

CHAPTER XVI INGUA'S NEW DRESS

"Well," said Mary Louise, when Josie had related to her friend the story next morning, "what do you think of Old Swallowtail now?"

"About the same as before. I'm gradually accumulating facts to account for the old man's strange actions, but I'm not ready to submit them for criticism just yet. The plot is still a bit ragged and I want to mend the holes before I spread it out before you."

"Do you think he suspects who you are?"

"No; he thinks I'm a waif from the city with a penchant for burglary. He expects me to rob you, presently, and then run away. I'm so unlikely to cross his path again that he talked with unusual frankness to me--or at me, if you prefer to put it that way. All I gained last night was the knowledge that he's afraid of himself, that his temper cost him a career in the world and obliged him to live in seclusion and that he has a secret which he doesn't intend any red-headed girl to stumble on accidentally."

"And you think he was angry when you accused him of neglecting Ingua?"

"I'm sure he was. It made him more furious than my attempt to saw his padlock. Come, let's run over and see Ingua now. I want to ask how her grandfather treated her this morning."

They walked through the grounds, crossed the river on the stepping-stones and found Ingua just finishing her morning's work. The child greeted them eagerly.

"I'm glad you come," she said, "for I was meanin' to run over to your place pretty soon. What d'ye think hes happened? Las' night, in the middle o' the night--or p'r'aps nearer mornin'--Gran'dad begun to slam things aroun'. The smashin' of tables an' chairs woke me up, but I didn't dare go down to see what was the matter. He tumbled ev'rything 'round in the kitchen an' then went inter his own room an' made the fur fly there. I knew he were in one o' his tantrums an' that he'd be sorry if he broke things, but it wasn't no time to interfere. When the rumpus stopped I went to sleep ag'in, but I got up early an' had his breakfas' all ready when he come from his room. I'd picked up all

the stuff he'd scattered an' mended a broken chair, an' things didn't look so bad.

"Well, Ol' Swallertail jes' looked aroun' the room an' then at me an' sot down to eat. 'Ingua,' he says pretty soon,' you need a new dress.' Say, girls, I near fell over backwards! 'Go down to Sol Jerrems,' says he, 'an' pick out the goods, an' I'll pay for it. I'll stop in this mornin' an' tell Sol to let ye have it. An',' says he, lookin' at me ruther queer, 'ye might ask that redheaded sewin'-girl that's stay in' at the Hathaways' to make it up fer ye. I don't think she'll ask ye a cent fer the work.'

"'Gran'dad,' says I, 'would ye hev a Cragg accep' charity, even to the makin' of a dress?'

"' No,' says he; 'the girl owes me somethin' an' I guess she'll be glad to square the account.'

"Then he goes away to town an' I've be'n nervous an' flustered ever since. I can't make it out, I can't. Do you owe him anything, Josie?"

"Yes," said Josie with a laugh, "I believe I do. You shall have the dress, Ingua--all made up--and I'll go down with you and help pick out the goods."

"So will I!" exclaimed Mary Louise, highly delighted.

"And we will have Miss Huckins cut and fit it," continued Josie. "I'm not much good at that thing, Ingua, so we will have a real dressmaker and I'll pay her and charge it up to what I owe your grandfather."

The little girl seemed puzzled.

"How'd ye happen to owe him anything, Josie?" she asked.

"Didn't he tell you?"

"Not a word."

"Then he expects it to remain a secret, and you mustn't urge me to tell. I'm pretty good at keeping secrets, Ingua. Aren't you glad of that?"

They trooped away to town, presently, all in high spirits, and purchased the dress and trimmings at the store. Old Sol was so astonished at this transaction that he assailed the three girls with a thousand questions, to none of which did he receive a satisfactory reply.

"He didn't put no limit on the deal," said the storekeeper. "He jus' said: 'Whatever the gal picks out, charge it to me an' I'll pay the bill.' Looks like Ol' Swallertail hed gone plumb crazy, don't it?"

Then they went upstairs to Miss Huckins, who was likewise thrilled with excitement at the startling event of Ingua's having a new dress. Mary Louise and Josie helped plan the dress, which was to be a simple and practical affair, after all, and the dressmaker measured the child carefully and promised her a fitting the very next day.

"I don't quite understan'," remarked Ingua, as they walked home after this impressive ceremony, "why you don't make the dress yourself, Josie, an' save yer money. You're a dressmaker, ye say."

"I'm a sewing-girl," replied Josie calmly, "but I've promised Mary Louise to sew for no one but her while I'm here, and I'm too lazy to sew much, anyway. I'm having a sort of vacation, you know."

"Josie is my friend," explained Mary Louise, "and I won't let her sew at all, if I can help it. I want her to be just my companion and have a nice visit before she goes back to the city."

But when the two girls were alone Josie said to Mary Louise:

"Old Cragg isn't so stony-hearted, after all. Just my suggestion last night that Ingua was being neglected has resulted in the new dress."

"He threw things, though, before he made up his mind to be generous," observed Mary Louise. "But this proves that the old man isn't so very poor. He must have a little money, Josie."

Josie nodded her head absently. She was trying hard to understand Mr. Cragg's character, and so far it baffled her. He had frankly admitted his ungovernable temper and had deplored it. Also he had refrained from having Josie arrested for burglary because he was "too occupied to prosecute her." Occupied? Occupied with what? Surely not the real estate business. She believed the true reason for her escape was that he dreaded prominence. Old Swallowtail did not wish to become mixed up with police courts any more than he could help. This very occurrence made her doubt him more than ever.