

## CHAPTER XIII - BUB SUCCUMBS TO FORCE

One day Peter Conant abruptly left his office, came home and packed his grip and then hurried down town and caught the five o'clock train for New York. He was glum and uncommunicative, as usual, merely telling Aunt Hannah that business called him away and he did not know when he would be back.

A week later Peter appeared at the family breakfast table, having arrived on the early morning express, and he seemed in a more gracious mood than usual. Indeed, he was really talkative.

"I met Will Morrison in New York, Hannah," he said to his wife. "He was just sailing for London with his family and will remain abroad all summer. He wanted us to occupy his mountain place, Hillcrest Lodge, during July and August, and although I told him we couldn't use the place he insisted on my taking an order on his man to turn the shack over to us."

"The shack!" cried Aunt Hannah indignantly.

"Why, Peter, Hillcrest Lodge is a little palace. It is the cosiest, most delightful place I have ever visited. Why shouldn't we accept Will Morrison's proposition to occupy it?"

"I can't leave my business."

"You could run up every Friday afternoon, taking the train to Millbank and the stage to Hillcrest, and stay with us till Monday morning."

He stared at her reflectively.

"Would you be safe in that out-of-the-way place?" he asked.

"Of course. Didn't you say Will had a man for caretaker? And only a few scattered cottages are located near by, so we shall be quite by ourselves and wholly unmolested. I mean to go, and take the girls. The change will do us all good, so you may as well begin to make arrangements for the trip."

Peter Conant stared awhile and then resumed his breakfast without comment. Mary Louise thought she saw a smile flicker over his stolid features for a moment, but could not be positive. Aunt Hannah had spoken in a practical, matter-of-fact way that did not admit of argument.

"Let me see," she resumed; "we will plan to leave on Thursday morning, over the branch road, which will get us to Millbank by noon. If you telegraph the stage-driver to meet us we can reach Hillcrest Lodge by three o'clock--perhaps earlier--and that will enable us to get settled before dark. That is far better than taking the afternoon train. Will you make the proper arrangements, Peter?"

"Yes," he briefly replied.

As he was leaving the house after breakfast he fixed his stare on Irene and said to her:

"In New York I ran across a lot of second-hand books at an auction sale- -old novels and romances which you will probably like. I bought the lot and shipped them home. If they arrive in time you can take them to Hillcrest and they will keep you reading all summer."

"Oh, thank you, Uncle Peter!" exclaimed the chair-girl gratefully.

"Have you any--any--news of Gran'pa Jim?" asked Mary Louise diffidently.

"No," he said and walked away.

During the few days that remained before their exodus they were busy preparing for the anticipated vacation. Summer gowns had to be looked over and such things gathered together as might be useful during their two months' stay at Hillcrest.

"Of course no one will see us," remarked Aunt Hannah; "it's really the jumping-off place of the world; but Will Morrison has made it as cosy as possible and we three, with just Peter at the week-ends, can amuse one another without getting lonely. Peter will fish in the mountain streams, of course, and that's the reason he is allowing us to go. We've visited the Morrisons two or three times at the Lodge and Peter has fished for trout every minute he was there."

"Who are the Morrisons?" asked Mary Louise.

"Will Morrison is a rich banker and his wife Sallie was an old schoolmate of mine. The Lodge is only a little resort of theirs, you know, for in the city they live in grand style. I know you girls will enjoy the place, for the scenery is delightful and the clear mountain air mighty invigorating."

All girls delight in change of location and although Irene was a little worried over the difficulties of getting to Hillcrest Lodge in her crippled condition, she was as eager to go as was Mary Louise. And she made the trip more comfortably than she had feared.

At Millbank the stage-driver fixed a comfortable seat for her in his carryall and loaded the boxes and baggage and the wheeled chair and the box of books--which had arrived from New York--on the railed top of his bus, and then they drove away through a rough but picturesque country that drew from the girls many exclamations of delight.

Presently they came to a small group of dwellings called the "Huddle," which lay at the foot of the mountain. Then up a winding path the four horses labored patiently, halting often to rest and get their breaths. At such times the passengers

gloried in the superb views of the valley and its farms and were never impatient to proceed. They passed one or two modest villas, for this splendid location had long ago been discovered by a few others besides Will Morrison who loved to come here for their vacations and so escape the maddening crowds of the cities.

Aunt Hannah had planned the trip with remarkable accuracy, for at about three o'clock the lumbering stage stopped at a pretty chalet half hidden among the tall pines and overlooking a steep bluff. Here the baggage and boxes were speedily unloaded.

"I gotta git back ter meet the aft'noon train," said Bill Coombs, their driver. "They won't be any more passingers in this direction, tain't likely, 'cause the houses 'roun' here is mighty scattered an' no one's expectin' nobody, as I know of. But in the other direction from Millbank--Sodd Corners way--I may catch a load, if I'm lucky."

So back he drove, leaving the Conants' traps by the roadside, and Peter began looking around for Morrison's man. The doors of the house were fast locked, front and rear. There was no one in the barn or the shed- like garage, where a rusty looking automobile stood. Peter looked around the grounds in vain. Then he whistled. Afterward he began bawling out "Hi, there!" in a voice that echoed lonesomely throughout the mountain side.

And, at last, when they were all beginning to despair, a boy came slouching around a corner of the house, from whence no one could guess. He was whittling a stick and he continued to whittle while he stared at the unexpected arrivals and slowly advanced. When about fifteen paces away he halted, with feet planted well apart, and bent his gaze sturdily on his stick and knife. He was barefooted, dressed in faded blue-jeans overalls and a rusty gingham shirt--the two united by a strap over one shoulder--and his head was covered by a broad Scotch golf cap much too big for him and considerably too warm for the season.

"Come here!" commanded Mr. Conant.

The boy did not move, therefore the lawyer advanced angrily toward him.

"Why didn't you obey me?" he asked.

"They's gals there. I hates gals," said the boy in a confidential tone. "Any sort o' men critters I kin stand, but gals gits my goat."

"Who are you?" inquired Mr. Conant.

"Me? I'm jus' Bub."

"Where is Mr. Morrison's man?"

"Meanin' Talbot? Gone up to Mark's Peak, to guide a gang o' hunters f'm the city."

"When did he go?" asked the lawyer.

"I guess a Tuesday. No--a Wednesday."

"And when will he be back?"

The boy whittled, abstractedly.

"Answer me!"

"How kin I? D'ye know where Mark's Peak is?"

"No."

"It takes a week ter git thar; they'll likely hunt two er three weeks; mebbe more; ye kin tell that as well as I kin. Mister Will's gone ter You-RUPP with Miss' Morrison, so Talbot he won't be in no hurry ter come back."

"Great Caesar! Here's a pretty mess. Are you Talbot's boy?"

"Nope. I'm a Grigger, an' live over in the holler, yonder."

"What are you doing here?"

"Earnin' two bits a week."

"How?"

"Lookin' after the place."

"Very well. Mr. Morrison has given us permission to use the Lodge while he is away, so unlock the doors and help get the baggage in."

The boy notched the stick with his knife, using great care.

"Talbot didn't say nuth'n' 'bout that," he remarked composedly.

Mr. Conant uttered an impatient ejaculation. It was one of his peculiarities to give a bark similar to that of a dog when greatly annoyed. After staring at the boy a while he took out Will Morrison's letter to Talbot, opened it and held it before Bub's face.

"Read that!" he cried.

Bub grinned and shook his head.

"I kain't read," he said.

Mr. Conant, in a loud and severe voice, read Mr. Morrison's instruction to his man Talbot to do everything in his power to make the Conants comfortable and to

serve them as faithfully as he did his own master. The boy listened, whittling slowly. Then he said:

"Mebbe that's all right; an' ag'in, mebbe tain't. Seein' as I kain't read I ain't goin' ter take no one's word fer it."

"You insolent brat!" exclaimed Peter Conant, highly incensed. Then he turned and called: "Come here, Mary Louise."

Mary Louise promptly advanced and with every step she made the boy retreated a like distance, until the lawyer seized his arm and held it in a firm grip.

"What do you mean by running away?" he demanded.

"I hates gals," retorted Bub sullenly.

"Don't be a fool. Come here, Mary Louise, and read this letter to the boy, word for word."

Mary Louise, marking the boy's bashfulness and trying to restrain a smile, read Mr. Morrison's letter.

"You see," said the lawyer sharply, giving Bub a little shake, "those are the exact words of the letter. We're going to enter the Lodge and take possession of it, as Mr. Morrison has told us to do, and if you don't obey my orders I shall give you a good flogging. Do you understand that?"

Bub nodded, more cheerfully.

"If ye do it by force," said he, "that lets me out. Nobody kin blame me if I'm forced."

Mary Louise laughed so heartily that the boy cast an upward, half-approving glance at her face. Even Mr. Conant's stern visage relaxed.

"See here, Bub," he said, "obey my orders and no harm can come to you. This letter is genuine and if you serve us faithfully while we are here I'll--I'll give you four bits a week."

"Heh? Four bits!"

"Exactly. Four bits every week."

"Gee, that'll make six bits a week, with the two Talbot's goin' ter give me. I'm hanged ef I don't buy a sweater fer next winter, afore the cold weather comes!"

"Very good," said Mr. Conant. "Now get busy and let us in."

Bub deliberately closed the knife and put it in his pocket, tossing away the stick.

"Gals," he remarked, with another half glance at Mary Louise, "ain't ter my likin'; but FOURBITS--"

He turned and walked away to where a wild rosebush clambered over one corner of the Lodge. Pushing away the thick, thorny branches with care, he thrust in his hand and drew out a bunch of keys.

"If it's jus' the same t' you, sir, I'd ruther ye'd snatch 'em from my hand," he suggested. "Then, if I'm blamed, I kin prove a alibi."

Mr. Conant was so irritated that he literally obeyed the boy's request and snatched the keys. Then he led the way to the front door.

"It's that thin, brass one," Bub hinted.

Mr. Conant opened the front door. The place was apparently in perfect order.

"Go and get Hannah and Irene, please," said Peter to Mary Louise, and soon they had all taken possession of the cosy Lodge, had opened the windows and aired it and selected their various bedrooms.

"It is simply delightful!" exclaimed Irene, who was again seated in her wheeled chair, "and, if Uncle Peter will build a little runway from the porch to the ground, as he did at home, I shall be able to go and come as I please."

Meantime Aunt Hannah--as even Mary Louise now called Mrs. Conant--ransacked the kitchen and cupboards to discover what supplies were in the house. There was a huge stock of canned goods, which Will Morrison had begged them to use freely, and the Conants had brought a big box of other groceries with them, which was speedily unpacked.

While the others were thus engaged in settling and arranging the house, Irene wheeled her chair to the porch, on the steps of which sat Bub, again whittling. He had shown much interest in the crippled girl, whose misfortune seemed instantly to dispel his aversion for her sex, at least so far as she was concerned. He was not reluctant even to look at her face and he watched with astonishment the ease with which she managed her chair. Having overheard, although at a distance, most of the boy's former conversation with Uncle Peter, Irene now began questioning him.

"Have you been eating and sleeping here?"

"Of course," answered Bub.

"In the Lodge?"

"No; over in Talbot's house. That's over the ridge, yonder; it's only a step, but ye kain't see it f'm here. My home's in the South Holler, four mile away."

"Do you cook your own meals?"

"Nobody else ter do it."

"And don't you get dreadfully lonesome at night?"

"Who? Me? Guess not. What the Sam Hill is they to be lonesome over?"

"There are no near neighbors, are there?"

"Plenty. The Barker house is two mile one way an' the Bigbee house is jus' half a mile down the slope; guess ye passed it, comin' up; but they ain't no one in the Bigbee house jus' now, 'cause Bigbee got shot on the mount'n las' year, a deer hunt'n', an' Bigbee's wife's married another man what says he's delicate like an' can't leave the city. But neighbors is plenty. Six mile along the canyon lives Doolittle."

Irene was delighted with Bub's quaint language and ways and before Mrs. Conant called her family to the simple improvised dinner the chair-girl had won the boy's heart and already they were firm friends.