

CHAPTER XII - A CHEERFUL COMRADE

The more Mary Louise saw of Irene Macfarlane the more she learned to love her. No one could be miserable or despondent for long in the chair-girl's society, because she was always so bright and cheery herself. One forgot to pity her or even to deplore her misfortunes while listening to her merry chatter and frank laughter, for she seemed to find genuine joy and merriment in the simplest incidents of the life about her.

"God has been so good to me, Mary Louise!" she once exclaimed as they were sitting together in the garden. "He has given me sight, that I may revel in bookland and in the beauties of flowers and trees and shifting skies and the faces of my friends. He has given me the blessing of hearing, that I may enjoy the strains of sweet music and the songs of the birds and the voices of those I love. And I can scent the fragrance of the morning air, the perfume of the roses and--yes! even the beefsteak Aunt Hannah is frying for supper. The beefsteak tastes as good to me as it does to you. I can feel the softness of your cheek; I can sing melodies, in my own way, whenever my heart swells with joy. I can move about, by means of this wonderful chair, without the bother of walking. You don't envy me, Mary Louise, because you enjoy almost equal blessings; but you must admit I have reason for being happy."

Irene read a good many books and magazines and through the daily papers kept well posted on the world's affairs. Indeed, she was much better posted than Mary Louise, who, being more active, had less leisure to think and thus absorb the full meaning of all that came to her notice. Irene would play the piano for hours at a time, though obliged to lean forward in her chair to reach the keys, and her moods ran the gamut from severely classical themes to ragtime, seeming to enjoy all equally. She also sewed and mended with such consummate skill that Mary Louise, who was rather awkward with her needle, marveled at her talent.

Nor was this the end of the chair-girl's accomplishments, for Irene had a fancy for sketching and made numerous caricatures of those persons with whom she came in contact. These contained so much humor that Mary Louise was delighted with them--especially one of "Uncle Peter" toying with his watch fob and staring straight ahead of him with round, expressionless eyes.

"Really, Irene, I believe you could paint," she once said.

"No," answered her friend, "I would not be so wicked as to do that. All imitations of Nature seem to me a mock of God's handiwork, which no mortal brush can hope to equal. I shall never be so audacious, I hope. But a photograph is a pure reflex of Nature, and my caricatures, which are merely bits of harmless fun, furnish us now and then a spark of humor to make us laugh, and laughter is good for the soul. I often laugh at my own sketches, as you know. Sometimes I laugh at their whimsical conception, before ever I put pencil to paper. Lots of caricatures I make secretly, laughing over and then destroying them for fear they

might be seen and hurt the feelings of their innocent subjects. Why, Mary Louise, I drew your doleful face only yesterday, and it was so funny I shrieked with glee. You heard me and looked over at me with a smile that made the caricature lie, so I promptly tore it up. It had served its purpose, you see."

So many of these quaint notions filled the head of the crippled girl that Mary Louise's wondering interest in her never flagged. It was easy to understand why Mrs. Conant had declared that Irene was the joy and life of the household, for it was impossible to remain morbid or blue in her presence.

For this reason, as well as through the warm and sincere affection inspired by Irene, Mary Louise came by degrees to confide to her the entire story of the mystery that surrounded her grandfather and influenced the lives of her mother and herself. Of her personal anxieties and fears she told her new friend far more than she had ever confessed to anyone else and her disclosures were met by ready sympathy.

"Phoo!" cried Irene. "This isn't a REAL trouble; it will pass away. Everything passes away in time, Mary Louise, for life is a succession of changes--one thing after another. Remember the quotation: 'Whate'er may be thy fate to-day, remember--this will pass away.' I love that little saying and it has comforted me and given me courage many a time."

"Life will also pass away," observed Mary Louise pessimistically.

"To be sure. Isn't that a glad prospect? To pass to a new life, to new adventures, planned for us by the wisdom of God, is the most glorious promise we mortals possess. In good time that joy will be ours, but now we must make the most of our present blessings. I take it, Mary Louise, that there is a purpose in everything--a Divine Purpose, you know--and that those who most patiently accept their trials will have the better future recompense. What's a twisted ankle or a shriveled leg to do with happiness? Or even a persecuted grandfather? We're made of better stuff, you and I, than to cry at such babyish bumps. My! what a lot of things we both have to be thankful for."

Somehow these conversations cheered Mary Louise considerably and her face soon lost its drawn, worried look and became almost as placid as in the days when she had Gran'pa Jim beside her and suspected no approaching calamity. Gran'pa Jim would surely have loved Irene, had he known her, because their ideas of life and duty were so similar.

As it was now less than a month to the long summer vacation, Mary Louise did not enter the Dorfield High School but studied a little at home, so as not to get "rusty," and passed most of her days in the society of Irene Macfarlane. It was a week or so after her arrival that Peter Conant said to her one evening:

"I have now received ample funds for all your needs, Mary Louise, so I have sent to Miss Stearne to have your trunk and books forwarded."

"Oh; then you have heard from Gran'pa Jim?" she asked eagerly.

"Yes."

"Where is he?"

"I do not know," chopping the words apart with emphasis. "The Colonel has been very liberal. I am to put twenty dollars in cash in your pocketbook and you are to come to me for any further sums you may require, which I am ordered to supply without question. I would have favored making you an allowance, had I been consulted, but the Colonel is--eh--eh--the Colonel is the Colonel."

"Didn't Gran'pa Jim send me any letter, or--any information at all?" she asked wistfully.

"Not a word."

"In my last letter, which you promised me to forward, I begged him to write me," she said, with disappointment.

Peter Conant made no reply. He merely stared at her. But afterward, when the two girls were alone, Irene said to her:

"I do not think you should beg your grandfather to write you. A letter might be traced by his enemies, you know, and that would mean his undoing. He surely loves you and bears you in mind, for he has provided for your comfort in every possible way. Even your letters to him may be dangerous, although they reach him in such roundabout ways. If I were you, Mary Louise, I'd accept the situation as I found it and not demand more than your grandfather and your mother are able to give you."

This frank advice Mary Louise accepted in good part and through the influence of the chair-girl she gradually developed a more contented frame of mind.

Irene was a persistent reader of books and one of Mary Louise's self-imposed duties was to go to the public library and select such volumes as her friend was likely to be interested in. These covered a wide range of subjects, although historical works and tales of the age of chivalry seemed to appeal to Irene more than any others. Sometimes she would read aloud, in her sweet, sympathetic voice, to Mary Louise and Mrs. Conant, and under these conditions they frequently found themselves interested in books which, if read by themselves, they would be sure to find intolerably dry and uninteresting. The crippled girl had a way of giving more than she received and, instead of demanding attention, would often entertain the sound-limbed ones of her immediate circle.