

## CHAPTER XIV - A CALL FROM AGATHA LORD

Hillcrest Lodge was perched upon a broad shelf of the wooded mountain, considerably nearer to the bottom than to the top, yet a stiff climb from the plain below. Behind it was a steep cliff; in front there was a gradual descent covered with scrub but affording a splendid view of the lowlands. At one side was the rocky canyon with its brook struggling among the boulders, and on the other side the roadway that wound up the mountain in zigzag fashion, selecting the course of least resistance.

Will Morrison was doubtless a mighty hunter and an expert fisherman, for the "den" at the rear of the Lodge was a regular museum of trophies of the chase. Stag and doe heads, enormous trout mounted on boards, antlers of wild mountain sheep, rods, guns, revolvers and hunting-knives fairly lined the walls, while a cabinet contained reels, books of flies, cartridge belts, creels and many similar articles. On the floor were rugs of bear, deer and beaver. A shelf was filled with books on sporting subjects. There was a glass door that led onto a little porch at the rear of the Lodge and a big window that faced the cliff.

This sanctum of the owner rather awed the girls when first they examined it, but they found it the most fascinating place in all the house and Irene was delighted to be awarded the bedroom that adjoined it. The other bedrooms were on the upper floor.

"However," said Mr. Conant to Irene, "I shall reserve the privilege of smoking my evening pipe in this den, for here is a student lamp, a low table and the easiest chairs in all the place. If you keep your bedroom door shut you won't mind the fumes of tobacco."

"I don't mind them anyhow, Uncle Peter," she replied.

Bub Grigger helped get in the trunks and boxes. He also filled the woodbox in the big living room and carried water from the brook for Aunt Hannah, but otherwise he was of little use to them. His favorite occupation was whittling and he would sit for hours on one of the broad benches overlooking the valley, aimlessly cutting chips from a stick without forming it into any object whatsoever.

"I suppose all this time he is deeply thinking," said Mary Louise as the girls sat on the porch watching him, the day after their arrival, "but it would be interesting to know what direction Bub's thoughts take."

"He must be figuring up his earnings and deciding how long it will take to buy that winter sweater," laughed Irene. "I've had a bit of conversation with the boy already and his ideas struck me as rather crude and undeveloped."

"One idea, however, is firmly fixed in his mind," declared Mary Louise. "He 'hates gals.'"

"We must try to dispel that notion. Perhaps he has a big sister at home who pounds him, and therefore he believes all girls are alike."

"Then let us go to him and make friends," suggested Mary Louise. "If we are gentle with the boy we may win him over."

Mr. Conant had already made a runway for the chair, so they left the porch and approached Bub, who saw them coming and slipped into the scrub, where he speedily disappeared from view. At other times, also, he shyly avoided the girls, until they began to fear it would be more difficult to "make friends" than they had supposed.

Monday morning Mr. Conant went down the mountain road, valise in hand, and met Bill Coombs the stage-driver at the foot of the descent, having made this arrangement to save time and expense. Peter had passed most of his two days' vacation in fishing and had been so successful that he promised Aunt Hannah he would surely return the following Friday. He had instructed Bub to "take good care of the womenfolks" during his absence, but no thought of danger occurred to any of them. The Morrisons had occupied the Lodge for years and had never been molested in any way. It was a somewhat isolated place but the country people in the neighborhood were thoroughly honest and trustworthy.

"There isn't much for us to do here," said Mary Louise when the three were left alone, "except to read, to eat and to sleep--lazy occupations all. I climbed the mountain a little way yesterday, but the view from the Lodge is the best of all and if you leave the road you tear your dress to shreds in the scrub."

"Well, to read, to eat and to sleep is the very best way to enjoy a vacation," asserted Aunt Hannah. "Let us all take it easy and have a good time."

Irene's box of books which Mr. Conant had purchased for her in New York had been placed in the den, where she could select the volumes as she chose, and the chair-girl found the titles so alluring that she promised herself many hours of enjoyment while delving among them. They were all old and secondhand--perhaps fourth-hand or fifth-hand--as the lawyer had stated, and the covers were many of them worn to tatters; but "books is books," said Irene cheerily, and she believed they would not prove the less interesting in contents because of their condition. Mostly they were old romances, historical essays and novels, with a sprinkling of fairy tales and books of verse--just the subjects Irene most loved.

"Being exiles, if not regular hermits," observed the crippled girl, sunning herself on the small porch outside the den, book in hand, "we may loaf and dream to our hearts' content, and without danger of reproach."

But not for long were they to remain wholly secluded. On Thursday afternoon they were surprised by a visitor, who suddenly appeared from among the trees that lined the roadway and approached the two girls who were occupying a bench at the edge of the bluff.

The new arrival was a lady of singularly striking appearance, beautiful and in the full flush of womanhood, being perhaps thirty years of age. She wore a smart walking-suit that fitted her rounded form perfectly, and a small hat with a single feather was jauntily perched upon her well-set head. Hair and eyes, almost black, contrasted finely with the bloom on her cheeks. In her ungloved hand she held a small walking-stick.

Advancing with grace and perfect self-possession, she smiled and nodded to the two young girls and then, as Mary Louise rose to greet her, she said:

"I am your nearest neighbor, and so I have climbed up here to get acquainted. I am Agatha Lord, but of course you do not know me, because I came from Boston, whereas you came from--from--"

"Dorfield," said Mary Louise. "Pray be seated. Let me present Irene Macfarlane; and I am Mary Louise Burrows. You are welcome, Miss Lord--or should I say Mrs. Lord?"

"Miss is correct," replied their visitor with a pleasant laugh, which brought an answering smile to the other faces; "but you must not address me except as 'Agatha.' For here in the wilderness formalities seem ridiculous. Now let us have a cosy chat together."

"Won't you come into the Lodge and meet Mrs. Conant?"

"Not just yet. You may imagine how that climb winded me, although they say it is only half a mile. I've taken the Bigbee house, just below you, you know, and I arrived there last night to get a good rest after a rather strenuous social career at home. Ever since Easter I've been on the 'go' every minute and I'm really worn to a frazzle."

She did not look it, thought Mary Louise. Indeed, she seemed the very picture of health.

"Ah," said she, fixing her eyes on Irene's book, "you are very fortunate. The one thing I forgot to bring with me was a supply of books, and there is not a volume--not even a prayer-book--in the Bigbee house. I shall go mad in these solitudes if I cannot read."

"You may use my library," promised Irene, sympathizing with Miss Lord's desire. "Uncle Peter brought a great box of books for me to read and you are welcome to share their delights with me, I believe there are fifty of them, at the least; but many were published ages ago and perhaps," with a glance at the dainty hands, "you won't care to handle secondhand books."

"This ozonic air will fumigate them," said Agatha Lord carelessly. "We don't absorb bindings, Irene, but merely the thoughts of the authors. Books are the one banquet-table whereat we may feast without destroying the delicacy or flavor of

the dishes presented. As long as the pages hold together and the type is legible a book is as good as when new."

"I like pretty bindings, though," declared Irene, "for they dress pretty thoughts in fitting attire. An ill-looking book, whatever its contents, resembles the ugly girl whose only redeeming feature is her good heart. To be beautiful without and within must have been the desire of God in all things."

Agatha gave her a quick look of comprehension. There was an unconsciously wistful tone in the girl's voice. Her face, though pallid, was lovely to view; her dress was dainty and arranged with care; she earnestly sought to be as beautiful "without and within" as was possible, yet the twisted limbs forbade her attaining the perfection she craved.

They sat together for an hour in desultory conversation and Agatha Lord certainly interested the two younger girls very much. She was decidedly worldly in much of her gossip but quick to perceive when she infringed the susceptibilities of her less sophisticated companions and was able to turn the subject cleverly to more agreeable channels.

"I've brought my automobile with me," she said, "and, unless you have a car of your own, we will take some rides through the valley together. I mean to drive to Millbank every day for mail."

"There's a car here, which belongs to Mr. Morrison," replied Mary Louise, "but as none of us understands driving it we will gladly accept your invitations to ride. Do you drive your own car?"

"Yes, indeed; that is the joy of motoring; and I care for my car, too, because the hired chauffeurs are so stupid. I didn't wish the bother of servants while taking my 'rest cure,' and so my maid and I are all alone at the Bigbee place."

After a time they went into the house, where Miss Lord was presented to Aunt Hannah, who welcomed their neighbor with her accustomed cordiality. In the den Agatha pounced upon the books and quickly selected two which she begged permission to take home with her.

"This is really a well selected collection," she remarked, eyeing the titles critically. "Where did Mr. Conant find it?"

"At an auction of second-hand junk in New York," explained Irene. "Uncle Peter knows that I love the old-fashioned books best but I'm sure he didn't realize what a good collection this is."

As she spoke, Irene was listlessly running through the leaves of two or three volumes she had not before examined, when in one of them her eye was caught by a yellowed sheet of correspondence paper, tucked among the pages at about midway between the covers. Without removing the sheet she leaned over to

examine the fine characters written upon it and presently exclaimed in wondering tones:

"Why, Mary Louise! Here is an old letter about your mother--yes, and here's something about your grandfather, too. How strange that it should be--"

"Let me see it!" cried Mary Louise, eagerly stretching out her hands.

But over her friend's shoulder Irene caught the expression of Agatha Lord--tense, startled, with a gleam of triumph in the dark eyes. It frightened her, that look on the face of one she had deemed a stranger, and it warned her. She closed the book with a little slam of decision and tucked it beside her in her chair.

"No," she said positively, "no one shall see the letter until I've had time to read it myself."

"But what was it about?" asked Mary Louise.

"I don't know, yet; and you're not to ask questions until I DO know," retorted Irene, calmly returning Miss Lord's curious gaze while addressing Mary Louise. "These are my books, you must admit, and so whatever I find in them belongs to me."

"Quite right, my dear," approved Agatha Lord, with her light, easy laugh. She knew that Irene had surprised her unguarded expression and wished to counteract the impression it had caused.

Irene returned the laugh with one equally insincere, saying to her guest:

"Help yourself to whatever books you like, neighbor. Carry them home, read them and return them at your convenience."

"You are exceedingly kind," answered Agatha and resumed her examination of the titles. Mary Louise had not observed the tell-tale expression on Miss Lord's face but she was shrewd enough to detect an undercurrent of ice in the polite phrases passing between her companions. She was consumed with curiosity to know more of the letter which Irene had found in the book but did not again refer to it in the presence of their visitor.

It was not long before Agatha rose to go, a couple of books tucked beneath her arm.

"Will you ride with me to Millbank to-morrow?" she asked, glancing from one face to another.

Mary Louise looked at Irene and Irene hesitated.

"I am not very comfortable without my chair," she said.

"You shall have the rear seat all to yourself, and it is big and broad and comfortable. Mary Louise will ride with me in front. I can easily drive the car up here and load you in at this very porch. Please come!"

"Very well, since you are so kind," Irene decided, and after a few more kindly remarks the beautiful Miss Lord left them and walked with graceful, swinging stride down the path to the road and down the road toward the Bigbee house.