

CHAPTER VII - THE ESCAPE

As she packed her trunk behind the locked door of her room--an unnecessary precaution, since the girls generally avoided her society-- Mary Louise considered whether to confide the fact of her going to Miss Stearne or to depart without a word of adieu. In the latter case she would forfeit her trunk and her pretty clothes, which she did not wish to do unless it proved absolutely necessary; and, after all, she decided, frankness was best. Gran'pa Jim had often said that what one could not do openly should not be done at all. There was nothing to be ashamed of in her resolve to leave the school where she was so unhappy. The girls did not want her there and she did not want to stay; the school would be relieved of a disturbing element and Mary Louise would be relieved of unjust persecution; no blame attached to any but those who had made public this vile slander against her grandfather. From all viewpoints she considered she was doing the right thing; so, when her preparations were complete, she went to Miss Stearne's room, although it was now after eight o'clock in the evening, and requested an interview.

"I am going away," she quietly announced to the principal.

"Going away! But where?" asked the astonished teacher.

"I cannot tell you that, Miss Stearne."

"Do you not know?"

"Yes, I know, but I prefer not to tell you."

Miss Stearne was greatly annoyed. She was also perplexed. The fact that Mary Louise was deserting her school did not seem so important, at the moment, as the danger involved by a young girl's going out into the world unprotected. The good woman had already been rendered very nervous by the dreadful accusation of Colonel Weatherby and the consequent stigma that attached to his granddaughter, a pupil at her eminently respectable school. She realized perfectly that the girl was blameless, whatever her grandsire might have done, and she deeply deplored the scornful attitude assumed by the other pupils toward poor Mary Louise; nevertheless a certain bitter resentment of the unwholesome scandal that had smirched her dignified establishment had taken possession of the woman, perhaps unconsciously, and while she might be a little ashamed of the ungenerous feeling, Miss Stearne fervently wished she had never accepted the girl as a pupil.

She HAD accepted her, however. She had received the money for Mary Louise's tuition and expenses and had promptly applied the entire sum to reducing her grocery bills and other pressing obligations; therefore she felt it her duty to give value received. If Mary Louise was to be driven from the school by the jeers and sneers of the other girls, Miss Stearne would feel like a thief. Moreover, it would

be a distinct reproach to her should she allow a fifteen-year-old girl to wander into a cruel world because her school--her sole home and refuge--had been rendered so unbearable that she could not remain there. The principal was really unable to repay the money that had been advanced to her, even if that would relieve her of obligation to shelter the girl, and therefore she decided that Mary Louise must not be permitted, under any circumstances, to leave her establishment without the authority of her natural guardians.

This argument ran hurriedly through her mind as the girl stood calmly waiting.

"Is this action approved by your mother, or--or--by your grandfather?" she asked, somewhat more harshly than was her wont in addressing her pupils.

"No, Miss Stearne."

"Then how dare you even suggest it?"

"I am not wanted here," returned the girl with calm assurance. "My presence is annoying to the other girls, as well as to yourself, and so disturbs the routine of the school. For my part, I--I am very unhappy here, as you must realize, because everyone seems to think my dear Gran'pa Jim is a wicked man--which I know he is not. I have no heart to study, and--and so--it is better for us all that I go away."

This statement was so absolutely true and the implied reproach was so justified, that Miss Stearne allowed herself to become angry as the best means of opposing the girl's design.

"This is absurd!" she exclaimed. "You imagine these grievances, Mary Louise, and I cannot permit you to attack the school and your fellow boarders in so reckless a manner. You shall not stir one step from this school! I forbid you, positively, to leave the grounds hereafter without my express permission. You have been placed in my charge and I insist that you obey me. Go to your room and study your lessons, which you have been shamefully neglecting lately. If I hear any more of this rebellious wish to leave the school, I shall be obliged to punish you by confining you to your room."

The girl listened to this speech with evident surprise; yet the tirade did not seem to impress her.

"You refuse, then, to let me go?" she returned.

"I positively refuse."

"But I cannot stay here, Miss Stearne," she protested.

"You must. I have always treated you kindly--I treat all my girls well if they deserve it--but you are developing a bad disposition, Mary Louise--a most reprehensible disposition, I regret to say--and the tendency must be corrected at once. Not another word! Go to your room."

Mary Louise went to her room, greatly depressed by the interview. She looked at her trunk, made a mental inventory of its highly prized contents, and sighed. But as soon as she rejoined Gran'pa, Jim, she reflected, he would send an order to have the trunk forwarded and Miss Stearne would not dare refuse. For a time she must do without her pretty gowns.

Instead of studying her text books she studied the railway time-card. She had intended asking Miss Stearne to permit her to take the five- thirty train from Beverly Junction the next morning and since the recent interview she had firmly decided to board that very train. This was not entirely due to stubbornness, for she reflected that if she stayed at the school her unhappy condition would become aggravated, instead of improving, especially since Miss Stearne had developed unexpected sharpness of temper. She would endure no longer the malicious taunts of her school fellows or the scoldings of the principal, and these could be avoided in no other way than by escaping as she had planned.

At ten o'clock she lay down upon her bed, fully dressed, and put out her light; but she dared not fall asleep lest she miss her train. At times she lighted a match and looked at her watch and it surprised her to realize how long a night can be when one is watching for daybreak.

At four o'clock she softly rose, put on her hat, took her suit case in hand and stealthily crept from the room. It was very dark in the hallway but the house was so familiar to her that she easily felt her way along the passage, down the front stairs and so to the front door.

Miss Stearne always locked this door at night but left the key in the lock. Tonight the key had been withdrawn. When Mary Louise had satisfied herself of this fact she stole along the lower hallway toward the rear. The door that connected with the dining room and farther on with the servants' quarters had also been locked and the key withdrawn. This was so unusual that it plainly told the girl that Miss Stearne was suspicious that she might try to escape, and so had taken precautions to prevent her leaving the house.

Mary Louise cautiously set down her suit case and tried to think what to do. The house had not been built for a school but was an old residence converted to school purposes. On one side of the hall was a big drawing- room; on the other side were the principal's apartments.

Mary Louise entered the drawing-room and ran against a chair that stood in her way. Until now she had not made the slightest noise, but the suit case banged against the chair and the concussion reverberated dully throughout the house.

The opposite door opened and a light flooded the hall. From where the girl stood in the dark drawing-room she could see Miss Stearne standing in her doorway and listening. Mary Louise held herself motionless. She scarcely dared breathe. The principal glanced up and down the hall, noted the locked doors and presently retired into her room, after a little while extinguishing the light.

Then Mary Louise felt her way to a window, drew aside the heavy draperies and carefully released the catch of the sash, which she then succeeded in raising. The wooden blinds were easily unfastened but swung back with a slight creak that made her heart leap with apprehension. She did not wait, now, to learn if the sound had been heard, for already she had wasted too much time if she intended to catch her train. She leaned through the window, let her suit case down as far as she could reach, and dropped it to the ground. Then she climbed through the opening and let herself down by clinging to the sill. It was a high window, but she was a tall girl for her age and her feet touched the ground. Now she was free to go her way.

She lost no time in getting away from the grounds, being guided by a dim starlight and a glow in the east that was a promise of morning. With rapid steps she made her way to the station, reaching it over the rough country road just as the train pulled in. She had been possessed with the idea that someone was stealthily following her and under the light of the depot lamps her first act was to swing around and stare into the darkness from which she had emerged. She almost expected to see Miss Stearne appear, but it was only a little man with a fat nose and a shabby suit of clothes, who had probably come from the village to catch the same train she wanted. He paid no attention to the girl but entered the same car she did and quietly took his seat in the rear.