

Mary Louise in the Country

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CHAPTER I THE ARRIVAL

"Is this the station, Gran'pa Jim?" inquired a young girl, as the train began to slow up.

"I think so, Mary Louise," replied the handsome old gentleman addressed.

"It does look very promising, does it?" she continued, glancing eagerly out of the window.

"The station? No, my dear; but the station isn't Cragg's Crossing, you know; it is merely the nearest railway point to our new home."

The conductor opened their drawing-room door.

"The next stop is Chargrove, Colonel," he said.

"Thank you."

The porter came for their hand baggage and a moment later the long train stopped and the vestibule steps were let down.

If you will refer to the time-table of the D. R. & G. Railway you will find that the station of Chargrove is marked with a character dagger ([Picture: Character dagger]), meaning that trains stop there only to let off passengers or, when properly signaled, to let them on. Mary Louise, during the journey, had noted this fact with misgivings that were by no means relieved when she stepped from the sumptuous train and found before her merely a shed-like structure, open on all sides, that served as station-house.

Colonel Hathaway and his granddaughter stood silently upon the platform of this shed, their luggage beside them, and watched their trunks tumbled out of the baggage car ahead and the train start, gather speed, and go rumbling on its way. Then the girl looked around her to discover that the primitive station was really the only barren spot in the landscape.

For this was no Western prairie country, but one of the oldest settled and most prosperous sections of a great state that had been one of the original thirteen to be represented by a star on our national banner. Chargrove might not be much of a railway station, as it was only eleven miles from a big city, but the country around it was exceedingly beautiful. Great oaks and maples stood here and there, some in groups and some in stately solitude; the land was well fenced and carefully cultivated; roads--smooth or rutty--led in every

direction; flocks and herds were abundant; half hidden by hills or splendid groves peeped the roofs of comfortable farmhouses that evidenced the general prosperity of the community.

"Uncle Eben is late, isn't he, Gran'pa Jim?" asked the girl, as her eyes wandered over the pretty, peaceful scene.

Colonel Hathaway consulted his watch.

"Our train was exactly on time," he remarked, "which is more than can be said for old Eben. But I think, Mary Louise, I now see an automobile coming along the road. If I am right, we have not long to wait."

He proved to be right, for presently a small touring car came bumping across the tracks and halted at the end of the platform on which they stood. It was driven by an old colored man whose hair was snow white but who sprang from his seat with the agility of a boy when Mary Louise rushed forward with words of greeting.

"My, Uncle Ebe, but it's good to see you again!" she exclaimed, taking both his dusky hands in her own and shaking them cordially. "How is Aunt Polly, and how is your 'rheum'tics'?"

"Rheum'tics done gone foh good, Ma'y Weeze," he said, his round face all smiles. "Dis shuah am one prosterous country foh health. Nobuddy sick but de invahlids, an' dey jus' 'magines dey's sick, dat's all."

"Glad to see you, Uncle," said the Colonel. "A little late, eh?--as usual. But perhaps you had a tire change."

"No, seh, Kun'l, no tire change. I was jus' tryin' to hurry 'long dat lazy Joe Brennan, who's done comin' foh de trunks. Niggehs is slow, Kun'l, dey ain't no argyment 'bout dat, but when a white man's a reg'leh loaf eh, seh, dey ain' no niggeh kin keep behind him."

"Joe Brennan is coming, then?"

"Dat's right, Kun'l; he's comin'. Done start befoh daylight, in de lumbeh-wagin. But when I done ketch up wi' dat Joe--a mile 'n' a half away--he won't lis'n to no reason. So I dodged on ahead to tell you-uns dat Joe's on de way."

"How far is it from here to Cragg's Crossing, then?" inquired Mary Louise.

"They call it ten miles," replied her grandfather, "but I imagine it's nearer twelve."

"And this is the nearest railway station?"

"Yes, the nearest. But usually the Crossing folks who own motor cars drive to the city to take the trains. We alighted here because in our own case it was more convenient and pleasant than running into the city and out again, and it will save us time."

"We be home in half'n hour, mos' likely," added Uncle Eben, as he placed the suit cases and satchels in the car. Colonel Hathaway and Mary Louise followed and took their seats.

"Is it safe to leave our trunks here?" asked the girl.

"Undoubtedly," replied her grandfather. "Joe Brennan will doubtless arrive before long and, really, there is no person around to steal them."

"I've an idea I shall like this part of the country," said Mary Louise musingly, as they drove away.

"I am confident you will, my dear."

"Is Cragg's Crossing as beautiful as this?"

"I think it more beautiful."

"And how did you happen to find it, Gran'pa Jim? It seems as isolated as can be."

"A friend and I were taking a motor trip and lost our way. A farmer told us that if we went to Cragg's Crossing we would find a good road to our destination. We went there, following the man's directions, and encountered beastly roads but found a perfect gem of a tiny, antiquated town which seems to have been forgotten or overlooked by map-makers, automobile guides and tourists. My friend had difficulty in getting me away from the town, I was so charmed with it. Before I left I had discovered, by dint of patient inquiry, a furnished house to let, and you know, of course, that I promptly secured the place for the summer. That's the whole story, Mary Louise."

"It is interesting," she remarked. "As a result of your famous discovery you sent down Uncle Eben and Aunt Polly, with our car and a lot of truck you

thought we might need, and now--when all is ready--you and I have come to take possession."

"Rather neatly arranged, I think," declared the Colonel, with satisfaction.

"Do you know anything about the history of the place, Gran'pa, or of the people who live in your tiny, forgotten town?"

"Nothing whatever. I imagine there are folks Cragg's Crossing who have never been a dozen miles away from it since they were born. The village boasts a 'hotel'--the funniest little inn you can imagine--where we had an excellent home-cooked meal; and there is one store and a blacksmith's shop, one church and one schoolhouse. These, with half a dozen ancient and curiously assorted residences, constitute the shy and retiring town of Cragg's Crossing. Ah, think we have found Joe Brennan."

Uncle Eben drew up beside a rickety wagon drawn by two sorry nags who just now were engaged in cropping grass from the roadside. On the seat half reclined a young man who was industriously eating an apple. He wore a blue checked shirt open at the throat, overalls, suspenders and a straw hat that had weathered many seasons of sunshine and rain. His feet were encased in heavy boots and his bronzed face betokened an out-of-door life. There are a million countrymen in the United States just like Joe Brennan in outward appearance.

Joe did not stop munching; he merely stared as the automobile stopped beside him.

"Say, you Joe!" shouted Uncle Eben indignantly, "wha' foh yo' done sett'n' heah?"

"Rest'n'," said Joe Brennan, taking another bite from his apple.

"Ain't yo' gwine git dem trunks home to-day?" demanded the old darkey.

Joe seemed to consider this question carefully before he ventured to commit himself. Then he looked at Colonel Hathaway and said:

"What I want t' know, Boss, is whether I'm hired by the hour, er by the day?"

"Didn't Uncle Eben tell you?"

"Naw, he didn't. He jes' said t' go git the trunks an' he'd gimme a dollar fer the trip."

"Well, that seems to settle the question, doesn't it!"

"Not quite, Boss. I be'n thinkin' it over, on the way, an' a dollar's too pesky cheap fer this trip. Sometimes I gits twenty-five cents a hour fer haulin' things, an' this looks to me like a day's work."

"If you made good time," said Colonel Hathaway, "you might do it easily in four hours."

Joe shook his head.

"Not me, sir," he replied. "I hain't got the constitution fer it. An' them hosses won't trot 'less I lick 'em, an' ef I lick 'em I'm guilty o' cru'lty ter animals-- includin' myself. No, Boss, the job's too cheap, so I guess I'll give it up an' go home."

"But you're nearly at the station now," protested the Colonel.

"I know; but it's half a mile fu'ther an' the hosses is tired. I guess I'll go home."

"Oh, Gran'pa!" whispered Mary Louise, "it'll never do to leave our trunks lying there by the railroad tracks."

The Colonel eyed Joe thoughtfully.

"If you were hired by the day," said he, "I suppose you would do a day's work?"

"I'd hev to," admitted Joe. "That's why I 'asked ye how about it. Jes' now it looks to me like I ain't hired at all. The black man said he'd gimme a dollar fer the trunks, that's all."

"How much do you charge a day?" asked the Colonel.

"Dollar 'n' a quarter's my reg'lar price, an' I won't take no less," asserted Joe.

Mary Louise nearly laughed outright, but the Colonel frowned and said:

"Joe Brennan, you've got me at your mercy. I'm going to hire you by the day, at a dollar and a quarter, and as your time now belongs to me I request you to go at once for those trunks. You will find them just beyond the station."

The man's face brightened. He tossed away the core of his apple and jerked the reins to make the horses hold up their heads.

"A bargain's a bargain, Boss," he remarked cheerfully, "so I'll get them air trunks to yer house if it takes till midnight."

"Very good," said the Colonel. "Drive on, Uncle."

The old servant started the motor.

"Dat's what I calls downright robbery, Kun'l," he exclaimed, highly incensed. "Didn't I ask de stoahkeepeh what to pay Joe Brennen foh bringin' oveh dem trunks, an' didn't he say a dolleh is big pay foh such-like a trip? If we's gwine live in dis town, where day don' un'stand city prices an' de high cost o' livin' yit, we gotta hol' 'em down an' keep 'em from speckilatin' with us, or else we'll spile 'em fer de time when we's gone away."

"Very true, Uncle. Has Joe a competitor?"

Uncle Eben reflected.

"Ef he has, Kun'l, I ain't seen it," he presently replied; "but I guess all he's got is dat lumbeh-wagin."

Mary Louise had enjoyed the controversy immensely and was relieved by the promise of the trunks by midnight. For the first time in her life the young orphaned girl was to play housekeeper for her grandfather and surely one of her duties was to see that the baggage was safely deposited in their new home.

This unknown home in an unknown town had an intense fascination for her just now. Her grandfather had been rather reticent in his description of the house he had rented at Cragg's Crossing, merely asserting it was a "pretty place" and ought to make them a comfortable home for the summer. Nor had the girl questioned him very closely, for she loved to "discover things" and be surprised--whether pleasurably or not did not greatly interfere with the thrill.

The motor took them speedily along a winding way to Cragg's Crossing, a toy town that caused Mary Louise to draw a long breath of delight at first sight. The "crossing" of two country roads had probably resulted, at some far-back period, in farmers' building their residences on the four corners, so as to be neighborly. Farm hands or others built little dwellings adjoining--not many of them, though--and some unambitious or misdirected merchant erected a big frame "store" and sold groceries, dry goods and other necessities of life not only to the community at the Crossing but to neighboring farmers. Then someone started the little "hotel," mainly to feed the farmers who came to the store to trade or the "drummers" who visited it to sell goods. A church and a schoolhouse naturally followed, in course of time, and then, as if its destiny were fulfilled, the sleepy little town--ten miles from the nearest railway--

gradually settled into the comatose state in which Colonel Hathaway and his granddaughter now found it.