

CHAPTER XXIV - FACING THE TRUTH

Irene was a great comfort to Mary Louise in this hour of trial. The chair-girl, beneath her gayety of demeanor and lightness of speech, was deeply religious. Her absolute faith sounded so cheering that death was robbed of much of its horror and her bereaved friend found solace. Mary Louise was able to talk freely of "Mamma Bee" to Irene, while with Aunt Hannah she rather avoided reference to her mother.

"I've always longed to be more with Mamma Bee and to learn to know her better," she said to her friend; "for, though she was very loving and gentle to me while I was with her, she spent most of her life caring for Gran'pa Jim, and they were away from me so much that I really didn't get to know Mamma very well. I think she worried a good deal over Gran'pa's troubles. She couldn't help that, of course, but I always hoped that some day the troubles would be over and we could all live happily together. And now--that can never be!"

Irene, knowing more of the Hathaway family history than Mary Louise did, through the letter she had found and read, was often perplexed how to console her friend and still regard honesty and truth. Any deception, even when practiced through the best of motives, was abhorrent to her nature, so she avoided speaking of the present affliction and led Mary Louise to look to a future life for the motherly companionship she had missed on earth.

"That," said she, "is the thought that has always given me the most comfort. We are both orphans, dear, and I'm sure your nature is as brave as my own and that you can bear equally well the loss of your parents."

And Mary Louise was really brave and tried hard to bear her grief with patient resignation. One thing she presently decided in her mind, although she did not mention it to Irene. She must find Gran'pa Jim and go to him, wherever he might be. Gran'pa Jim and her mother had been inseparable companions; Mary Louise knew that her own present sorrow could be nothing when compared with that of her grandfather. And so it was her duty to find him and comfort him, to devote her whole life, as her mother had done, to caring for his wants and cheering his loneliness--so far, indeed, as she was able to do. Of course, no one could quite take the place of Mamma Bee.

She was thinking in this vein as she sat in the den with Irene that Saturday afternoon. The chair-girl, who sewed beautifully, was fixing over one of Mary Louise's black dresses while Mary Louise sat opposite, listlessly watching her. The door into the hall was closed, but the glass door to the rear porch was wide open to let in the sun and air. And this simple scene was the setting for the drama about to be enacted.

Mary Louise had her back half turned to the hall door, which Irene partially faced, and so it was that when the door opened softly and the chair-girl raised her

head to gaze with startled surprise at someone who stood in the doorway, Mary Louise first curiously eyed her friend's expressive face and then, rather languidly, turned her head to glance over her shoulder.

The next moment she sprang to her feet and rushed forward.

"Gran'pa Jim--Oh, Gran'pa Jim!" she cried, and threw herself into the arms of a tall man who folded her to his breast in a close embrace.

For a while they stood there silent, while Irene dropped her eyes to her lap, deeming the reunion too sacred to be observed by another. And then a little stir at the open porch door attracted her attention and with a shock of repulsion she saw Agatha Lord standing there with a cynical smile on her lovely face. Softly the sash of the window was raised, and the maid Susan stood on the ground outside, leaned her elbows on the sill and quietly regarded the scene within the den.

The opening of the window arrested Colonel Weatherby's attention. He lifted his head and with a quick glance took in the situation. Then, still holding his granddaughter in his arms, he advanced to the center of the room and said sternly, addressing Agatha:

"Is this a deliberate intrusion, because I am here, or is it pure insolence?"

"Forgive us if we intrude, Mr. Hathaway," replied Agatha. "It was not our desire to interrupt your meeting with your granddaughter, but--it has been so difficult, in the past, to secure an interview with you, sir, that we dared not risk missing you at this time."

He regarded her with an expression of astonishment.

"That's it, exactly, Mr. Weatherby-Hathaway," remarked Susan mockingly, from her window.

"Don't pay any attention to them, Gran'pa Jim," begged Mary Louise, clinging to him. "They're just two dreadful women who live down below here, and--and--"

"I realize who they are," said the old gentleman in a calm voice, and addressing Agatha again he continued: "Since you are determined to interview me, pray step inside and be seated."

Agatha shook her head with a smile; Nan Shelley laughed outright and retorted:

"Not yet, Hathaway. We can't afford to take chances with one who has dodged the whole Department for ten years."

"Then you are Government agents?" he asked.

"That's it, sir."

He turned his head toward the door by which he had entered, for there was an altercation going on in the hallway and Mr. Conant's voice could be heard angrily protesting.

A moment later the lawyer came in, followed by the little man with the fat nose, who bowed to Colonel Weatherby very respectfully yet remained planted in the doorway.

"This is--er--er--very unfortunate, sir; ve-ry un-for-tu-nate!" exclaimed Peter Conant, chopping off each word with a sort of snarl. "These con-found-ed secret service people have trailed us here."

"It doesn't matter, Mr. Conant," replied the Colonel, in a voice composed but very weary. He seated himself in a chair, as he spoke, and Mary Louise sat on the arm of it, still embracing him.

"No," said O'Gorman, "it really doesn't matter, sir. In fact, I'm sure you will feel relieved to have this affair off your mind and be spared all further annoyance concerning it."

The old gentleman looked at him steadily but made no answer. It was Peter Conant who faced the speaker and demanded:

"What do you mean by that statement?"

"Mr. Hathaway knows what I mean. He can, in a few words, explain why he has for years borne the accusation of a crime of which he is innocent."

Peter Conant was so astounded he could do nothing but stare at the detective. Staring was the very best thing that Peter did and he never stared harder in his life. The tears had been coursing down Mary Louise's cheeks, but now a glad look crossed her face.

"Do you hear that, Gran'pa Jim?" she cried. "Of course you are innocent! I've always known that; but now even your enemies do."

Mr. Hathaway looked long into the girl's eyes, which met his own hopefully, almost joyfully. Then he turned to O'Gorman.

"I cannot prove my innocence," he said.

"Do you mean that you WILL not?"

"I will go with you and stand my trial. I will accept whatever punishment the law decrees."

O'Gorman nodded his head.

"I know exactly how you feel about it, Mr. Hathaway," he said, "and I sympathize with you most earnestly. Will you allow me to sit down awhile? Thank you."

He took a chair facing that of the hunted man. Agatha, seeing this, seated herself on the door-step. Nan maintained her position, leaning through the open window.

"This," said O'Gorman, "is a strange case. It has always been a strange case, sir, from the very beginning. Important government secrets of the United States were stolen and turned over to the agent of a foreign government which is none too friendly to our own. It was considered, in its day, one of the most traitorous crimes in our history. And you, sir, a citizen of high standing and repute, were detected in the act of transferring many of these important papers to a spy, thus periling the safety of the nation. You were caught red-handed, so to speak, but made your escape and in a manner remarkable and even wonderful for its adroitness have for years evaded every effort on the part of our Secret Service Department to effect your capture. And yet, despite the absolute truth of this statement, you are innocent."

None cared to reply for a time. Some who had listened to O'Gorman were too startled to speak; others refrained. Mary Louise stared at the detective with almost Peter Conant's expression--her eyes big and round. Irene thrilled with joyous anticipation, for in the presence of this sorrowing, hunted, white-haired old man, whose years had been devoted to patient self-sacrifice, the humiliation the coming disclosure would, thrust upon Mary Louise seemed now insignificant. Until this moment Irene had been determined to suppress the knowledge gained through the old letter in order to protect the feelings of her friend, but now a crying need for the truth to prevail was borne in upon her. She had thought that she alone knew this truth. To her astonishment, as well as satisfaction, the chair-girl now discovered that O'Gorman was equally well informed.