

CHAPTER XXIII PECULIAR PEOPLE

Old Swallowtail came home at about four o'clock in the afternoon. The day was hot, yet the old man seemed neither heated nor wearied. Without a word to his daughter or Ingua he drew a chair to the little shady porch and sat down in their company. Nan was mending her child's old frock; Ingua sat thinking.

For half an hour, perhaps, silence was maintained by all. Then Nan turned and asked:

"Have you covered your tracks?"

He turned his glassy, expressionless eyes toward her.

"My tracks, as you call them," said he, "have been laid for forty years or more. They are now ruts. I cannot obliterate them in a day."

The woman studied his face thoughtfully.

"You are not worrying over your probable arrest?"

"No."

"Then it's all right," said she, relieved. "You're a foxy old rascal, Dad, and you've held your own for a good many years. I guess you don't need more than a word of warning."

He made no reply, his eyes wandering along the path to the bridge. Mary Louise was coming their way, walking briskly. Her steps slowed a bit as she drew nearer, but she said in an eager voice:

"Oh, Mrs. Scammel, Josie has told me you are here and who you are. Isn't it queer how lives get tangled up? But I remember you with gratitude and kindest thoughts, because you were so considerate of my dear Gran'pa Jim. And to think that you are really Ingua's mother!"

Nan rose and took the girl's hands in her own.

"I fear I've been a bad mother to my kid," she replied, "but I thought she was all right with her grandfather and happy here. I shall look after her better in the future."

Mary Louise bowed to Mr. Cragg, who nodded his head in acknowledgment. Then she sat down beside Ingua.

"Are you plannin' to take me away from here, Mama?" asked the child.

"Wouldn't you rather be with me than with your grandfather?" returned Nan with a smile.

"I dunno," said Ingua seriously. "You're a detective, an' I don't like detections. You ain't much like a mother to me, neither, ner I don't know much about you. I dunno yet whether I'm goin' to like you or not."

A wave of color swept over Nan's face; Mary Louise was shocked; the old man turned his inscrutable gaze down the path once more.

"I like it here," continued the child, musingly: "Gran'dad makes me work, but he don't bother me none 'cept when the devils get, hold o' him. I 'member that you git the devils, too, once in awhile, Marm, an' they're about as fierce as Gran'dad's is. An' I gets 'em 'cause I'm a Cragg like the rest o' you, an' devils seem to be in the Cragg blood. I've a notion it's easier to stand the devils in the country here, than in the city where you live."

Nan didn't know whether to be amused or angry.

"Yet you tried to run away once," she reminded Ingua, "and it was Mary Louise who stopped you. You told me of this only an hour ago.

"Didn't I say the devils pick on me sometimes?" demanded the girl. "An' Mary Louise was right. She fought the devils for me, and I'm glad she did, 'cause I've had a good time with her ever since," and she pressed Mary Louise's hand gratefully.

Her child's frankness was indeed humiliating to Nan Scammel, who was by no means a bad woman at heart and longed to win the love and respect of her little girl. Ingua's frank speech had also disturbed Mary Louise, and made her sorry for both the child and her mother. Old Swallowtail's eyes lingered a moment on Ingua's ingenuous countenance but he exhibited no emotion whatever.

"You're a simple little innocent," remarked Nan to Ingua, after a strained pause. "You know so little of the world that your judgment is wholly unformed. I've a notion to take you to Washington and buy you a nice outfit of clothes--like those of Mary Louise, you know--and put you into a first-class

girls' boarding-school. Then you'll get civilized, and perhaps amount to something."

"I'd like that," said Ingua, with a first display of enthusiasm; "but who'd look after Gran'dad?"

"Why, we must provide for Dad in some way, of course," admitted Nan after another pause. "I can afford to hire a woman to keep house for him, if I hold my present job. I suppose he has a hoard of money hidden somewhere, but that's no reason he wouldn't neglect himself and starve if left alone. And, if he's really poor, I'm the one to help him. How does that arrangement strike you, Ingua?"

"It sounds fine," replied the girl, "but any woman that'd come here to work, an' would stan' Gran'dad's devils, wouldn't amount to much, nohow. If we're goin' to move to the city," she added with a sigh, "let's take Gran'dad with us."

This conversation was becoming too personal for Mary Louise to endure longer. They talked of Mr. Cragg just as if he were not present, ignoring him as he ignored them. With an embarrassed air Mary Louise rose.

"I must go now," said she. "I just ran over to welcome you, Mrs. Scammel, and to ask you and Ingua to dine with us to-morrow night. Will you come? Josie O'Gorman is with us, you know, and I believe you are old friends."

Nan hesitated a moment.

"Thank you," she replied, "we'll be glad to come. You've been mighty good to my little girl and I am grateful. Please give my regards to Colonel Hathaway."

When Mary Louise had gone the three lapsed into silence again. Ingua was considering, in her childish but practical way, the proposed changes in her life. The mother was trying to conquer her annoyance at the child's lack of filial affection, tacitly admitting that the blame was not Ingua's. The old man stared at the path. Whatever his thoughts might be he displayed no hint of their nature.

Presently there appeared at the head of the path, by the bridge, the form of a stranger, a little man who came on with nervous, mincing steps. He was dressed in dandified fashion, with tall silk hat, a gold-headed cane and yellow kid gloves. Almost had he reached the porch when suddenly he stopped short, looked around in surprise and ejaculated:

"Bless me--bless me! I--I've made a mistake. This is a private path to your house. No thoroughfare. Dear me, what an error; an unpardonable error. I hope you will excuse me--I--I hope so!"

"To be sure we will," replied Nan with a laugh, curiously eyeing the dapper little man. "The only way out, sir, is back by the bridge."

"Thank you. Thank you very much," he said earnestly. "I--I am indulging in a stroll and--and my mind wandered, as did my feet. I--I am an invalid in search of rest. Thank you. Good afternoon."

He turned around and with the same mincing, regular steps retreated along the path. At the bridge he halted as if undecided, but finally continued along the country road past the Kenton Place.

Ingua laughed delightedly at the queer man. Nan smiled. Old Swallowtail had altered neither his position nor his blank expression.

"He's a queer fish, ain't he?" remarked the girl. "He's pretty lively for an invalid what's lookin' for rest. I wonder when he landed, an' where he's stoppin'."

Something in the child's remark made Nan thoughtful. Presently she laid down her work and said:

"I believe I'll take a little walk, myself, before dark. Want to go along, Ingua?"

Ingua was ready. She had on her new dress and hoped they might meet someone whom she knew. They wandered toward the town, where most of the inhabitants were sitting out of doors--a Sunday afternoon custom. Jim Bennett, in his shirtsleeves, was reading a newspaper in front of the postoffice; Sol Jerrems and his entire family occupied the platform before the store, which was of course locked; Nance Milliker was playing the organ in the brown house around the corner, and in front of the hotel sat Mary Ann Hopper in her rocking-chair.

Nan strolled the length of the street, startling those natives who had formerly known her, Ingua nodded and smiled at everyone. Mary Ann Hopper called, as they passed her: "Hullo, Ingua. Where'd ye git the new duds?"

"Miss Huckins made 'em," answered Ingua proudly.

"I guess I'll go and shake hands with Mrs. Hopper," said Nan. "Don't you remember me, Mary Ann? I'm Nan Cragg."

"Gee! so y'are," exclaimed Mary Ann wonderingly. "We all 'spicioned you was dead, long ago."

"I'm home for a visit. You folks seem prosperous. How's business?"

"Pretty good. We got a new boarder to-day, a feller with bum nerves who come from the city. Gee! but he's togged out t' kill. Got money, too, an' ain't afraid to spend it. He paid Dad in advance."

"That's nice," said Nan. "What's his name?"

"It's a funny name, but I can't remember it. Ye kin see it on the register."

Nan went inside, leaving Ingua with Mary Ann, and studied the name on the register long and closely.

"No," she finally decided, "Lysander isn't calculated to arouse suspicion. He wears a wig, I know, but that is doubtless due to vanity and not a disguise. I at first imagined it was someone O'Gorman had sent down here to help Josie, but none of our boys would undertake such a spectacular personation, bound to attract attention. This fellow will become the laughing-stock of the whole town and every move he makes will be observed. I'm quite sure there is nothing dangerous in the appearance here of Mr. Lysander Antonius Sinclair."

She chatted a few minutes with Mrs. Hopper, whom she found in the kitchen, and then she rejoined Ingua and started homeward. Scarcely were mother and child out of sight when Mr. Sinclair came mincing along from an opposite direction and entered the hotel. He went to his room but soon came down and in a querulous voice demanded his omelet, thanking the landlady again and again for promising it in ten minutes.

He amused them all very much, stating that an omelet for an evening meal was "an effective corrective of tired nerves" and would enable him to sleep soundly all night.

"I sleep a great deal," he announced after he had finished his supper and joined Mr. Hopper on the porch. "When I have smoked a cigar--in which luxury I hope you will join me, sir--I shall retire to my couch and rest in the arms of Morpheus until the brilliant sun of another day floods the countryside."

"P'r'aps it'll rain," suggested the landlord.

"Then Nature's tears will render us sweetly sympathetic."

He offered his cigar case to Mr. Hopper, who recognized a high priced cigar and helped himself.

"Didn't see anything to make ye nervous, durin' yer walk, did ye?" he inquired, lighting the weed.

"Very little. It seems a nice, quiet place. Only once was I annoyed. I stumbled into a private path, just before I reached the river, and--and had to apologize."

"Must 'a' struck Ol' Swallertail's place," remarked the landlord.

"Old Swallowtail? Old Swallowtail? And who is he?" queried the stranger.

Hopper was a born gossip, and if there was any one person he loved to talk of and criticize and "pick to pieces" it was Old Swallowtail. So he rambled on for a half hour, relating the Cragg history in all its details, including the story of Ingua and Ingua's mother, Nan Cragg, who had married some unknown chap named Scammel, who did not long survive the ceremony.

Mr. Sinclair listened quietly, seeming to enjoy his cigar more than he did the Cragg gossip. He asked no questions, letting the landlord ramble on as he would, and finally, when Hopper had exhausted his fund of fact and fiction, which were about evenly mixed, his guest bade him good night and retired to his private room.

"It ain't eight o'clock, yet," said the landlord to his wife, "but a feller with nerves is best asleep. An' when he's asleep he won't waste our kerosene."

No, Mr. Sinclair didn't waste the Hopper kerosene. He had a little pocket arrangement which supplied him with light when, an hour before midnight, he silently rose, dressed himself and prepared to leave the hotel. He was not attired in what Mary Ann called his "glad rags" now, but in a dark gray suit of homespun that was nearly the color of the night. The blond wig was carefully locked in a suit case, a small black cap was drawn over his eyes, and thus--completely transformed--Mr. Hopper's guest had no difficulty in gaining the street without a particle of noise betraying him to the family of his host.

He went to the postoffice, pried open a window, unlocked the mail bag that was ready for Jim Bennett to carry to the morning train at Chargrove and from it abstracted a number of letters which he unsealed and read with great care. They had all been written and posted by Hezekiah Cragg. The man spent a couple of hours here, resealing the envelopes neatly and restoring them to the mail bag, after which, he attached the padlock and replaced the bag in

exactly its former position. When he had left the little front room which was devoted by the Bennetts to the mail service, the only evidence of his visit was a bruised depression beside the window-sash which was quite likely to escape detection.

After this the stranger crept through the town and set off at a brisk pace toward the west, taking the road over the bridge and following it to the connecting branch and thence to the lane. A half hour later he was standing in old Cragg's stone lot and another hour was consumed among the huge stones by the hillside--the place where Josie had discovered the entrance to the underground cave. Mr. Sinclair did not discover the entrance, however, so finally he returned to town and mounted the stairs beside Sol Jerrem's store building to the upper hallway.

In five minutes he was inside of Cragg's outer office; in another five minutes he had entered the inner office. There he remained until the unmistakable herald of dawn warned him to be going. However, when he left the building there was no visible evidence of his visit. He was in his own room and in bed long before Mrs. Hopper gave a final snore and wakened to light the kitchen fire and prepare for the duties of the day.