

CHAPTER XXI A CASE OF NERVES

The "hotel" at the Crossing was not an imposing affair. Indeed, had there not been an "office" in the front room, with a wooden desk in one corner, six chairs and two boxes of sawdust to serve as cuspidors, the building might easily have been mistaken for a private residence. But it stood on the corner opposite the store and had a worn and scarcely legible sign over the front door, calling it a hotel in capital letters.

The Hoppers, who operated the establishment, did an excellent business. On week days the farmers who came to town to trade made it a point to eat one of Silas Hopper's twenty-five cent dinners, famous for at least five miles around for profusion and good cookery. On Sundays--and sometimes on other days--an automobile party, touring the country, would stop at the hotel for a meal, and Mrs. Hopper was accustomed to have a chicken dinner prepared every Sunday in the hope of attracting a stray tourist. There were two guest rooms upstairs that were religiously reserved in case some patron wished to stay overnight, but these instances were rare unless a drummer missed his train and couldn't get away from the Crossing until the next day.

The Sunday following the arrival of Ingua's mother in town proved a dull day with the Hoppers, who had been compelled to eat their chicken dinner themselves in default of customers. The dishes had been washed and Mary Ann, the daughter of the house, was sitting on the front porch in her Sunday gown and a rocking-chair, when an automobile drove up to the door and a dapper little man alighted. He was very elaborately dressed, with silk hat, patent-leather shoes and a cane setting off his Prince Albert coat and lavender striped trousers. Across his white waistcoat was a heavy gold watch-guard with an enormous locket dangling from it; he had a sparkling pin in his checkered neck-scarf that might be set with diamonds but perhaps wasn't; on his fingers gleamed two or three elaborate rings. He had curly blond hair and a blond moustache and he wore gold-rimmed eyeglasses. Altogether the little man was quite a dandy and radiated prosperity. So, when the driver of the automobile handed out two heavy suit cases and received from the stranger a crisp bill for his services, Mary Ann Hopper realized with exultation that the hotel was to have a guest.

As the car which had brought him rolled away the little man turned, observed Mary Ann, and removing his silt hat bowed low.

"I presume," said he in precise accents, "that this town is that of Cragg's Crossing, and that this building is the hotel. Am I correct in the surmise?"

"I'll call Pa," said Mary Ann, somewhat embarrassed. Drummers she could greet with unconcern, but this important individual was a man of a different sort. His brilliant personality dazzled her.

Mr. Hopper came out in his shirtsleeves, gave one look at his customer and put on his coat.

"Goin' to stay, sir?" he asked.

"For a time, if I like the accommodations," was the reply. "I am in need of perfect quiet. My doctor says I must court tranquility to avoid a nervous breakdown. I do not know your town; I do not know your hotel; I hired a man in the city to drive me until I came to a quiet place. He assured me, on the way, that this is a quiet place."

"I dunno him," said Hopper, "but he didn't put up no bluff. If ye can find a quieter place ner this, outside a graveyard, I'll board ye fer noth'n'."

"I thank you for your assurance, sir. Can you show me to the best room you can place at my disposal?"

"Had dinner?"

"I thank you, yes. I am weary from the long ride. I will lie down for an hour. Then I will take my usual walk. When I return I would like an omelet with mushrooms--I suppose you have no truffles?--for my evening meal."

The landlord grinned and picked up the suit cases.

"We're jest out o' truffles an' we're out o' mushrooms," he said, "but we're long on eggs an' ye can have 'em omeletted or fried or b'iled, as it suits yer fancy. Sophie's best hold is cookin' eggs. Sophie's my wife, ye know, an' there ain't no better cook in seven counties, so the drummers say."

As he spoke he entered the house and led the way up the stairs.

"Thank you; thank you," said the stranger. "I am glad your good wife is an experienced cook. Kindly ask her to spare no expense in preparing my meals. I am willing to pay liberally for what I receive."

"This room, with board," remarked Hopper, setting down the suit cases in the front corner bedchamber, "will cost you a dollar a day, or five dollars a week--"

if you eat our reg'lar meals. If ye keep callin' fer extrys, I'll hev to charge ye extry."

"Very reasonable; very reasonable, indeed," declared the stranger, taking a roll of bills from his pocket. "As I am at present unknown to you, I beg you to accept this five-dollar bill in advance. And now, if you will bring me a pitcher of ice-water, I will take my needed siesta. My nerves, as you may have observed, are at somewhat of a tension to-day."

"We're out o' ice," remarked the landlord, pocketing the money, "but ye'll find plenty of good cold water at the pump in the back yard. Anything else, sir?"

"I thank you, no. I am not thirsty. Ice-water is not necessary to my happiness. You will pardon me if I ask to be left alone--with my nerves."

Hopper went away chuckling. His wife and Mary Ann were both at the foot of the stairs, lying in wait to question him.

"That feller's as good as a circus," he asserted, taking off his coat again and lighting his corncob pipe. "He's got nerves an' money, an' he's come here to git rid of 'em both."

"Who is he?" demanded Mrs. Hopper.

"By gum, I fergot to ask him. I got thanked fer ev'rything I did an' ev'rything I couldn't do, an' I've got five dollars o' his money in my jeans as a evidence o' good faith. The whole performance sort o' knocked me out."

"No wonder," asserted, his wife sympathetically.

"I'll bet he's some punkins, though," declared Mary Ann, "an' he'll be a godsend to us after a dull week. Only, remember this, if he kicks on the feed he don't git no satisfaction out o' me."

"I don't think he'll kick on anything," said her father. "He wants eggs for his supper, in a omelet."

"He couldn't want anything that's cheaper to make," said Mrs. Hopper. "The hens are layin' fine jus' now."

"When he comes down, make him register," suggested Mary Ann. "If ye don't, we won't know what ter call him."

"I'll call him an easy mark, whatever his name is," said the landlord, grinning at his own attempt at wit.

The stranger kept his room until five o'clock. Then he came down, spick and span, his cane under his arm, upon his hands a pair of bright yellow kid gloves.

"I will now indulge in my walk," said he, addressing the family group in the office. "My nerves are better, but still vibrant. I shall be further restored on my return."

"Jest sign the register," proposed Hopper, pointing to a worn and soiled book spread upon the counter. "Hate to trouble ye, but it's one o' the rules o' my hotel."

"No trouble, thank you; no trouble at all," responded the stranger, and drawing a fountain-pen from his pocket he approached the register and wrote upon the blank page. "I hope there is, nothing to see in your town," he remarked, turning away. "I don't wish to see anything. I merely desire to walk."

"Yer wish'll come true, I guess," said Hopper. "I've lived here over twenty year an' I hain't seen noth'n' yet. But the walkin' is as good as it is anywhere."

"Thank you. I shall return at six o'clock--for the omelet," and he walked away with short, mincing steps that seemed to them all very comical.

Three heads at once bent over the register, on which the stranger had I written in clear, delicate characters: "Lysander Antonius Sinclair, B. N., Boston, Mass."

"I wonder what the 'B. N.' stands for," said Mary Ann Hopper, curiously.

"Bum Nerves, o' course," replied the landlord. "He's got 'em, sure enough."