

## CHAPTER XIII BLUFF AND REBUFF

The door was locked. Immediately Josie pounded upon it with her knuckles and a voice demanded:

"Who is there?"

Instead of replying, Josie knocked again, and suddenly the door was opened and Old Swallowtail stood before her.

"I--I beg your pardon," said she diffidently; "are you the real estate man?"

"Yes," he replied, standing quietly in the doorway.

"Then you're the man I want to see," she asserted and took a step forward. But he did not move an inch from his position and his eyes were fixed steadfastly on her face.

"I have nothing to sell, at present," he remarked.

"But I want to give you something to sell," she retorted impatiently, summoning her wits to meet the occasion. "Let me in, please. Or do you transact all your business in the hallway?"

Somewhat to her surprise he stepped back and held the door for her to enter. Josie promptly walked in and sat down near a round table, one comprehensive glance fixing in her mind the entire contents of the small room.

There was one window, dim and unwashed, facing the street. It had a thick shade, now raised. Originally the room had been square, and rather crudely plastered and wallpapered, but a wooden partition had afterward been erected to cut the room into two, so that the portion she had entered was long and narrow. Its sole furniture consisted of the round table, quite bare, two or three wooden-bottomed chairs, and against one wall a rack filled with books. During the interview she noted that these books were mostly directories of the inhabitants of various prominent cities in the United States, and such a collection astonished her and aroused her curiosity.

Just at present, however, the partition proved the most interesting thing she observed, for beyond it must be another room which was doubtless the particular sanctum of Old Swallowtail and to which she scarcely expected to gain admittance. The door was closed. It was stout and solid and was fitted

with both an ordinary door-lock and a hasp and padlock, the latter now hanging on a nail beside the door.

This much Josie's sharp eyes saw in her first glance, but immediately her attention was demanded by Mr. Cragg, who took a seat opposite her and said in a quiet, well modulated voice: "Now, my girl, state your business." She had planned to tell him how she had come to town to sew for Mary Louise Burrows, how she had now finished her work but was so charmed with Cragg's Crossing that she did not care to leave it during the hot weather to return to the stuffy city. Therefore, she intended to add, if he would let her make some new dresses for Ingua, she would work for half her regular wages. Her dress as a sewing-girl would carry out this deception and the bait of small wages ought to interest the old man. But this clever plan had suddenly gone glimmering, for in order to gain admittance to the office and secure an interview with Old Swallowtail she had inadvertently stated that she had some real estate to dispose of. So sudden a change of base required the girl to think quickly in order to formulate a new argument that would hold his attention.

To gain time she said, slowly:

"My name is Josie Jessup. I'm a sewing-girl by profession."

"Yes, I know," he replied.

"I've been here ten days or so, working for Miss Burrows."

"I have seen you here," said Mr. Cragg.

She wondered how he knew so much, as he had never seemed to favor her with even a glance when by chance they met in the street. But perhaps Ingua had told him.

"I like Cragg's Crossing," continued Josie, assuming a confidential tone, "and I've made up my mind I'd like to live here. There ought to be plenty of work sewing for the farmers' wives, outside of what Miss Huckins does, and it don't cost much to live in a small town. In the city I own a little house and lot left to me by my uncle on my mother's side, and I've decided to trade it for some place here. Don't you know, sir, of someone who'd like to move to the city, and will be glad to make the exchange?"

"I know of no such person," he replied coldly.

"But you will make inquiries?"

"It would be useless. I am very busy to-day, so if you will excuse me--"

He rose and bowed.

Josie was disappointed. She decided to revert to her first proposition.

"Doesn't your granddaughter need some sewing done, sir?" she asked, with a frank look from her innocent blue eyes.

He stood still, silently studying her face. With one hand he rubbed his chin gently, as if in thought. Then he said:

"We cannot afford to hire our sewing done, but I thank you for the offer. Good morning, Miss--Jessup."

Walking to the door he held it open and bowed gravely as she walked out. Next moment she heard the key click as it turned in the lock.

Josie, feeling a sense of failure, slowly went down the stairs, entered the store and perched herself upon the sugar-barrel. Old Sol was waiting on a farmer's wife and only gave the girl a glance.

Josie reflected on her interview with Mr. Cragg while it was fresh in her mind. He was no crude, uneducated country bumpkin, despite his odd ways and peculiar dress. Indeed, the man had astonished her by his courtesy, his correct method of speech, his perfect self-assurance. Her visit was calculated to annoy him and to arouse his impatience. After Ingua's report of him she expected he would become scornful or sarcastic or even exhibit violent anger; yet there had been nothing objectionable in his manner or words. Still, he had dismissed her as abruptly as possible and was not eager to grasp an opportunity to exchange real estate.

"That isn't his business at all," she told herself. "It's merely a blind, although he actually did rent the Kenton Place to Colonel Hathaway...I wonder what he does in that office all day. In the inner room, of course. That is his real workshop...He's quite gentlemanly. He has a certain amount of breeding, which Ingua wholly lacks....He must realize what a crude and uncultured little thing his granddaughter is. Then why hasn't he tried to train her differently?...Really, he quite awed me with his stately, composed manner. No one would expect that sort of man to be a murderer. But--there! haven't I been warned that the educated gentleman is the worst type of criminal, and the most difficult to detect?"

Sol's customer went away and the old man approached the barrel.

"Well," he said, "wanter buy anything to-day?"

"No," said Josie pleasantly, "this is only a social call. I've just come from Old Swallow-tail's office and thought a word with you would cheer me up."

"You! You be'n to Ol' Swallertail's office! Sakes alive, gal, I wouldn't dare do that myself."

"Why not?"

"He goes crazy when he gits mad."

"Are you sure of that?"

"Ev'rybody here knows it, from the three-year-olds up. What did ye go to him for?"

"A little matter of business."

"An' he slammed the door in yer face?"

"No, indeed."

"That's funny," said old Sol, rubbing his forehead in a perplexed way.

"He was very decent to me," continued Josie. "Acted like a gentleman. Talked as if he'd been to school, you know."

"School? Well, I should say he had!" exclaimed the storekeeper. "Ol' Swallertail's the most eddicated man in these 'ere parts, I guess. Ol' Nick Cragg, his daddy, wanted for him to be a preacher--or a priest, most likely--an' when he was a boy his ol' man paid good money to hev him eddicated at a the--at a theo--at a collidge. But Hezekiah wa'n't over-religious, an' 'lowed he didn't hev no call to preach; so that's all the good the eddication ever done him."

"You've never felt the need of an education, have you?" asked the girl, artlessly.

"Me? Well, I ain't sayin' as I got no eddication, though I don't class myself in book-l'arnin' with Ol' Swallertail. Three winters I went to school, an' once I helped whip the school-teacher. Tain't ev'ry one has got that record. But eddication means more'n books; it means keepin' yer eyes open an' gitt'n'

onter the tricks o' yer trade. Ev'ry time I git swindled, I've l'arned somethin', an' if I'd started this store in New York instid o' Cragg's Crossin', they might be runnin' me fer president by this time."

"But what could Cragg's Crossing have done without you?" inquired Josie. "It seems to me you're needed here."

"Well, that's worth thinkin' on," admitted the storekeeper. "And as for Old Swallowtail, he may have learned some tricks of his trade too. But I don't know what his trade is."

"Nobody knows that. I don't b'lieve that business o' his'n is a trade at all; I'll bet it's a steal, whatever its other name happens to be."

"But he doesn't prosper."

"No; he ain't got much t' show fer all these years. Folks used to think he'd got money saved from the sale of his land, till Ned Joselyn come here an' dallied with Ol' Swallertail's savin's an' then took to the woods. It's gener'ly b'lieved that what Cragg had once Ned's got now; but it don't matter much. Cragg hain't got long ter live an' his feed don't cost him an' his little gal much more'n it costs to feed my cat."

There was no further information to be gleaned from Sol Jerrems, so Josie walked home.