

## CHAPTER XVII - THE HIRED GIRL

Mr. Conant had just put on a comfortable smoking-jacket and slippers and seated himself in the den, pipe in mouth, when the old-fashioned knocker on the front door of the Lodge began to bang. It banged three times, so Mr. Conant rose and made for the door.

Mrs. Conant and Mary Louise were in the kitchen and Irene was in her own room. The lawyer reflected, with a deprecating glance at his unconventional costume, that their evening caller could be none other than their neighbor, the beautiful Miss Lord, so as he opened the door he regretted that his appearance was not more presentable.

But it was not Miss Lord who stood upon the porch awaiting admittance. It was a strange girl, who asked in a meek voice:

"Is this Hillcrest Lodge?"

"It is," replied the lawyer.

The girl came in without an invitation, bringing a carpet-bag in one hand and a bundle tied in a newspaper tucked under the other arm. As she stood in the lighted room she looked around inquiringly and said:

"I am Sarah Judd. Where is Mrs. Morrison, please?"

Mr. Conant stood and stared at her, his hands clasped behind his back in characteristic attitude. He could not remember ever having heard of Sarah Judd.

"Mrs. Morrison," he said in his choppy voice, "is in Europe."

The girl stared at him in return, as if stupified. Then she sat down in the nearest chair and continued to stare. Finding her determined on silence, Mr. Conant spoke again.

"The Morrisons are spending the summer abroad. I and my family are occupying the Lodge in their absence. I--eh--eh--I am Mr. Conant, of Dorfield."

The girl sighed drearily. She was quite small, about seventeen years of age and dressed in a faded gingham over which she wore a black cloth coat that was rusty and frayed. A black straw hat, fearfully decorated with red velvet and mussed artificial flowers, was tipped over her forehead. Her features were not bad, but her nose was blotched, her face strongly freckled and her red hair very untidy. Only the mild blue eyes redeemed the unattractive face--eyes very like those of Mary Louise in expression, mused Mr. Conant, as he critically eyed the girl.

"I have come here to work," she said after a long pause, during which she seemed trying to collect her thoughts. "I am Sarah Judd. Mrs. Morrison said I must come

here on Saturday, the tenth day of July, to go to work. This is the tenth day of July."

"H-m--h-m; I see. When did Mrs. Morrison tell you that?"

"It was last September."

"Oh; so she hired you a year in advance and didn't tell you, afterward, that she was going abroad?"

"I didn't see her since, sir."

Mr. Conant was perplexed. He went into the kitchen and told Aunt Hannah about it and the good woman came at once to interview Sarah Judd, followed by Mary Louise, who had just finished wiping the dishes.

"This seems very unfortunate for you," began Mrs. Conant, regarding the strange girl with mild interest. "I suppose, when Mrs. Morrison engaged you, she expected to pass the summer at the Lodge, and afterward she forgot to notify you."

Sarah Judd considered this soberly; then nodded her head.

"I've walked all the way from Millbank," she said with another sigh.

"Then you've had nothing to eat!" exclaimed Mary Louise, with ready sympathy. "May I get her something, Aunt Hannah?"

"Of course, my dear."

Both Mr. and Mrs. Conant felt rather embarrassed.

"I regret," said the latter, "that we do not need a maid at present. We do our own housework, you see."

"I have left a good place in Albany to come here," said Sarah, plaintively.

"You should have written to Mrs. Morrison," declared the lawyer, "asking if she still required your services. Many unforeseen things may happen during a period of ten months."

"Mrs. Morrison, she have paid me a month in advance," asserted the girl, in justification. "And she paid me my expenses to come here, too. She said I must not fail her; I should come to the Lodge on the tenth of July and do the work at the Lodge. She did not say she would be here. She did not say you would be here. She told me to come and work, and she paid me a month in advance, so I could give the money to my sister, who needed it then. And I must do as Mrs. Morrison says. I am paid to work at the Lodge and so I must work at the Lodge. I cannot help that, can I?"

The lawyer was a man of experience, but this queer complication astonished him. He exchanged a questioning glance with his wife.

"In any event," said Mrs. Conant, "the girl must stay here to-night, for it would be cruel to ask her to find her way down the mountain in the dark. We will put her in the maid's room, Peter, and to-morrow we can decide what to do with her."

"Very well," agreed Mr. Conant and retreated to the den to have his smoke.

Mary Louise arranged some food on the kitchen table for Sarah Judd and after the girl had eaten, Mrs. Conant took her to the maid's room, which was a very pleasant and well furnished apartment quite in keeping with all the comfortable appointments at Hillcrest Lodge, although it was built behind the kitchen and formed a little wing of its own.

Sarah Judd accepted these favors with meek resignation. Since her one long speech of explanation she had maintained silence. Leaving her in her room, the family congregated in the den, where Mr. Conant was telling Irene about the queer arrival and the unfortunate misunderstanding that had occasioned it.

"The girl is not to blame," said Mary Louise. "She seems an honest little thing, resolved to do her duty. It is all Mrs. Morrison's fault."

"Doesn't look like a very competent servant, either," observed Mr. Conant, comfortably puffing his pipe.

"You can't tell that from appearances, Peter," replied Mrs. Conant. "She can at least wash dishes and sweep and do the drudgery. Why not keep her?"

"Oh, my dear!"

"Mrs. Morrison has paid her a month's wages, and Molly Morrison wouldn't have done that had not the girl been competent. It won't cost us anything to keep her--except her food--and it seems a shame to cast her adrift just because the Morrisons forgot to notify her they had changed their plans."

"Also," added Mary Louise, "Sarah Judd will be useful to us. This is Aunt Hannah's vacation, as well as a vacation for the rest of us, and a rest from cooking and housework would do her a heap of good."

"Looking at it from that viewpoint," said Peter, after puffing his pipe reflectively, "I approve of our keeping Sarah Judd. I believe it will please the Morrisons better than for us to send her away, and--it surely won't hurt Hannah to be a lady of leisure for a month or so."