

## CHAPTER XX AN UNEXPECTED APPEARANCE

For a week it was very quiet at Cragg's Crossing. The only ripple of excitement was caused by the purchase of Ingua's new outfit. In this the child was ably assisted by Mary Louise and Josie; indeed, finding the younger girl so ignorant of prices, and even of her own needs, the two elder ones entered into a conspiracy with old Sol and slyly added another ten dollars to Ingua's credit. The result was that she carried home not only shoes and a new hat--trimmed by Miss Huckins without cost, the material being furnished from the fund--but a liberal supply of underwear, ribbons, collars and hosiery, and even a pair of silk gloves, which delighted the child's heart more than anything else.

Miss Huckins' new dress proved very pretty and becoming, and with all her wealth of apparel Ingua was persuaded to dine with Mary Louise at the Kenton house on Saturday evening. The hour was set for seven o'clock, in order to allow the girl to prepare her grandfather's supper before going out, and the first intimation Old Swallowtail had of the arrangement was when he entered the house Saturday evening and found Ingua arrayed in all her finery.

He made no remark at first, but looked at her more than once--whether approvingly or not his stolid expression did not betray. When the girl did not sit down to the table and he observed she had set no place for herself, he suddenly said:

"Well?"

"I'm goin' to eat with the Hathaways to-night," she replied. "Their dinner ain't ready till seven o'clock, so if ye hurry a little I kin wash the dishes afore I go."

He offered no objection. Indeed, he said nothing at all until he had finished his simple meal. Then, as she cleared the table, he said:

"It might be well, while you are in the society of Mary Louise and Colonel Hathaway, to notice their method of speech and try to imitate it."

"What's wrong with my talk?" she demanded. She was annoyed at the suggestion, because she had been earnestly trying to imitate Mary Louise's speech.

"I will leave you to make the discovery yourself," he said dryly.

She tossed her dishes into the hot water rather recklessly.

"If I orter talk diff'rent," said she, "it's your fault. Ye hain't give me no schooling ner noth'n'. Ye don't even say six words a week to me. I'm just your slave, to make yer bed an' cook yer meals an' wash yer dishes. Gee! how'd ye s'pose I'd talk? Like a lady?"

"I think," he quietly responded, "you picked up your slang from your mother, who, however, had some education. The education ruined her for the quiet life here and she plunged into the world to get the excitement she craved. Hasn't she been sorry for it many times, Ingua?"

"I don't know much 'bout Marm, an' I don't care whether she's sorry or not. But I do know I need an eddication. If Mary Louise hadn't had no eddication she'd 'a' been just like me: a bit o' junk on a scrap-heap, that ain't no good to itself ner anybody else."

He mused silently for a while, getting up finally and walking over to the door.

"Your peculiarities of expression," he then remarked, as if more to himself than to the child, "are those we notice in Sol Jerrems and Joe Brennan and Mary Ann Hopper. They are characteristic, of the rural population, which, having no spur to improve its vocabulary, naturally grows degenerate in speech."

She glanced at him half defiantly, not sure whether he was "pokin' fun at her" or not.

"If you mean I talks country talk," said she, "you're right. Why shouldn't I, with no one to tell me better?"

Again he mused. His mood was gentle this evening.

"I realize I have neglected you," he presently said. "You were thrust upon me like a stray kitten, which one does not want but cannot well reject. Your mother has not supplied me with money for your education, although she has regularly paid for your keep."

"She has?" cried Ingua, astounded. "Then you've swindled her an' me both, for I pays for more'n my keep in hard work. My keep? For the love o' Mike, what does my keep amount to? A cent a year?"

He winced a little at her sarcasm but soon collected himself. Strangely enough, he did not appear to be angry with her.

"I've neglected you," he repeated, "but it has been an oversight. I have had so much on my mind that I scarcely realized you were here. I forgot you are Nan's child and that you--you needed attention."

Ingua put on her new hat, looking into a cracked mirror.

"Ye might 'a' remembered I'm a Cragg, anyhow," said she, mollified by his tone of self reproach. "An' ye might 'a' remembered as you're a Cragg. The Craggs orter help each other, 'cause all the world's ag'in 'em."

He gave her an odd look, in which pride, perplexity and astonishment mingled.

"And you are going into the enemy's camp to-night?"

"Oh, Mary Louise is all right. She ain't like them other snippy girls that sometimes comes here to the big houses. She don't care if I am a Cragg, or if I talks country. I like Mary Louise."

When she had gone the old man sat in deep thought for a long time. The summer evening cast shadows; twilight fell; darkness gradually shrouded the bare little room. Still he sat in his chair, staring straight ahead into the gloom and thinking.

Then the door opened. Shifting his eyes he discovered a dim shadow in the opening. Whoever it was stood motionless until a low, clear voice asked sharply:

"Anybody home?"

He got up, then, and shuffled to a shelf, where he felt for a kerosene lamp and lighted it.

"Come in, Nan," he said without turning around, as he stooped over the lamp and adjusted the wick.

The yellow light showed a young woman standing in the doorway, a woman of perhaps thirty-five. She was tall, erect, her features well formed, her eyes bright and searching. Her walking-suit was neat and modish and fitted well her graceful, rounded form. On her arm was a huge basket, which she placed upon a chair as she advanced into the room and closed the door behind her.

"So you've come back," remarked Old Swallowtail, standing before her and regarding her critically.

"A self-evident fact, Dad," she answered lightly, removing her hat. "Where's Ingua?"

"At a dinner party across the river."

"That's good. Is she well?"

"What do you care, Nan, whether she is well or not?"

"If she's at a dinner party I needn't worry. Forgive the foolish question, Dad. Brennan promised to bring my suit case over in the morning. I lugged the basket myself."

"What's in the basket?"

"Food. Unless you've changed your mode of living the cupboard's pretty bare, and this is Saturday night. I can sleep on that heartbreaking husk mattress with Ingua, but I'll be skinned if I eat your salt junk and corn pone. Forewarned is forearmed; I brought my own grub."

As she spoke she hung her hat and coat on some pegs, turned the lamp a little higher and then, pausing with hands on hips, she looked inquisitively at her father.

"You seem pretty husky, for your age," she continued, with a hard little laugh.

"You've been prospering, Nan."

"Yes," sitting in a chair and crossing her legs, "I've found my forte at last. For three years, nearly, I've been employed by the Secret Service Department at Washington."

"Ah."

"I've made good. My record as a woman sleuth is excellent. I make more money in a week--when I'm working--than you do in a year. Unless--" She paused abruptly and gave him a queer look.

"Unless it's true that you're coining money in a way that's not legal."

He stood motionless before her, reading her face. She returned his scrutiny with interest. Neither resumed the conversation for a time. Finally the old man sank back into his chair.

"A female detective," said he, a little bitterly, "is still--a female."

"And likewise a detective. I know more about you, Dad, than you think," she asserted, in an easy, composed tone that it seemed impossible to disturb. "You need looking after, just at this juncture, and as I've been granted a vacation I ran up here to look after you."

"In what way, Nan?"

"We'll talk that over later. There isn't much love lost between us, more's the pity. You've always thought more of your infernal 'Cause' than of your daughter. But we're Craggs, both of us, and it's the Cragg custom to stand by the family."

It struck him as curious that Ingua had repeated almost those very words earlier that same evening. He had never taught them the Cragg motto, "Stand Fast," that he could remember, yet both Nan and her child were loyal to the code. Was he loyal, too? Had he stood by Nan in the past, and Ingua in the present, as a Cragg should do?

His face was a bit haggard as he sat in his chair and faced his frank-spoken daughter, whose clear eyes did not waver before his questioning gaze.

"I know what you're thinking," said she; "that I've never been much of a daughter to you. Well, neither have you been much of a father to me. Ever since I was born and my unknown mother--lucky soul!--died, you've been obsessed by an idea which, lofty and altruistic as you may have considered it, has rendered you self-centered, cold and inconsiderate of your own flesh and blood. Then there's that devilish temper of yours to contend with. I couldn't stand the life here. I wandered away and goodness knows how I managed to live year after year in a struggle with the world, rather than endure your society and the hardships you thrust upon me. You've always had money, yet not a cent would you devote to your family. You lived like a dog and wanted me to do the same, and I wouldn't. Finally I met a good man and married him. He wasn't rich but he was generous. When he died I was thrown on my own resources again, with a child of my own to look after. Circumstances forced me to leave Ingua with you while I hunted for work. I found it. I'm a detective, well-known and respected in my profession."

"I'm glad to know you are prosperous," he said gently, as she paused. He made no excuses. He did not contradict her accusations. He waited to hear her out.

"So," said Nan, in a careless, offhand tone, "I've come here to save you. You're in trouble."

"I am not aware of it."

"Very true. If you were, the danger would be less. I've always had to guess at most of your secret life. I knew you were sly and secretive. I didn't know until now that you've been crooked."

He frowned a little but made no retort.

"It doesn't surprise me, however," she continued. "A good many folks are crooked, at times, and the only wonder is that a clever man like you has tripped and allowed himself to fall under suspicion. Suspicion leads to investigation--when it's followed up--and investigation, in such cases, leads to--jail."

He gave a low growl that sounded like the cry of an enraged beast, and gripped the arms of his chair fiercely. Then he rose and paced the room with frantic energy. Nan watched him with a half smile on her face. When he had finally mastered his wrath and became more quiet she said:

"Don't worry, Dad. I said I have come to save you. It will be fun, after working for the Government so long, to work against it. There's a certain red-headed imp in this neighborhood who is the daughter of our assistant chief, John O'Gorman. Her name is Josie O'Gorman and she's in training for the same profession of which I'm an ornament. I won't sneer at her, for she's clever, in a way, but I'd like to show O'Gorman that Nan Shelley--that's my name in Washington--is a little more clever than his pet. This Josie O'Gorman is staying with the Hathaway family. She's been probing your secret life and business enterprises and has unearthed an important clew in which the department is bound to be interested. So she sent a code telegram to O'Gorman, who left it on his desk long enough for me to decipher and read it. I don't know what the assistant chief will do about it, for I left Washington an hour later and came straight to you. What I do know is that I'm in time to spike Miss Josie's guns, which will give me a great deal of pleasure. She doesn't know I'm your daughter, any more than O'Gorman does, so if the girl sees me here she'll imagine I'm on Government business. But I want to keep out of her way for a time. Do you know the girl, Dad?"

"Yes," he said.

"She's rather clever."

"Yes."

"I think she'd have nabbed you, presently, if I hadn't taken hold of the case so promptly myself. With our start, and the exercise of a grain of intelligence, we can baffle any opposition the girl can bring to bear. Do you wish to run away?"

"No," he growled.

"I'm glad of that. I like the excitement of facing danger boldly. But there's ample time to talk over details. I see you've had your supper, so I'll just fry myself a beefsteak."

She opened her basket and began to prepare a meal. Old Swallowtail sat and watched her. Presently he smiled grimly and Nan never noticed the expression. Perhaps, had she done so, she would have demanded an explanation. He rarely smiled, and certainly his daughter's disclosures were not calculated to excite mirth, or even to amuse.