

CHAPTER XI THE FATE OF NED JOSELYN

The child stared dreamily at the rushing water for several minutes. Then she looked earnestly into Josie's face. Finally, with a sigh, she said:

"I may as well go on an' finish it, I s'pose."

"To be sure," said Josie. "You haven't told me anything very important yet."

"The important part's comin'," asserted Ingua, her tone gradually assuming its former animation. "'Twas last winter on the Thursday between Christmas an' New Year's. It was cold an' snowin' hard, an' it gits dark early them days. Gran'dad an' me was eat'n' supper by lamplight when there come a knock at the door. I jumped up an' opened it an' there stood Ned Joselyn, in a big heavy coat that was loaded with snow, an' kid gloves on, an' his one-eyed spectacle on his face. He come in an' stood while I shut the door, an' Gran'dad glared at him like he does when the devils gits him, and said: 'What--more?'

"'Sure thing,' says Ned. 'Noth'n' lasts forever.'

"'That's true,' says Gran'dad, holdin' himself in. Then he looks at me, an' back to Ned, an' says: 'I can't see ye here. Where ye stoppin'? At the Kenton house?'

"'Jes' fer to-night,' says Ned. 'It's more private than a hotel.'

"'Go home, then,' says Gran'dad. 'I'll come over, by-'n'-by.'

"Ned opened the door an' went out, sayin' noth'n' more. Gran'dad finished his supper an' then sot by the stove an' smoked his pipe while I washed the dishes. I wondered why he didn't go over an' see Ned, but he sot there an' smoked till I went upstairs to bed. That was queer, for I never knew him to smoke more'n one pipe o' tobacco at a time, before, an' then mostly on Sundays. And I'd never seen his face so hard an' cruel-lookin' as it were that night, and his eyes, seemed like they were made of glass. I didn't undress, fer I knowed there'd be trouble if he went over to Ned's house, and I made up my mind to keep watch o' things.

"So I set still in my room in the attic, an' Gran'dad set still in the room downstairs, an' it must 'a' be'n pretty late when I heard him get up an' go out. I slipped down right after him, meanin' to foller him, an' let myself out the back door so's he wouldn't see me. It had stopped snowin' by then, but it was

so cold that the air cut like a knife and the only jacket I had wasn't any too warm fer such weather.

"When I got 'round the house Ol' Swallertail was standin' on the bank, lookin' at the river. I never knew nobody to try the steppin'-stones in winter, an' I s'posed o' course Gran'dad would take the path to the bridge; but he went down the bank, wadin' through the snow, an' started to cross over. The moon an' the snow made it light enough to see easy, after you'd be'n out a few minutes. I watched him cross over an' climb the bank an' make for the house, an' then I run down to the river myself.

"The water covered all the stones, but I knew where they were as well as Gran'dad did. I didn't like my job a bit, but I knew if I waited to go roun' by the bridge that I'd be too late to see anything that happened. So I screwed up courage an' started over. My legs ain't as long as a grown-up's and at the third step I missed the stone an' soused one leg in the water up to my knee. Gee! that was a cold one. But I wouldn't give up, an' kep' on until jus' in the middle, where the water were roarin' the worst, I slipped with both legs and went in to my waist. That settled it for me. I thought I'd drown, for a minute, but I went crazy with fear an' the next thing I knew I was standin' on the bank where I'd come from an' the cold wind was freezin' a sheet of ice on my legs an' body.

"There wasn't no time to lose. Whatever was happenin' over to the big house didn't mean as much to me as death did, an' death was on my track if I didn't get back home afore I froze stiff. I started to run. It ain't far--look there, Josie, ye could almost make it in three jumps-- but I remember fallin' down half a dozen times in the snow, an' at the last I crawled to the door on my hands an' knees an' had jus' strength enough to rise up an' lift the latch.

"Gran'dad's awful stingy about burnin' wood, but I threw the chunks into the stove till the old thing roared like a furnace an' when I'd thawed out some I got off my shoes an' stockin's an' my wet dress an' put another skirt on. Then I lay in Gran'dad's chair afore the fire an' shivered an' cried like a baby whenever I thought o' that icy river.

"I guess I must 'a' went to sleep, afterwards, fer when I woke up the fire was gett'n' low an' Ol' Swallertail opened the door on a sudden an' walked in. Josie, ye orter seen him! His legs was wet an' icy, too, so he must 'a' slipped on the stones himself; an' he was shakin' all over as if he'd got the ague. His face was a dirty white an' his eyes burnt like two coals. He threw on more wood, reckless-like, an' jerked off his shoes an' socks an' set down t'other side

the stove. Neither of us said noth'n' fer awhile an' then he looks at me sort o' curious an' asks:

"Did ye git across, Ingua?"

"No," says I. 'I near got drowned, tryin' it.'

"Then he set silent ag'in, lookin' at the fire. By-'n'-by says he: 'Ingua, yer old enough to hev sense, an' I want ye to think keerful on what I'm goin' ter say. Folks aroun' here don't like you an' me very much, an' if they got a chance--or even thought they had a chance-- they'd crush us under heel like they would scorpions. That's 'cause we're Craggs, for Craggs ain't never be'n poplar in this neighborhood, for some reason. Now lis'n. I've done with Ned Joselyn. It ain't nay fault as I've cast him off; it's his'n. He's got a bad heart an' he's robbed me right an' left. I could fergive him fer that, because--well, ye don't need to know why I clung to the feller when I knew he was a scoundrel. But he robbed a cause dearer to my heart than myself, an' for that I couldn't fergive him. Nobody knows Ned were here to-night, Ingua, so if anybody asks ye questions ye didn't see him at all. Fix that firm in yer mind. Ye don't know noth'n' 'bout Ned sence he went away las' October. Ye hain't seen him. Stick to that, girl, an' yer all right; but if ye blab--if ye ever tell a soul as Ned were here--I'll hev to kill yer myself, to stop yer mouth. Fix that in yer mind, too.'

"I was so skeered that I jes' looked at him. Then I says in a whisper: 'What did ye do to Ned, Gran'dad?'"

"He turned his eyes on me so fierce that I dropped my head.

"I didn't kill him, if that's what ye mean,' says he. 'I orter strangled him, but I didn't want to swing fer no common thief like Ned Joselyn. Besides, he's--but that's none o' yer business. So I threatened him, an' that was jus' as good as killin'. He won't show up ag'in here, never; an' he ain't likely to show up anywheres else that he's known. P'raps he'll be hunted for, but he'll keep out a' the way. You an' I ain't got noth'n' to worry about, Ingua--unless you blab.'

"I didn't believe a word he said, Josie. They was jus' words, an' it was nat'ral he'd lie about that night's work. When I went to bed it was near mornin', but Ol' Swallertail was still sett'n' by the fire.

"Nex' day he went on jus' as usual, an' from then till now he's never spoke to me of that night. In a couple o' weeks we heard as Ned Joselyn had run away. His wife come down here askin' fer him, but nobody'd seen hide ner hair of

him. That's all, Josie; that's the whole story, an' I'm glad you know it now as well as I do. Wha' d'ye think? Did Ol' Swallertail kill Ned Joselyn?"

Josie woke from her meditation with a start.

"I--I'm going to think it over," she said evasively. "It's a queer story, Inguamighty queer--and it's going to take a lot of thought before I make up my mind about it."