

## CHAPTER XIII DORFIELD

In one of the middle-west states there is a delightful little city called Dorfield. It hasn't so many thousand inhabitants, but in all its aspects and its municipal equipment it is indeed a modern city. It has factories and a big farming community to support its streets of neat and progressive shops, and at the west side of the business district is a residence section where broad, wooded streets furnish the setting for many cozy homes. Some of the houses are old and picturesque, and some are new and imposing, but each has its flower-lit garden, its fruit and shade trees and its little garage or barn tucked away in the back yard.

When you come to Oak Street there is a rambling frame house on the corner, set well back, where Peter Conant, the lawyer, lives with his good wife and his niece Irene Macfarlane, who is seventeen. This is one of the ancient dwellings of Dorfield, for the Conants are "old inhabitants." Right next them stands a more modern and expensive, if less attractive, mansion, with grounds twice as large and a velvet lawn that puts the Conants' carelessly-cropped grass to shame. But the two families are neighbors and friends nevertheless, for in the new house lives Colonel James Hathaway and his granddaughter Mary Louise Burrows. At least, they live there when at home and, although they seem persistent ramblers, they are glad to have this refuge to return to when wearied with traveling and sight-seeing.

One morning in June Mr. Conant was just seating himself at the breakfast table when a messenger-boy delivered a telegram--a "night letter" from New York. The lawyer, a short, thick-set man of middle age, with a stern countenance but mild blue eyes, laid aside his morning paper and read the telegram with his usual deliberation. Mrs. Conant silently poured the coffee, knowing any interference would annoy him. Irene, the niece, was a cripple and sat in her wheeled chair at the table, between her uncle and aunt. She was a pleasant-faced, happy little maid, consistently ignoring her withered limbs and thankful that from her knees up she was normal and that her wheeled chair rendered her fairly independent of assistance in all ordinary activities. Everyone loved Irene Macfarlane because of her brave and cheery acceptance of her misfortune, and her merry speech and spontaneous laughter rendered

her, as "Aunt Hannah" often declared, "the light of the house." Irene was, moreover, an intimate and highly valued friend of her next door neighbor, Mary Louise Burrows.

Mr. Peter Conant, sipping his coffee reflectively, read the lengthy telegram a second time. Then he said, somewhat irritably and chopping his words into distinct syllables, as was his habit at all times:

"I wonder why people imagine a lawyer's duties cover every phase of life? My clients use me as a real-estate agent, a horse trader, a purchasing agent, a father confessor, an automobile expert, a medical adviser, and sometimes--in their simplicity--as a banker!"

"What's wrong now, Peter?" inquired Mrs. Conant with wifely sympathy.

"Colonel Hathaway wants to know--"

"Oh, is Mary Louise coming back?" cried Irene eagerly.

He frowned at her.

"What does the Colonel wish to know, Peter?"

"I object to this unwarrantable cross-examination," said he. "It is customary to first allow one to state his case."

"Forgive me, Uncle Peter!"

"Take your time," said Aunt Hannah, composedly buttering the toast.

"You will, anyhow, and I'm sure Irene and I have both learned to curb our feminine curiosity."

He glanced at the telegram again.

"Do you know if the Pelton place has been rented, my dear?"

"The Pelton place? Why, it wasn't rented yesterday, for I passed by there and saw the rent sign still in the window. Mr. Harlan is the agent."

"I know. And where can we find a female house-servant, Hannah?"

"Now, see here, Peter; it's all very well for you to keep your own counsel, when there's a professional secret to be guarded, but if you want any help from me you've got to open your mouth and talk out plainly, so I can answer you in a sensible way."

"You're always sensible, Hannah," he observed, quite unruffled by her demand. And then he ate a whole slice of toast and drank his coffee and handed his cup for more before he spoke another word.

Irene devoted herself to her breakfast. She knew Uncle Peter's ways and that it was useless to attempt to hurry him or force him to explain, until he was quite ready to do so. Aunt Hannah bided her time. Peter was a thoughtful man, and he was doubtless thinking. His wife was not only a clever helpmate but was noted for her consideration of her erratic spouse.

"The Colonel," said Mr. Conant at last, "has run across a man who wants to make his home in Dorfield. A very sensible idea. The Colonel met the man in Europe. The man----"

"What's the man's name?" inquired Mrs. Conant.

He referred to the telegram.

"Jones. Jason Jones."

"I never heard of him."

He looked at her reproachfully.

"Why should you, my dear? The Colonel found the man in Europe. We live in Dorfield. The man, it seems, has a daughter----"

"Oh, goody!" cried Irene.

"Who has become a friend of Mary Louise, therefore the Colonel wires to ask if there is a furnished house to rent at a modest price and if a competent female servant can be secured for the man and his daughter. He requests me to wire an answer promptly. That is the gist of the telegram, although the Colonel, in his usual extravagant way, has paid for more words than were required to express his meaning."

"And what are you going to do about it?" demanded Mrs. Conant.

"I am endeavoring to gain information from my wife."

"Very well. What does he mean by 'a modest price'? The Pelton place is expensive. The rent is sixty dollars a month, while a comfortable house like that of the Widow Harrington rents for fifteen dollars, with good, solid furniture."

"Is Mrs. Harrington's house for rent?" he asked.

"Yes. She'll go to live with her married daughter as soon as she can find a tenant. The poor creature needs the money, and her house is just around the corner from here and her back yard backs up to the Colonel's back yard. Now, the Pelton place is two blocks from here, and the Peltons don't need the money, because they're already too rich and aristocratic to live in Dorfield any longer."

"H-m-m!" murmured Mr. Conant. "It occurs to me that a friend of Colonel Hathaway might desire a more luxurious home than that of the Widow Harrington."

"Doesn't the telegram say 'a modest price'?"

"It does. I'll quote both places and let the man Jones take his choice. And how about the female servant, Hannah?"

"Leave that to me; I can hire plenty. But if Mr. Jason Jones takes the Pelton place he will want one kind of a servant, and if he takes Mrs. Harrington's house he'll want a different sort."

He gazed at her admiringly and passed his cup again, saying:

"You've a logical mind, my dear. Had you been a man you might have become a fairly good lawyer."

"No, Peter; not another drop. You've two cups already."

"Are you sure, Hannah?"

"Absolutely positive!"

"Then," said he, rising with a sigh, "I'll go to the office."

To Mr. Conant's disappointment, to Mrs. Conant's delight, to Irene's satisfaction and the astonishment of all, Mr. Jason Jones selected Mrs. Harrington's modest house and ordered it rented and prepared for his arrival on the following Thursday. This was conveyed in a second telegram from Colonel Hathaway, who requested the lawyer to inform old Uncle Eben and Aunt Sally, the Colonel's own faithful colored servants and caretakers, that he and Mary Louise would return home on the same day.

"You see," said Aunt Hannah, triumphantly, "I sized the Joneses up pretty well. It isn't necessary for a man to be rich to be a friend of the dear Colonel, for he considers a man, rather than a man's pocketbook."

"Yet a man who can afford to travel abroad, with his daughter," began Mr. Conant, argumentatively, "should certainly be able and willing----"

"What do you know about him, Peter? Perhaps he has spent his ready money in Europe and is now obliged to economize. Unless that is the case, why does he come to a sleepy little town like Dorfield, which is almost forgotten by the big world, to settle down?"

"Why, he's the Colonel's friend," retorted the lawyer, stiffly.

"And Mary Louise is his daughter's friend," said Irene. "That accounts for it, of course, and they couldn't have picked a prettier place. Dorfield may be sleepy, and quiet, and half forgotten by the rest of the big world, but it's simply delightful as a residence. Didn't Colonel Hathaway choose it for a home? And the Colonel could afford to live at the Waldorf-Astoria, if he wanted to."

"I know why you are pleased, Irene," remarked Aunt Hannah, smiling upon her niece. "You're going to have another girl friend."

"She won't be as nice as Mary Louise, though," was the reply. "There's no girl in the world as sweet and lovely as Mary Louise!"

"Or one that innocently gets into more trouble," declared Mr. Conant.

"That," said Aunt Hannah, "is because she can't let other people's troubles alone."