

CHAPTER XXI - BAD NEWS

Peter Conant had told his wife that he wouldn't be at the Lodge this week until Saturday, as business would prevent his coming earlier, yet the Thursday afternoon train brought him to Millbank and Bill Coombs' stage took him to Hillcrest.

"Why, Peter!" exclaimed Aunt Hannah, when she saw him, "what on earth brought you--"

Then she stopped short, for Peter's eyes were staring more roundly than usual and the hand that fumbled at his locket trembled visibly. He stared at Aunt Hannah, he stared at Irene; but most of all he stared at Mary Louise, who seemed to sense from his manner some impending misfortune.

"H-m," said the lawyer, growing red and then paling; "I've bad news."

He chopped the words off abruptly, as if he resented the necessity of uttering them. His eyes, which had been fixed upon the face of Mary Louise, suddenly wavered and sought the floor.

His manner said more than his words. Mary Louise grew white and pressed her hands to her heart, regarding the lawyer with eyes questioning and full of fear. Irene turned a sympathetic gaze upon her friend and Aunt Hannah came closer to the girl and slipped an arm around her waist, as if to help her to endure this unknown trial. And Mary Louise, feeling she could not bear the suspense, asked falteringly:

"Has--Gran'pa Jim--been--"

"No," said Mr. Conant. "No, my dear, no."

"Then--has anything happened to--to--mother?"

"Well, well," muttered the lawyer, with a sort of growl, "Mrs. Burrows has not been in good health for some months, it seems. She--eh--was under a--eh--under a nervous strain; a severe nervous strain, you know, and--"

"Is she dead?" asked the girl in a low, hard voice.

"The end, it seems, came unexpectedly, several days ago. She did not suffer, your grandfather writes, but--"

Again he left his sentence unfinished, for Mary Louise had buried her face in Aunt Hannah's bosom and was sobbing in a miserable, heart-breaking way that made Peter jerk a handkerchief from his pocket and blow his nose lustily. Then he turned and marched from the room, while his wife led the hapless girl to a sofa and cuddled her in her lap as if she had been a little child.

"She's best with the women," muttered Peter to himself. "It's a sorrowful thing--a dreadful thing, in a way--but it can't be helped and- -she's best with the women."

He had wandered into the dining room, where Sarah Judd was laying the table for dinner. She must have overheard the conversation in the living room, for she came beside the lawyer and asked:

"When did Mrs. Burrows die?"

"On Monday."

"Where?"

"That's none of your business, my girl."

"Has the funeral been held?"

He regarded her curiously. The idea of a servant asking such questions! But there was a look in Sarah's blue eyes that meant more than curiosity; somehow, it drew from him an answer.

"Mrs. Burrows was cremated on Wednesday. It seems she preferred it to burial." Having said this, he turned to stare from the window again.

Sarah Judd stood silent a moment. Then she said with a sigh of relief:

"It's a queer world, isn't it, Mr. Conant? And this death isn't altogether a calamity."

"Eh? Why not?" whirling round to face her.

"Because," said Sarah, "it will enable Mr. Hathaway to face the world again--a free man."

Peter Conant was so startled that he stood motionless, forgetting his locket but not forgetting to stare. Sarah, with her hands full of forks and spoons, began placing the silver in orderly array upon the table. She paid no heed to the lawyer, who gradually recovered his poise and watched her with newly awakened interest. Once or twice he opened his mouth to speak, and then decided not to. He was bewildered, perplexed, suspicious. In thought he began to review the manner of Sarah's coming to them, and her subsequent actions. She seemed a capable servant. Mrs. Conant had never complained of her. Yet--what did she know of Hathaway?

Mary Louise did not appear at dinner. She begged to be left alone in her room. Sarah took her some toast and tea, with honest sympathy in her eyes, but the sorrowing girl shook her head and would not taste the food. Later, however, in the evening, she entered the living room where the others sat in depressed silence and said:

"Please, Mr. Conant, tell me all you know about--mother."

"It is very little, my dear" replied the lawyer in a kindly tone. "This morning I received a message from your grandfather which said: 'Poor Beatrice passed away on Monday and at her request her body was cremated to-day. Be very gentle in breaking the sad news to Mary Louise.' That was all, my child, and I came here as quickly as I could. In a day or so we shall have further details, I feel sure. I am going back to town in the morning and will send you any information I receive."

"Thank you," said the girl, and was quietly leaving the room when Irene called to her.

"Mary Louise!"

"Yes?" half turning.

"Will you come with me to my room?"

"Now?"

"Yes. You know I cannot go up the stairs. And--I lost my own dear mother not long ago, you will remember."

Tears started to the girl's eyes, but she waited until Irene wheeled her chair beside her and then the two went through the den to Irene's room.

Mrs. Conant nodded to Peter approvingly.

"Irene will comfort her," she said, "and in a way far better than I might do. It is all very dreadful and very sad, Peter, but the poor child has never enjoyed much of her mother's society and when the first bitter grief is passed I think she will recover something of her usual cheerfulness."

"H-m," returned the lawyer; "it seems a hard thing to say, Hannah, but this demise may prove a blessing in disguise and be best for the child's future happiness. In any event, I'm sure it will relieve the strain many of us have been under for the past ten years."

"You talk in riddles, Peter."

"The whole thing is a riddle, Hannah. And, by the way, have you noticed anything suspicious about our hired girl?"

"About Sarah? No," regarding him with surprise.

"Does she--eh--snoop around much?"

"No; she's a very good girl."

"Too good to be true, perhaps," observed Peter, and lapsed into thought. Really, it wouldn't matter now how much Sarah Judd--or anyone else--knew of the Hathaway case. The mystery would solve itself, presently.