

CHAPTER III - A SURPRISE

On the afternoon when our story begins Mary Louise walked home from school and found Colonel Weatherby waiting for her in the garden, leggings strapped to his gaunt legs, the checked walking-cap on his head, a gold-headed crop in his hand.

"Let us go for a walk, my dear," he proposed. "It is Friday, so you will have all day to-morrow in which to get your lessons."

"Oh, it won't take all day for that," she replied with a laugh. "I'll be glad of the walk. "Where shall we go, Gran'pa Jim?"

"Perhaps to the mill-race. We haven't visited it for a long time."

She ran to the house to put away her books and get her stout shoes, and presently rejoined him, when together they strolled up the street and circled round the little town until they came to the river bank. Then they followed the stream toward the old mill.

Mary Louise told her grandfather of the recent edict of Miss Stearne and the indignation it had aroused in her girl boarders.

"And what do you think of it, Gran'pa Jim?" she asked in conclusion.

"What do YOU think of it, Mary Louise?"

"It is rather hard on the girls, who have enjoyed their liberty for so long; but I think it is Miss Stearne's plan to keep them away from the picture theatre."

"And so?"

"And so," she said, "it may do the girls more good than harm."

He smiled approvingly. It was his custom to draw out her ideas on all questions, rather than to assert his own in advance. If he found her wrong or misinformed he would then correct her and set her right.

"So you do not approve of the pictures, Mary Louise?"

"Not all of them, Gran'pa Jim, although they all seem to have been 'passed by the Board of Censors'--perhaps when their eyes were shut. I love the good pictures, and I know that you do, but some we have seen lately gave me the shivers. So, perhaps Miss Stearne is right."

"I am confident she is," he agreed. "Some makers of pictures may consider it beneficial to emphasize good by exhibiting evil, by way of contrast, but they are doubtless wrong. I've an old-fashioned notion that young girls should be shielded,

as much as possible, from knowledge of the world's sins and worries, which is sure to be impressed upon them in later years. We cannot ignore evil, unfortunately, but we can often avoid it."

"But why, if these pictures are really harmful, does Mr. Welland exhibit them at his theatre?" asked the girl.

"Mr. Welland is running his theatre to make money," explained the Colonel, "and the surest way to make money is to cater to the tastes of his patrons, the majority of whom demand picture plays of the more vivid sort, such as you and I complain of. So the fault lies not with the exhibitor but with the sensation-loving public. If Mr. Welland showed only such pictures as have good morals he would gain the patronage of Miss Stearne's twelve young ladies, and a few others, but the masses would refuse to support him."

"Then," said Mary Louise, "the masses ought to be educated to desire better things."

"Many philanthropists have tried to do that, and signally failed. I believe the world is gradually growing better, my dear, but ages will pass before mankind attains a really wholesome mental atmosphere. However, we should each do our humble part toward the moral uplift of our fellows and one way is not to condone what we know to be wrong."

He spoke earnestly, in a conversational tone that robbed his words of preachment. Mary Louise thought Gran'pa Jim must be an exceptionally good man and hoped she would grow, in time, to be like him. The only thing that puzzled her was why he refused to associate with his fellow men, while at heart he so warmly espoused their uplift and advancement.

They had now reached the mill-race and had seated themselves on the high embankment where they could watch the water swirl swiftly beneath them. The mill was not grinding to-day and its neighborhood seemed quite deserted. Here the old Colonel and his granddaughter sat dreamily for a long time, conversing casually on various subjects or allowing themselves to drift into thought. It was a happy hour for them both and was only interrupted when Jackson the miller passed by on his way home from the village. The man gave the Colonel a surly nod, but he smiled on Mary Louise, the girl being as popular in the district as her grandfather was unpopular.

After Jackson had passed them by Gran'pa Jim rose slowly and proposed they return home.

"If we go through the village," said he, "we shall reach home, without hurrying ourselves, in time to dress for dinner. I object to being hurried, don't you, Mary Louise?"

"Yes, indeed, if it can be avoided."

Going through the village saved them half a mile in distance, but Mary Louise would not have proposed it herself, on account of the Colonel's well-known aversion to meeting people. This afternoon, however, he made the proposal himself, so they strolled away to the main road that led through the one business street of the little town.

At this hour there was little life in Beverly's main street. The farmers who drove in to trade had now returned home; the town women were busy getting supper and most of their men were at home feeding the stock or doing the evening chores. However, they passed an occasional group of two or three and around the general store stood a few other natives, listlessly awaiting the call to the evening meal. These cast curious glances at the well-known forms of the old man and the young girl, for his two years' residence had not made the testy old Colonel any less strange to them. They knew all about him there was to know--which was nothing at all--and understood they must not venture to address him as they would have done any other citizen.

Cooper's Hotel, a modest and not very inviting frame building, stood near the center of the village and as Mary Louise and her grandfather passed it the door opened and a man stepped out and only avoided bumping into them by coming to a full stop. They stopped also, of necessity, and Mary Louise was astonished to find the stranger staring into the Colonel's face with an expression of mingled amazement and incredulity on his own.

"James Hathaway, by all the gods!" he exclaimed, adding in wondering tones: "And after all these years!"

Mary Louise, clinging to her grandfather's arm, cast an upward glance at his face. It was tensely drawn; the eyelids were half closed and through their slits the Colonel's eyes glinted fiercely.

"You are mistaken, fellow. Out of my way!" he said, and seizing the girl's arm, which she had withdrawn in affright, he marched straight ahead. The man fell back, but stared after them with his former expression of bewildered surprise. Mary Louise noted this in a glance over her shoulder and something in the stranger's attitude--was it a half veiled threat?--caused her to shudder involuntarily.

The Colonel strode on, looking neither to right nor left, saying never a word. They reached their home grounds, passed up the path in silence and entered the house. The Colonel went straight to the stairs and cried in a loud voice:

"Beatrice!"

The tone thrilled Mary Louise with a premonition of evil. A door was hastily opened and her mother appeared at the head of the stairs, looking down on them with the customary anxiety on her worn features doubly accentuated.

"Again, father?" she asked in a voice that slightly trembled.

"Yes. Come with me to the library, Beatrice."