

CHAPTER V MARY LOUISE BECOMES A PEACEMAKER

"Here are the dishes, exactly like the broken ones," reported Mary Louise in a jubilant tone as she set down her heavy basket. "Let us go in and wash them, Ingua, and put them away where they belong."

The child followed her into the house. All her former pent-up energy seemed to have evaporated. She moved in a dull sort of way that betokened grim resignation.

"I've be'n plannin' fer months to make a run fer it," she remarked as she washed the new dishes and Mary Louise wiped them dry, "an' just when I'd mustered up courage to do the trick, along comes you an' queered the whole game."

"You'll thank me for that, some day, Ingua. Aren't you glad, even now, that you have a home and shelter?"

"I ain't tickled to death about it. Home!" with a scornful glance around the room, barren of all comforts. "A graveyard's a more cheerful place, to my notion."

"We must try to make it pleasanter, dear. I'm going to get acquainted with Mr. Cragg and coax him to brighten things up some, and buy you some new clothes, and take better care of you."

Ingua fell back on a stool, fairly choking twixt amazement and derision.

"You! Coax Ol' Swallertail? Make him spend money on me! Say, if ye wasn't a stranger here, Mary Louise, I'd jes' laugh; but bein' as how yer a poor innercent, I'll only say ther' ain't no power on earth kin coax Gran'dad to do anything better than to scowl an' box my ears. You don't know him, but I do."

"Meantime," said Mary Louise, refusing to argue the point, "here are some little things for you to hide away, and to eat whenever you please," and she took from the basket the canned goods she had bought and set them in an enticing row upon the table.

Ingua stared at the groceries and then stared at Mary Louise. Her wan face flushed and then grew hard.

"Ye bought them fer me?" she asked.

"Yes; so you won't have to steal eggs to satisfy your natural hunger."

"Well, ye kin take the truck away ag'in. An' you'd better go with it," said the girl indignantly. "We may be poor, but we ain't no beggars, an' we don't take charity from nobody."

"But your grandfather--"

"We'll pay our own bills an' buy our own fodder. The Craggs is jus' as good as yer folks, an' I'm a Cragg to the backbone," she cried, her eyes glinting angrily. "If we want to starve, it's none o' yer business, ner nobody else's," and springing up she seized the tins one by one and sent them flying through the window, as she had sent the dishpan and dishes earlier in the morning. "Now, then, foller yer charity an' make yerself scarce!" and she stamped her foot defiantly at Mary Louise, who was dumb with astonishment.

It was hard to understand this queer girl. She had made no objection to replacing the broken dishes, yet a present of food aroused her to violent anger. Her temper was positively something terrible in so small a person and remembering her story of how Old Swallowtail had clenched his talon-like fingers and twisted Ingua's arm till she screamed with pain, Mary Louise could well believe the statement that the child was "a Cragg to the backbone."

But Mary Louise, although only a few years older than Ingua, had had a good deal more experience and was, moreover, a born diplomat. Astonished though she was, she quickly comprehended the peculiar pride exhibited in a refusal to accept food from a stranger and knew she must soothe the girl's outraged spirit of independence if they were to remain friends.

"I guess I'll have to beg your pardon, Ingua," she said quietly. "I was grieved that you are so often hungry, while I have so much more than I need, and the money which I spent was all my own, to do what I liked with. If I were in your place, and you in mine, and we were good chums, as I know we're going to be, I'd be glad to have you help me in any little way you could. True friends, Ingua, share and share alike and don't let any foolish pride come between them."

She spoke earnestly, with a ring of sincerity in her voice that impressed the other girl. Ingua's anger had melted as quickly as it had roused and with sudden impulsiveness she seized Mary Louise's hands in her own and began to cry.

"I'm as wicked as they make 'em!" she wailed. "I know I am! But I can't help it, Mary Louise; it's borned in me. I want to be friends with ye, but I won't take your charity if I starve. Not now, anyhow. Here; I'll go git the stuff an' put it back in yer basket, an' then ye kin lug it home an' do what ye please with it."

They picked up the cans together, Ingua growing more calm and cheerful each moment. She even laughed at Mary Louise's disappointed expression and said:

"I don't always hev tantrums. This is my bad day; but the devils'll work out o' me by termorrer and I'll be sweet as sugar. I'm sorry; but it's the Cragg blood that sets me crazy, at times."

"Won't you run over and see me?" asked Mary Louise, preparing to go home.

"When?"

"This afternoon."

Ingua shook her head.

"I dastn't," she said. "I gotta hold myself in, the rest o' the day, so's I won't fight with Ol' Swallertail when he comes home. Anyhow, I ain't fit t' show up aroun' yer swell place. That black coon o' yers'd turn me out, if he saw me comin', thinkin' I was a tramp."

Mary Louise had a bright idea.

"I'm going to have tea to-morrow afternoon in that summer-house across the creek," said she. "I will be all alone and if you will come over and join me we'll have a nice visit together. Will you, Ingua?"

"I guess so," was the careless answer. "When ye're ready, jes' wave yer han'ker'cher an' if the devils ain't squeezin' my gizzard, like they is to-day, I'll be there in a jiffy."