

CHAPTER XII THEORIES ARE DANGEROUS

"What were you and Ingua talking about for so long?" asked Mary Louise, when she and Josie were alone.

"She was telling me her story," was the reply.

"All of it?"

"Every bit of it, I think."

"Oh, what was it all about?" questioned Mary Louise eagerly.

"I've promised not to tell."

"Not even me, Josie?"

"Not even you. Ingua insisted; and, really, dear, it's better you should know nothing just at present."

"Am I to be left out of all this thrilling mystery?" demanded Mary Louise with an aggrieved air.

"There won't be a thrill in it, until the end, and perhaps not then. But you shall come in at the finish, if not before; I'll promise that."

"Won't this enforced promise to Ingua tie your hands?" queried the other girl, thoughtfully.

"No. I didn't promise not to act, but only to keep the child's secret. For Ingua's sake, as well as to satisfy your curiosity--and my own--I'm going to delve to the bottom of Ned Joselyn's disappearance. That will involve the attempt to discover all about Old Swallowtail, who is a mystery all by himself. I shall call on you to help me, at times, Mary Louise, but you're not to be told what is weighing so heavily on poor Ingua's mind."

"Well," said Mary Louise, "if I may help, that will serve to relieve my disappointment to an extent. But I'm surprised at Ingua. I thought she loved and trusted me."

"So she does," asserted Josie. "Since I've heard the story, I'm not surprised at Ingua at all. If you knew all, my dear, you would realize why she believes that one confidant is enough. Indeed, I'm rather surprised that Ingua ventured to confide in me."

"Is it so serious, then?"

"If her fears are justified," replied Josie gravely, "it is very serious."

"But are they justified?" urged Mary Louise.

"Ingua is a child, and very sensitive to impressions. But she is a shrewd child and, living a lonely life, has had ample time to consider the problems that confront her. Whether she is right or wrong in her conjectures, time will determine. But don't question me further, please, or you will embarrass me. To-morrow I want to go to the city, which is the county seat. Will you go with me? And can we get Uncle Eben to drive us over in the car?"

"I'll ask Gran'pa Jim."

Colonel Hathaway was rather amused at the efforts of the two girls to fathom the mystery of Old Swallowtail, but he was willing to assist in any practical way. So Uncle Eben drove them to the county seat next day and Josie spent several hours in the county clerk's office and paid a visit to the chief of police, who knew her father, John O'Gorman, by reputation. Mary Louise shopped leisurely while her friend was busy with her investigations and at last they started for home, where they arrived in time for dinner. On the way, Mary Louise inquired if Josie had secured any information of importance.

"A little," said the girl detective. "For one thing, old Hezekiah Cragg pays taxes on just one bit of land besides that little homestead of his. It is a five-acre tract, but the assessment puts it at an astonishingly low valuation--scarcely ten per cent of the value of all surrounding property. That strikes me as queer. I've got the plat of it and to-morrow we will look it up."

They found it was not easy to locate that five acres, even with a map, when the two girls made the attempt the next forenoon. But finally, at the end of a lonely lane about a mile and a half from the village, they came upon a stony tract hemmed in by low hills, which seemed to fit the location described. The place was one mass of tumbled rocks. Little herbiage of any sort grew there and its low assessment value was easily explained. The surrounding farms, all highly cultivated, backed up to the little waste valley, which was fenced out--or rather in--by the owners of the fertile lands. One faintly trodden path led from the bars of the lane the girls were in toward Mr. Cragg's five acres of stones, but amid the jumble of rocks it would be difficult to walk at all.

"This is an odd freak of nature," remarked Josie, gazing at the waste with a puzzled expression. "It is easy to understand why Mr. Cragg hasn't sold this lot, as he did all his other land. No one would buy it."

"Haven't the stones a value, for building or something?" asked Mary Louise.

"Not in this location, so far from a railway. In my judgment the tract is absolutely worthless. I wonder that so economical a man as Mr. Cragg pays taxes on it."

They went no farther than the edge of the rock-strewn field, for there was nothing more to see. Up the slope of the hill, on the far side from where they stood, were jumbled masses of huge slabs and boulders that might be picturesque but were not especially interesting. The girls turned and retraced their steps to the neglected lane and from thence reached the main road again.

"I have now satisfied myself on two counts," was Josie's comment. "First, that Mr. Cragg owns no property but this stone-yard and his little home, and second, that within the last forty years he has at different times disposed of seventy thousand dollars worth of land left him by his father. The county records prove that. The last sale was made about four years ago, so he has consistently turned all his real estate into ready money."

"What can he have done with so much money?" exclaimed Mary Louise.

"Ah, that is part of the mystery, my dear. If he still has it, then the man is a miser. If he has lost it, he is a gambler, which is just about as bad. Either way, Hezekiah Cragg is not entitled to our admiration, to say the least. Let us admit that in a big city a man might lose seventy thousand dollars in business ventures without exciting adverse criticism except for a lack of judgment; but Old Swallowtail has never left Cragg's Crossing, according to all reports, and I'm sure there is no way for him to squander a fortune here."

"I think he must be a miser," said Mary Louise with conviction. "Ingua once told me of seeing lots of money pass between him and Mr. Joselyn. And--tell me, Josie--what is all his voluminous correspondence about?"

"I'm going to investigate that presently," replied her friend. "It isn't quite in line yet but will come pretty soon. To-morrow I shall call upon Old Swallowtail at his office."

"Shall you, really? And may I go with, you, Josie?"

"Not this time. You'd spoil my excuse, you see, for you are going to discharge your sewing-girl, and your sewing-girl is going to apply to Hezekiah Cragg for work. His granddaughter needs some sewing done, by the looks of her wardrobe."

"Oh. Very well. But you will tell me what happens?"

"Of course."

"Once," said Mary Louise, "I proposed going myself to Mr. Cragg, to intercede for Ingua, but the girl thought I would do more harm than good. So I abandoned the idea."

"I think that was wise. I don't expect to get much out of the man except an interview, with a chance to study him at close range. Also I'm anxious to see what that mysterious office looks like."

Mary Louise regarded her friend admiringly.

"You're very brave, Josie," she said.

"Pooh! There's no danger. One of the first things father taught me about the detective business was that all men belong to one tribe, and the criminal is inevitably a coward at heart. Old Swallowtail may be afraid of me, before I'm through with this case, but whether he proves guilty or innocent I shall never fear him a particle."

"Have you any theory, as yet, Josie?"

"No. Theories are dangerous things and never should be indulged in until backed by facts."

"But do not theories often lead to facts? And how about those 'O'Gorman theories' you mentioned, which you were eager to test?"

"Those are mere theories of investigation--methods to be pursued in certain situations. I believe I shall be able to test some of them in this case. My plan is to find out all I can about everyone and everything, and then marshal my facts against the question involved. If there is no answer, I've got to learn more. If I can't learn more, then the whole thing becomes mere guesswork--in other words, theory--more likely to be wrong than right."

Mary Louise seldom argued with Josie's decisions. When, the next morning, her friend started for the village to call upon Old Swallowtail, she pressed her

hand and wished her good luck. Josie departed in her plain gingham dress, shoes run over at the heels, hair untidy and uncovered by hat or hood--a general aspect of slovenly servitude.

Mr. Cragg was never an early riser. He breakfasted at eight o'clock and at half past eight stalked with stiff dignity to town and entered his office without deigning to recognize any villagers he might meet. Josie was aware of this habit. She timed her visit for half-past ten.

Unnoticed she passed through the village street and crept up the stairs at the end of the store building. Before the door marked "H. Cragg, Real Estate" she paused to listen. No sound came from within, but farther along the passage she heard the dull rumble of Miss Huckins' sewing machine.

For once Josie hesitated, but realizing that hesitation meant weakness on such an errand she boldly thrust out a hand and attempted to turn the doorknob.