

CHAPTER XVIII DOUBTS AND SUSPICIONS

Mary Louise entered her friend's room at seven o'clock and exclaimed: "Not up yet?"

Josie raised her head drowsily from the pillow.

"Let me sleep till noon," she pleaded. "I've been out all night."

"And did you learn anything?" was the eager question.

"Please let me sleep!"

"Shall I send you up some breakfast, Josie?"

"Breakfast? Bah!"

She rolled over, drawing the clothes about her, and Mary Louise softly left the darkened room and went down to breakfast.

"Gran'pa Jim," said she, thoughtfully buttering her toast, "do you think it's right for Josie to be wandering around in the dead of night?"

He gave her an odd look and smiled.

"If I remember aright, it was one Miss Mary Louise Burrows who thrust Josie into this vortex of mystery."

"You didn't answer my question, Gran'pa Jim."

"I can imagine no harm, to girl or man, in being abroad in this peaceful country at night, if one has the nerve to undertake it. You and I, dear, prefer our beds. Josie is wrapped up in the science of criminal investigation and has the enthusiasm of youth to egg her on. Moreover, she is sensible enough to know what is best for her. I do not think we need worry over her nightly wanderings, which doubtless have an object. Has she made any important discovery as yet?"

"I believe not," said Mary Louise. "She has learned enough to be positive that old Mr. Cragg is engaged in some secret occupation of an illegal character, but so far she is unable to determine what it is. He's a very queer old man, it seems, but shrewd and clever enough to keep his secret to himself."

"And how about the disappearance of Mr. Joselyn?"

"We're divided in opinion about that," said the girl. "Ingua and I both believe Mr. Cragg murdered him, but Josie isn't sure of it. If he did, however, Josie thinks we will find the poor man's grave somewhere under the stones of the river bed. There was no grave dug on our grounds, that is certain."

Colonel Hathaway regarded her seriously.

"I am sorry, Mary Louise," he remarked, "that we ever decided to mix in this affair. I did not realize, when first you proposed having Josie here, that the thing might become so tragic."

"It has developed under investigation, you see," she replied. "But I am not very sure of Josie's ability, because she is not very sure of it herself. She dare not, even yet, advance a positive opinion. Unless she learned something last night she is still groping in the dark."

"We must give her time," said the Colonel.

"We have accomplished some good, however," continued the girl. "Ingua is much happier and more content. She is improving in her speech and manners and is growing ambitious to become a respectable and refined young lady. She doesn't often give way to temper, as she used to do on every occasion, and I am sure if she could be removed from her grandfather's evil influence she would soon develop in a way to surprise us all."

"Does her grandfather's influence seem to be evil, then?" asked the Colonel.

"He has surrounded her with privations, if not with actual want," said she. "Only the night before last he was in such a violent rage that he tried to smash everything in the house. That is surely an evil example to set before the child, who has a temper of her own, perhaps inherited from him. He has, however, bought her a new dress--the first one she has had in more than a year--so perhaps the old man at times relents toward his granddaughter and tries to atone for his shortcomings."

Gran'pa Jim was thoughtful for a time.

"Perhaps," he presently remarked, "Mr. Cragg has but little money to buy dresses with. I do not imagine that a man so well educated as you report him to be would prefer to live in a hovel, if he could afford anything better."

"If he is now poor, what has he done with all his money?" demanded Mary Louise.

"That is a part of the mystery, isn't it? Do you know, my dear, I can't help having a kindly thought for this poor man; perhaps because he is a grandfather and has a granddaughter--just as I have."

"He doesn't treat her in the same way, Gran'pa Jim," said she, with a loving look toward the handsome old Colonel.

"And there is a perceptible difference between Ingua and Mary Louise," he added with a smile.

They were to have Ingua's dress fitted by Miss Huckins that morning, and as Josie was fast asleep Mary Louise went across to the cottage to go with the girl on her errand. To her surprise she found old Mr. Cragg sitting upon his little front porch, quite motionless and with his arms folded across his chest. He stared straight ahead and was evidently in deep thought. This was odd, because he was usually at his office an hour or more before this time.

Mary Louise hesitated whether to advance or retreat. She had never as yet come into personal contact with Ingua's grandfather and, suspecting him of many crimes, she shrank from meeting him now. But she was herself in plain sight before she discovered his presence and it would be fully as embarrassing to run away as to face him boldly. Moreover, through the open doorway she could see Ingua passing back and forth in the kitchen, engaged in her customary housework. So on she came.

Mr. Cragg had not seemed to observe her, at first, but as she now approached the porch he rose from his chair and bowed with a courtly grace that astonished her. In many ways his dignified manners seemed to fit his colonial costume.

"You will find Ingua inside, I believe," he said.

"I--I am Mary Louise Burrows."

Again he bowed.

"I am glad to meet you, Miss Burrows. And I am glad that you and Ingua are getting acquainted," he rejoined, in even, well modulated tones. "She has not many friends and her association with you will be sure to benefit her."

Mary Louise was so amazed that she fairly gasped.

"I--I like Ingua," she said. "We're going into town to have her new dress tried on this morning."

He nodded and resumed his chair. His unexpected politeness gave her courage.

"It's going to be a pretty dress," she continued, "and, if only she had a new hat to go with it, Ingua would have a nice outfit. She needs new shoes, though," as an afterthought, "and perhaps a few other little things--like stockings and underwear."

He was silent, wholly unresponsive to her suggestion.

"I--I'd like to buy them for her myself," went on the girl, in a wistful tone, "only Ingua is so proud that she won't accept gifts from me."

Still he remained silent.

"I wonder," she said, with obvious hesitation, "if you would allow me to give you the things, sir, and then you give them to Ingua, as if they came from yourself."

"No!" It was a veritable explosion, so fierce that she started back in terror. Then he rose from his chair, abruptly quitted the porch and walked down the path toward the bridge in his accustomed deliberate, dignified manner.

Ingua, overhearing his ejaculation, came to the open window to see what had caused it.

"Oh, it's you, Mary Louise, is it?" she exclaimed. "Thank goodness, you've drove Gran'dad off to the office. I thought he'd planted himself in that chair for the whole day."

"Are you ready to go to Miss Huckins'?" asked Mary Louise.

"I will be, in a few minutes. Gran'dad was late gett'n' up this mornin' and that put things back. He had the 'wakes' ag'in last night."

"Oh; did he walk out, then?"

"Got back at about daylight and went to bed. That's why he slep' so late."

Mary Louise reflected that in such a case Josie ought to have some news to tell her. She answered Ingua's inquiries after Josie by saying she was engaged this morning and would not go to town with them, so presently the two girls set off together. Mary Louise was much better qualified to direct the making of the new dress than was Josie, and she gave Miss Huckins some hints on modern attire that somewhat astonished the country dressmaker but were

gratefully received. There was no question but that Mary Louise was stylishly, if simply, dressed on all occasions, and so Miss Huckins was glad to follow the young girl's advice.

They were in the dressmaker's shop a long time, fitting and planning, and when at length they came down the stairs they saw Sol Jerrems standing in his door and closely scrutinizing through his big horn spectacles something he held in his hand. As Mary Louise wished to make a slight purchase at the store she approached the proprietor, who said in a puzzled tone of voice:

"I dunno what t' say to you folks, 'cause I'm up in the air. This money may be genoine, but it looks to me like a counterfeit," and he held up a new ten-dollar bill.

"I want a roll of tape, please," said Mary Louise. "I hope your money is good, Mr. Jerrems, but its value cannot interest us."

"I dunno 'bout that," he replied, looking hard at Ingua, "Ol' Swallertail gimme this bill, not ten minutes ago, an' said as his gran'darter was to buy whatever she liked, as fur as the money would go. That order was so queer that it made me suspicious. See here: a few days ago ol' Cragg bought Ingua a dress--an' paid for it, by gum!--an' now he wants her t' git ten dollars' wuth o' shoes an' things! Don't that look mighty strange?"

"Why?" asked Mary Louise.

"'Cause it's the first money he's spent on the kid since I kin remember, an' he's allus talkin' poverty an' says how he'll die in the poorhouse if prices keep goin' up, as they hev durin' the furrin war that's now hummin' acrost the water. If he's that poor, an' on a sudden springs a ten-dollar bill on me for fixin's fer his kid, there's sure somethin' wrong somewhere. I got stuck on a bill jus' like this a year ago, an' I ain't goin' to let any goods go till I find out for sure whether it's real money or not."

"When can you find out?" inquired Mary Louise.

"To-morrer there's a drummer due here f'm the city--a feller keen as a razor--who'll know in a minute if the bill is a counterfeit. If he says it's good, then Ingua kin trade it out, but I ain't goin' to take no chances."

Ingua came close to the storekeeper, her face dark with passion.

"Come," said Mary Louise, taking the child's arm, "let us go home. I am sure Mr. Jerrems is over particular and that the money is all right. But we can wait until to-morrow, easily. Come, Ingua."

The child went reluctantly, much preferring to vent her indignation on old Sol. Mary Louise tried to get her mind off the insult.

"We'll have the things, all right, Ingua," she said. "Wasn't it splendid in your grandfather to be so generous, when he has so little money to spend? And the ten dollars will fit you up famously. I wish, though," she added, "there was another or a better store at the Crossing at which to trade."

"Well, there ain't," observed Ingua, "so we hev to put up with that Sol Jerrems. When I tell Gran'dad about this business I bet he'll punch Sol Jerrems' nose."

"Don't tell him," advised Mary Louise.

"Why not?"

"I think he gave this money to Mr. Jerrems on a sudden impulse. Perhaps, if there is any question about its being genuine, he will take it back, and you will lose the value of it. Better wait until to-morrow, when of course the drummer will pronounce it all right. My opinion is that Mr. Jerrems is so unused to new ten dollar bills that having one makes him unjustly suspicious."

"I guess yer right," said Ingua more cheerfully. "It's amazin' that Gran'dad loosened up at all. An' he might repent, like you say, an' take the money back. So I'll be like ol' Sol--I'll take no chances."