

CHAPTER II THE KENTON PLACE

The tiny town, however, was not all that belonged to the Cragg's Crossing settlement. Barely a quarter of a mile away from the village a stream with beautifully wooded banks ran diagonally through the countryside. It was called a "river" by the natives, but it was more of a creek; halfway between a small rivulet and a brook, perhaps. But its banks afforded desirable places for summer residences, several of which had been built by well-to-do families, either retired farmers or city people who wished for a cool and quiet place in which to pass the summer months.

These residences, all having ample grounds and facing the creek on either side, were sufficiently scattered to be secluded, and it was to one of the most imposing of these that Uncle Eben guided the automobile. He crossed the creek on a primitive but substantial bridge, turned to the right, and the first driveway led to the house that was to be Mary Louise's temporary home.

"This is lovely!" exclaimed the girl, as they rolled up a winding drive edged by trees and shrubbery, and finally drew up before the entrance of a low and rambling but quite modern house. There was Aunt Polly, her round black face all smiles, standing on the veranda to greet them, and Mary Louise sprang from the car first to hug the old servant--Uncle Eben's spouse--and then to run in to investigate the establishment, which seemed much finer than she had dared to imagine it.

The main building was of two stories, but the wings, several of which jutted out in various directions, were one story in height, somewhat on the bungalow plan. There was a good-sized stable in connection--now used as a garage--and down among the oaks toward the river an open pavilion had been built. All the open spaces were filled with flowers and ferns, in beds and borders, and graveled paths led here and there in a very enticing way. But the house was now the chief fascination and the other details Mary Louise gleaned by sundry glances from open windows as she rambled from room to room.

At luncheon, which Aunt Polly served as soon as her young mistress could be coaxed from her tour of inspection, the girl said:

"Gran'pa Jim, who owns this place?"

"A Mrs. Joselyn," he replied.

"A young woman?"

"I believe so. It was built by her mother, a Mrs. Kenton, some fifteen years ago, and is still called 'the Kenton Place.' Mrs. Kenton died and her daughter, who married a city man named Joselyn, has used it as a summer home until this year. I think Mrs. Joselyn is a woman of considerable means."

"The furnishings prove that," said Mary Louise. "They're not all in the best of taste, but they are plentiful and meant to be luxurious. Why doesn't Mrs. Joselyn occupy her home this summer? And why, if she is wealthy, does she rent the place?"

"Those are problems I am unable to solve, my dear," replied the Colonel with a smile. "When old man Cragg, who is the nearest approach to a real estate agent in the village, told me the place was for rent, I inquired the price and contracted to lease it for the summer. That satisfied me, Mary Louise, but if you wish to inquire into the history and antecedents of the Kenton and Joselyn families, I have no doubt there are plenty of village gossips who can fill your ears full of it."

"Dar's one thing I foun' out, seh," remarked Uncle Eben, who always served at table and was not too diffident to join in the conversation of his betters, at times; "dis Joselyn man done dis'pear--er run away-- er dig out, somehow--an' he missus is mos' plumb crazy 'bout it."

"When did that happen?" asked Mary Louise.

"'Bout Chris'mas time, de stoahkeepah say. Nobody don't like him down heah, 'cause he put on a 'stord'nary 'mount o' airs an' didn't mix wid de town people, nohow. De stoahkeepah t'inks Marse Joselyn am crooked-like an' done squandeh a lot o' he wife's money befoh he went."

"Perhaps," said Mary Louise musingly, "that is why the poor woman is glad to rent this house. I wish, however, we had gotten it for a more pleasant reason."

"Don't pay attention to Eben's chatter, my dear," advised her grandfather. "His authority seems to be the ancient storekeeper, whom I saw but once and didn't fancy. He looks like an old owl, in those big, horn-rimmed spectacles."

"Dat stoahkeepah ain' no owl, Kun'l," asserted Uncle Eben earnestly. "He done know all dey is to know 'roun' dese diggin's, an' a lot moah, too. An' a owl is a mighty wise bird, Kun'l, ef I do say it, an' no disrespec'; so what dat stoahkeepah say I's boun' to take notice of."

Mary Louise spent the afternoon in examining her new possession and "getting settled." For--wonder of wonders!--Joe Brennan arrived with the trunks at three o'clock, some nine hours before the limit of midnight. The Colonel, as he paid the man, congratulated him on making such good time.

"Ya-as," drawled Joe; "I done pretty well, considerin'. But if I hadn't hired out by the day I'd sure be'n a loser. I've be'n a good ten hours goin' fer them trunks, fer I started at five this mornin'; so, if I'd taken a dollar fer the job, I'd only made ten cents a hour, my price bein' twenty-five. But, as it is," he added with pride, "I git my reg'lar rate of a dollar 'n' a quarter a day."

"Proving that it pays to drive a bargain," commented the Colonel.

Mary Louise unpacked Gran'pa Jim's trunk first and put his room in "apple-pie order," as Aunt Polly admiringly asserted. Then she settled her own pretty room, held a conference with her servants about the meals and supplies, and found it was then time to dress for dinner. She was not yet old enough to find household duties a bore, so the afternoon had been delightfully spent.

Early after breakfast the next morning, however, Mary Louise started out to explore the grounds of her domain. The day was full of sunshine and the air laden with fragrance of flowers--a typical May morning. Gran'pa Jim would, of course, read for an hour or two and smoke his pipe; he drew a chair upon the broad veranda for this very purpose; but the girl had the true pioneer spirit of discovery and wanted to know exactly what her five acres contained.

The water was doubtless the prime attraction in such a neighborhood. Mary Louise made straight for the river bank and found the shallow stream--here scarce fifty feet in width--rippling along over its stony bed, which was a full fifty feet wider than the volume of water then required. When the spring freshets were on perhaps the stream reached its banks, but in the summer months it was usually subdued as now. The banks were four feet or more above the rabble of stones below, and close to the bank, facing the river on her side, Mrs. Kenton had built a pretty pavilion with ample seats and room for half a dozen wicker chairs and a table, where one could sit and overlook the water. Mary Louise fervently blessed the old lady for this idea and at once seated herself in the pavilion while she examined at leisure the scene spread out before her.

Trees hid all the neighboring residences but one. Just across the river and not far from its bank stood a small, weather-beaten cottage that was in sharp contrast with the rather imposing Kenton residence opposite. It was not well

kept, nor even picturesque. The grounds were unattractive. A woodpile stood in the front yard; the steps leading to the little porch had rotted away and had been replaced by a plank-- rather unsafe unless one climbed it carefully, Mary Louise thought. There were time-worn shades to the windows, but no curtains. A pane of glass had been broken in the dormer window and replaced by a folded newspaper tacked over it. Beside the porch door stood a washtub on edge; a few scraggly looking chickens wandered through the yard; if not an abode of poverty it was surely a place where careless indifference to either beauty or the comfort of orderly living prevailed.

So much Mary Louise had observed, wondering why Mrs. Kenton had not bought the cottage and torn it down, since it was a blot on the surrounding landscape, when she saw the door open and a man come out. She gave a little gasp of astonishment as her eyes followed this man, who slowly took the path to the bridge, from whence the road led into the village.