

CHAPTER VI - UNDER A CLOUD

The officer's injunction not to talk of the case of Colonel Weatherby was of little avail in insuring secrecy. Oscar Dowd, who owned and edited the one weekly newspaper in town, which appeared under the title of "The Beverly Beacon," was a very ferret for news. He had to be; otherwise there never would have been enough happenings in the vicinity to fill the scant columns of his little paper, which was printed in big type to make the items and editorials fill as much space as possible.

Uncle Eben met the editor and told him the Colonel had gone away suddenly and had vacated the Vandeventer mansion and put Mary Louise with Miss Stearne to board. Thereat, Oscar Dowd scented "news" and called on Miss Stearne for further information. The good lady was almost as much afraid of an editor as of an officer of the law, so under Oscar's rapid-fire questioning she disclosed more of the dreadful charge against Colonel Weatherby than she intended to. She even admitted the visit of the secret service agent, but declined to give details of it.

Oscar found the agent had departed for parts unknown--perhaps to trail the escaped Colonel--but the hotel keeper furnished him with other wisps of information and, bunching all the rumors together and sifting the wheat from the chaff, the editor evolved a most thrilling tale to print in the Wednesday paper. Some of the material his own imagination supplied; much else was obtained from irresponsible gossips who had no foundation for their assertions. Miss Stearne was horrified to find, on receiving her copy of the Wednesday "Beacon" that big headlines across the front page announced: "Beverly Harbors a Criminal in Disguise! Flight of Colonel James Weatherby when a Federal Officer Seeks to Arrest him for a Terrible Crime!"

Then followed a mangled report of the officer's visit to Beverly on government business, his recognition of Colonel Weatherby--who was none other than the noted criminal, James J. Hathaway--on the street in front of Cooper's Hotel, how the officer wired Washington for instructions and how Hathaway, alias Weatherby, escaped in the dead of night and had so far successfully eluded all pursuit. What crime Hathaway, alias Weatherby, was accused of, the officer would not divulge, and the statements of others disagreed. One report declared the Colonel had wrecked a New York bank and absconded with enormous sums he had embezzled; another stated he had been president of a swindling stock corporation which had used the mails illegally to further its nefarious schemes. A third account asserted he had insured his life for a million dollars in favor of his daughter, Mrs. Burrows, and then established a false death and reappeared after Mrs. Burrows had collected the insurance money.

Having printed all this prominently in big type, the editor appended a brief note in small type saying he would not vouch for the truth of any statement made in

the foregoing article. Nevertheless, it was a terrible arraignment and greatly shocked the good citizens of Beverly.

Miss Stearne, realizing how humiliated Mary Louise would be if the newspaper fell into her hands, carefully hid her copy away where none of the girls could see it; but one of the day scholars brought a copy to the school Thursday morning and passed it around among the girls, so that all were soon in possession of the whole scandalous screed.

Mable Westervelt, after feasting upon the awful accusations, cruelly handed the paper to Mary Louise. The girl's face blanched and then grew red, her mouth fell open as if gasping for breath and her eyes stared with a pained, hopeless expression at the printed page that branded her dearly loved Gran'pa Jim a swindler and a thief. She rose quickly and left the room, to the great relief of the other girls, who wanted to talk the matter over.

"The idea," cried Mable indignantly, "of that old villain's foisting his grandchild on this respectable school while he ran away to escape the penalty of his crimes!"

"Mary Louise is all right," asserted Jennie Allen stoutly. "She isn't to blame, at all."

"I warned you that her goody-goody airs were a cloak to hidden wickedness," said Mable, tossing her head.

"Blood will tell," drawled Lina Darrow, a very fat girl. "Mary Louise has bad blood in her veins and it's bound to crop out, sooner or later. I advise you girls to keep your trunks locked and to look after your jewelry."

"Shame--shame!" cried Dorothy Knerr, and the others echoed the reproach. Even Mable looked at fat Lina disapprovingly.

However, in spite of staunch support on the part of her few real friends, Mary Louise felt from that hour a changed atmosphere when in the presence of her school fellows. Weeks rolled by without further public attacks upon Gran'pa Jim, but among the girls at the school suspicion had crept in to ostracize Mary Louise from the general confidence. She lost her bright, cheery air of self-assurance and grew shy and fearful of reproach, avoiding her schoolmates more than they avoided her. Instead of being content in her new home, as she had hoped to be, the girl found herself more miserable and discontented than at any other period of her life. She longed continually to be comforted by Gran'pa Jim and Mamma Bee, and even lost interest in her studies, moping dismally in her room when she should have been taking an interest in the life at the school.

Even good Miss Stearne had unconsciously changed in her attitude toward the forlorn girl. Deciding one day that she needed some new shoes, Mary Louise went to the principal to ask for the money with which to buy them.

Miss Stearne considered the matter seriously. Then she said with warning emphasis:

"My dear, I do not think it advisable for you to waste your funds on shoes, especially as those you have are in fairly good condition. Of course, your grandfather left some money with me, to be expended as I saw fit, but now that he has abscon--eh--eh--secreted himself, so to speak, we can expect no further remittances. When this term is ended any extra money should be applied toward your further board and tuition. Otherwise you would become an outcast, with no place to go and no shelter for your head. That, in common decency, must be avoided. No; I do not approve of any useless expenditures. I shall hoard this money for future emergencies."

In happier times Mary Louise would have been indignant at the thought that her grandfather would ever leave her unprovided for, but she had been so humbled of late that this aspect of her affairs, so candidly presented by Miss Stearne, troubled her exceedingly. She had written a letter every week to her grandfather, addressing it, as he had instructed her to do, in care of Mr. Peter Conant at Dorfield. And always she had stolen out, unobserved, and mailed the letter at the village post office. Of course she had never by a single word referred to the scandal regarding the Colonel or her mother, or to her own unhappy lot at school because of that scandal, knowing how such a report would grieve them; but the curious thing about this correspondence was that it was distinctly one-sided. In the three months since they had gone away, Mary Louise had never received an answer to any of her letters, either from her grandfather or her mother.

This might be explained, she reflected, by the fact that they suspected the mails would be watched; but this supposition attributed some truth to the accusation that Gran'pa Jim was a fugitive from justice, which she would not allow for an instant. Had he not told her to have faith in him, whatever happened? Should she prove disloyal just because a brutal officer and an irresponsible newspaper editor had branded her dear grandfather a criminal?

No! Whatever happened she would cling to her faith in the goodness of dear Gran'pa Jim.

There was very little money in her purse; a few pennies that she must hoard to buy postage stamps with. Two parties for young people were given in Beverly and at both of them Mary Louise was the only girl boarding at the school who was uninvited. She knew that some of the girls even resented her presence at the school and often when she joined a group of schoolmates their hushed conversation warned her they had been discussing her.

Altogether, she felt that her presence at the school was fast becoming unbearable and when one of the boarders openly accused her of stealing a diamond ring-- which was later discovered on a shelf above a washstand-- the patient humility of Mary Louise turned to righteous anger and she resolved to leave the shelter of Miss Stearne's roof without delay.

There was only one possible place for her to go--to the Conant house at Dorfield, where her mother and grandfather were staying and where she had already passed three of the most pleasant years of her short life. Gran'pa Jim had not told her she could come to him, even in an emergency, but when she explained all the suffering she had endured at the school she knew quite well that he would forgive her for coming.

But she needed money for the long journey, and this must be secured in some way from her own resources. So she got together all the jewelry she possessed and placing it in her handbag started for the town.

She had an idea that a jewelry shop was the proper place to sell her jewelry, but Mr. Trumbull the jeweler shook his head and said that Watson, at the bank, often loaned money on such security. He advised the girl to see Watson.

So Mary Louise went to the "bank," which was a one-man affair situated in the rear of the hardware store, where a grating had been placed in one corner. There she found Mr. Watson, who was more a country broker than a banker, and thrived by lending money to farmers.

Gran'pa Jim was almost as fond of pretty jewels as he was of good clothes and he had always been generous in presenting his grand-daughter with trinkets on her birthdays and at Christmas time. The jewelry she laid before Mr. Watson was really valuable and the banker's eye was especially attracted by a brooch of pearls that must have cost several hundred dollars.

"How much do you want to borrow on this lot?" he asked.

"As much as I can get, sir," she replied.

"Have you any idea of redeeming it?"

"I hope to do so, of course."

The banker knew perfectly well who Mary Louise was and suspected she needed money.

"This is no pawnbroker's shop," he asserted. "I'll give you a hundred dollars, outright, for this pearl brooch--as a purchase, understand--but the rest of the junk I don't want."

A little man who had entered the hardware store to purchase a tin dipper was getting so close to the "bank" that Mary Louise feared being overheard; so she did not argue with Mr. Watson. Deciding that a hundred dollars ought to take her to Dorfield, she promptly accepted the offer, signed a bill of sale and received her money. Then she walked two miles to the railway station and discovered that a ticket to Dorfield could be bought for ninety-two dollars. That would give her eight dollars leeway, which seemed quite sufficient. Elated at the prospect of freedom

she returned to the school to make her preparation for departure and arrived just in time to join the other girls at dinner.