

## CHAPTER IX JOSIE INVESTIGATES

"Well, what luck?" asked Mary Louise, as she came into Josie's room while her friend was dressing for dinner.

"Not much," was the reply. "I'm not at all sure, Mary Louise, that this chase will amount to anything. But it will afford me practice in judging human nature, if nothing else comes of it, so I'm not at all sorry you put me on the trail. When are we to see Ingua again?"

"To-morrow afternoon. She's coming to tea in the pavilion."

"That's good. Let me see all of her you can. She's an original, that child, and I'm going to like her. Our natures are a good deal alike."

"Oh, Josie!"

"That's a fact. We're both proud, resentful, reckless and affectionate. We hate our enemies and love our friends. We're rebellious, at times, and not afraid to defy the world."

"I'm sure you are not like that, dear," protested Mary Louise.

"I am. Ingua and I are both children of nature. The only difference is that I am older and have been taught diplomacy and self-control, which she still lacks. I mask my feelings, while Ingua frankly displays hers. That's why I am attracted to her."

Mary Louise did not know how to combat this mood. She remained silent until Josie was dressed and the two went down to dinner. Their visitor was no longer the type of a half ignorant, half shrewd sewing-girl, such as she had appeared to be while in the village. Her auburn hair was now tastefully arranged and her attire modest and neat. She talked entertainingly during dinner, enlivening her companions thereby, and afterward played a game of dominoes with the Colonel in the living-room, permitting him to beat her at this, his favorite diversion.

Both the old gentleman and his granddaughter enjoyed their evenings with Josie O'Gorman, for she proved delightful company. In the mornings, however, she would don her cheap gingham, rumple her hair, and pose throughout the day as Josie Jessup the sewing-girl.

Ingua, at first shy of the visitor, soon developed a strong liking for Josie and would talk with her more freely than with Mary Louise. Josie would skip across the stepping-stones and help Ingua wash the breakfast dishes and sweep the bare little rooms of the cottage and then together they would feed the chickens, gather the eggs and attend to such daily tasks as Ingua was obliged to fulfill. With Josie's help this was soon accomplished and then the child was free for the day and could run across to join Mary Louise, while Josie sallied to the village to interview the natives.

When the girl detective had been at Cragg's Crossing for a week she was a familiar figure to the villagers--every one of whom was an acquaintance--and had gleaned all the information it was possible to secure from them, which was small in amount and unsatisfactory in quality. Two or three times she had passed Old Swallowtail on the street, but he had not seemed to notice her. Always the old man stared straight ahead, walking stiffly and with a certain repellent dignity that forbade his neighbors to address him. He seemed to see no one. He lived in a world known only to himself and neither demanded nor desired association with his fellows.

"An eccentric; bigoted, sullen and conceited," reflected Josie, in considering his character. "Capable of any cruelty or crime, but too cautious to render himself liable to legal punishment. The chances are that such a man would never do any great wrong, from cowardly motives. He might starve and threaten a child, indeed, but would refrain from injuring one able to resent the act. Nevertheless, he quarreled with Joselyn--and Joselyn disappeared. There was some reason for that quarrel; some reason for that disappearance; some reason why a man like Edward Joselyn made Old Swallowtail his confidential friend. A business connection, perhaps. Before daring a conjecture I must discover what business Cragg is engaged in."

She soon discovered that Ingua was as ignorant of her grandfather's business life as were all others. One day, as the two girls were crossing the stepping-stones to reach the pavilion, after "doing" the morning housework, Josie remarked:

"In winter one could cross here on the ice."

"Oh, no," replied Ingua, "the water don't freeze. It runs too fast. But sometimes it gits over the top o' the stones, an' then you has to step keerful to keep from fallin' in."

"Did you ever try to cross at such a time?" "Once I did, an' I was skeered, you kin bet. But I says to myself: 'If Ol' Swallertail kin make the crossin', I kin--dark or no dark--an' by cracky I tackled it brave as a lion."

"You tried to cross in the dark, on a winter's night? What for, Ingua?"

Ingua, walking beside her up the bank, paused with a startled expression and grew red. Her eyes, narrowed and shrewd, fixed themselves suspiciously on Josie's face. But the other returned the look with a bland smile that surely ought to disarm one more sophisticated than this simple child.

"I mustn't talk 'bout that," said Ingua in a low voice. "Jes' fergit as I said it, Josie."

"Why?"

"Do ye want me choked, or killed?"

"Who would do that?"

"Gran'dad would, if I blabbed."

"Shucks!"

"Ye don't know Gran'dad--not when he's got the temper on him. If ye'd seen what I seen, ye'd know that he'd keep his word--'to, kill me if I talk too much."

Josie sat down on top the bank.

"What did you see, Ingua?"

"Ye'll hev to guess it."

"It looks that way," said Josie calmly; "but you needn't be afraid of me, Ingua. You and I could know a lot of things, together, and keep 'em to ourselves. Don't you think I'm a good enough friend not to get you choked or killed by telling any secrets you confided to me? And-- look here, Ingua--this secret is worrying you a good deal."

"Who says so?"

"I do. You'd feel a heap better if you told me about it, for then we could talk it over together when we're alone."

Ingua sat down beside her, gazing thoughtfully at the river.

"You'd tell Mary Louise."

"You know better than that. A secret's a secret, isn't it? I guess I can keep my mouth shut when I want to, Ingua."

Josie had a way of imitating Ingua's mode of speech when they were together. It rendered their intercourse more free and friendly. But the girl did not reply at once. She sat dreamily reflecting upon the proposition and its possible consequences. Finally she said in a hesitating way:

"I wisht I knew what ter do. I sometimes think I orter tell somebody that knows more'n I do, Josie, if I ever blab at all."

"Try me, Ingua. I'm pretty smart, 'cause I've seen more of the big world than you have, and know what goes on in the big, busy cities, Where life is different from what it is in this little place. I've lived in more than one city, too, and that means a lot of experience for a girl of my age. I'm sure I could help you, dear. Perhaps, when I've heard your story, I will tell you never to say anything about it to anyone else; and then, on the other hand, I might think differently. Anyhow, I'd never tell, myself, any secret of yours, whatever I might think, because I'd cut off my right hand rather than get you into trouble."

This dramatic speech was intended to appeal to the child's imagination and win her full confidence. In a way, it succeeded. Ingua sidled closer to Josie and finally said in a trembling whisper:

"Ye wouldn't git Gran'dad inter trouble either, would ye?"

"Do you like him, Ingua?"

"I hate him! But he's a Cragg, an' I'm a Cragg, an' the Craggs kin stand up an' spit at the world, if they wants to."

"That's right," agreed Josie, emphatically. "We've got to stick up for our own families and fight for our good name when it's necessary. Do you think I'd let anybody get the best of a Jessup? Never in a thousand years!"

Ingua nodded her head as if pleased.

"That's the way I look at it, Josie. Ev'rybody's down on Ol' Swallertail, an' I'm down on him myself, fer that matter; but I'll dare anybody to say anything ag'in him when I'm aroun'. An' yet, Josie--an' yet--I ain't sure but he's--but he's a murderer!"

She had dropped her voice until she scarcely breathed the last words and her little body trembled through and through with tense nervousness. Josie took her hand.

"Never mind, dear," she said gently. "Perhaps he didn't kill Ned Joselyn, after all."

Ingua sprang up with a hoarse scream and glared at Josie in absolute terror.

"How'd ye know? How'd ye know it were Ned Joselyn?" she demanded, trembling more and more.

Josie's reply was a smile. Josie's smile was essentially winning and sweet. It was reassuring, trustful, friendly.

"This isn't a very big place, Ingua," she quietly remarked. "I can count the people of Cragg's Crossing on my fingers and toes, and the only one who has ever disappeared is Ned Joselyn. Why, you've told me so yourself. Your grandfather and Joselyn were friends. Then they quarreled. Afterward Joselyn disappeared."

"Who said they quarreled?"

"Miss Huckins told me. It was in the office, next door to where she lives and works."

"Oh," with a sigh of relief. "But Ned Joselyn run away. Ev'rybody knows that."

"Everybody but you, dear. Sit down. Why do you get so nervous? Really, Ingua, after you've told me the whole story you'll feel better. It's too big a secret for one small body to hold, isn't it? And just between ourselves we will talk it all over--many times--and then it won't seem so dreadful to you. And, after all, you're not positive your grandfather killed Ned Joselyn. Perhaps he didn't. But you're afraid he did, and that keeps you unstrung and unhappy. Who knows but I may be able to help you discover the truth? Sit down, Ingua, and let's talk it all over."