the sadness of the past,but look forward to the joy of your future.""Of course," said Patsy, nodding gravely; "Joe Wegg is bound to be agreat man, some day."CHAPTER XVIII.THE LOCKED CUPBOARD.Louise and Beth returned to the farm in dismal silence. Every prop hadbeen knocked from beneath their carefully erected temple of mystery. Nowthere was no mystery at all.In a few words, Joe Wegg had explained everything, and explained all sosimply and naturally that Louise felt like sobbing with the bitternessof a child deprived of its pet plaything. The band of self-constitutedgirl detectives had been "put out of business," as Patsy said, becausethe plain fact had developed that there was nothing to detect, and neverhad been. There had been no murder, no robbery, no flight or hiding onthe part of the Weggs to escape an injured enemy; nothing evenmysterious, in the light of the story they had just heard. It wasdreadfully humiliating and thoroughly disheartening, after all theirearnest endeavor to investigate a crime that had never been committed.Uncle John rallied his nieces on their somber faces at the dinner table,and was greatly amused when the Major, despite the appealing looksdirected at him, gave Mr. Merrick a brief resume of the afternoon'sdevelopments."Well, I declare!" said the little man, merrily; "didn't I warn you,Louise, not to try to saddle a murder onto my new farm? How you foolishgirls could ever have imagined such a carnival of crime in connectionwith the Weggs is certainly remarkable.""I don't know about that, sir," returned the Major, seriously. "I wasmeself inoculated with the idea, and for a while I considered meself andthe girls the equals of all the Pinkertons in the country. And when yecome to think of it, the history of poor Captain Wegg and his wife, andof Nora and Thomas as well, is out of the ordinary entirely, and,without the explanation, contained all the elements of afirst-class mystery.""How did you say the Weggs lost their money?" inquired Uncle John,turning the subject because he saw that it embarrassed his nieces."Why, forest fires at Almaquo, in Canada, burned down the timber theyhad bought," replied the Major. "And, by the way, John, you'reinterested in that matter yourself, for the Pierce-Lane Lumber Company,in which you own a lot of stock, had contracted to cut the timber ona royalty.""How long ago?""Three years, sir.""Well, we've been cutting timber at Almaquo ever since," said Mr.Merrick.Louise dropped her fork with a clatter, disclosing, in this well-bredyoung lady, an unusual degree of excitement."Then there \_is\_ something to detect!" she cried."Eh? What do you mean?" inquired her uncle."If you've been cutting timber at Almaquo for three years, the treescouldn't have burned down," Louise declared, triumphantly."That is evident," said the Major, dryly. "I've had it in me mind,Louise, to take that matter up for investigation; but you are so imbuedwith the detective spirit that there's no heading you off a trail.""Before the dessert comes on," announced Uncle John, impressively, "Iwant to make a statement. You folks have tried your hands at thedetective business and made a mess of it. Now it's my turn. I'll be adetective for three days, and if I don't succeed better than you did,young women, we'll mingle our tears in all humility. Eh, Major?""Put me in the bunch, sir," said the old soldier, "I was as bad as anyof them. And go ahead in your own way, if ye like. It's me humbleopinion, John, that you're no Sherlock Holmes; but ye won't believe it'til ye satisfy yourself of the fact."Next morning the loungers around Sam Cotting's store were thrown into astate of great excitement when "the nabob" came over from the Wegg farmand held the long-distance telephone for more than an hour, while hetalked with people in New York. The natives knew that their telephone,which was built into a small booth at one end of the store--next thepost-office boxes--was part of a system that made it possible for one totalk to those in far away cities. Often the country people would eye themysterious-looking instrument with awe and whisper to each other of itsmighty powers; but no one had ever before used it to telephone fartherthan the Junction, and then only on rare occasions."It'll cost a heap o' money, Sam," said McNutt, uneasily, while UncleJohn was engaged in his remarkable conversation. They could see him inthe booth, through the little window."It will, Mac," was the solemn reply. "But the fool nabob may as wellspend it thet way as any other. It's mighty little of his capital ersurplus gits inter \_my\_ cash-drawer; 'n' thet's a fact."Uncle John came from the booth, perspiring, but smiling and happy. Hewalked across the street to see Joe Wegg, and found the youth seated ina rocking-chair and looking quite convalescent. But he had company. In achair opposite sat a man neatly dressed, with a thin, intelligent face,a stubby gray moustache, and shrewd eyes covered by horn-rimmedspectacles."Good morning, Mr. Merrick," said Joe, cheerily; "this is Mr. RobertWest, one of the Millville merchants, who is an old friend ofour family.""I've heard of Mr. West, and I'm glad to meet him," replied Uncle John,looking at the other calmly, but not offering to shake hands. "I believeyou are the president and treasurer of the Almaquo Timber Tract Company,are you not?"Joseph looked startled, and then embarrassed, as he overheard thequestion. West, without altering his position of careless ease, glancedover the rims of his glasses at the speaker."I am the humble individual you refer to, Mr. Merrick," he said,briefly."But the Almaquo timber all burned down." remarked Joe, thinking anexplanation was needed."That's a mistake," returned Mr. Merrick. "My company has paid Mr. West,as treasurer of his company, more than fifty thousand dollars during thelast three years."West's jaw dropped."Your company!" he exclaimed, as if mystified."Yes; I own the controlling interest in the Pierce-Lane Lumber Company,which has the contract to cut your timber," answered Mr. Merrick.The hardware dealer slowly arose and glanced at his watch."I must get back to my store," he said. "You are somewhat in error aboutyour company, Mr. Merrick; but I suppose your interests are so large andvaried that you cannot well keep track of them. Good morning, sir. I'llsee you again soon, Joe. Glad you're improving so rapidly. Let me knowif I can do anything to help you."With these quiet words, he bowed and left the room, and when he hadgone, Joe said, in a deprecating tone:"Poor Bob must be very unhappy about having lost my father's money inthat speculation, for he advocated the plan very strongly, believing itwas a good investment. I'm afraid your mistake about paying him all thatmoney upset him. Don't mind if he was a little brusque, sir. Bob West isa simple, kindly man, whom my father fully trusted. It was he thatloaned me the money to get away from here with.""Tell me," said Uncle John, thoughtfully, "did your father receive stockin the Almaquo Timber Tract Company in exchange for his money?""Oh, yes; I have seen it in the steel cupboard," replied Joe."Where is that?""Why, it is the cupboard in the right wing of our house, which was theCaptain's own room. It was one of his whims, when he built, to providewhat he called his 'bank.' You may have noticed the wooden doors of acupboard built into the stone wall, sir?""Yes; I occupy the room.""Behind the wooden doors are others of steel. The entire cupboard issteel-lined. Near the bottom is a sliding-plate, which, when pushedaside, discovers a hidden drawer--a secret my father never confided toanyone but me. He once told me that if his heart trouble earned him offsuddenly I ought to know of the existence of this drawer; so he showedme how to find it. On the day after his death I took the keys, which healways carried on a small chain around his neck and concealed underneathhis clothing, and opened the cupboard to see if I could find anything ofvalue. It is needless to say, I could not discover anything that couldbe converted into a dollar. The Captain had filled the cupboard with oldletters and papers of no value, and with relics he had brought fromforeign lands during his many voyages. These last are mere rubbish, butI suppose he loved them for their association. In the secret drawer Ifound his stock in the timber company, and also that of old WillThompson, who had doubtless left it with my father for safekeeping.Knowing it was now worthless, I left it in the drawer.""I'd like to see it," announced Uncle John.Joe laughed."I've lost the keys," he said."How's that, my lad?""Why, on the day of the funeral the keys disappeared. I could neverimagine what became of them. But I did not care to look in the cupboarda second time, so the loss did not matter."Mr. Merrick seemed thoughtful."I suppose I own that cupboard now," he remarked."Of course," said Joe. "But without the keys it is not serviceable. Ifyou drill through the steel doors you destroy their security.""True; but I may decide to do that.""If you do, sir, I'd like you to clear out the rubbish and papers andsend them to me. They are family matters, and I did not intend to sellthem with the place.""You shall have them, Joe.""Just underneath the left end of the lower shelf you will find thesliding steel plate. It slides toward the front. In the drawer you willfind the worthless stock and a picture of my mother. I'd like to keepthe picture.""You shall, Joseph. How are you getting on?""Why, I'm a new man, Mr. Merrick, and today I'm feeling as strong as abuffalo--thanks to your kind guardianship.""Don't overdo, sir. Take it easy. There's a young lady coming to see youtoday.""Ethel!" the boy exclaimed, his face turning crimson."Yes," returned Uncle John, tersely. "You've treated that girlshamefully, Joseph Wegg. Try to make proper amends.""I never could understand," said Joe, slowly, "why Ethel refused toanswer the letter I wrote her when I went away. It explainedeverything, yet--""I'll bet the farm against your lame shoulder she never got yourletter," declared Uncle John. "She thought you left her without a word.""I gave it to McNutt to deliver after I was gone. But you say she'scoming today?""That is her intention, sir."Joe said nothing more, but his expressive face was smiling and eager.Uncle John pressed the boy's hand and left him, promising to callagain soon."Now, then," muttered the little millionaire, as he walked down thestreet, "to beard the lion in his den."The den proved to be the hardware store, and the lion none other thanRobert West. Mr. Merrick found the merchant seated at his desk in theotherwise deserted store, and, with a nod, helped himself to the onlyother chair the little office contained."Sir," said he, "I am here to demand an explanation.""Of what?" asked West, coldly."Of your action in the matter of the Almaquo Timber Tract Company. Ibelieve that you falsely asserted to Captain Wegg and Mr. Thompson thatthe timber had burned and their investment was therefore worthless. Thenews of the disaster killed one of your confiding friends and drove theother mad; but that was a consequence that I am sure you did not intendwhen you planned the fraud. The most serious thing I can accuse you ofis holding the earnings of the Wegg and Thompson stock--and big earningsthey are, too--for your own benefit, and defrauding the heirs of yourassociates of their money."West carefully balanced a penholder across his fingers, and eyed it withclose attention."You are a queer man, Mr. Merrick," he said, quietly. "I can only excuseyour insults on the grounds of ignorance, or the fact that you have beenmisinformed. Here is the newspaper report of the Almaquo fire, which Ishowed my friends the night of Captain Wegg's sudden death." He took aclipping from a drawer of the desk and handed it to Uncle John, who readit carefully."As a matter of fact," continued West, "you are not cutting that portionof the Almaquo tract which this fire refers to, and which Thompson andWegg were interested in, but the north half of the tract, which they hadnever acquired any title to.""I suppose the stock will show that," suggested Mr. Merrick."Of course, sir.""I will look it up."West smiled."You will have some trouble doing that," he said."Why?""Wegg and Thompson had transferred their entire stock to me before onedied and the other went mad," was the quiet reply."Oh, I see." The lie was so evident that Uncle John did not try torefute it."I am rather busy, Mr. Merrick. Anything more, sir?""Not today. Bye and bye, Mr. West."He marched out again and climbed into his buggy to drive home. Theinterview with Bob West had made him uneasy, for the merchant's cold,crafty nature rendered him an opponent who would stick at nothing toprotect his ill-gotten gains. Uncle John had thought it an easy matterto force him to disgorge, but West was the one inhabitant of Millvillewho had no simplicity in his character. He was as thoroughly imbued withworldly subtlety and cunning as if he had lived amid the grille of acity all his life; and Mr. Merrick was by no means sure of his ownability to unmask the man and force him to make restitution.CHAPTER XIX.THE COURT'N OF SKIM CLARK.By this time the summer was well advanced, and the rich people at theWegg farm had ceased to be objects of wonder to the Millville folk. Thegirls were still regarded with curious looks when they wandered into thevillage on an errand, and Mr. Merrick and Major Doyle inspired a certainamount of awe; but time had dulled the edge of marvelous invasion andthe city people were now accepted as a matter of course.Peggy McNutt was still bothering his head over schemes to fleece thestrangers, in blissful ignorance of the fact that one of his neighborswas planning to get ahead of him.The Widow Clark was a shrewd woman. She had proven this by becoming oneof the merchants of Millville after her husband's death. The poor manhad left an insurance of five hundred dollars and the little framebuilding wherein he had conducted a harness shop. Mrs. Clark couldn'tmake and repair harness; so she cleared the straps and scraps andwax-ends out of the place, painted the interior of the shop brightyellow, with a blue ceiling, erected some shelves and a counter andturned part of the insurance money into candy, cigars, stationery, and ameager stock of paper-covered novels.Skim, her small son, helped her as far as he was able, and between themthey managed things so frugally that at the end of eight years the widowstill had her five hundred dollars capital, and the little store hadpaid her living expenses.Skim was named after his uncle, Peter Skimbley, who owned a farm nearWatertown. The widow's hopeful was now a lank, pale-faced youth ofeighteen, whose most imposing features were his big hands and a longnose that ended in a sharp point. The shop had ruined him for manuallabor, for he sat hunched up by the stove in winter, and in summer hungaround Cotting's store and listened to the gossip of the loungers. Hewas a boy of small conversational powers, but his mother declared thatSkim "done a heap o' thinkin' that nobody suspected."The widow was a good gossip herself, and knew all the happenings in thelittle town. She had a habit of reading all her stock of paper-coverednovels before she sold them, and her mind was stocked with the mass ofromance and adventure she had thus absorbed. "What I loves more'n eat'n'or sleep'n'," she often said, "is a rattlin' good love story. Theredon't seem to be much love in real life, so a poor lone crittur like mehas to calm her hankerin's by a-readin' novels."No one had been more interested in the advent of the millionaire at theWegg farm than the widow Clark. She had helped "fix up" the house forthe new owner and her appreciative soul had been duly impressed by thedisplay of wealth demonstrated by the fine furniture sent down from thecity. She had watched the arrival of the party and noticed with eagereyes the group of three pretty and stylishly dressed nieces whoaccompanied their rich uncle. Once or twice since the young ladies hadentered her establishment to purchase pens or stationery, and on suchoccasions the widow was quite overcome by their condescension.All this set her thinking to some purpose. One day she walked over tothe farm and made her way quietly to the back door. By good fortune shefound blind Nora hemming napkins and in a mood to converse. Nora was anespecially neat seamstress, but required some one to thread her needles.Mary the cook had been doing this, but now Mrs. Clark sat down besideNora to "hev a little talk" and keep the needles supplied with thread.She learned a good deal about the nieces, for old Nora could not praisethem enough. They were always sweet and kind to her and she loved totalk about them. They were all rich, too, or would be; for their unclehad no children of his own and could leave several millions to each onewhen he died."An' they're so simple, too," said the old woman; "nothin' cityfied nerstuck-up about any on 'em, I kin tell ye. They dresses as fine as theQueen o' Sheba, Tom says; but they romp 'round just like they was bornedin the country. Miss Patsy she's learnin' to milk the cow, an' Miss Bethtakes care o' the chickens all by herself. They're reg'lar girls, MarthyClark, an' money hain't spiled 'em a bit."This report tended to waken a great ambition in the widow's heart. Orperhaps the ambition had already taken form and this gossip confirmedand established it. Before she left the farm she had a chance tosecretly observe the girls, and they met with her full approval.At supper that evening she said to her hopeful:"Skim, I want ye to go courtin'."Skim looked up in amazement."Me, ma?" he asked."Yes, you. It's time you was thinkin' of gittin' married."Skim held his knife in his mouth a moment while he thought over thisstartling proposition. Then he removed the cutlery, heaved a deep sigh,and enquired:"Who at, ma?""What's that?""Who'll I go courtin' at?""Skim, you 'member in thet las' book we read, 'The Angel Maniac'sRevenge,' there was a sayin' that fate knocks wunst on ev'ry man's door.Well, fate's knockin' on your door."Skim listened, with a nervous glance toward the doorway. Then he shookhis head."All fool fancy, ma," he remarked. "Don't ye go an' git no rumanticnotions out'n books inter yer head.""Skim, am I a fool, er ain't I?""'Tain't fer me ter say, ma.""Fate's knockin', an' if you don't open to it, Skim, I'll wash my handso' ye, an' ye kin jest starve to death."The boy looked disturbed."What's aggrivatin' of ye, then?" he enquired, anxiously."A millionaire is come right under yer nose. He's here in Millville,with three gals fer nieces thet's all got money to squander an's boundto hev more."Skim gave a low whistle."Ye don't mean fer me to be courtin' at them gals, do ye?" he demanded."Why not? Yer fambly's jest as respectible as any, 'cept thet yer UncleMell backslided after the last revival, an' went to a hoss race. Yeryoung, an' yer han'some; an' there's three gals waitin' ready to be wonby a bold wooer. Be bold, Skim; take fate by the fetlock, an' yerfortun's made easy!"Skim did not reply at once. He gulped down his tea and stared at theopposite wall in deep thought. It wasn't such a "tarnal bad notion,"after all, and so thoroughly impressed was he with his own importanceand merit that it never occurred to him he would meet with anydifficulties if he chose to undertake the conquest."Peggy says marri'ge is the mark of a fool; an' Peggy married money,too," he remarked slowly."Pah! money! Mary Ann Cotting didn't hev but a hundred an' fortydollars, all told, an' she were an old maid an' soured an' squint-eyedwhen Peggy hitched up with her.""I hain't seen nuthin' o' the world, yit," continued Skim, evasively."Ner ye won't nuther, onless ye marry money. Any one o' them gals couldtake ye to Europe an' back a dozen times."Skim reflected still farther."Courtin' ought to hev some decent clothes," he said. "I kain't set inthe nabob's parlor, with all thet slick furnitur', in Nick Thorne'scast-off Sunday suit.""The cloth's as good as ever was made, an' I cut 'em down myself, an'stitched 'em all over.""They don't look like store clothes, though," objected Skim.The widow sighed."Tain't the coat that makes the man, Skim.""It's the coat thet makes decent courtin', though," he maintained,stubbornly. "Gals like to see a feller dressed up. It shows he meansbusiness an' 'mounts to somethin'.""I give Nick Thorne two dollars an' a packidge o' terbacker fer themclotlies, which the on'y thing wrong about was they'd got too snug fercomfert. Nick said so himself. But I'll make a bargain with ye, Skim. Efyou'll agree to give me fifty dollars after yer married, I'll buy yesome store clothes o' Sam Cotting, to do courtin' in.""Fifty dollars!""Well, I've brung ye up, hain't I?" "I've worked like a nigger, mindin'shop." "Say forty dollars. I ain't small, an' ef ye git one o' them citygals, Skim, forty dollars won't mean no more'n a wink of an eye to ye."Skim frowned. Then he smiled, and the smile disclosed a front toothmissing."I'll dream on't," he said. "Let ye know in the mornin', ma. But I won'tcourt a minite, mind ye, 'nless I git store clothes."CHAPTER XX.A LOST CAUSE.The boy's musings confirmed him in the idea that his mother's scheme wasentirely practical. He didn't hanker much to marry, being young andfairly satisfied with his present lot; but opportunities like this didnot often occur, and it seemed his bounden duty to take advantage of it.He got the "store clothes" next day, together with a scarlet necktiethat was "all made up in the latest style," as Sam Cotting assured him,and a pair of yellow kid gloves "fit fer a howlin' swell." Skim wasn'tsure, at first, about the gloves, but capitulated when Sam declared theywere "real cityfied."In the evening he "togged up," with his mother's help, and then walkedover to the Wegg farm.Beth answered the knock at the door. The living room was brightlylighted; Uncle John and the Major were playing checkers in a corner andPatsy was softly drumming on the piano. Louise had a book and Beth hadbeen engaged upon some fancy-work.When the door opened Skim bobbed his head and said:"Evenin', mom. I've come a-visitin'."Beth conquered an inclination to smile."Won't you come in?" she said, sweetly."Thankee; I will. I'm Skimbley Clark, ye know; down t' the village. Makeeps a store there.""I'm pleased to meet you, Mr. Clark. Allow me to introduce to you myuncle and cousins," said the girl, her eyes dancing with amusement.Skim acknowledged the introductions with intense gravity, and then satdown upon a straight-backed chair near the piano, this being the end ofthe room where the three girls were grouped. Uncle John gave a chuckleand resumed his game with the Major, who whispered that he would give adollar for an oil painting of Mr. Clark--if it couldn't be had for less.Louise laid down her book and regarded the visitor wonderingly. Patsyscented fun and drew a chair nearer the group. Beth resumed herembroidery with a demure smile that made Skim decide at once that "hepicked the pretty one."Indeed, the decision did justice to his discretion. Beth De Graf was ararely beautiful girl and quite outshone her cousins in this respect.Louise might be attractive and Patsy fascinating; but Beth was the realbeauty of the trio, and the most charming trait in her character was herunconsciousness that she excelled in good looks.So Skim stared hard at Beth, and answered the preliminary remarksaddressed to him by Patsy and Louise in a perfunctory manner."Won't you take off your gloves?" asked Louise, soberly. "It's so warmthis evening, you know."The boy looked at his hands."It's sech a tarnal job to git 'em on agin," he replied."Don't put them on, then," advised Patsy. "Here in the country we areallowed to dispense with much unnecessary social etiquette.""Air ye? Then off they come. I ain't much stuck on gloves, myself; butma she 'lowed that a feller goin' courtin' orter look like a sport."A chorus of wild laughter, which greeted this speech, had the effect ofmaking Skim stare at the girls indignantly. He couldn't find anythingfunny in his remark; but there they sat facing him and utteringhysterical peals of merriment, until the tears ran down their cheeks.Silently and with caution he removed the yellow gloves from his hands,and so gave the foolish creatures a chance "to laugh out theirblamed giggle."But they were watching him, and saw that he was disconcerted. They hadno mind to ruin the enjoyment in store for them by offending theirguest, so they soon resumed a fitting gravity and began to assist theyouth to forget their rudeness."May I ask," said Patsy, very graciously, "which one of us you intend tofavor with your attentions?""I ain't much used to sech things," he replied, looking down at his bighands and growing a little red-faced. "P'raps I hadn't orter tell,before the rest o' ye.""Oh, yes; do tell!" pleaded Louise. "We're so anxious to know.""I don't s'pose it's right clever to pick an' choose when ye're all by,"said Skim, regaining confidence. "But ma, she 'lowed thet with threegals handy I orter git one on 'em, to say the least.""If you got more than one," remarked Beth, calmly, "it would beillegal.""Oh, one's enough," said Skim, with a grin. "Peggy says it's too many,an' a feller oughtn't to take his gal out'n a grab-bag.""I should think not, indeed," returned Patsy. "But here are three of usopenly displayed, and unless you turn us all down as unworthy, it willbe necessary for you to make a choice.""What foolishness are you girls up to now?" demanded Uncle John,catching a stray word from the other corner while engaged in a desperatestruggle with the Major."This is a time for you to keep quiet, Uncle," retorted Patsy, merrily."We've got important things to consider that are none of your affairs,whatever."Skim reflected that he didn't want this one, except as a last resort.She was "too bossy.""When I started out," he said, "I jest come a-courtin', as any fellermight do thet wasn't much acquainted. But ef I've got to settle down toone o' ye--"He hesitated."Oh, you must really take one at a time, you know," asserted Louise."It's the only proper way.""Then I'll start on thet dark-eyed one thet's a sewin'," he said,slowly.Beth looked up from her work and smiled."Go ahead, Mr. Clark," she said, encouragingly. "My name is Beth. Hadyou forgotten it?""Call me Skim," he said, gently."Very well, Skim,--Now look here, Patsy Doyle, if you're going to sitthere and giggle you'll spoil everything. Mr. Clark wants to court, andit's getting late.""P'raps I've went fur enough fer tonight," remarked Skim, uneasily."Next time they'll leave us alone, an' then----""Oh, don't postpone it, please!" begged Beth, giving the boy a demureglance from her soft brown eyes. "And don't mind my cousins. I don't.""These things kain't be hurried," he said. "Si Merkle courted threeweeks afore he popped. He tol' me so.""Then he was a very foolish man," declared Patsy, positively. "Just lookat Beth! She's dying to have you speak out. What's the use of waiting,when she knows why you are here?"By this time Skim had been flattered to the extent of destroying anystray sense he might ever have possessed. His utter ignorance of girlsand their ways may have been partly responsible for his idiocy, or hismother's conviction that all that was necessary was for him to declarehimself in order to be accepted had misled him and induced him toabandon any native diffidence he might have had. Anyway, the boy fellinto the snare set by the mischievous young ladies without a suspicionof his impending fate."Miss Beth," said he, "ef yer willin', I'll marry ye; any time ye say. Iagreed t' help Dick Pearson with the harvestin', but I'll try to' gitNed Long to take my place, an' it don't matter much, nohow.""But I couldn't have you break an engagement," cried Beth, hastily."Why not?""Oh, it wouldn't be right, at all. Mr. Pearson would never forgive me,"she asserted."Can't ye--""No; not before harvest, Skim. I couldn't think of it.""But arterward--""No; I've resolved never to marry after harvest. So, as you're engaged,and I don't approve of breaking engagements, I must refuse yourproposition entirely."Skim looked surprised; then perplexed; then annoyed."P'raps I didn't pop jest right," he murmured, growing red again."You popped beautifully," declared Patsy. "But Beth is very peculiar,and set in her ways. I'm afraid she wouldn't make you a goodwife, anyhow.""Then p'raps the gal in blue----""No;" said Louise. "I have the same prejudices as my cousin. If youhadn't been engaged for the harvest I might have listened to you; butthat settles the matter definitely, as far as I am concerned."Skim sighed."Ma'll be mad as a hornet ef I don't get any of ye," he remarked, sadly."She's paid Sam Cotting fer this courtin' suit, an' he won't take backthe gloves on no 'count arter they've been wore; an' thet'll set macrazy. Miss Patsy, ef yo' think ye could----""I'm sure I couldn't," said Patsy, promptly. "I'm awfully sorry to breakyour heart, Skim, dear, and ruin your future life, and make youmisanthropic and cynical, and spoil your mother's investment and makeher mad as a hornet. All this grieves me terribly; but I'll recover fromit, if you'll only give me time. And I hope you'll find a wife that willbe more congenial than I could ever be."Skim didn't understand all these words, but the general tenor of thespeech was convincing, and filled him with dismay."Rich gals is tarnal skeerce in these parts," he said, regretfully.Then they gave way again, and so lusty was the merriment that Uncle Johnand the Major abandoned their game and came across the room to discoverthe source of all this amusement."What's up, young women?" asked their Uncle, glancing from theirlaughing faces to the lowering, sullen one of the boy, who had only nowbegun to suspect that he was being "poked fun at.""Oh, Uncle!" cried Patsy; "you've no idea how near you have been tolosing us. We have each had an offer of marriage within the lasthalf hour!""Dear me!" ejaculated Uncle John."It shows the young man's intelligence and good taste," said the Major,much amused. "But is it a Mormon ye are, sir, to want all three?"directing a keen glance at Skim."Naw, 'tain't," he returned, wholly disgusted with the outcome of hissuit. "All three got as't 'cause none of 'em's got sense enough t' knowa good thing when they seen it.""But I do," said the Major, stoutly; "and I maintain that you're a goodthing, and always will be. I hope, sir, you'll call 'round and see me inBaltimore next year. I'll not be there, but ye can leave your card, justthe same.""Please call again, sir," added Uncle John; "about October--just beforesnow flies."The boy got up."I don't keer none," he said, defiantly. "It's all ma's fault, gittin'me laughed at, an' she won't hear the last of it in a hurry, nuther.""Be gentle with her, Skim," suggested Beth, softly. "Remember she has toface the world with you by her side."Having no retort for this raillery, which he felt rather thanunderstood, Skim seized his hat and fled. Then Patsy wiped the tearsfrom her eyes and said:"Wasn't it grand, girls? I haven't had so much fun since I was born."CHAPTER XXI.THE TRAP IS SET.Uncle John was forced to acknowledge to his nieces that his boast tounmask Bob West within three days was mere blustering. If heaccomplished anything in three weeks he would consider himselffortunate. But he had no wish to conceal anything from the girls, so hetold them frankly of his interview with the hardware merchant, and alsowhat Joe Wegg had said about the stock in the locked cupboard. Theywere, of course, greatly interested in this new phase of the matter andcanvassed it long and eagerly."The man is lying, of course," said Patsy, "for Captain Wegg and poorMr. Thompson could not transfer their stock to West after that fatalnight when he brought to them the news of the fire.""I believe the stock is still in this cupboard," declared Uncle John."Unless West stole the keys and has taken it away," suggested Louise."I'm sure he did not know about the secret drawer," said her uncle."Probably he stole the keys and searched the cupboard; if he had foundthe stock he would have left the keys, which would then be of no furtheruse to him. As he did not find the stock certificates, he carried thekeys away, that he might search again at his leisure. And they've neveryet been returned.""Why, John, ye're possessed of the true detective instinct," the Majorremarked, admiringly. "Your reasoning is at once clever andunassailable.""I wonder," mused Beth, "if we could tempt Mr. West to come again tosearch the cupboard.""He will scarcely venture to do that while we are here," replied UncleJohn."I said 'tempt him,' Uncle.""And what did you mean by that expression, Beth?""I'll think it over and tell you later," she returned, quietly. \* \* \* \* \*Ethel Thompson would have shown Joe Wegg how much she resented hisleaving Millville without a word to her, had she not learned from Mr.Merrick the boy's sad condition. Knowing her old friend was ill, shedetermined to ignore the past and go to him at once, and Uncle John knewvery well there would be explanations to smooth away all the formermisunderstandings.Joe was now aware of the fact that his letter to Ethel had never reachedits destination, so, as soon as the girl had arrived and the firstrather formal greetings were over, he sent Kate Kebble to McNutt's toask the agent to come over to the hotel at once.The girl returned alone."Peggy says as he can't come," she announced."Why not?" asked Joe."Says he's jest painted his off foot blue an' striped it with red, an'it hain't dried yit.""Go back," said Joe, firmly. "Tell Peggy he's in trouble, and it'slikely to cost him more than a new coat of paint for his foot if hedoesn't come here at once."Kate went back, and in due time the stump of McNutt's foot was heard onthe stairs. He entered the room looking worried and suspicious, and thestern faces of Ethel and Joe did not reassure him, by any means. But hetried to disarm the pending accusation with his usual brazenimpertinence."Nice time ter send fer me, this is, Joe," he grumbled. "It's gittin' soa feller can't even paint his foot in peace an' quiet.""Peggy," said Joe, "when I went away, three years ago, I gave you aletter for Miss Ethel. What did you do with it?"Peggy's bulging eyes stared at his blue foot, which he turned first oneside and then the other to examine the red stripes."It's this way, Joe," he replied; "there wa'n't no postige stamp on theletter, an' Sam Cotting said it couldn't be posted no way 'thouta stamp.""It wasn't to be sent through the post-office," said the boy. "I gaveyou a quarter to deliver it in person to Miss Ethel.""Did ye, Joe? did ye?""Of course I did.""Cur'ous," said McNutt, leaning over to touch the foot cautiously withone finger, to see if the paint was dry."Well, sir!""Well, Joe, there's no use gittin' mad 'bout it. Thet blamed quarter yegiv me rolled down a crack in the stoop, an' got lost. Sure. Got lost aseasy as anything.""Well, what was that to me?""Oh, I ain't blamin' you," said Peggy; "but 'twere a good deal to me, Ikin tell ye. A whole quarter lost!""Why didn't you take up a board, and get it again?""Oh, I did," said McNutt. cheerfully. "I did, Joe. But the money was allblack an' tarnished like, by thet time, an' didn't look at all likesilver. Sam he wouldn't take it at the store, so my ol' woman she 'lowedshe'd polish it up a bit. Ye know how sort o' vig'rous she is, Joe. Shepolished that blamed quarter the same way she jaws an' sweeps; shepolished it 'til she rubbed both sides smooth as glass, an' then Samwouldn't take it, nuther, 'n' said it wasn't money any more. So Idrilled two holes in it an' sewed it on my pants fer a 'spender butt'n.""But why didn't you deliver the letter?""Did ye 'spect I'd tramp way t' Thompson's Crossing fer nuthin'?""I gave you a quarter.""An' it turned out to be on'y a 'spender butt'n. Be reason'ble, Joe.""Where is the letter?""'Tain't a letter no more. It's on'y ol' fambly papers by this time.Three years is----""Where is it? By thunder, Peggy, if you don't answer me I'll put you injail for breach of trust!""Ye've changed, Joe," sadly. "Ye ain't no more like----""Where is it?""Behind the lookin'-glass in my sett'n-room.""Go and get it immediately, sir!""Ef I hev to cross thet dusty road twic't more, I'll hev to paint allover agin, an' thet's a fact.""Ethel," said Joe, with the calmness of despair, "you'll have totelephone over to the Junction and ask them to send a constable hereat once.""Never mind," cried McNutt, jumping up hastily; "I'll go. Paint don'tcost much, nohow."He stumped away, but on his return preferred to let Kate carry thesoiled, torn envelope up to the young folks. The letter had palpablybeen tampered with. It had been opened and doubtless read, and the flapclumsily glued down again.But Ethel had it now, and even after three years her sweet eyes dimmedas she read the tender words that Joe had written because he lacked thecourage to speak them. "My one great ambition is to win a home for us,dear," he had declared, and with this before her eyes Ethel reproachedherself for ever doubting his love or loyalty.When she rode her pony over to the Wegg farm next day Ethel's brightface was wreathed with smiles. She told her girl friends that she andJoe had had a "good talk" together, and understood each other betterthan ever before. The nieces did not tell her of their newly conceivedhopes that the young couple would presently possess enough money torender their future comfortable, because there were so many chances thatBob West might win the little game being played. But at this momentEthel did not need worldly wealth to make her heart light and happy, forshe had regained her childhood's friend, and his injuries only renderedthe boy the more interesting and companionable.Meantime Uncle John had been busily thinking. It annoyed him to be socomposedly defied by a rascally country merchant, and he resolved, if hemust fight, to fight with all his might.So he wired to his agent in New York the following words:"What part of the Almaquo timber tract burned in forest fire three yearsago?"The answer he received made him give a satisfied grunt."No forest fires near Almaquo three years ago. Almadona, seventy milesnorth, burned at that time, and newspaper reports confounded the names.""Very good!" exclaimed Uncle John. "I've got the rascal now."He issued instructions to the lumber company to make no further paymentsof royalties to Robert West until otherwise advised, and this had theeffect of bringing West to the farm white with rage."What do you mean by this action, Mr. Merrick?" he demanded."We've been paying you money that does not belong to you for threeyears, sir," was the reply. "In a few days, when my investigations arecomplete, I will give you the option of being arrested for embezzlementof funds belonging to Joseph Wegg and the Thompsons, or restoring tothem every penny of their money."West stared."You are carrying matters with a high hand, sir," he sneered."Oh, no; I am acting very leniently," said Uncle John."Neither Joe nor the Thompsons own a dollar's interest in the Almaquoproperty. It is all mine, and mine alone.""Then produce the stock and prove it!" retorted Mr. Merrick,triumphantly.At that moment Louise interrupted the interview by entering the roomsuddenly."Oh, Uncle," said she, "will you join us in a picnic to the Fallstomorrow afternoon? We are all going.""Then I won't be left behind," he replied, smiling upon her."We shall take even Thomas and Nora, and come home late in the evening,by moonlight.""That suits me, my dear," said he.West stood silent and scowling, but as the girl tripped away she saw himraise his eyes and glance slyly toward the cupboard, for they were inthe right wing room."Mr. Merrick," he resumed, in a harsh voice; "I warn you that if yourcompany holds up the payment of my royalties it will break the contract,and I will forbid them to cut another tree. You are doubtless aware thatthere are a dozen firms willing to take your place and pay me higherroyalties.""Act as you please, sir," said Uncle John, indifferently. "I believe youare face to face with ruin, and it won't matter much what you do."West went away more quietly than he had come, and the girls exclaimed,delightedly:"The trap is set, Uncle!""I think so, myself," he rejoined. "That picnic was a happy thought,Louise."Early the next afternoon they started out with hammocks and baskets andall the paraphernalia of a picnic party. The three girls, Nora and UncleJohn squeezed themselves into the surrey, while the Major and Old Hucksrode after them in the ancient buggy, with Dan moaning and groaningevery step he took. But the old horse moved more briskly when followingJoe, and Hucks could get more speed out of him than anyone else; so hedid not lag much behind.The procession entered Millville, where a brief stop was made at thestore, and then made its exit by the north road. West was standing inthe door of his hardware store, quietly observing them. When theydisappeared in the grove he locked the door of his establishment andsauntered in the direction of the Pearson farm, no one noticing himexcept Peggy McNutt, who was disappointed because he had intended to goover presently and buy a paper of tacks.When the village was left behind, Uncle John drove swiftly along,following the curve of the lake until he reached a primitive lane thathe had discovered formed a short cut directly back to the Wegg farm. OldThomas was amazed by this queer action on the part of the picnic party,but aside from blind Nora, who had no idea where they were, the othersseemed full of repressed eagerness, and in no way surprised.The lane proved very rocky though, and they were obliged to jolt slowlyover the big cobble stones. So Beth and Patsy leaped out of the surreyand the former called out:"We will run through the forest, Uncle, and get home as soon as you do.""Be careful not to show yourselves, then," he replied. "Remember ourplans.""We will. And don't forget to tie the horses in the thicket, and warnThomas and Nora to keep quiet until we come for them," said Patsy."I'll attend to all that, dear," remarked Louise, composedly. "But ifyou girls are determined to walk, you must hurry along, or you will keepus waiting."The nieces had explored every path in the neighborhood by this time, soBeth and Patsy were quite at home in the pine forest. The horses startedup again, and after struggling along another quarter of a mile a wheelof the surrey dished between two stones, and with a bump the axle struckthe ground and the journey was promptly arrested."What shall we do now?" asked Uncle John, much annoyed, as the partyalighted to examine the wreck."Send Thomas back to the village for another wheel" suggested the Major."Not today!" cried Louise. "We mustn't appear in the village again thisafternoon, on any account. It is absolutely necessary we should keep outof sight.""True," agreed Uncle John, promptly. "Thomas and Nora must picnic hereall by themselves, until nearly midnight. Then they may drive the buggyhome, leading Daniel behind them. It will be time enough tomorrow to geta new buggy wheel, and the broken surrey won't be in anybody's way untilwe send for it."If Old Hucks thought they had all gone crazy that day he was seeminglyjustified in the suspicion, for his master left the baskets of goodthings to be consumed by himself and Nora and started to walk to thefarm, the Major and Louise accompanying him."We mustn't loiter," said the girl, "for while West may wait untildarkness falls to visit the farm, he is equally liable to arrive at anytime this afternoon. He has seen us all depart, and believes the housedeserted."But they were obliged to keep to the lane, where walking was difficult,and meantime Patsy and Beth were tripping easily along their woodlandpaths and making much better progress.CHAPTER XXII.CAUGHT."We're early," said Beth, as they came to the edge of the woods andsighted the farm house; "but that is better than being late."Then she stopped suddenly with a low cry and pointed to the right wing,which directly faced them. Bob West turned the corner of the house,tried the door of Uncle John's room, and then walked to one of theFrench windows. The sash was not fastened, so he deliberately opened itand stepped inside."What shall we do?" gasped Patsy, clasping her hands excitedly.Beth was always cool in an emergency."You creep up to the window, dear, and wait till you hear me open theinside door," said she. "I'll run through the house and enter from theliving-room. The key is under the mat, you know.""But what can we do? Oughtn't we to wait until Uncle John and fathercome?" Patsy asked, in a trembling voice."Of course not. West might rob the cupboard and be gone by that time.We've got to act promptly, Patsy; so don't be afraid."Without further words Beth ran around the back of the house anddisappeared, while Patsy, trying to control the beating of her heart,stole softly over the lawn to the open window of Uncle John's room.She could not help looking in, at the risk of discovery. Bob West--tall,lean and composed as ever--was standing beside the cupboard, the doorsof which were wide open. The outer doors were of wood, panelled andcarved; the inner ones were plates of heavy steel, and in the lock thatsecured these latter doors were the keys that had so long been missing.Both were attached to a slender silver chain.As Patsy peered in at the man West was engaged in deliberately examiningpacket after packet of papers, evidently striving to find the missingstock certificates. He was in no hurry, believing he would have thehouse to himself for several hours; so he tumbled Captain Wegg'ssouvenirs of foreign lands in a heap on the floor beside him, thrustinghis hand into every corner of the cupboard in order that the searchmight be thorough. He had once before examined the place in vain; thistime he intended to succeed.Presently West drew a cigar from his pocket, lighted it, and was aboutto throw the match upon the floor when the thought that it might laterbetray his presence made him pause and then walk to the open window. Ashe approached, Patsy became panic-stricken and, well knowing that sheought to run or hide, stood rooted to the spot, gazing half appealinglyand half defiantly into the startled eyes of the man who suddenlyconfronted her.So for a moment they stood motionless. West was thinking rapidly. Bysome error be had miscounted the picnic party and this girl had beenleft at home. She had discovered his intrusion, had seen him at thecupboard, and would report the matter to John Merrick. This being thecase, it would do him no good to retreat without accomplishing hispurpose. If once he secured the stock certificates he could afford tolaugh at his accusers, and secure them he must while he had theopportunity.So clearly did these thoughts follow one another that West's hesitationseemed only momentary. Without a word to the girl he tossed the matchupon the grass, calmly turned his back, and started for thecupboard again.But here a new surprise awaited him. Brief as had been his absence,another girl had entered the room. Beth opened the door even as Westturned toward the window, and, taking in the situation at a glance, shetiptoed swiftly to the cupboard, withdrew the keys from the lock anddropped them noiselessly into a wide-mouthed vase that stood on thetable and was partially filled with flowers. The next instant Westturned and saw her, but she smiled at him triumphantly. "Good afternoon,sir," said the girl, sweetly; "can I do anything to assist you?"West uttered an impatient exclamation and regarded Beth savagely."Is the house full of girls?" he demanded."Oh, no; Patsy and I are quite alone," she replied, with a laugh. "Comein, Patsy dear, and help me to entertain our guest," she added.Patsy came through the window and stood beside her cousin. The manstared at them, bit his lip, and then turned again to the cupboard. Ifhe noted the absence of the keys he did not remark upon the fact, butwith hurried yet thorough examination began anew to turn over thebundles of papers.Beth sat down and watched him, but Patsy remained standing behind herchair. West emptied all the shelves, and then after a pause took out hispocket knife and began tapping with its end the steel sides of thecupboard. There was no doubt he suspected the existence of a secretaperture, and Beth began to feel uneasy.Slowly the man worked his way downward, from shelf to shelf, and beganto sound the bottom plates, wholly oblivious of the fascinated gaze ofthe two young girls. Then a sudden gruff ejaculation startled them all,and West swung around to find a new group of watchers outside thewindow. In the foreground appeared the stern face of John Merrick.The scene was intensely dramatic to all but the singular man who hadbeen battling to retain a fortune. West knew in an instant that hisattempt to secure the certificates was a failure. He turned from thecupboard, dusted his hands, and nodded gravely to the last arrivals."Come in, Mr. Merrick," said he, seating himself in a chair and removinghis hat, which he had been wearing. "I owe you an apology for intrudingupon your premises in your absence."Uncle John strode into the room angry and indignant at the fellow's coolimpertinence. The Major and Louise followed, and all eyes centered uponthe face of Bob West."The contents of this cupboard," remarked the hardware merchant, calmly,"belong to the estate of Captain Wegg, and can scarcely be claimed byyou because you have purchased the house. You falsely accused me theother day, sir, and I have been searching for proof that the AlmaquoTimber Tract stock is entirely my property.""Have you found such proof?" inquired Mr. Merrick."Not yet.""And you say the stock was all issued to you?"West hesitated."It was all transferred to me by Captain Wegg and Will Thompson.""Does the transfer appear upon the stock itself?""Of course, sir.""In that case," said Uncle John, "I shall be obliged to ask your pardon.But the fact can be easily proved."He walked to the open cupboard, felt for the slide Joe had described tohim, and drew it forward. A small drawer was behind the orifice, andfrom this Mr. Merrick drew a packet of papers.West gave a start and half arose. Then he settled back into his chairagain."H-m. This appears to be the stock in question," said Uncle John. Hedrew a chair to the table, unfolded the documents and examined them withdeliberate care.The nieces watched his face curiously. Mr. Merrick first frowned, thenturned red, and finally a stern, determined look settled upon hisrugged features."Take your stock, Mr. West," he said, tossing it toward the man; "andtry to forgive us for making fools of ourselves!"CHAPTER XXIII.MR. WEST EXPLAINS.A cry of amazed protest burst from the girls. The Major whistled softlyand walked to the window."I find the stock properly transferred," continued Uncle John, grimlyconscious that he was as thoroughly disappointed as the girls. "It issigned by both Wegg and Thompson, and witnessed in the presence of anotary. I congratulate you, Mr. West. You have acquired a fortune.""But not recently," replied the hardware dealer, enjoying the confusionof his recent opponents. "I have owned this stock for more than threeyears, and you will see by the amount endorsed upon it that I paid aliberal price for it, under the circumstances."Uncle John gave a start and a shrewd look."Of course you did," said he. "On paper.""I have records to prove that both Captain Wegg and Will Thompsonreceived their money," said West, quietly. "I see it is hard for you toabandon the idea that I am a rogue."There could be no adequate reply to this, so for a time all sat in moodysilence. But the thoughts of some were busy."I would like Mr. West to explain what became of the money he paid forthis stock," said Louise; adding: "That is, if he will be so courteous."West did not answer for a moment. Then he said, with a gesture ofindifference:"I am willing to tell all I know. But you people must admit that theannoyances you have caused me during the past fortnight, to say nothingof the gratuitous insults heaped upon my head, render me little inclinedto favor you.""You are quite justified in feeling as you do," replied Uncle John,meekly. "I have been an ass, West; but circumstances warranted me insuspecting you, and even Joseph Wegg did not know that the Almaquo stockhad been transferred to you. He merely glanced at it at the time of hisfather's death, without noticing the endorsement, and thought the firehad rendered it worthless. But if you then owned the stock, why was itnot in your possession?""That was due to my carelessness," was the reply. "The only notaryaround here is at Hooker's Falls, and Mr. Thompson offered to have himcome to Captain Wegg's residence and witness the transfer. As mypresence was not necessary for this, and I had full confidence in myfriends' integrity, I paid them their money, which they were eager tosecure at once, and said I would call in a few days for the stock. I didcall, and was told the notary had been here and the transfer had beenlegally made. Wegg said he would get the stock from the cupboard andhand it to me; but we both forgot it at that time. After his death Icould not find it, for it was in the secret drawer.""Another thing, sir," said Uncle John. "If neither Wegg nor Thompson wasthen interested in the Almaquo property, why did the news of itsdestruction by fire shock them so greatly that the result was CaptainWegg's death?""I see it will be necessary for me to explain to you more fully,"returned West, with a thoughtful look. "It is evident, Mr. Merrick, fromyour questions, that some of these occurrences seem suspicious to astranger, and perhaps you are not so much to be blamed as, in myannoyance and indignation, I have imagined.""I would like the matter cleared up for the sake of Ethel and Joe," saidMr. Merrick, simply."And so would I," declared the hardware dealer. "You must know, sir,that Will Thompson was the one who first led Captain Wegg into investinghis money. I think the Captain did it merely to please Will, for at thattime he had become so indifferent to worldly affairs that he took nointerest in anything beyond a mild wish to provide for his son's future.But Thompson was erratic in judgment, so Wegg used to bring theirmatters to me to decide upon. I always advised them as honestly as I wasable. At the time I secured an option on the Almaquo tract, and wantedthem to join me, Will Thompson had found another lot of timber, butlocated in an out-of-the-way corner, which he urged the Captain to joinhim in buying. Wegg brought the matter to me, as usual, and I pointedout that my proposed contract with the Pierce-Lane Lumber Company wouldassure our making a handsome profit at Almaquo, while Thompson had noone in view to cut the other tract. Indeed, it was far away from anyrailroad. Wegg saw the force of my argument, and insisted that Thompsonabandon his idea and accept my proposition. Together we bought theproperty, having formed a stock company, and the contract for cuttingthe timber was also secured. Things were looking bright for us androyalty payments would soon be coming in."Then, to my amazement, Wegg came to me and wanted to sell out theirinterests. He said Thompson had always been dissatisfied because theyhad not bought the other tract of timber, and that the worry anddisappointment was affecting his friend's mind. He was personallysatisfied that my investment was the best, but, in order to sooth oldWill and prevent his mind from giving way, Wegg wanted to withdraw andpurchase the other tract."I knew there was a fortune in Almaquo, so I went to New York andmortgaged all I possessed, discounting a lot of notes given me byfarmers in payment for machinery, and finally borrowing at a high rateof interest the rest of the money I needed. In other words I risked allmy fortune on Almaquo, and brought the money home to pay Wegg andThompson for their interest. The moment they received the payment theyinvested it in the Bogue tract--""Hold on!" cried Uncle John. "What tract did you say?""The Bogue timber tract, sir. It lies--""I know where it lies. Our company has been a whole year trying to findout who owned it.""Wegg and Thompson bought it. I was angry at the time, because theirwithdrawal had driven me into a tight corner to protect my investment,and I told them they would bitterly regret their action. I think Weggagreed with me, but Will Thompson was still stubborn."Then came the news of the fire at Almaquo. It was a false report, Iafterward learned, but at that time I believed the newspapers, and theblow almost deprived me of reason. In my excitement I rushed over toWegg's farm and found the two men together, whereupon I told them Iwas ruined."The news affected them powerfully because they had just savedthemselves from a like ruin, they thought. Wegg was also a sympatheticman, in spite of his reserve. His old heart trouble suddenly came uponhim, aggravated by the excitement of the hour, and he died with scarcelya moan. Thompson, whose reason was tottering long before this, becameviolently insane at witnessing his friend's death, and has never sincerecovered. That is all I am able to tell you, sir.""The Bogue tract," said Uncle John, slowly, "is worth far more than theAlmaquo. Old Will Thompson was sane enough when insisting on thatinvestment. But where is the stock, or deed, to show they bought thatproperty?""I do not know, sir. I only know they told me they had effected thepurchase.""Pardon me," said the Major. "Have you not been through this cupboardbefore?"West looked at him with a frown."Yes; in a search for my own stock," he said. "But I found neither thatnor any deed to the Bogue property. I am not a thief, Major Doyle.""You stole the keys, though," said Louise, pointedly."I did not even do that," said West. "On the day of the funeral Joecarelessly left them lying upon a table, so I slipped them into mypocket. When I thought of them again Joe had gone away and I did notknow his address. I came over and searched the cupboard unsuccessfully.But it was not a matter of great importance at that time if the stockwas mislaid, since there was no one to contest my ownership of it. Itwas only after Mr. Merrick accused me of robbing my old friends andordered my payments stopped that I realized it was important to me toprove my ownership. That is why I came here today."Again a silence fell upon the group. Said Uncle John, finally:"If the deed to the Bogue tract can be found, Joe and Ethel will berich. I wonder what became of the paper."No one answered, for here was another mystery.CHAPTER XXIV.PEGGY HAS REVENGE.Joe Wegg made a rapid recovery, his strength returning under theinfluence of pleasant surroundings and frequent visits from Ethel andUncle John's three nieces. Not a word was hinted to either the invalidor the school teacher regarding the inquiries Mr. Merrick was makingabout the deed to the Bogue timber lands, which, if found, would makethe young couple independent. Joe was planning to exploit a new patentas soon as he could earn enough to get it introduced, and Ethelexhibited a sublime confidence in the boy's ability that rendered allquestion of money insignificant.Joe's sudden appearance in the land of his birth and his generallysmashed up condition were a nine days' wonder in Millville. The gossipswanted to know all the whys and wherefores, but the boy kept his room inthe hotel, or only walked out when accompanied by Ethel or one of thethree nieces. Sometimes they took him to ride, as he grew better, andthe fact that Joe "were hand an' glove wi' the nabobs" lent him adistinction he had never before possessed.McNutt, always busy over somebody else's affairs, was very curious toknow what had caused the accident Joe had suffered. Notwithstanding thelittle affair of the letter, in which he had not appeared with especialcredit, Peggy made an effort to interview the young man that resulted inhis complete discomfiture. But that did not deter him from indulging invarious vivid speculations about Joe Wegg, which the simple villagerslistened to with attention. For one thing, he confided to "the boys" atthe store that, in his opinion, the man who had murdered Cap'n Wegg hadtried to murder his son also, and it wasn't likely Joe could manage toescape him a second time. Another tale evolved from Peggy's fertileimagination was that Joe, being about to starve to death in the city,had turned burglar and been shot in the arm in an attempt athousebreaking."Wouldn't be s'prised," said the agent, in an awed voice, "ef the p'licewas on his track now. P'raps there's a reward offered, boys; let's keepan eye on him!"He waylaid the nieces once or twice, and tried to secure from them averification of his somber suspicions, which they mischievouslyfostered.The girls found him a source of much amusement, and relieved their owndisappointment at finding the "Wegg Mystery" a pricked bubble by gettingMcNutt excited over many sly suggestions of hidden crimes. They knew hewas harmless, for even his neighbors needed proof of any assertion hemade; moreover, the investigation Uncle John was making would soon setmatters right; so the young ladies did not hesitate to "have fun" at thelittle agent's expense.One of McNutt's numerous occupations was raising a "patch" ofwatermelons each year on the lot back of the house. These he hadfostered with great care since the plants had first sprouted through thesoil, and in these late August days two or three hundreds of fine, bigmelons were just getting ripe. He showed the patch with much pride oneday to the nieces, saying:"Here's the most extry-fine melling-patch in this county, ef I do say itmyself. Dan Brayley he thinks he kin raise mellings, but the ol' foolain't got a circumstance to this. Ain't they beauties?""It seems to me," observed Patsy, gravely, "that Brayley's are just asgood. We passed his place this morning and wondered how he could raisesuch enormous melons.""'Normous! Brayley's!""I'm sure they are finer than these," said Beth."Well, I'll be jiggered!" Peggy's eyes stared as they had never staredbefore. "Dan Brayley, he's a miser'ble ol' skinflint. Thet man couldn'traise decent mellings ef he tried.""What do you charge for melons, Mr. McNutt?" inquired Louise."Charge? Why--er--fifty cents a piece is my price to nabobs; an' dirtcheap at that!""That is too much," declared Patsy. "Mr. Brayley says he will sell hismelons for fifteen cents each.""Him! Fifteen cents!" gasped Peggy, greatly disappointed. "Say,Brayley's a disturbin' element in these parts. He oughter go to jail ferasking fifteen cents fer them mean little mellings o' his'n.""They seem as large as yours," murmured Louise."But they ain't. An' Brayley's a cheat an' a rascal, while a honesterman ner me don't breathe. Nobody likes Brayley 'round Millville. Why,on'y las' winter he called me a meddler--in public!--an' said as I shotoff my mouth too much. Me!""How impolite.""But that's Dan Brayley. My mellings at fifty cents is better 'n his'nat fifteen.""Tell me," said Patsy, with a smile, "did you ever rob a melon-patch,Mr. McNutt?""Me? I don't hev to. I grow 'em.""But the ones you grow are worth fifty cents each, are they not?""Sure; mine is.""Then every time you eat one of your own melons you eat fifty cents. Ifyou were eating one of Mr. Brayley's melons you would only eatfifteen cents.""And it would be Brayley's fifteen cents, too," added Beth, quickly.Peggy turned his protruding eyes from one to the other, and a smileslowly spread over his features."By jinks, let's rob Brayley's melling-patch!" he cried."All right; we'll help you," answered Patsy, readily."Oh, my dear!" remonstrated Louise, not understanding."It will be such fun," replied her cousin, with eyes dancing merrily."Boys always rob melon-patches, so I don't see why girls shouldn't. Whenshall we do it, Mr. McNutt?""There ain't any moon jest now, an' the nights is dark as blazes. Let'sgo ternight.""It's a bargain," declared Patsy. "We will come for you in the surrey atten o'clock, and all drive together to the back of Brayley's yard andtake all the melons we want.""It'll serve him right," said Peggy, delightedly. "Ol' Dan called me ameddler onc't--in public--an' I'm bound t' git even with him.""Don't betray us, sir," pleaded Beth."I can't," replied McNutt, frankly; "I'm in it myself, an' we'll jestfind out what his blame-twisted ol' fifteen-cent mellings is like."Patsy was overjoyed at the success of her plot, which she had conceivedon the spur of the moment, as most clever plots are conceived. On theway home she confided to her cousins a method of securing revenge uponthe agent for selling them the three copies of the "Lives ofthe Saints.""McNutt wants to get even with Brayley, he says, and we want to get evenwith McNutt. I think our chances are best, don't you?" she asked.And they decided to join the conspiracy.There was some difficulty escaping from Uncle John and the Major thatnight, but Patsy got them interested in a game of chess that was likelyto last some hours, while Beth stole to the barn and harnessed Joe tothe surrey. Soon the others slipped out and joined her, and with Patsyand Beth on the front seat and Louise Inside the canopy they droveslowly away until the sound of the horse's feet on the stones was nolonger likely to betray them.McNutt was waiting for them when they quietly drew up before his house.The village was dark and silent, for its inhabitants retired early tobed. By good fortune the sky was overcast with heavy clouds and not eventhe glimmer of a star relieved the gloom.They put McNutt on the back seat with Louise, cautioned him to be quiet,and then drove away. Dan Brayley's place was two miles distant, but inanswer to Peggy's earnest inquiry if she knew the way Beth declared shecould find it blind-folded. In a few moments Louise had engaged theagent in a spirited discussion of the absorbing "mystery" and sooccupied his attention that he paid no heed to the direction they hadtaken. The back seat was hemmed in by side curtains and the canopy, soit would be no wonder if he lost all sense of direction, even had notthe remarks of the girl at his side completely absorbed him.Beth drove slowly down the main street, up a lane, back by the lake roadand along the street again; and this programme was repeated severaltimes, until she thought a sufficient distance had been covered toconvince the agent they had arrived at Brayley's. They way was pitchdark, but the horse was sensible enough to keep in the middle of theroad, so they met with no accident more than to jolt over a stonenow and then.But now the most difficult part of the enterprise lay before them. Thegirls turned down the lane back of the main street and bumped over theruts until they thought they had arrived at a spot opposite McNutt's ownmelon patch."What's wrong?" asked the agent, as they suddenly stopped with a jerk."This ought to be Brayley's," said Beth; "but it's so dark I'm notcertain just where we are."McNutt thrust his head out and peered into the blackness."Drive along a little," he whispered.The girl obeyed."Stop--stop!" said he, a moment later. "I think that's them contwistedfifteen-cent mellings--over there!"They all got out and Beth tied the horse to the fence. Peggy climbedover and at once whispered:"Come on! It's them, all right."Through the drifting clouds there was just enough light to enable themto perceive the dark forms of the melons lying side by side upon theirvines. The agent took out his big clasp knife and recklessly slashed oneof them open."Green's grass!" he grumbled, and slashed another.Patsy giggled, and the others felt a sudden irresistible impulse to joinher."Keep still!" cautioned McNutt. "Wouldn't ol' Dan be jest ravin' ef heknew this? Say--here's a ripe one. Hev a slice."They all felt for the slices he offered and ate the fruit without beingable to see it. But it really tasted delicious.As the girls feasted they heard a crunching sound and inquired in lowvoices what it was.McNutt was stumping over the patch and plumping his wooden foot intoevery melon he could find, smashing them wantonly against the ground.The discovery filled them with horror. They had thought inducing theagent to rob his own patch of a few melons, while under the delusionthat they belonged to his enemy Brayley, a bit of harmless fun; but herewas the vindictive fellow actually destroying his own property by thewholesale."Oh, don't! Please don't, Mr. McNutt!" pleaded Patsy, in frightenedaccents."Yes, I will," declared the agent, stubbornly. "I'll git even with DanBrayley fer once in my life, ef I never do another thing, by gum!""But it's wrong--it's wicked!" protested Beth."Can't help it; this is my chance, an' I'll make them bum fifteen-centmellings look like a penny a piece afore I gits done with 'em.""Never mind, girls," whispered Louise. "It's the law of retribution.Poor Peggy will be sorry for this tomorrow."The man had not the faintest suspicion where he was. He knew his ownmelon patch well enough, having worked in it at times all the summer;but he had never climbed over the fence and approached it from the rearbefore, so it took on a new aspect to him from this point of view, andmoreover the night was dark enough to deceive anybody.If he came across an especially big melon McNutt would lug it to thecarriage and dump it in. And so angry and energetic was the little manthat in a brief space the melon patch was a scene of awful devastation,and the surrey contained all the fruit that survived the massacre.Beth unhitched the horse and they all took their places in the carriageagain, having some difficulty to find places for their feet on accountof the cargo of melons. McNutt was stowed away inside, with Louise, andthey drove away up the lane. The agent was jubilant and triumphant, andchuckled in gleeful tones that thrilled the girls with remorse as theyremembered the annihilation of McNutt's cherished melons."Ol' Dan usu'lly has a dorg," said Peggy, between his fits of laughter;"but I guess he had him chained up ternight.""I'm not positively sure that was Brayley's place," remarked Beth; "it'sso very dark.""Oh, it were Brayley's, all right," McNutt retorted. "I could tell bythe second-class taste o' them mellings, an' their measley little size.Them things ain't a circumstance to the kind I raise.""Are you sure?" asked Louise."Sure's shootln'. Guess I'm a jedge o' mellings, when I sees 'em.""No one could see tonight," said Beth."Feelin's jest the same," declared the little man, confidently.After wandering around a sufficient length of time to allay suspicion,Beth finally drew up before McNutt's house again."I'll jest take my share o' them mellings," said Peggy, as he alighted."They ain't much 'count, bein' Brayley's; but it'll save me an' the ol'woman from eatin' our own, or perhaps I kin sell 'em to Sam Cotting."He took rather more than his share of the spoils, but the girls had novoice to object. They were by this time so convulsed with suppressedmerriment that they had hard work not to shriek aloud their laughter.For, in spite of the tragic revelations the morrow would bring forth,the situation was so undeniably ridiculous that they could not resistits humor."I've had a heap o' fun," whispered McNutt. "Good night, gals. Ef yedidn't belong to thet gum-twisted nabob, ye'd be some pun'kins.""Thank you, Mr. McNutt. Good night."And it was not until well on their journey to the farm that the girlsfinally dared to abandon further restraint. Then, indeed, they made thegrim, black hills of the plateau resound to the peals of theirmerry laughter.CHAPTER XXV.GOOD NEWS AT LAST.It was on the morning following this adventure that Uncle John receiveda bulky envelope from the city containing the result of theinvestigation he had ordered regarding the ownership of the Bogue tractof pine forest. It appeared that the company in which he was so largelyinterested had found the tract very valuable, and had been seeking forthe owners in order to purchase it or lease the right to cut the timber.But although they had traced it through the hands of several successiveowners the present holders were all unknown to them until Mr. Merrick'sinformation had furnished them with a clue. A year ago the company hadpaid up the back taxes--two years overdue--in order to establish a claimto the property, and now they easily succeeded in finding the record ofthe deed from a certain Charles Walton to Jonas Wegg and WilliamThompson. The deed itself could not be found, but Uncle John consideredthe county record a sufficient claim to entitle the young folks to theproperty unless the ownership should be contested by others, which wasnot likely.Uncle John invited Ethel and Joe to dine with him that evening, and Marywas told the occasion merited the best menu she could provide. The youngfolks arrived without any idea of receiving more than a good dinner andthe pleasure of mingling with the cordial, kindly household at the farm;but the general air of hilarity and good fellowship pervading the familycircle this evening inspired the guests with like enthusiasm, and noparty could be merrier than the one that did full justice to Mary'ssuperior cookery.One of the last courses consisted of iced watermelon, and when itappeared the three girls eyed one another guiltily and then made franticattempts to suppress their laughter, which was unseemly because no onebut themselves understood the joke. But all else was speedily forgottenin the interest of the coming ceremony, which Mr. Merrick had carefullyplanned and prepared.The company was invited to assemble in the room comprising the spaciousright wing, and when all were seated the little gentleman coughed toclear his throat and straightway began his preamble.He recited the manner in which Captain Wegg and Will Thompson, havingmoney to invest, were led into an enterprise which Bob West hadproposed, but finally preferred another venture and so withdrew theirmoney altogether from the Almaquo tract.This statement caused both Joe and Ethel to stare hard, but they saidnothing."Your grandfather, Ethel," continued the narrator, "was much impressedby the value of another timber tract, although where he got hisinformation concerning it I have been unable to discover. This piece ofproperty, called the Bogue tract, was purchased by Wegg and Thompsonwith the money they withdrew from Almaquo, and still stands intheir name."Then he recounted, quite frankly, his unjust suspicions of the hardwaredealer, and told of the interview in which the full details of thistransaction were disclosed by West, as well as the truth relating to thedeath of Captain Wegg and the sudden insanity and paralysis of oldWill Thompson.Joe could corroborate this last, and now understood why Thompson hadcried out that West's "good news" had killed his father. He meant, ofcourse, their narrow escape from being involved in West's supposed ruin,for at that time no one knew the report of the fire was false.Finally, these matters being cleared up, Uncle John declared that thePierce-Lane Lumber Company was willing to contract to cut the timber onthe Bogue property, or would pay a lump sum of two hundred thousanddollars for such title to the tract as could be given. He did not addthat he had personally offered to guarantee the title. That was anunnecessary bit of information.You may perhaps imagine the happiness this announcement gave Joe andEthel. They could scarcely believe the good news was true, even when thekindly old gentleman, with tears in his eyes, congratulated the youngcouple on the fortune in store for them. The Major followed with a happyspeech of felicitation, and then the three girls hugged the littleschool teacher rapturously and told her how glad they were."I think, sir," said Joe, striving to curb his elation, "that it will bebetter in the end for us to accept the royalty. Don't you?""I do, indeed, my boy," was the reply. "For if our people make an offerfor the land of two hundred thousand you may rest assured it is worthmuch more. The manager has confided to me in his letter that if we areobliged to pay royalties the timber will cost us nearly double what itwould by an outright purchase of the tract.""In that case, sir," began Joe, eagerly, "we will--""Nonsense. The company can afford the royalty, Joe, for it is making aheap of money--more than I wish it were. One of my greatest trials is totake care of the money I've already made, and--""And he couldn't do it at all without my help," broke in the Major."Don't ye hesitate to take an advantage of him, Joseph, if ye can getit--which I doubt--for Mr. Merrick is most disgracefully rich already.""That's true," sighed the little millionaire. "So it will be a royalty,Joe. We are paying the same percentage to Bob West for the Almaquotract, but yours is so much better that I am sure your earnings willfurnish you and Ethel with all the income you need."They sat discoursing upon the happy event for some time longer, but Joehad to return to the hotel early because he was not yet strong enough tobe out late."Before I go, Mr. Merrick," he said, "I'd like you to give me mymother's picture, which is in the secret drawer of the cupboard. Youhave the keys, now, and Ethel is curious to see how my mother looked."Uncle John went at once to the cupboard and unlocked the doors. Joehimself pushed the slide and took out of the drawer the picture, whichhad lain just beneath the Almaquo stock certificates.The picture was passed reverently around. A sweet-faced, sad littlewoman it showed, with appealing eyes and lips that seemed to quiver evenin the photograph.As Louise held it in her hand something induced her to turn it over."Here is some writing upon the back," she said.Joe bent over and read it aloud. It was in his father's handwriting."'Press the spring in the left hand lower corner of the secret drawer.'""Hah!" cried Uncle John, while the others stared stupidly. "That's it!That's the information we've been wanting so long, Joseph!"He ran to the cupboard, even as he spoke, and while they all throngedabout him thrust in his hand, felt for the spring, and pressed it.The bottom of the drawer lifted, showing another cavity beneath. Fromthis the searcher withdrew a long envelope, tied with red tape."At last, Joseph!" he shouted, triumphantly waving the envelope over hishead. And then he read aloud the words docketed upon the outside:"'Warranty Deed and Conveyance from Charles Walton to Jonas Wegg andWilliam Thompson.' Our troubles are over, my boy, for here is the key toyour fortune.""Also," whispered Louise to her cousins, rather disconsolately, "itexplains the last shred of mystery about the Wegg case. Heigh-ho! what achase we've had for nothing!""Not for nothing, dear," replied Patsy, softly, "for we've helped maketwo people happy, and that ought to repay us for all our anxietyand labor." \* \* \* \* \*A knock was heard at the door, and Old Hucks entered and handed Mr.Merrick a paper."He's waiting, sir," said he, ambiguously."Oh, Tom--Tom!" cried Joe Wegg, rising to throw his arms around the oldman's neck, "I'm rich, Tom--all my troubles are over--and Mr. Merrickhas done it all--for Ethel and me!"The ever smiling face of the ancient retainer did not change, but hiseyes softened and filled with tears as he hugged the boy close tohis breast."God be praised. Joe!" he said in a low voice. "I allus knew theMerricks 'd bring us luck.""What the devil does this mean?" demanded Uncle John at this juncture,as he fluttered the paper and glared angrily around."What is it, dear?" inquired Louise."See for yourself," he returned.She took the paper and read it, while Patsy and Beth peered over hershoulder. The following was scrawled upon a sheet of soiled stationery:"John Merrak, esquare, to Marshall McMahon McNutt, detter."To yur gals Smashin' 162 mellings at 50 cents a one .....................$81.00 Pleas remitt & save trouble."The nieces screamed, laughing until they cried, while Uncle Johnspluttered, smiled, beamed, and then requested an explanation.Patsy told the story of the watermelon raid with rare humor, and itserved to amuse everybody and relieve the strain that had preceded thearrival of McNutt's bill."Did you say the man is waiting, Thomas?" asked Uncle John."Yes, sir.""Here--give him five dollars and tell him to receipt the bill. If herefuses, I'll carry the matter to the courts. McNutt's a rascal, and afool in the bargain; but we've had some of his melons and the girls havehad five dollars' worth of fun in getting them. But assure him that thissquares accounts, Thomas."Thomas performed his mission.McNutt rolled his eyes, pounded the floor with his stump to emphasizehis mingled anger and satisfaction, and then receipted the bill."It's jest five more'n I 'spected to git, Hucks," he said with a grin."But what's the use o' havin' nabobs around, ef ye don't bleed 'em?" \* \* \* \* \*

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