

## CHAPTER XXII - THE FOLKS AT BIGBEE'S

Mr. Conant decided to take the Friday morning train back to Dorfield, saying it would not be possible for him to remain at the Lodge over Sunday, because important business might require his presence in town.

"This demise of Mrs. Burrows," he said confidentially to his wife in the privacy of their room, "may have far-reaching results and turn the whole current of Colonel Weatherby's life."

"I don't see why," said Aunt Hannah.

"You're not expected to see why," he replied. "As the Colonel is my most important client, I must be at the office in case of developments or a sudden demand for my services. I will tell you one thing, however, and that is that this vacation at Hillcrest Lodge was planned by the Colonel while I was in New York, with the idea that he and Mrs. Burrows would come here secretly and enjoy a nice visit with Mary Louise."

"You planned all that, Peter!"

"Yes. That is, Weatherby planned it. He knows Will Morrison well, and Will was only too glad to assist him; so they wired me to come to New York, where all was quickly arranged. This place is so retired that we considered it quite safe for the fugitives to come here."

"Why didn't they come, then?"

"Two reasons prevented them. One was the sudden breaking of Mrs. Burrows' health; the other reason was the Colonel's discovery that in some way our carefully laid plans had become known to the detectives who are seeking him."

"Good gracious! Are you sure of that, Peter!"

"The Colonel seemed sure. He maintains a detective force on his own account and his spies discovered that Hillcrest is being watched by agents of the Secret Service."

"Dear me; what a maze of deceit!" wailed the good woman. "I wish you were well out of the whole affair, Peter; and I wish Mary Louise was out of it, too."

"So do I, with all my heart. But it's coming to a focus soon, Hannah. Be patient and it may end better than we now fear."

So Bub drove Mr. Conant to Millbank and then the boy took the car to the blacksmith shop to have a small part repaired. The blacksmith made a bungle of it and wasted all the forenoon before he finally took Bub's advice about shaping it and the new rod was attached and found to work successfully.

It was after one o'clock when the boy at last started for home and on the way was hailed by a stranger--a little man who was trudging along the road with both hands thrust in his pockets.

"Going far?" he asked.

"Up th' mount'n to Hillcrest," said Bub.

"Oh. May I have a lift?"

"How fer?"

"Well, I can't say how far I'll go. I'm undecided. Just came out here for a little fresh air, you know, with no definite plans," explained the stranger.

"Hop in," said Bub and for a time they rode together in silence.

"This 'ere's the Huddle, as we're comin' to," announced the boy. "Ol' Miss' Parsons she sometimes takes boarders."

"That's kind of her," remarked the stranger. "But the air isn't so good as further up the hill."

"Ef ye go up," said Bub with a grin, "guess ye'll hev to camp out an' eat scrub. Nobody don't take boarders, up th' mount'n."

"I suppose not."

He made no demand to be let out at the Huddle, so Bub drove on.

"By the way," said the little man, "isn't there a place called Bigbee's, near here?"

"Comin' to it pretty soon. They's some gals livin' there now, so ye won't care to stop."

"What sort of girls are they?"

"Sort o' queer."

"Yes?"

"Ye bet ye. Come from the city a while ago an' livin' by theyselves. Someth'n' wrong 'bout them gals," added Bub reflectively.

"In what way?" asked the little man in a tone of interest.

"They ain't here fer nuth'n' special 'cept watchin' the folks at Hillcrest. Them's the folks I belongs to. For four bits a week. They's someth'n' queer 'bout them, too; but I guess all the folks is queer thet comes here from the city."

"Quite likely," agreed the little man, nodding. "Let me out at Bigbee's, please, and I'll look over those women and form my own opinion of them. They may perhaps be friends of mine."

"In that case," asserted Bub, "I pity ye, stranger. F'r my part, I ain't got no use fer anything that wears skirts--'cept one er two, mebbe," he added reflectively. "Most men I kin git 'long with fust-rate; but ef a man ever gits in trouble, er begins cussin' an' acts ugly, it's 'cause some gal's rubbed him crossways the grain er stuck a knife in him an' twisted the blade--so's ter speak."

"You're an observant lad, I see."

"When I'm awake I kain't help seein' things."

"And you're a pastoral philosopher."

Bub scowled and gave him a surly glance.

"What's the use firin' that high-brow stuff at me?" he asked indignantly. "I s'pose ye think I'm a kid, jes' 'cause I don't do no fancy talkin'."

"I suspect you of nothing but generosity in giving me this ride," said the stranger pleasantly. "Is that Bigbee's, over yonder?"

"Yes."

The little man got out at the point where the Bigbee drive met the road, and walked up the drive toward the house. Agatha Lord was standing at the gateway, as he approached it, and seemed rather startled at his appearance. But she quickly controlled her surprise and asked in a calm voice, as she faced him:

"What's up, O'Gorman?"

"Hathaway's coming here," he said.

"Are you sure?"

"He's in Dorfield to-day, waiting to see Lawyer Conant, who went in on the morning train. Where's Nan?"

"Here, my lord!" said Nan Shelley, stepping from behind a tall shrub. "How are you, partner? I recognized you as you passed the Huddle with the boy."

"Field glasses, eh? There isn't much escapes you, Nan."

"Why didn't you tell me?" asked Agatha reproachfully.

"Why don't you make your own discoveries?" retorted her confederate. Then, turning to O'Gorman, she continued: "So Hathaway's coming, is he? At last."

"A little late, but according to program. How have you been getting along?"

"Bored to death," asserted Nan. "Agatha has played the lady and I've done the dirty work. But tell me, why didn't you nab Hathaway at Dorfield?"

O'Gorman smiled a little grimly as he answered:

"I'm not sure, Nan, that we shall nab Hathaway at all."

"Isn't he being shadowed?" with some surprise.

"No. But he'll come here, right enough; and then--"

"And then," she added, as he paused, "the chase of years will come to an end."

"Exactly. We may decide to take him to Washington, and we may not."

She gazed at him inquiringly.

"There are some new developments, then, O'Gorman?"

"I'm inclined to suspect there are."

"Known to the department?"

"Yes. I'm to investigate and use my judgment."

"I see. Then Agatha and I are out of it?"

"Not yet; I'm still depending on your shrewdness to assist me. The office has only had a hint, so far, of the prospective break in the case, but--"

"Oh, yes; I remember now," exclaimed Nan.

"That girl up at Conant's sent a telegram, in a desperate hurry. I suspected it meant something important. Who is she, O'Gorman, and why did the Chief cut under us by planting Sarah Judd in the Conants' household?"

"He didn't. The girl has nothing to do with the Department."

"Then some of you intercepted the telegram?"

"We know what it said," he admitted.

"Come, let's go to the house. I've had no lunch. Can you feed me?"

"Certainly." They turned and walked slowly up the path. Said Nan, musingly:

"That Sarah Judd is rather clever, O'Gorman. Is she in Hathaway's pay?"

"I think not," he replied, with an amused chuckle.

Nan tossed her head indignantly.

"Very well; play me for a ninny, if you like," she said resentfully. "You'll get a heap more out of me, in that way!"

"Now, now," said Agatha warningly, "keep your tempers and don't quarrel. You two are like cats and dogs when you get together; yet you're the two cleverest people in the service. According to your story, Mr. O'Gorman, there's an important crisis approaching, and we'd all like to be able to render a good account of ourselves."

Agatha Lord may have lacked something of Nan's experience, but this speech proved her a fair diplomat. It dispersed the gathering storm and during the rest of that afternoon the three counseled together in perfect harmony, O'Gorman confiding to his associates such information as would enable them to act with him intelligently. Hathaway and Peter Conant could not arrive till the next day at noon; they might even come by the afternoon train. Nan's field glasses would warn them of the arrival and meanwhile there was ample time to consider how they should act.