

CHAPTER VI AFTERNOON TEA

Mary Louise, who possessed a strong sense of humor, that evening at dinner told Gran'pa Jim of her encounter with old Mr. Cragg's granddaughter and related their interview in so whimsical a manner that Colonel Hathaway laughed aloud more than once. But he also looked serious, at times, and when the recital was ended he gravely considered the situation and said:

"I believe, my dear, you have discovered a mine of human interest here that will keep you occupied all summer. It was most fortunate for the poor child that you interpreted her intent to run away from home and foiled it so cleverly. From the little girl's report, that grim and dignified grandsire of hers has another and less admirable side to his character and, unless she grossly exaggerates, has a temper so violent that he may do her a mischief some day."

"I'm afraid of that, too," declared Mary Louise, "especially as the child is so provoking. Yet I'm sure Ingua has a sweeter side to her nature, if it can be developed, and perhaps old Cragg has, too. Do you think, Gran'pa Jim, it would be advisable for me to plead with him to treat his orphaned grandchild more considerately?"

"Not at present, my dear. I'll make some inquiries concerning Cragg and when we know more about him we can better judge how best to help Ingua. Are you sure that is her name?"

"Yes; isn't it an odd name?"

"Somewhere," said the Colonel, musingly, "I have heard it before, but just now I cannot recollect where. It seems to me, however, that it was a man's name. Do you think the child's mother is dead?"

"I gathered from what Ingua and the storekeeper said that she has simply disappeared."

"An erratic sort of creature, from the vague reports you have heard," commented Gran'pa Jim. "But, whatever her antecedents may have been, there is no reason why Ingua may not be rescued from her dreadful environments and be made to become a quite proper young lady, if not a model one. But that can only result from changing the existing character of her environment, rather than taking her out of them."

"That will be a big task, Gran'pa Jim, and it may prove beyond me, but I'll do the best I can."

He smiled.

"These little attempts to help our fellows," said the Colonel, "not only afford us pleasure but render us stronger and braver in facing our own tribulations, which none, however securely placed, seem able to evade."

Mary Louise gave him a quick, sympathetic glance. He had surely been brave and strong during his own period of tribulation and the girl felt she could rely on his aid in whatever sensible philanthropy she might undertake. She was glad, indeed, to have discovered poor Ingua, for she was too active and of too nervous a temperament to be content simply to "rest" all summer. Rest was good for Gran'pa Jim, just now, but rest pure and simple, with no compensating interest, would soon drive Mary Louise frantic.

She conferred with Aunt Polly the next day and told the faithful black servant something of her plans. So, when the old cook lugged a huge basket to the pavilion for her in the afternoon, and set a small table with snowy linen and bright silver, with an alcohol arrangement for making tea, she said with an air of mystery:

"Don' yo' go open dat bastik, Ma'y 'Weeze, till de time comes fer eatin'. I jes' wants to s'prise yo'--yo' an' dat li'l' pooah girl what gits hungry so much."

So, when Aunt Polly had gone back to the house, Mary Louise arranged her table and then stood up and waved a handkerchief to signal that all was ready.

Soon Ingua appeared in her doorway, hesitated a moment, and then ran down the plank and advanced to the river bank instead of following the path to the bridge. Almost opposite the pavilion Mary Louise noticed that several stones protruded from the surface of the water. They were not in a line, but placed irregularly. However, Ingua knew their lie perfectly and was able to step from one to another until she had quickly passed the water. Then she ran up the dry bed of the river to the bank, where steps led to the top.

"Why, this is fine!" exclaimed Mary Louise, meeting her little friend at the steps. "I'd no idea one could cross the river in that way."

"Oh, we've known 'bout that always," was the reply. "Ned Joselyn used to come to our house ever so many times by the river stones, to talk with Ol'

Swallertail, an' Gran'dad used to come over here, to this same summer-house, an' talk with Joselyn."

Mary Louise noticed that the old gingham dress had been washed, ironed and mended--all in a clumsy manner. Ingua's blond hair had also been trained in awkward imitation of the way Mary Louise dressed her own brown locks. The child, observing her critical gaze, exclaimed with a laugh:

"Yes, I've slicked up some. No one'll see me but you, will they?" she added suspiciously.

"No, indeed; we're to be all alone. How do you feel to-day, Ingua?"

"The devils are gone. Gran'dad didn't 'spicion anything las' night an' never said a word. He had one o' his dreamy fits an' writ letters till long after I went to bed. This mornin' he said as ol' Sol Jerrems has raised the price o' flour two cents, so I'll hev to be keerful; but that was all. No rumpus ner anything."

"That's nice," said Mary Louise, leading her, arm in arm, to the pavilion. "Aren't you glad you didn't run away?"

Ingua did not reply. Her eyes, big and round, were taking in every detail of the table. Then they wandered to the big basket and Mary Louise smiled and said:

"The table is set, as you see, but I don't know what we're to have to eat. I asked Aunt Polly to put something in the basket, as I was going to have company, and I'm certain there'll be enough for two, whatever it's like. You see, this is a sort of surprise party, for we won't know what we've got until we unpack the basket."

Ingua nodded, much interested.

"Ye said 'tea,'" she remarked, "an' I hain't tasted tea sence Marm left us. But I s'pose somethin' goes with tea?"

"Always. Tea means a lunch, you know, and I'm very hungry because I didn't eat much luncheon at noon. I hope you are hungry, too, Ingua," she added, opening the basket and beginning to place its contents upon the table.

Ingua may have considered a reply unnecessary, for she made none. Her eyes were growing bigger every moment, for here were dainty sandwiches, cakes, jelly, a pot of marmalade, an assortment of cold meats, olives, Saratoga chips, and last of all a chicken pie still warm from the oven--one of those chicken pies that Aunt Polly could make as no one else ever made them.

Even Mary Louise was surprised at the array of eatables. It was a veritable feast. But without comment she made the tea, the water being already boiling, and seating Ingua opposite her at the table she served the child as liberally as she dared, bearing in mind her sensitiveness to "charity."

But Ingua considered this a "party," where as a guest she was entitled to all the good things, and she ate with a ravenous haste that was pitiful, trying the while not to show how hungry she was or how good everything tasted to her.

Mary Louise didn't burden her with conversation during the meal, which she prolonged until the child positively could eat no more. Then she drew their chairs to a place where they had the best view of the river and woodland--with the old Cragg cottage marring the foreground--and said:

"Now we will have a good, long talk together."

Ingua sighed deeply.

"Don't we hev to do the dishes?" she asked.

"No; Aunt Polly will come for them, by and by. All we have to do now is to enjoy your visit, which I hope you will repeat many times while I am living here."

Again the child sighed contentedly.

"I wish ye was goin' ter stay always," she remarked. "You folks is a sight nicer'n that Joselyn tribe. They kep' us stirred up a good deal till Ned--"

She stopped abruptly.

"What were the Joselyns like?" inquired Mary Louise, in a casual tone that was meant to mask her curiosity.

"Well, that's hard to say," answered Ingua thoughtfully. "Ol' Mis' Kenton were a good lady, an' ev'rybody liked her; but after she died Ann Kenton come down here with a new husban', who were Ned Joselyn, an' then things began to happen. Ned was slick as a ban'box an' wouldn't hobnob with nobody, at first; but one day he got acquainted with Ol' Swallertail an' they made up somethin' wonderful. I guess other folks didn't know 'bout their bein' so close, fer they was sly 'bout it, gen'rally. They'd meet in this summer-house, or they'd meet at our house, crossin' the river on the steppin'-stones; but when Ned came over to us Gran'dad allus sent me away an' said he'd skin me if I listened. But

one day--No, I mus'n't tell that," she said, checking herself quickly, as a hard look came over her face.

"Why not?" softly asked Mary Louise.

"Cause if I do I'll git killed, that's why," answered the child, in a tone of conviction.

Something in her manner startled her hearer.

"Who would kill you, Ingua?" she asked.

"Gran'dad would."

"Oh, I'm sure he wouldn't do that, whatever you said."

"Ye don't know Gran'dad, Mary Louise. He'd as lief kill me as look at me, if I give him cause to."

"And he has asked you not to talk about Mr. Joselyn?"

"He tol' me ter keep my mouth shet or he'd murder me an' stick my body in a hole in the yard. An' he'd do it in a minute, ye kin bank on that."

"Then," said Mary Louise, looking troubled, "I advise you not to say anything he has forbidden you to. And, if anything ever happens to you while I'm here, I shall tell Gran'pa Jim to have Mr. Cragg arrested and put in prison."

"Will ye? Will ye--honest?" asked the girl eagerly. "Say! that'll help a lot. If I'm killed, I'll know I'll be revenged."

So tragic was her manner that Mary Louise could have laughed outright had she not felt there was a really serious foundation for Ingua's fears. There was something about the silent, cold-featured, mysterious old man that led her to believe he might be guilty of any crime. But, after all, she reflected, she knew Mr. Cragg's character only from Ingua's description of it, and the child feared and hated him.

"What does your grandfather do in his office all day?" she inquired after a long pause.

"Writes letters an' reads the ones he gits, I guess. He don't let me go to his office."

"Does he get many letters, then?"

"Heaps an' heaps of 'em. You ask Jim Bennett, who brings the mail bag over from the station ev'ry day."

"Is Jim Bennett the postman?"

"His wife is. Jim lugs the mail 'tween the station an' his own house-- that's the little white house next the church--where his wife, who's deaf-'n'-dumb, runs the postoffice. I know Jim. He says there's 'bout six letters a year for the farmers 'round here, an' 'bout one a week for Sol Jerrems--which is mostly bills--an' all the rest belongs to Ol' Swallertail."

Mary Louise was puzzled.

"Has he a business, then?" she asked.

"Not as anybody knows of."

"But why does he receive and answer so many letters?"

"Ye'll hev to guess. I've guessed, myself; but what's the use? If he was as stingy of postage stamps as he is of pork an' oatmeal, he wouldn't send a letter a year."

Mary Louise scented a mystery. Mysteries are delightful things to discover, and fascinating to solve. But who would have thought this quiet, retired village harbored a mystery?

"Does your grandfather ever go away from here? Does he travel much?" was her next question.

"He ain't never been out of Cragg's Crossing sence I've knowed him."

"Really," said Mary Louise, "it is perplexing."

Ingua nodded. She was feeling quite happy after her lunch and already counted Mary Louise a warm friend. She had never had a friend before, yet here was a girl of nearly her own age who was interested in her and her history and sweetly sympathetic concerning her woes and worries. To such a friend Ingua might confide anything, almost; and, while she was not fully aware of that fact just now, she said impulsively:

"Without tellin' what'd cost me my life, or lettin' anybody know what's become of Ned Joselyn, I'll say they was money--lots o' money!--passed atween him an' ol' Swallertail. Sometimes the heap went to one, an' sometimes to the other; I seen it with my own eyes, when Gran'dad didn't know I was spyin'. But it

didn't stick to either one, for Ned was--" She stopped short, then continued more slowly: "When Ned dis'peared, he'd spent all his own an' his wife's money, an' Ol' Swallertail ain't got enough t' live decent."

"Are you sure of that, Ingua?"

"N-o, I ain't sure o' noth'n. But he don't spend no money, does he?"

"For stamps," Mary Louise reminded her.

Then the child grew silent and thoughtful again. Mary Louise, watching the changing expressions on her face, was convinced she knew more of the mystery than she dared confide to her new friend. There was no use trying to force her confidence, however; in her childish way she was both shrewd and stubborn and any such attempt would be doomed to failure. But after quite a period of silence Mary Louise asked gently:

"Did you like Mr. Joselyn, Ingua?"

"Sometimes. Only when--" Another self-interruption. She seemed often on the point of saying something her better judgment warned her not to. "Sometimes Ned were mighty good to me. Sometimes he brought me candy, when things was goin' good with him. Once, Mary Louise, he kissed me, an' never wiped off his mouth afterwards! Y-e-s, I liked Ned, 'ceptin' when--" Another break. "I thought Ned was a pretty decent gink."

"Where did you learn all your slang, dear?"

"What's slang?"

"Calling a man a 'gink,' and words like that." "Oh. Marm was full o' them words," she replied with an air of pride. "They seem to suit things better than common words; don't you think so, Mary Louise?"

"Sometimes," with an indulgent smile. "But ladies do not use them, Ingua, because they soil the purity of our language."

"Well," said the girl, "it'll be a long time, yit, afore I'm a lady, so I guess I'll talk like Marm did. Marm weren't a real lady, to my mind, though she claimed she'd show anybody that said she wasn't. Real ladies don't leave the'r kids in the clutches of Ol' Swallertails."

Mary Louise did not think it wise to criticize the unknown Mrs. Scammel or to allow the woman's small daughter to do so. So she changed the subject to more pleasant and interesting topics and the afternoon wore speedily away.

Finally Ingua jumped up and said:

"I gotta go. If Gran'dad don't find supper ready there'll be another rumpus, an' I've been so happy to-day that I want to keep things pleasant-like."

"Won't you take the rest of these cakes with you?" urged Mary Louise.

"Nope. I'll eat one more, on my way home, but I ain't one o' them tramps that wants food pushed at 'em in a bundle. We ain't got much to home, but what we got's ours."

A queer sort of mistaken pride, Mary Louise reflected, as she watched the girl spring lightly over the stepping-stones and run up the opposite bank. Evidently Ingua considered old Mr. Cragg her natural guardian and would accept nothing from others that he failed to provide her with. Yet, to judge from her speech, she detested her grandfather and regarded him with unspeakable aversion.