

CHAPTER IV GETTING ACQUAINTED

The two girls had been sitting on the edge of the bridge, but Mary Louise now rose and took Ingua's arm in her own, leading the reluctant child gently toward the path. It wasn't far to the old cottage and when they reached the yard Ingua laughed again at the scene of disorder.

"It's a'most a pity Gran'dad can't see it," she chuckled. "He'd be so crazy he'd hev them claws o' his'n 'round my throat in a jiffy."

Mary Louise drew back, startled.

"Did he ever do that?" she asked.

"Only once; but that time near ended me. It were a long time ago, an' he was sorry, I guess, 'cause he bought me a new dress nex' day--an' new shoes! I ain't had any since," she added disconsolately, "so the other day I asked him wasn't it about time he choked me ag'in."

"What did he say to that?"

"Jes' growled at me. Gran'dad's got a awful temper when he's good an' riled, but usual' he's still as a mouse. Don't say a word to me fer days together, sometimes. Once I saw him--"

She suddenly checked herself and cast an uneasy, sidelong glance at her companion. Mary Louise was rolling the washtub back to the stoop.

"The only thing that will bother us, Ingua," she said, "is those dishes. Let us try to count the broken ones. Do you know how many there were?"

"Sure I do," answered the girl, removing the battered dishpan from the heap of crockery. "Two plates, two cups-'n'-saucers, a oatmeal dish, a bread plate an' the pork platter. Gee! what a smash. One cup's whole-- an' the oatmeal dish. The rest is gone-up."

"I'm going to dig a hole and bury the broken pieces," said Mary Louise. "Have you a spade?"

"There's an ol' shovel. But it won't do no good to bury of 'em. Gran'dad he counts ev'ry piece ev'ry day. He counts ev'ry thing, from the grains of salt to the chickens. Say, once I tried to play a trick on him. I'd got so hungry fer

meat I jes' couldn't stand it, so one day I killed a chick'n, thinkin' he wouldn't miss it. My--my! Wha' d'ye s'pose? Say, ye never told me yer name yit."

"I am Mary Louise Burrows."

"Highflyin' name, ain't it? Well, I killed thet chick'n, an' cut it up an' fried it, an' et jes' a leg an' a wing, an' hid the rest under my bed in the peak up there, where Ol' Swallertail never goes. All the feathers an' the head I buried, an' I cleaned up the hatchet an' the fry-in'-pan so's there wasn't a smitch of anything left to prove I'd murdered one o' them chicks. I was feelin' kinder chirky when Gran'dad come home, 'cause I thought he'd never find out. But what did the ol' vill'n do but begin to sniff aroun'; an' he sniffed an' he sniffed till he says: 'Ingua, what chick'n did ye kill, an' why did ye kill it?'

"'Yer crazy,' says I. 'What're ye talkin' 'bout?'

"Then he gives me one sour look an' marches out to count the chick'ns, an' when he comes back he says: 'It's the brown pullet with white on the wings. It were worth forty cents, an' forty cents'll buy ten pounds o' oatmeal. Where's the chick'n, girl?' 'Et up,' says I. 'Yer lyin',' says he. 'Go git it! Hustle!'

"Well, I saw his claws beginnin' to work an' it scared me stiff. So I goes to my room an' brings down the chick'n, an' he eyes it quiet-like fer a long time an' then eats some fer his supper. The rest he locks up in the cupboard that he allus carries the key to. Say, Mary Louise, I never got another taste o' that chick'n as long as it lasted! Ol' Swallertail et it all himself, an' took a week to do it."

During this recital the broom and mop and scrubbing-brush had been picked up and restored to their proper places. Then the two girls got out the old shovel and buried the broken dishes in a far corner of the yard, among high weeds. Mary Louise tried to get the dents out of the old dishpan, but succeeded only indifferently. It was so battered through long use, however, that Ingua thought the "jams" would not be noticed.

"Next," said Mary Louise, "we must replace the broken pieces. I suppose they sell dishes at the village store, do they not?"

"That's where these come from--long ago," replied Ingua; "but dishes cost money."

"I've a little money in my purse; enough for that, I'm sure. Will you go to town with me?"

Ingua stared at her as if bewildered. The proposition was wholly beyond her understanding. But she replied to her new friend's question, saying slowly:

"No; I won't go. Ol' Swallertail'd skin me alive if he caught me in the village."

"Then I'll go alone; and I'll soon be back, though I must run over to my own house first, to get my purse and my hat. Let me have one of the cups for a sample, Ingua."

She left the child sitting on the plank runway and looking rather solemn and thoughtful. Mary Louise was somewhat fearful that she might run away in her absence, so she hurried home and from there walked into the village, a tramp easily accomplished in ten minutes.

The store was the biggest building in town, but not very big at that. It was "clapboarded" and two stories in height, the upper floor being used by Sol Jerrems, the storekeeper, as a residence, except for two little front rooms which he rented, one to Miss Huckins, the dressmaker and milliner, who slept and ate in her shop, and the other to Mr. Cragg. A high platform had been built in front of the store, for the convenience of farmer customers in muddy weather, and there were steps at either end of the platform for the use of pedestrians.

When Mary Louise entered the store, which was cluttered with all sorts of goods, not arranged in very orderly manner, there were several farmers present. But old Sol had his eye on her in an instant and shuffled forward to wait upon her.

"I want some crockery, please," she said.

He looked at the sample cup and led her to a corner of the room where a jumble of dishes crowded a single shelf.

"I take it you're one o' them new folks at the Kenton Place," he remarked.

"Yes," said she.

"Thought ther' was plenty o' dishes in that place," continued Mr. Jerrems, in a friendly tone. "But p'r'aps ye don't want the black folks t' eat off'n the same things ye do yerselves."

Mary Louise ignored this speech and selected the dishes she wanted. She had measured the broken platter and found another of the same size. Old Sol wouldn't sell a saucer without a cup, explaining that the two always went

together: "the cup to hold the stuff an' the saucer to drink it out'n." Without argument, however, the girl purchased what she wanted. It was heavy, cheap ware of the commonest kind, but she dared not substitute anything better for it.

Then she went to the grocery counter and after considering what Ingua might safely hide and eat in secret she bought a tin of cooked corned beef, another of chipped beef, one of deviled ham and three tins of sardines. Also she bought a basket to carry her purchases in and although old Sol constantly sought to "pump" her concerning her past life, present history and future prospects, she managed to evade successfully his thirst for information. No doubt the fellow was a great gossip, as old Eben had declared, but Mary Louise knew better than to cater to this dangerous talent.

The proprietor accompanied her to the door and she drew back, hesitating, as she observed an old man in a bottle-blue swallowtail coat pace in deliberate, dignified manner along the opposite side of the street.

"Who is that?" she asked, as an excuse for not going out until Ingua's grandfather had passed from sight.

"That? Why, that's Ol' Swallertail, otherwise Hezekiah Cragg, one o' our most interestin' citizens," replied Sol, glad of the chance to talk.

"Does he own Cragg's Crossing?" asked Mary Louise.

"Mercy, no! He owned a lot of it once, though, but that were afore my time. Sold it out an' squandered the money, I guess, for he lives like a rat in a hole. Mebbe, though, he's got some hid away; that's what some o' the folks here whispers--folks that's likely to know. But, if that's a fact, he's got a streak o' miser in him, for he don't spend more'n the law allows."

"He may have lost the money in speculations," suggested the girl.

"Say, ye've hit the nail square on the head!" he exclaimed admiringly. "Them's my own opinions to a T. I've told the boys so a hunderd times, but they can't git it. Wasn't Ol' Swal-lertail hand-in-glove wi' that slick Mister Joselyn, who they say has run away an' left his pore wife in the lurch? That's how you got a chance to rent the Kenton house. Joselyn were slick as butter, an' high-strung. Wouldn't hobnob with any o' us but Ol' Swallertail, an' that's why I think Cragg was investin' money with him. Joselyn he came down here three year ago, havin' married Annabel Kenton in the winter, an' the way he swelled aroun' were a caution to snakes. But the pore devil run his rope an' lit out.

Where he skipped to, I dunno. Nobuddy seems to know, not even his wife. But they say she didn't hev enough money left to count, an' by the glum looks o' Ol' Swallertail I'm guessin' he got nipped too."

"How long ago was that?" asked Mary Louise.

"Some time 'bout last Christmas, they say. Anyhow, that's when his wife missed him an' set up a hunt that didn't do no good. She came down here with red eyes an' tramped 'round in the deep snow askin' questions. But, sakes, Ned Joselyn wouldn't 'a' come to an out-o'-the-way place like this; we didn't never suit his style, ye see; so poor Ann Kenton-- whose misfortun' made her Mrs. Ned Joselyn--cried an' wailed fer a day er two an' then crep' back to the city like a whipped dog. Funny how women'll care fer a wuthless, ne'er-do-well chap that happens to be good-lookin', ain't it?"

Mary Louise nodded rather absently. However distorted the story might be, it was curious what had become of Mr. Joselyn. But her thoughts reverted to another theme and she asked:

"Hasn't Mr. Cragg a granddaughter?"

"Oh, ye've seen little Ingua Scammel, hev ye? Or mebbe just heard tell of her. She's the cussedest little coal o' fire in seven counties! Keeps Ol' Swallertail guessin' all the time, they say, jes' like her mom, Nan Cragg, did afore her. Gosh, what a woman her mom were! She didn't stay 'round here much, but whenever she run out o' cash an' didn't hev a square meal comin' to her, she camped on Ol' Swallertail an' made him board her. Las' time she come she left her young-un-- that's Ingua, ye know--an' the kid's been here ever since; sort of a thorn in the side of ol' Hezekiah, we folks think, though he don't never complain. She ain't more'n twelve or thirteen year old, thet Ingua, but she keeps house fer her gran'dad--what they is to keep, which ain't much. I won't let the kid 'round my store, nohow, 'cause she swipes ev'rything, from dried apples to peanuts, thet she kin lay her hands on."

"Perhaps she is hungry," said Mary Louise, defending her new friend.

"Like enough. But I ain't feedin' starvin' kids, 'Tain't my business. If Ol' Swallertail don't feed her enough, thet's his lookout. I've warned him if she sets foot in this store I'll charge him ten cents, jes' fer safety, so he keeps her out. He's slick, Ol' Swallertail is, an' silent-like an' secret in all he does an' says; but he's got to git up earlier in the mornin' to git the best o' Sol Jerrems, he er his kid, either one."

As Mr. Cragg had now vanished from sight up the street, Mary Louise ventured out and after a brisk walk deposited her basket on the stoop of the Cragg cottage, where Ingua still sat, swinging her feet pensively, as if she had not stirred since Mary Louise had left her.