

CHAPTER IV - SHIFTING SANDS

Mary Louise hid herself in the drawing-room, where she could watch the closed door of the library opposite. At times she trembled with an unknown dread; again, she told herself that no harm could possibly befall her dear, good Gran'pa Jim or her faithful, loving mother. Yet why were they closeted in the library so long, and how could the meeting with that insolent stranger affect Colonel Weatherby so strongly?

After a long time her mother came out, looking more pallid and harassed than ever but strangely composed. She kissed Mary Louise, who came to meet her, and said:

"Get ready for dinner, dear. We are late."

The girl went to her room, dazed and uneasy. At dinner her mother appeared at the table, eating little or nothing, but Gran'pa Jim was not present. Afterward she learned that he had gone over to Miss Stearne's School for Girls, where he completed important arrangements concerning his granddaughter.

When dinner was over Mary Louise went into the library and, drawing a chair to where the light of the student lamp flooded her book, tried to read. But the words were blurred and her mind was in a sort of chaos. Mamma Bee had summoned Aunt Polly and Uncle Eben to her room, where she was now holding a conference with the faithful colored servants. A strange and subtle atmosphere of unrest pervaded the house; Mary Louise scented radical changes in their heretofore pleasant home life, but what these changes were to be or what necessitated them she could not imagine.

After a while she heard Gran'pa Jim enter the hall and hang up his hat and coat and place his cane in the rack. Then he came to the door of the library and stood a moment looking hard at Mary Louise. Her own eyes regarded her grandfather earnestly, questioning him as positively as if she had spoken.

He drew a chair before her and leaning over took both her hands in his and held them fast.

"My dear," he said gently, "I regret to say that another change has overtaken us. Have you ever heard of 'harlequin fate'? 'Tis a very buffoon of mischief and irony that is often permitted to dog our earthly footsteps and prevent us from becoming too content with our lot. For a time you and I, little maid, good comrades though we have been, must tread different paths. Your mother and I are going away, presently, and we shall leave you here in Beverly, where you may continue your studies under the supervision of Miss Stearne, as a boarder at her school. This house, although the rental is paid for six weeks longer, we shall at once vacate, leaving Uncle Eben and Aunt Sallie to put it in shape and close it properly. Do you understand all this, Mary Louise?"

"I understand what you have told me, Gran'pa Jim. But why--"

"Miss Stearne will be supplied with ample funds to cover your tuition and to purchase any supplies you may need. You will have nothing to worry about and so may devote all your energies to your studies."

"But howlong---"

"Trust me and your mother to watch over your welfare, for you are very dear to us, believe me," he continued, disregarding her interruptions. "Do you remember the address of the Conants, at Dorfield?"

"Of course."

"Well, you may write to me, or to your mother, once a week, addressing the letter in care of Peter Conant. But if you are questioned by anyone," he added, gravely, "do not mention the address of the Conants or hint that I have gone to Dorfield. Write your letters privately and unobserved, in your own room, and post them secretly, by your own hand, so that no one will be aware of the correspondence. Your caution in this regard will be of great service to your mother and me. Do you think you can follow these instructions?"

"To be sure I can, Gran'pa Jim. But why must I---"

"Some day," said he, "you will understand this seeming mystery and be able to smile at your present perplexities. There is nothing to fear, my dear child, and nothing that need cause you undue anxiety. Keep a brave heart and, whatever happens, have faith in Gran'pa Jim. Your mother--as good a woman as God ever made--believes in me, and she knows all. Can you accept her judgment, Mary Louise? Can you steadfastly ignore any aspersions that may be cast upon my good name?"

"Yes, Gran'paJim."

She had not the faintest idea what he referred to. Not until afterward was she able to piece these strange remarks together and make sense of them. Just now the girl was most impressed by the fact that her mother and grandfather were going away and would leave her as a boarder with Miss Stearne. The delightful home life, wherein she had passed the happiest two years of her existence, was to be broken up for good and all.

"Now I must go to your mother. Kiss me, my dear!"

As he rose to his feet Mary Louise also sprang from her chair and the Colonel folded his arms around her and for a moment held her tight in his embrace. Then he slowly released her, holding the girl at arms' length while he studied her troubled face with grave intensity. One kiss upon her upturned forehead and the old man swung around and left the room without another word.

Mary Louise sank into her chair, a little sob in her throat. She felt very miserable, indeed, at that moment. "Harlequin fate!" she sighed. "I wonder why it has chosen us for its victims?"

After an hour passed in the deserted library she stole away to her own room and prepared for bed. In the night, during her fitful periods of sleep, she dreamed that her mother bent over her and kissed her lips-- once, twice, a third time.

The girl woke with a start. A dim light flooded her chamber, for outside was a full moon. But the room was habited only by shadows, save for her own feverish, restless body. She turned over to find a cooler place and presently fell asleep again.