

CHAPTER V - OFFICIAL INVESTIGATION

"And you say they are gone?" cried Mary Louise in surprise, as she came down to breakfast the next morning and found the table laid for one and old Eben waiting to serve her.

"In de night, chile. I don' know 'zac'ly wha' der time, by de clock, but de Kun'l an' Missy Burrows did'n' sleep heah a-tall."

"There is no night train," said the girl, seating herself thoughtfully at the table. "How could they go, Uncle?"

"Jus' took deh auto'bile, chile, an' de Kun'l done druv it heself--bag an' baggage. But--see heah, Ma'y 'Ouisse--we-all ain' s'pose to know nuth'n' bout dat git-away. Ef some imper'nent puss'n' ask us, we ain' gwine t' know how dey go, nohow. De Kun'l say tell Ma'y 'Ouisse she ain' gwine know noth'n' a-tall, 'bout nuth'n', 'cause 'tain't nobody's business."

"I understand, Uncle Eben."

She reflected upon this seemingly unnecessary secrecy as she ate her breakfast. After a time she asked:

"What are you and Aunt Polly going to do, Uncle?"

"Fus' thing," replied the old negro, "Polly gwine git yo' traps all pack up an' I gwine take 'em ovah to Missy Stearne's place in de wheel-barrer. Den I gwine red up de house an' take de keys to Mass' Gimble, de agent. Den Polly an' me we go back to our own li'l' house in de lane yondeh. De Kun'l done 'range ev'thing propeh, an' we gwine do jus' like he say."

Mary Louise felt lonely and uncomfortable in the big house, now that her mother and grandfather had gone away. Since the move was inevitable, she would be glad to go to Miss Stearne as soon as possible. She helped Aunt Polly pack her trunk and suit case, afterwards gathering into a bundle the things she had forgotten or overlooked, all of which personal belongings Uncle Eben wheeled over to the school. Then she bade the faithful servitors good-bye, promising to call upon them at their humble home, and walked slowly over the well-known path to Miss Stearne's establishment, where she presented herself to the principal.

It being Saturday, Miss Stearne was seated at a desk in her own private room, where she received Mary Louise and bade her sit down.

Miss Stearne was a woman fifty years of age, tall and lean, with a deeply lined face and a tendency to nervousness that was increasing with her years. She was a very clever teacher and a very incompetent business woman, so that her small school, of excellent standing and repute, proved difficult to finance. In character

Miss Stearne was temperamental enough to have been a genius. She was kindly natured, fond of young girls and cared for her pupils with motherly instincts seldom possessed by those in similar positions. She was lax in many respects, severely strict in others. Not always were her rules and regulations dictated by good judgment. Therefore her girls usually found as much fault as other boarding school girls are prone to do, and with somewhat more reason. On the other hand, no one could question the principal's erudition or her skill in imparting her knowledge to others.

"Sit down, Mary Louise," she said to the girl. "This is an astonishing change in your life, is it not? Colonel Weatherby came to me last evening and said he had been suddenly called away on important matters that would brook no delay, and that your mother was to accompany him on the journey. He begged me to take you in as a regular boarder and of course I consented. You have been one of my most tractable and conscientious pupils and I have been proud of your progress. But the school is quite full, as you know; so at first I was uncertain that I could accommodate you here; but Miss Dandler, my assistant, has given up her room to you and I shall put a bed for her in my own sleeping chamber, so that difficulty is now happily arranged. I suppose your family left Beverly this morning, by the early train?"

"They have gone," replied Mary Louise, non-committally.

"You will be lonely for a time, of course, but presently you will feel quite at home in the school because you know all of my girls so well. It is not like a strange girl coming into a new school. And remember, Mary Louise, that you are to come to me for any advice and assistance you need, for I promised your grandfather that I would fill your mother's place as far as I am able to do so."

Mary Louise reflected, with a little shock of pain, that her mother had never been very near to her and that Miss Stearne might well perform such perfunctory duties as the girl had been accustomed to expect. But no one could ever take the place of Gran'pa Jim.

"Thank you, Miss Stearne," she said. "I am sure I shall be quite contented here. Is my room ready?"

"Yes; and your trunk has already been placed in it. Let me know, my dear, if there is anything you need."

Mary Louise went to her room and was promptly pounced upon by Dorothy Knerr and Sue Finley, who roomed just across the hall from her and were delighted to find she was to become a regular boarder. They asked numerous questions as they helped her to unpack and settle her room, but accepted her conservative answers without comment.

At the noon luncheon Mary Louise was accorded a warm reception by the assembled boarders and this cordial welcome by her school-mates did much to

restore the girl to her normal condition of cheerfulness. She even joined a group in a game of tennis after luncheon and it was while she was playing that little Miss Dandler came with, a message that Mary Louise was wanted in Miss Stearne's room at once.

"Take my racquet," she said to Jennie Allen; "I'll be back in a minute."

When she entered Miss Stearne's room she was surprised to find herself confronted by the same man whom she and her grandfather had encountered in front of Cooper's Hotel the previous afternoon--the man whom she secretly held responsible for this abrupt change in her life. The principal sat crouched over her desk as if overawed by her visitor, who stopped his nervous pacing up and down the room as the girl appeared.

"This is Mary Louise Burrows," said Miss Stearne, in a weak voice.

"Huh!" He glared at her with a scowl for a moment and then demanded: "Where's Hathaway?"

Mary Louise reddened.

"I do not know to whom you refer," she answered quietly.

"Aren't you his granddaughter?"

"I am the granddaughter of Colonel James Weatherby, sir."

"It's all the same; Hathaway or Weatherby, the scoundrel can't disguise his personality. Where is he?"

She did not reply. Her eyes had narrowed a little, as the Colonel's were sometimes prone to do, and her lips were pressed firmly together.

"Answer me!" he shouted, waving his arms threateningly.

"Miss Stearne," Mary Louise said, turning to the principal, "unless you request your guest to be more respectful I shall leave the room."

"Not yet you won't," said the man in a less boisterous tone. "Don't annoy me with your airs, for I'm in a hurry. Where is Hathaway--or Weatherby--or whatever he calls himself?"

"I do not know."

"You don't, eh? Didn't he leave an address?"

"No."

"I don't believe you. Where did he go?"

"If I knew," said Mary Louise with dignity, "I would not inform you."

He uttered a growl and then threw back his coat, displaying a badge attached to his vest.

"I'm a federal officer," he asserted with egotistic pride, "a member of the Government's Secret Service Department. I've been searching for James J. Hathaway for nine years, and so has every man in the service. Last night I stumbled upon him by accident, and on inquiring found he has been living quietly in this little jumping-off place. I wired the Department for instructions and an hour ago received orders to arrest him, but found my bird had flown. He left you behind, though, and I'm wise to the fact that you're a clew that will lead me straight to him. You're going to do that very thing, and the sooner you make up your mind to it the better for all of us. No nonsense, girl! The Federal Government's not to be trifled with. Tell me where to find your grandfather."

"If you have finished your insolent remarks," she answered with spirit, "I will go away. You have interrupted my game of tennis."

He gave a bark of anger that made her smile, but as she turned away he sprang forward and seized her arm, swinging her around so that she again faced him.

"Great Caesar, girl! Don't you realize what you're up against?" he demanded.

"I do," said she. "I seem to be in the power of a brute. If a law exists that permits you to insult a girl, there must also be a law to punish you. I shall see a lawyer and try to have you properly punished for this absolute insolence."

He regarded her keenly, still frowning, but when he spoke again he had moderated both his tone and words.

"I do not intend to be insolent, Miss Burrows, but I have been greatly aggravated by your grandfather's unfortunate escape and in this emergency every moment is precious if I am to capture him before he gets out of America, as he has done once or twice before. Also, having wired the Department that I have found Hathaway, I shall be discredited if I let him slip through my fingers, so I am in a desperate fix. If I have seemed a bit gruff and nervous, forgive me. It is your duty, as a loyal subject of the United States, to assist an officer of the law by every means in your power, especially when he is engaged in running down a criminal. Therefore, whether you dislike to or not, you must tell me where to find your grandfather."

"My grandfather is not a criminal, sir."

"The jury will decide that when his case comes to trial. At present he is accused of crime and a warrant is out for his arrest. Where is he?"

"I do not know," she persisted.

"He--he left by the morning train, which goes west," stammered Miss Stearne, anxious to placate the officer and fearful of the girl's stubborn resistance.

"So the nigger servant told me," sneered the man; "but he didn't. I was at the station myself--two miles from this forsaken place--to make sure that Hathaway didn't skip while I was waiting for orders. Therefore, he is either hidden somewhere in Beverly or he has sneaked away to an adjoining town. The old serpent is slippery as an eel; but I'm going to catch him, this time, as sure as fate, and this girl must give me all the information she can."

"Oh, that will be quite easy," retorted Mary Louise, somewhat triumphantly, "for I have no information to divulge."

He began to pace the room again, casting at her shrewd and uncertain glances.

"He didn't say where he was going?"

"No."

"Or leave any address?"

"No."

"What DID he say?"

"That he was going away and would arrange with Miss Stearne for me to board at the school."

"Huh! I see. Foxy old guy. Knew I would question you and wouldn't take chances. If he writes you, or you learn what has become of him, will you tell me?"

"No."

"I thought not." He turned toward the principal. How about this girl's board money?" he asked. "When did he say he'd send it?"

"He paid me in advance, to the end of the present term," answered the agitated Miss Stearne.

"Foxy old boy! Seemed to think of everything. I'm going, now; but take this warning--both of you. Don't gabble about what I've said. Keep the secret. If nothing gets out, Hathaway may think the coast is clear and it's safe for him to come back. In that case I--or someone appointed by the Department--will get a chance to nab him. That's all. Good day."

He made his exit from the room without ceremony, leaving Mary Louise and Miss Stearne staring fearfully at one another.

"It--it's--dreadful!" stammered the teacher, shrinking back with a moan.

"It would be, if it were true," said the girl. "But Gran'pa Jim is no criminal, we all know. He's the best man that ever lived, and the whole trouble is that this foolish officer has mistaken him for someone else. I heard him, with my own ears, tell the man he was mistaken."

Miss Stearne reflected.

"Then why did your grandfather run away?" she asked.

It was now Mary Louise's turn to reflect, seeking an answer. Presently she realized that a logical explanation of her grandfather's action was impossible with her present knowledge.

"I cannot answer that question, Miss Stearne," she admitted, candidly, "but Gran'pa Jim must have had some good reason."

There was unbelief in the woman's eyes--unbelief and a horror of the whole disgraceful affair that somehow included Mary Louise in its scope. The girl read this look and it confused her. She mumbled an excuse and fled to her room to indulge in a good cry.