

CHAPTER XI - MARY LOUISE MEETS IRENE

As Mary Louise approached the home of the Conants, which was a pretty little house set far back in a garden filled with trees and shrubs, she was surprised to hear a joyous ragtime tune being drummed upon the piano--an instrument she remembered Mrs. Conant kept in the house exclusively as an ornament, being unable to play it. Then, as the girl reached the porch, the melody suddenly stopped, a merry laugh rang out and a fresh, sweet voice was heard through the open window talking rapidly and with eager inflection.

"I wonder who that can be?" thought Mary Louise. Everyone had to speak loudly to poor Mrs. Conant, who might be entertaining a visitor. She rang the bell and soon her old friend appeared in the doorway.

"My dear, dear child!" cried the good lady, recognizing the girl instantly and embracing her after a welcoming kiss. "Where on earth have you come from?"

"From Beverly," said Mary Louise with a smile, for in her depressed state of mind this warm greeting cheered her wonderfully.

"Come right in," said Mrs. Conant, seizing the suit case. "Have you had breakfast?"

"Yes, indeed; hours ago. And I've seen Mr. Conant at his office. He--he wanted me to talk to you."

She spoke loudly, as she had been accustomed to do, but now Mrs. Conant wore on her ear an instrument similar in appearance to a small telephone receiver, and she seemed to hear quite distinctly through its mechanism. Indeed, she pointed to it with an air of pride and said: "I can hear a whisper, my dear!"

As Mary Louise was ushered into the cosy sitting room she looked for the piano-player and the owner of the merry laugh and cheery voice. Near the center of the room was a wheeled chair in which sat a young girl of about her own age--a rather pretty girl in spite of her thin frame and pallid countenance. She was neatly dressed in figured dimity, with a bright ribbon at her throat. A pair of expressive brown eyes regarded Mary Louise with questioning earnestness. Over her lap lay a coverlet; her slender white fingers rested upon the broad arms of her chair.

"This," said Mrs. Conant, "is my niece, Irene Macfarlane, who is living with us just now and is the life and joy of our formerly dull household. You'll have to love her, Mary Louise, because no one can help doing so."

Mary Louise advanced to the chair and took one of the wan hands in her own. A thrill of pity flooded her heart for the unfortunate girl, who instantly noted her expression and met it with a charmingly spontaneous smile.

"Don't you dare think of me as a cripple!" she said warningly. "I am not at all helpless and my really-truly friends quickly forget this ugly wheeled chair. We're to be friends, are we not? And you're going to stay, because I see your baggage. Also I know all about you, Mary Louise Burrows, for Aunt Hannah never tires of singing your praises."

This was said so naturally and with such absence of affectation that Mary Louise could not fail to respond to the words and smile.

"I'm glad to find you here, Irene," she said, "and I don't know yet whether I'm to stay or not. That will depend on Mrs. Conant's decision."

"Then you're to stay," promptly decided the hospitable lady, who by turning her mechanical ear toward the speaker seemed able to hear her words clearly.

"But you don't know all the complications yet," confessed the girl. "I've run away from school and--and there are other things you must know before you decide. Mr. Conant wasn't at all enthusiastic over my coming here, I assure you, so I must tell you frankly the whole story of my adventures."

"Very good," returned Mrs. Conant. "I think I can guess at most of the story, but you shall tell it in your own way. Presently Irene is going out to inspect the roses; she does that every morning; so when she is out of the way we'll have a nice talk together."

"I'm going now," said Irene, with a bright laugh at her dismissal. "Mary Louise won't be happy till everything is properly settled; nor will I, for I'm anxious to get acquainted with my new friend. So here I go and when you've had your talk out just whistle for me, Mary Louise."

She could propel the chair by means of rims attached to the wheels and, even as she spoke, began to roll herself out of the room. Mary Louise sprang to assist her, but the girl waved her away with a little laugh.

"I'm an expert traveler," she said, "and everyone lets me go and come as I please. Indeed, I'm very independent, Mary Louise, as you will presently discover."

Away she went, through the hall, out at the front door and along the broad porch, and when she had gone Mary Louise whispered softly into Mrs. Conant's mechanical eardrum:

"What is wrong with her?"

"A good many things," was the reply, "although the brave child makes light of them all. One leg is badly withered and the foot of the other is twisted out of shape. She can stand on that foot to dress herself-- which she insists on doing unaided--but she cannot walk a step. Irene has suffered a great deal, I think, and she's a frail little body; but she has the sweetest temperament in the world and seems happy and content from morn till night."

"It's wonderful!" exclaimed Mary Louise. "What caused her affliction?"

"It is the result of an illness she had when a baby. Irene is sixteen and has never known what it is to be well and strong, yet she never resents her fate, but says she is grateful for the blessings she enjoys. Her father died long ago and her mother about a year since; so, the child being an orphan, Peter and I have taken her to live with us."

"That is very kind of you," asserted Mary Louise with conviction.

"No; I fear it is pure selfishness," returned the good woman, "for until she came to us the old home had been dreadfully dull--the result, my dear, of your going away. And now tell me your story, and all about yourself, for I'm anxious to hear what brought you to Dorfield."

Mary Louise drew a chair close to that of Aunt Hannah Conant and confided to her all the worries and tribulations that had induced her to quit Miss Stearne's school and seek shelter with her old friends the Conants. Also, she related the episode of Detective O'Gorman and how she had first learned through him that her grandfather and her mother were not living in Dorfield.

"I'm dreadfully worried over Gran'pa Jim," said she, "for those terrible agents of the Secret Service seem bent on catching him. And he doesn't wish to be caught. If they arrested him, do you think they would put him in jail, Aunt Hannah?"

"I fear so," was the reply.

"What do they imagine he has done that is wrong?"

"I do not know," said Mrs. Conant. "Peter never tells me anything about the private affairs of his clients, and I never ask him. But of one thing I am sure, my dear, and that is that Peter Conant would not act as Colonel Weatherby's lawyer, and try to shield him, unless he believed him innocent of any crime. Peter is a little odd, in some ways, but he's honest to the backbone."

"I know it," declared Mary Louise. "Also I know that Gran'pa Jim is a good man. Cannot the law make a mistake, Aunt Hannah?"

"It surely can, or there would be no use for lawyers. But do not worry over your grandfather, my child, for he seems quite able to take care of himself. It is nine or ten years since he became a fugitive--also making a fugitive of your poor mother, who would not desert him--and to this day the officers of the law have been unable to apprehend him. Be patient, dear girl, and accept the situation as you find it. You shall live with us until your people again send for you. We have excellent schools in Dorfield, where you will not be taunted with your grandfather's misfortunes because no one here knows anything about them."

"Doesn't Irene know?" asked Mary Louise.

"She only knows that your people are great travelers and frequently leave you behind them as they flit from place to place. She knows that you lived with us for three years and that we love you."

The girl became thoughtful for a time. "I can't understand," she finally said, "why Gran'pa Jim acts the way he does. Often he has told me, when I deserved censure, to 'face the music' and have it over with. Once he said that those who sin must suffer the penalty, because it is the law of both God and man, and he who seeks to escape a just penalty is a coward. Gran'pa knows he is innocent, but the government thinks he is guilty; so why doesn't he face the music and prove his innocence, instead of running away as a coward might do and so allow his good name to suffer reproach?"

Mrs. Conant shook her head as if perplexed.

"That very question has often puzzled me, as it has you," she confessed. "Once I asked Peter about it and he scowled and said it might be just as well to allow Colonel Weatherby to mind his own business. The Colonel seems to have a good deal of money, and perhaps he fears that if he surrendered to the law it would be taken away from him, leaving you and your mother destitute."

"We wouldn't mind that," said the girl, "if Gran'pa's name could be cleared."

"After all," continued Mrs. Conant reflectively, "I don't believe the Colonel is accused of stealing money, for Peter says his family is one of the oldest and richest in New York. Your grandfather inherited a vast fortune and added largely to it. Peter says he was an important man of affairs before this misfortune--whatever it was--overtook him."

"I can just remember our home in New York," said Mary Louise, also musingly, "for I was very young at the time. It was a beautiful big place, with a good many servants. I wonder what drove us from it?"

"Do you remember your father?" asked Mrs. Conant.

"Not at all."

"Peter once told me he was a foreigner who fell desperately in love with your mother and married her without your grandfather's full approval. I believe Mr. Burrows was a man of much political influence, for he served in the Department of State and had a good many admirers. Peter never knew why your grandfather opposed the marriage, for afterward he took Mr. and Mrs. Burrows to live with him and they were all good friends up to the day of your father's death. But this is ancient history and speculation on subjects we do not understand is sure to prove unsatisfactory. I wouldn't worry over your grandfather's troubles, my dear. Try to forget them."

"Grandfather's real name isn't Weatherby," said the girl. "It is Hathaway."

Mrs. Conant gave a start of surprise.

"How did you learn that?" she asked sharply.

The girl took out her watch, pried open the back case with a penknife and allowed Mrs. Conant to read the inscription. Also she curiously watched the woman's face and noted its quick flush and its uneasy expression. Did the lawyer's wife know more than she had admitted?

If so, why was everyone trying to keep her in the dark?

"I cannot see that this helps to solve the mystery," said Mrs. Conant in a brisk tone as she recovered from her surprise. "Let us put the whole thing out of mind, Mary Louise, or it will keep us all stirred up and in a muddle of doubt. I shall tell Peter you are to live with us, and your old little room at the back of the hall is all ready for you. Irene has the next room, so you will be quite neighborly. Go and put away your things and then we'll whistle for Irene."

Mary Louise went to the well-remembered room and slowly and thoughtfully unpacked her suit case. She was glad to find a home again among congenial people, but she was growing more and more perplexed over the astonishing case of Gran'pa Jim. It worried her to find that an occasional doubt would cross her mind in spite of her intense loyalty to her dearly loved grandparent. She would promptly drive out the doubt, but it would insist on intruding again.

"Something is wrong somewhere," she sighed. "There must be some snarl that even Gran'pa Jim can't untangle; and, if he can't, I'm sure no one else can. I wish I could find him and that he would tell me all about it. I suppose he thinks I'm too young to confide in, but I'm almost sixteen now and surely that's old enough to understand things. There were girls at school twenty years old that I'm sure couldn't reason as well as I can."

After a while she went down stairs and joined Irene in the garden, where the chair-girl was trimming rose bushes with a pair of stout scissors. She greeted Mary Louise with her bright smile, saying:

"I suppose everything is fixed up, now, and we can begin to get acquainted."

"Why, we ARE acquainted," declared Mary Louise. "Until to-day I had never heard of you, yet it seems as if I had known you always."

"Thank you," laughed Irene; "that is a very pretty compliment, I well realize. You have decided to stay, then?"

"Aunt Hannah has decided so, but Mr. Conant may object."

"He won't do that," was the quick reply. "Uncle Peter may be an autocrat in his office, but I've noticed that Aunt Hannah is the ruler of this household."

Mr. Conant may have noticed that, also, for he seemed not at all surprised when his wife said she had decided to keep Mary Louise with them. But after the girls had gone to bed that night the lawyer had a long talk with his better half, and thereafter Mary Louise's presence was accepted as a matter of course. But Mr. Conant said to her the next morning:

"I have notified your grandfather, at his six different addresses, of your coming to us, so I ought to receive his instructions within the next few days. Also, to-day I will write Miss Stearne that you are here and why you came away from the school."

"Will you ask her to send my trunk?"

"Not now. We will first await advices from Colonel Weatherby."

These "advices" were received three days later in the form of a brief telegram from a Los Angeles attorney. The message read: "Colonel Weatherby requests you to keep M. L. in Dorfield until further instructions. Money forwarded. Hot. Caution." It was signed "O. L." and when Mr. Conant showed Mary Louise the message she exclaimed:

"Then Mr. O'Gorman was right!"

"In what way?" questioned the lawyer.

"In the note he left for me at the hotel he said I might find my grandfather by writing to Oscar Lawler at Los Angeles, California. This telegram is from Los Angeles and it is signed 'O. L.' which must mean 'Oscar Lawler.'"

"How clever!" said Mr. Conant sarcastically.

"That proves, of course, that Gran'pa Jim and mother are in California, But how did the detective know that?" she asked wonderingly.

"He didn't know it," answered Peter Conant. "On the contrary, this message proves to me that they are not there at all."

"But the telegram says--"

"Otherwise," continued the lawyer, "the telegram would not have come from that far-away point on the Pacific coast. There now remain five other places where Colonel Weatherby might be located. The chances are, however, that he is not in any of them."

Mary Louise was puzzled. It was altogether too bewildering for her comprehension.

"Here are two strange words," said she, eyeing the telegram she still held. "What does 'hot' mean, Mr. Conant?"

"It means," he replied, "that the government spies are again seeking Colonel Weatherby. The word 'caution' means that we must all take care not to let any information escape us that might lead to his arrest. Don't talk to strangers, Mary Louise; don't talk to anyone outside our family of your grandfather's affairs, or even of your own affairs. The safety of Colonel Weatherby depends, to a great extent, on our all being silent and discreet."