

## CHAPTER X - RATHER QUEER INDEED

Mary Louise found the door of the office, which was located on the third floor of the Chambers Building, locked. However, the sign: "Peter Conant, Attorney at Law," was painted on the glass panel in big, distinct letters, so she was sure she had made no mistake. She slowly paced the hall, waiting, until the elevator stopped and Mr. Conant stepped out and approached the door, his morning paper in one hand, a key in the other. Running to him, the girl exclaimed:

"Oh, Mr. Conant!"

He stopped short and turned to face her. Then he stepped a pace backward and said:

"Great heavens, it's Mary Louise!"

"Didn't you recognize me?" she asked.

"Not at first," he answered slowly. "You have grown tall and--and-- older, in two years."

"Where is Gran'pa J-"

"Hush!" with a startled glance up and down the hall. Then he unlocked the door and added: "Come in."

Mary Louise followed him through the outer office and into a smaller room beyond, the door of which Mr. Conant carefully closed after them. Then he turned to look steadily at the girl, who thought he did not seem especially delighted at her appearance in Dorfield. Indeed, his first words proved this, for he asked sternly:

"Why are you here?"

"I left the school at Beverly because the girls made it so uncomfortable for me there that I could not bear it longer," she explained.

"In what way did they make it uncomfortable for you?"

"They jeered at me because--because--Gran'pa Jim is being hunted by the officers of the law, who accuse him, of doing something wicked."

Mr. Conant frowned.

"Perhaps their attitude was only natural," he remarked; "but there was no accusation against you, my child. Why didn't you stick it out? The scandal would soon have died away and left you in peace."

"I was unhappy there," she said simply, "and so I thought I would come here to mother and Gran'pa Jim."

"Here?" as if surprised.

"Yes. Aren't they here, with you?"

"No."

"Then where are they?"

"I've no idea."

She sat still and stared at him, while he regarded her with a thoughtful and perplexed look on his face.

Mr. Conant is difficult to describe because he was like dozens of men one meets every day, at least in outward appearance. He was neither tall nor short, lean nor fat, handsome nor ugly, attractive nor repulsive. Yet Peter Conant must not be considered a nonentity because he was commonplace in person, for he possessed mannerisms that were peculiar. He would open his eyes very wide and stare at one steadily until the person became confused and turned away. The gaze was not especially shrewd, but it was disconcerting because steadfast. When he talked he would chop off his words, one by one, with a distinct pause between each, and that often made it hard to tell whether he had ended his speech or still had more to say. When very earnest or interested he would play with a locket that dangled from his watch chain; otherwise he usually stood with his hands clasped behind his back.

Mary Louise well knew these peculiarities, having previously lived in his house, and also she knew he was a kind-hearted man, devotedly attached to his deaf wife and thoroughly trusted by Gran'pa Jim.

"I was told," said the girl presently, "to direct all my letters to my grandfather in your care."

"I am aware that you have done so," he replied.

"So I thought, of course, that he and my mother were with you."

"No; they did not come here. Colonel Weatherby arranged for me to forward your letters, which I did as soon as they arrived."

"Oh; then you know his address?"

"I do not. There are six different points to which I forward letters, in rotation, both those from you and from others on various matters of business, and these points are widely scattered. My impression is that Colonel Weatherby is in none of these places and that the letters are again forwarded to him to--wherever he may be."

Mary Louise felt quite discouraged. With hesitation she asked:

"Do you suppose you could find him for me?"

"It is impossible."

"What am I to do, Mr. Conant?"

"I advise you to go back to your school."

"Can't I stay here, with you?"

He stared at her with his round eyes, playing with his locket.

"I haven't the money for the return trip," she went on falteringly. "I had to sell some of my jewelry to get here. I won't be much trouble, if you will let me live with you until I can find Gran'pa Jim."

Mr. Conant still stared.

"I'm sure," said Mary Louise, "that my grandfather will gladly repay you any money it costs you to keep me."

"You--don't--un-der-stand," he retorted, chopping off his words rather viciously. "Moreover, you can't understand. Go to the house and talk to Hannah. Have you any baggage!"

"I've a suit case at the hotel," she said, and went on to tell him the experiences of her journey and of her encounter with Detective O'Gorman.

During this relation, which he did not interrupt, Mr. Conant toyed persistently with his watch charm. His features were noncommittal but he was thoroughly interested.

"You see," he remarked when she had finished, "Colonel Weatherby's elaborate system of evading discovery is quite necessary."

"But why should he wish to hide?" asked the girl.

"Don't you know?"

"No, sir."

"Then your grandfather doesn't wish you to know. I am his lawyer--at least I am one of his lawyers--and a lawyer must respect the confidences of his clients."

Mary Louise looked at him wonderingly, for here was someone who evidently knew the entire truth.

"Do you believe my grandfather is a bad man?" she asked.

"No. I have the highest respect for Colonel Weatherby."

"Do you know his name to be Weatherby--or is it Hathaway?"

"I am his lawyer," reiterated Mr. Conant.

"Is it possible that an innocent man would change his name and hide, rather than face an unjust accusation?"

"Yes."

Mary Louise sighed.

"I will go with you to the hotel and pay your bill," said the lawyer. "Then you may go to the house and talk to Hannah. When I have talked with her myself, we will determine what to do with you."

So they went to the hotel and the girl packed her suit case and brought it downstairs.

"Queer!" said Mr. Conant to her, fingering his locket. "Your bill has been paid by that man O'Gorman."

"How impertinent!" she exclaimed.

"There is also a note for you in your box."

The clerk handed her an envelope, which she opened. "I hope to be able to send you your grandfather's address very soon," wrote O'Gorman. "You will probably stay in Dorfield; perhaps with the Conants, with whom you lived before. You might try sending Colonel Weatherby a letter in care of Oscar Lawler, at Los Angeles, California. In any event, don't forget my card or neglect to wire me in case of emergency."

Having read this with considerable surprise the girl handed the note to Mr. Conant, who slowly read it and gave a bark like that of an angry dog when he came to the name of the California attorney. Without remark he put the detective's letter in his pocket and picking up Mary Louise's suit case led the girl outside to the street corner.

"This car will take you to within two blocks of my house," he said. "Can you manage your grip alone?"

"Easily," she assured him.

"You have carfare!"

"Yes, thank you."

"Then good-bye. I'll see you this evening."

He turned away and she boarded the street car.