

CHAPTER VIII THE RED-HEADED GIRL

Sol Jerrems the storekeeper, coming in from the back room where he had been drawing molasses for Farmer Higgins, found perched on top the sugar-barrel a chunky, red-haired, freckle-faced young girl whom he had never seen before. She seemed perfectly at home in his store and sat with her knees drawn up to her chin and her arms encircling her legs, eyeing soberly the two or three farmers who had come to the Crossing to "trade."

"If the head o' thet bar'l busts in, you'll be a fine mess," remarked Sol.

The girl nodded but did not move from her position. Sol waited on his customers, at times eyeing the strange girl curiously. When the farmers had gone with their purchases he approached the barrel and examined his visitor with speculative care.

"Want anything?"

"Spool o' red cotton, number thirty."

"Ain't got no red."

"Green'll do."

"Ain't got green. Only black an' white."

"All right."

"Want black or white?"

"No."

Sol leaned against the counter. He wasn't busy; the girl seemed in no hurry; it was a good time to gossip and find out all about the strange creature perched on his sugar-barrel.

"Where'd ye come from?" he inquired.

"City," tossing her head toward the north.

"What for?"

"To do sewing for the Hathaways folks. Mary Louise, you know."

Sol pricked up his ears. The Hathaways were newcomers, about whom little was known. He wanted to know more, and here was a girl who could give him inside information.

"Knowed the Hathaways in the city?"

"Kind o'. Sewed on Mary Louise's spring dresses. How long you been here?"

"Me? Why, I come here more'n twenty years ago. What does the Colonel do in the city?"

"Never asked him. Why do they call this place Cragg's Crossing?"

"I didn't name it. S'pose 'cause ol' Cragg used to own all the land, an' the roads crossed in the middle o' his farm."

"What Cragg was that?"

"Eh? Why, father to Ol' Swallertail. Ever seen Ol' Swallertail?"

"No."

"Wal, he's a sight fer sore eyes. First time anybody sees him they either laughs er chokes. The movin'-pictur' folks would go crazy over him. Ever seen a movin'-pictur'?"

"Yes."

"I did, too, when I was in the city las' year. Ol' Swallertail 'minds me of 'em. Goes 'round dressed up like George Washington when he crossed the Delaware."

"Crazy?"

"That way, yes; other ways, not a bit. Pretty foxy gent, is Ol' Swallertail."

"Why?"

Sol hesitated, reflecting. These questions were natural, in a stranger, but to explain old Hezekiah Cragg's character was not a particularly easy task.

"In the fust place, he drives a hard bargain. Don't spend money, but allus has it. Keeps busy, but keeps his business to himself."

"What is his business?"

"Didn't I say he kep' it to himself?"

"But he owns all the land around here."

"Not now. He owns jest a half-acre, so far's anybody knows, with a little ol' hut on it thet a respect'ble pig wouldn't live in. It's jes' acrost the river from the place where you're workin'."

"Then what has become of his land?"

"It's stayed jes' where it allus was, I guess," with a chuckle at his own wit, "but Ol' Swaller-tail sold it, long ago. Ol' Nick Cragg, his father afore him, sold a lot of it, they say, and when he died he left half his ready money an' all his land to Hezekiah--thet's Ol' Swallertail--an' the other half o' his money to his second son, Peter."

"Where is Peter?" asked the girl quickly.

"Went back to Ireland, years ago, and never's be'n heard of since. The Craggs was Irish afore they got to be Americans, but it seems Pete hankered fer th' Ol' Sod an' quit this country cold."

"So the Craggs are Irish, eh?" mused the girl in a casual tone. And then she yawned, as if not greatly interested. But Sol was interested, so long as he was encouraged to talk.

"I be'n told, by some o' the ol' settlers," he went on, "thet ol' Nick Cragg were born in Ireland, was a policeman in New York--where he made his first money--an' then come here an' bought land an' settled down. They ain't much difference 'tween a policeman an' a farmer, I guess. If the story's true, it proves Ol' Swallertail has Irish blood in him yit, though fer that matter he's lived here long enough to be jes' American, like the rest of us. After he come inter the property he gradual-like sold off all the land, piece by piece, till he ain't got noth'n left but thet half-acre. Sold most of it afore I come here, an' I be'n at the Crossing more'n twenty year."

"If the land brought a fair price, Old Swallowtail ought to be rich," remarked the girl.

"Then he ain't what he orter be. Folks says he specilated, years ago, an' got stung. I know him pretty well--as well as anybody knows him-- an' my opinion is he ain't got more'n enough to bury him decent."

"Thought you said he drives a hard bargain?"

"Young woman," said Sol earnestly, "the man don't live as kin make money specilatin'. The game's ag'in him, fust an' last, an' the more brains he's got the harder he'll git stung."

"But I thought you said Mr. Cragg has a business."

"An' I said nobody knows what it is. When Ned Joselyn used to come here the two was thick, an' Ned were a specilater through an' through. Some thinks it was him as got Cragg's wad, an' some says he lost it all, an' his wife's money, too. Anyhow, Joselyn lit out fer good an' when he were gone Ann Kenton cried like a baby an' ol' Swallertail 's been dumb as a clam ever since."

"What makes you think Cragg has a business?" persisted the girl.

"He keeps an office, over the store here, an' he has a sign on the door thet says 'Real Estate.' But he ain't got no real estate, so that ain't why he shuts himself in the office day after day--an' even Sundays. He's got some other business. Ev'ry night, afore he goes home, he takes a bunch o' letters to Mrs. Bennett's postoffice, an' ev'ry mornin' he goes there an' gits another bunch o' letters that's come to him in the mail. If that don't mean some sort o' business, I don't know what'n thunder it does mean."

"Nor I," said the girl, yawning again. "What about Ned Joselyn? Was he nice?"

"Dressed like a dandy, looked like a fool, acted like the Emp'ror o' Rooshy an' pleased ev'rybody by runnin' away. That is, ev'rybody but his wife an' Ol' Swallertail."

"I see. Who else lives over your store?"

"I live there myself; me an' my fambly, in the back part. One o' the front rooms I rents to Ol' Swallertail, an' he pays the rent reg'lar. The other front room Miss Huckins, the dressmaker, lives in."

"Oh. I'm a dressmaker, too. Guess I'll go up and see her. Is she in?"

"When she's out, she leaves the key with me, an' the key ain't here. Say, girl, what's yer name?"

"Josie."

"Josie what?"

"Jessup. Pa was a drayman. Ever hear of him?"

"No. But about the Hathaways; what has--"

"And you've got no red thread? Or green?"

"Only black an' white. Does the Colonel--"

"Can't use black or white," said the girl, deliberately getting off the barrel.

"Guess I'll go up and ask Miss Huckins if she has any red."

Out she walked, and old Sol rubbed his wrinkled forehead with a bewildered look and muttered:

"Drat the gal! She's pumped me dry an' didn't tell me a word about them Hathaway folks. She worse'n ol' Eben, the nigger help. Seems like nobody wants t' talk about the Hathaways, an' that means there's somethin' queer about 'em. But this red-headed sewin'-girl is a perfec' innercent an' I'll git her talkin' yet, if she stays here long."

Meantime Josie mounted the stairs, which were boarded in at one end of the building, being built on the outside to economize space, and entered the narrow upper hallway. A chatter of children's voices in the rear proclaimed that portion to be the quarters of the Jerrems family. Toward the front was a door on which, in dim letters, was the legend: "H. Cragg. Real Estate."

Here the girl paused to listen. No sound came from the interior of H. Cragg's apartment. Farther along she found a similar door on which was a card reading: "Miss Huckins, Dressmaker and Milliner." Listening again, she heard the sound of a flatiron thumping an ironing board.

She knocked, and the door was opened by a little middle-aged woman who held a hot flatiron in one hand. She was thin; she was bright-eyed; her hair was elaborately dressed with little ringlets across the forehead and around the ears, so Josie at once decided it was a wig.

Seeing a stranger before her, Miss Huckins looked her over carefully from head to foot, while Josie smiled a vacuous, inconsequent smile and said in a perfunctory way:

"Good morning."

"Come in," returned Miss Huckins, with affable civility. "I don't think I know you."

"I'm Josie Jessup, from the city. I'm in your line, Miss Huckins--in a way, that is. I've come here to do some sewing for Mary Louise Burrows, who is the granddaughter of Colonel Hathaway, who has rented the Kenton Place. Nice weather, isn't it?"

Miss Huckins was not enthusiastic. Her face fell. She had encouraged sundry hopes that the rich little girl would employ her to do whatever sewing she might need. So she resumed the pressing of a new dress that was spread over her ironing-board and said rather shortly:

"Anything I can do for you?"

"I want to use some red thread and the storekeeper doesn't keep it in stock. Queer old man, that storekeeper, isn't he?"

"I don't call him queer. He's honest as the day is long and makes a good landlord. Country stores don't usually keep red thread, for it is seldom used."

"He has been talking to me about old Mr. Cragg, who has an office next door to you. I'm sure you'll admit that Mr. Cragg is queer, if the storekeeper isn't."

"A man like Mr. Cragg has the right to be queer," snapped the dressmaker, who did not relish this criticism of the natives by a perfect stranger. "He is very quiet and respectable and makes a very satisfactory neighbor."

Josie, seated in a straight, wood-bottomed chair, seemed not at all chagrined by her reception. She watched the pressing for a time silently.

"That's a mighty pretty gown," she presently remarked, in a tone of admiration. "I don't suppose I shall ever be able to make anything as nice as that. I--I'm not good at planning, you know," with modest self-deprecation. "I only do plain sewing and mending."

The stern features of Miss Huckins relaxed a bit. She glanced at the girl, then at her work, and said more pleasantly than she had before spoken:

"This dress is for Mary Donovan, who lives two miles north of here. She's to be married next Saturday--if they get the haying over with by that time--and this is part of her trousseau. I've made her two other dresses and trimmed two hats for her--a straw shape and a felt Gainsboro. The Donovans are pretty well-to-do."

Josie nodded with appreciation.

"It's nice she can get such elegant things so near home, isn't it? Why, she couldn't do as well in the city--not half as well!"

Miss Huckins held up the gown and gazed at it with unmistakable pride. "It's the best Henrietta," said she, "and I'm to get six dollars for the making. I wanted seven, at first, and Mary only wanted to pay five, so we split the difference. With all the other things, I didn't do so badly on this trousseau."

"You're in luck," declared Josie, "and so is Mary Donovan. Doesn't Mr. Cragg do any business except real estate?"

"I think he must," replied the dressmaker, hanging up the gown and then seating herself opposite her visitor. "All the real estate business he's done in the last two years was to rent the Kenton Place to Colonel Hathaway and make a sale of Higgins' cow pasture to Sam Marvin. But he's so quiet, all day, in the next room, that I can't figure out what he's up to. No one goes near him, so I can't overhear any talk. One time, of course, Mr. Joselyn used to go there, and then they always whispered, as if they were up to some deviltry. But after the quarrel Joselyn never came here again."

"Oh, did they quarrel?" asked Josie, with languid interest. She knew her praise of the dress had won the dressmaker's heart and also she was delighted to find Miss Huckins a more confirmed and eager gossip than even Sol Jerrems.

"I should say they did quarrel!" was the emphatic reply, although she sank her voice to a whisper and glanced warningly at the thin partition. "At one time I thought there'd be murder done, for Joselyn yelled: 'Take that away--take it away!' and Old Swallowtail--that's the name we call Mr. Cragg, you know--roared out: 'You deserve to die for this cowardly act.' Well, you'd better believe my hair stood on end for a minute," Josie smiled as she thought of the wig standing on end, "but nothing happened. There was deep silence. Then the door opened and Mr. Joselyn walked out. I never interfere with other people's business, but attend strictly to my own, yet that day I was so flustered that I peeked through a crack of my door at Mr. Joselyn and he seemed cool as a cucumber. Then Mr. Cragg slammed the door of his room--which is a very unusual thing for him to do--and that was all."

"When did this happen?" asked Josie.

"Last fall, just before Mrs. Joselyn and her husband went back to their city home. Some time in the winter Mr. Joselyn ran away from her, they say, but I

guess old Cragg had nothing do with that. Around here, Joselyn wasn't liked. He put on too many airs of superiority to please the country folks. Sol Jerrems thinks he made away with Mr. Cragg's money, in unwise speculations, but I don't believe Cragg had any money to lose. He seems as poor as I am."

"What do you suppose drew those two men together, Miss Huckins?" inquired the girl.

"I can't say. I've tried to figure it out, but the truth is that old Cragg don't confide in anyone--not even in me, and we're close neighbors. You couldn't find two men in all America more different than Joselyn and Cragg, and yet they had dealings of some sort together and were friendly, for a time."

Josie sighed regretfully.

"I like to hear about these mysterious things," said she. "It's almost as good as reading a story. Only, in this case, we will never know how the story ends."

"Well, perhaps not," admitted the dressmaker. "Joselyn is gone and no one'll ever get the truth out of Cragg. But--I'd like to know, myself, not only how the story ends but what it was all about. Just now all we know is that there was a story, of some sort or other, and perhaps is yet."

A period of silence, while both mused.

"I don't suppose you could find a bit of red thread?" said Josie.

"No, I haven't used it for ages. Is it to mend with?"

"Yes."

"If it's a red dress, use black thread. It won't show, if you're careful; and it won't fade away and leave a white streak, like red sometimes does."

"Thank you, Miss Huckins." She rose to go. "I'd like to drop in again, sometime, for a little visit."

"Come as often as you like," was the cordial reply.

"Cragg's Crossing people are rather interesting; they're so different from city folks," said Josie.

"Yes, they really are, and I know most of them pretty well. Come in again, Josie."

"Thank you; I will."