BAUM LYMAN FRANK

MARY LOUISE IN THE COUNTRY

Lyman Baum
Mary Louise in the Country

http://www.litres.ru/pages/biblio_book/?art=25019323
Mary Louise in the Country:

Содержание

L. Frank Baum
Mary Louise in the Country

CHAPTER I
THE ARRIVAL

"Is this the station, Gran'pa Jim?" inquired a young girl, as the train began to slow up.

"I think so, Mary Louise," replied the handsome old gentleman addressed.

"It does look very promising, does it?" she continued, glancing eagerly out of the window.

"The station? No, my dear; but the station isn't Cragg's Crossing, you know; it is merely the nearest railway point to our new home."

The conductor opened their drawing-room door.

"The next stop is Chargrove, Colonel," he said.

"Thank you."

The porter came for their hand baggage and a moment later the long train stopped and the vestibule steps were let down.

If you will refer to the time-table of the D. R. & G. Railway you will find that the station of Chargrove is marked with a character dagger (), meaning that trains stop there only to

let off passengers or, when properly signaled, to let them on. Mary Louise, during the journey, had noted this fact with misgivings that were by no means relieved when she stepped from the sumptuous train and found before her merely a shed-like structure, open on all sides, that served as station-house.

Colonel Hathaway and his granddaughter stood silently upon the platform of this shed, their luggage beside them, and watched their trunks tumbled out of the baggage car ahead and the train start, gather speed, and go rumbling on its way. Then the girl looked around her to discover that the primitive station was really the only barren spot in the landscape.

For this was no Western prairie country, but one of the oldest settled and most prosperous sections of a great state that had been one of the original thirteen to be represented by a star on our national banner. Chargrove might not be much of a railway station, as it was only eleven miles from a big city, but the country around it was exceedingly beautiful. Great oaks and maples stood here and there, some in groups and some in stately solitude; the land was well fenced and carefully cultivated; roads – smooth or rutty – led in every direction; flocks and herds were abundant; half hidden by hills or splendid groves peeped the roofs of comfortable farmhouses that evidenced the general prosperity of the community.

"Uncle Eben is late, isn't he, Gran'pa Jim?" asked the girl, as her eyes wandered over the pretty, peaceful scene.

Colonel Hathaway consulted his watch.

"Our train was exactly on time," he remarked, "which is more than can be said for old Eben. But I think, Mary Louise, I now see an automobile coming along the road. If I am right, we have not long to wait."

He proved to be right, for presently a small touring car came bumping across the tracks and halted at the end of the platform on which they stood. It was driven by an old colored man whose hair was snow white but who sprang from his seat with the agility of a boy when Mary Louise rushed forward with words of greeting.

"My, Uncle Ebe, but it's good to see you again!" she exclaimed, taking both his dusky hands in her own and shaking them cordially. "How is Aunt Polly, and how is your 'rheum'tics'?"

"Rheum'tics done gone foh good, Ma'y Weeze," he said, his round face all smiles. "Dis shuah am one prosterous country foh health. Nobuddy sick but de invahlids, an' dey jus' 'magines dey's sick, dat's all."

"Glad to see you, Uncle," said the Colonel. "A little late, eh? – as usual. But perhaps you had a tire change."

"No, seh, Kun'l, no tire change. I was jus' tryin' to hurry 'long dat lazy Joe Brennan, who's done comin' foh de trunks. Niggehs is slow, Kun'l, dey ain't no argyment 'bout dat, but when a white man's a reg'leh loaf eh, seh, dey ain' no niggeh kin keep behind him."

"Joe Brennan is coming, then?"

"Dat's right, Kun'l; he's comin'. Done start befoh daylight, in de lumbeh-wagin. But when I done ketch up wi' dat Joe – a mile 'n' a half away – he won't lis'n to no reason. So I dodged on ahead to tell you-uns dat Joe's on de way."

"How far is it from here to Cragg's Crossing, then?" inquired Mary Louise.

"They call it ten miles," replied her grandfather, "but I imagine it's nearer twelve."

"And this is the nearest railway station?"

"Yes, the nearest. But usually the Crossing folks who own motor cars drive to the city to take the trains. We alighted here because in our own case it was more convenient and pleasant than running into the city and out again, and it will save us time."

"We be home in half'n hour, mos' likely," added Uncle Eben, as he placed the suit cases and satchels in the car. Colonel Hathaway and Mary Louise followed and took their seats.

"Is it safe to leave our trunks here?" asked the girl.

"Undoubtedly," replied her grandfather. "Joe Brennan will doubtless arrive before long and, really, there is no person around to steal them."

"I've an idea I shall like this part of the country," said Mary Louise musingly, as they drove away.

"I am confident you will, my dear."

"Is Cragg's Crossing as beautiful as this?"

"I think it more beautiful."

"And how did you happen to find it, Gran'pa Jim? It seems

as isolated as can be."

"A friend and I were taking a motor trip and lost our way. A farmer told us that if we went to Cragg's Crossing we would find a good road to our destination. We went there, following the man's directions, and encountered beastly roads but found a perfect gem of a tiny, antiquated town which seems to have been forgotten or overlooked by map-makers, automobile guides and tourists. My friend had difficulty in getting me away from the town, I was so charmed with it. Before I left I had discovered, by dint of patient inquiry, a furnished house to let, and you know, of course, that I promptly secured the place for the summer. That's the whole story, Mary Louise."

"It is interesting," she remarked. "As a result of your famous discovery you sent down Uncle Eben and Aunt Polly, with our car and a lot of truck you thought we might need, and now – when all is ready – you and I have come to take possession."

"Rather neatly arranged, I think," declared the Colonel, with satisfaction.

"Do you know anything about the history of the place, Gran'pa, or of the people who live in your tiny, forgotten town?"

"Nothing whatever. I imagine there are folks Cragg's Crossing who have never been a dozen miles away from it since they were born. The village boasts a 'hotel' – the funniest little inn you can imagine – where we had an excellent home-cooked meal; and there is one store and a blacksmith's shop, one church and one schoolhouse. These, with half a dozen ancient and

curiously assorted residences, constitute the shy and retiring town of Cragg's Crossing. Ah, think we have found Joe Brennan."

Uncle Eben drew up beside a rickety wagon drawn by two sorry nags who just now were engaged in cropping grass from the roadside. On the seat half reclined a young man who was industriously eating an apple. He wore a blue checked shirt open at the throat, overalls, suspenders and a straw hat that had weathered many seasons of sunshine and rain. His feet were encased in heavy boots and his bronzed face betokened an out-of-door life. There are a million countrymen in the United States just like Joe Brennan in outward appearance.

Joe did not stop munching; he merely stared as the automobile stopped beside him.

"Say, you Joe!" shouted Uncle Eben indignatly, "wha' foh yo' done sett'n' heah?"

"Rest'n'," said Joe Brennan, taking another bite from his apple.

"Ain't yo' gwine git dem trunks home to-day?" demanded the old darkey.

Joe seemed to consider this question carefully before he ventured to commit himself. Then he looked at Colonel Hathaway and said:

"What I want t' know, Boss, is whether I'm hired by the hour, er by the day?"

"Didn't Uncle Eben tell you?"

"Naw, he didn't. He jes' said t' go git the trunks an' he'd gimme

a dollar fer the trip."

"Well, that seems to settle the question, doesn't it!"

"Not quite, Boss. I be'n thinkin' it over, on the way, an' a dollar's too pesky cheap fer this trip. Sometimes I gits twenty-five cents a hour fer haulin' things, an' this looks to me like a day's work."

"If you made good time," said Colonel Hathaway, "you might do it easily in four hours."

Joe shook his head.

"Not me, sir," he replied. "I hain't got the constitution fer it. An' them hosses won't trot 'less I lick 'em, an' ef I lick 'em I'm guilty o' cru'lty ter animals – includin' myself. No, Boss, the job's too cheap, so I guess I'll give it up an' go home."

"But you're nearly at the station now," protested the Colonel.

"I know; but it's half a mile fu'ther an' the hosses is tired. I guess I'll go home."

"Oh, Gran'pa!" whispered Mary Louise, "it'll never do to leave our trunks lying there by the railroad tracks."

The Colonel eyed Joe thoughtfully.

"If you were hired by the day," said he, "I suppose you would do a day's work?"

"I'd hev to," admitted Joe. "That's why I 'asked ye how about it. Jes' now it looks to me like I ain't hired at all. The black man said he'd gimme a dollar fer the trunks, that's all."

"How much do you charge a day?" asked the Colonel.

"Dollar 'n' a quarter's my reg'lar price, an' I won't take no less,"

asserted Joe.

Mary Louise nearly laughed outright, but the Colonel frowned and said:

"Joe Brennan, you've got me at your mercy. I'm going to hire you by the day, at a dollar and a quarter, and as your time now belongs to me I request you to go at once for those trunks. You will find them just beyond the station."

The man's face brightened. He tossed away the core of his apple and jerked the reins to make the horses hold up their heads.

"A bargain's a bargain, Boss," he remarked cheerfully, "so I'll get them air trunks to yer house if it takes till midnight."

"Very good," said the Colonel. "Drive on, Uncle."

The old servant started the motor.

"Dat's what I calls downright robbery, Kun'l," he exclaimed, highly incensed. "Didn't I ask de stoahkeepeh what to pay Joe Brennen foh bringin' oveh dem trunks, an' didn't he say a dolleh is big pay foh such-like a trip? If we's gwine live in dis town, where day don' un'stand city prices an' de high cost o' livin' yit, we gotta hol' 'em down an' keep 'em from speckilatin' with us, or else we'll spile 'em fer de time when we's gone away."

"Very true, Uncle. Has Joe a competitor?"

Uncle Eben reflected.

"Ef he has, Kun'l, I ain't seen it," he presently replied; "but I guess all he's got is dat lumbeh-wagin."

Mary Louise had enjoyed the controversy immensely and was relieved by the promise of the trunks by midnight. For the first

time in her life the young orphaned girl was to play housekeeper for her grandfather and surely one of her duties was to see that the baggage was safely deposited in their new home.

This unknown home in an unknown town had an intense fascination for her just now. Her grandfather had been rather reticent in his description of the house he had rented at Cragg's Crossing, merely asserting it was a "pretty place" and ought to make them a comfortable home for the summer. Nor had the girl questioned him very closely, for she loved to "discover things" and be surprised – whether pleasurably or not did not greatly interfere with the thrill.

The motor took them speedily along a winding way to Cragg's Crossing, a toy town that caused Mary Louise to draw a long breath of delight at first sight. The "crossing" of two country roads had probably resulted, at some far-back period, in farmers' building their residences on the four corners, so as to be neighborly. Farm hands or others built little dwellings adjoining – not many of them, though – and some unambitious or misdirected merchant erected a big frame "store" and sold groceries, dry goods and other necessities of life not only to the community at the Crossing but to neighboring farmers. Then someone started the little "hotel," mainly to feed the farmers who came to the store to trade or the "drummers" who visited it to sell goods. A church and a schoolhouse naturally followed, in course of time, and then, as if its destiny were fulfilled, the sleepy little town – ten miles from the nearest railway – gradually

settled into the comatose state in which Colonel Hathaway and his granddaughter now found it.

CHAPTER II
THE KENTON PLACE

The tiny town, however, was not all that belonged to the Cragg's Crossing settlement. Barely a quarter of a mile away from the village a stream with beautifully wooded banks ran diagonally through the countryside. It was called a "river" by the natives, but it was more of a creek; halfway between a small rivulet and a brook, perhaps. But its banks afforded desirable places for summer residences, several of which had been built by well-to-do families, either retired farmers or city people who wished for a cool and quiet place in which to pass the summer months.

These residences, all having ample grounds and facing the creek on either side, were sufficiently scattered to be secluded, and it was to one of the most imposing of these that Uncle Eben guided the automobile. He crossed the creek on a primitive but substantial bridge, turned to the right, and the first driveway led to the house that was to be Mary Louise's temporary home.

"This is lovely!" exclaimed the girl, as they rolled up a winding drive edged by trees and shrubbery, and finally drew up before the entrance of a low and rambling but quite modern house. There was Aunt Polly, her round black face all smiles, standing on the veranda to greet them, and Mary Louise sprang from the

car first to hug the old servant – Uncle Eben's spouse – and then to run in to investigate the establishment, which seemed much finer than she had dared to imagine it.

The main building was of two stories, but the wings, several of which jutted out in various directions, were one story in height, somewhat on the bungalow plan. There was a good-sized stable in connection – now used as a garage – and down among the oaks toward the river an open pavilion had been built. All the open spaces were filled with flowers and ferns, in beds and borders, and graveled paths led here and there in a very enticing way. But the house was now the chief fascination and the other details Mary Louise gleaned by sundry glances from open windows as she rambled from room to room.

At luncheon, which Aunt Polly served as soon as her young mistress could be coaxed from her tour of inspection, the girl said:

"Gran'pa Jim, who owns this place?"

"A Mrs. Joselyn," he replied.

"A young woman?"

"I believe so. It was built by her mother, a Mrs. Kenton, some fifteen years ago, and is still called 'the Kenton Place.' Mrs. Kenton died and her daughter, who married a city man named Joselyn, has used it as a summer home until this year. I think Mrs. Joselyn is a woman of considerable means."

"The furnishings prove that," said Mary Louise. "They're not all in the best of taste, but they are plentiful and meant to

be luxurious. Why doesn't Mrs. Joselyn occupy her home this summer? And why, if she is wealthy, does she rent the place?"

"Those are problems I am unable to solve, my dear," replied the Colonel with a smile. "When old man Cragg, who is the nearest approach to a real estate agent in the village, told me the place was for rent, I inquired the price and contracted to lease it for the summer. That satisfied me, Mary Louise, but if you wish to inquire into the history and antecedents of the Kenton and Joselyn families, I have no doubt there are plenty of village gossips who can fill your ears full of it."

"Dar's one thing I foun' out, seh," remarked Uncle Eben, who always served at table and was not too diffident to join in the conversation of his betters, at times; "dis Joselyn man done dis'pear – er run away – er dig out, somehow – an' he missus is mos' plumb crazy 'bout it."

"When did that happen?" asked Mary Louise.

"'Bout Chris'mas time, de stoahkeepah say. Nobody don't like him down heah, 'cause he put on a 'strord'nary 'mount o' airs an' didn't mix wid de town people, nohow. De stoahkeepeh t'inks Marse Joselyn am crooked-like an' done squandeh a lot o' he wife's money befoh he went."

"Perhaps," said Mary Louise musingly, "that is why the poor woman is glad to rent this house. I wish, however, we had gotten it for a more pleasant reason."

"Don't pay attention to Eben's chatter, my dear," advised her grandfather. "His authority seems to be the ancient storekeeper,

whom I saw but once and didn't fancy. He looks like an old owl, in those big, horn-rimmed spectacles."

"Dat stoahkeepeh ain' no owl, Kun'l," asserted Uncle Eben earnestly. "He done know all dey is to know 'roun' dese diggin's, an' a lot moah, too. An' a owl is a mighty wise bird, Kun'l, ef I do say it, an' no disrespec'; so what dat stoahkeepeh say I's boun' to take notice of."

Mary Louise spent the afternoon in examining her new possession and "getting settled." For – wonder of wonders! – Joe Brennan arrived with the trunks at three o'clock, some nine hours before the limit of midnight. The Colonel, as he paid the man, congratulated him on making such good time.

"Ya-as," drawled Joe; "I done pretty well, considerin'. But if I hadn't hired out by the day I'd sure be'n a loser. I've be'n a good ten hours goin' fer them trunks, fer I started at five this mornin'; so, if I'd tooken a doller fer the job, I'd only made ten cents a hour, my price bein' twenty-five. But, as it is," he added with pride, "I git my reg'lar rate of a dollar 'n' a quarter a day."

"Proving that it pays to drive a bargain," commented the Colonel.

Mary Louise unpacked Gran'pa Jim's trunk first and put his room in "apple-pie order," as Aunt Polly admiringly asserted. Then she settled her own pretty room, held a conference with her servants about the meals and supplies, and found it was then time to dress for dinner. She was not yet old enough to find household duties a bore, so the afternoon had been delightfully spent.

Early after breakfast the next morning, however, Mary Louise started out to explore the grounds of her domain. The day was full of sunshine and the air laden with fragrance of flowers – a typical May morning. Gran'pa Jim would, of course, read for an hour or two and smoke his pipe; he drew a chair upon the broad veranda for this very purpose; but the girl had the true pioneer spirit of discovery and wanted to know exactly what her five acres contained.

The water was doubtless the prime attraction in such a neighborhood. Mary Louise made straight for the river bank and found the shallow stream – here scarce fifty feet in width – rippling along over its stony bed, which was a full fifty feet wider than the volume of water then required. When the spring freshets were on perhaps the stream reached its banks, but in the summer months it was usually subdued as now. The banks were four feet or more above the rabble of stones below, and close to the bank, facing the river on her side, Mrs. Kenton had built a pretty pavilion with ample seats and room for half a dozen wicker chairs and a table, where one could sit and overlook the water. Mary Louise fervently blessed the old lady for this idea and at once seated herself in the pavilion while she examined at leisure the scene spread out before her.

Trees hid all the neighboring residences but one. Just across the river and not far from its bank stood a small, weather-beaten cottage that was in sharp contrast with the rather imposing Kenton residence opposite. It was not well kept, nor even

picturesque. The grounds were unattractive. A woodpile stood in the front yard; the steps leading to the little porch had rotted away and had been replaced by a plank – rather unsafe unless one climbed it carefully, Mary Louise thought. There were time-worn shades to the windows, but no curtains. A pane of glass had been broken in the dormer window and replaced by a folded newspaper tacked over it. Beside the porch door stood a washtub on edge; a few scraggly looking chickens wandered through the yard; if not an abode of poverty it was surely a place where careless indifference to either beauty or the comfort of orderly living prevailed.

So much Mary Louise had observed, wondering why Mrs. Kenton had not bought the cottage and torn it down, since it was a blot on the surrounding landscape, when she saw the door open and a man come out. She gave a little gasp of astonishment as her eyes followed this man, who slowly took the path to the bridge, from whence the road led into the village.

CHAPTER III
THE FOLKS ACROSS THE RIVER

Her first glance told the girl that here was a distinctly unusual personage. His very appearance was quaint enough to excite comment from a stranger. It must have been away back in the revolutionary days when men daily wore coats cut in this fashion, straight across the waist-line in front and with two long tails flapping behind. Modern "dress coats" were much like it, to be sure, but this was of a faded blue-bottle color and had brass buttons and a frayed velvet collar on it. His trousers were tight-fitting below the knee and he wore gaiters and a wide-brimmed silk hat that rivaled his own age and had doubtless seen happier days.

Mary Louise couldn't see all these details from her seat in the pavilion across the river, but she was near enough to observe the general effect of the old man's antiquated costume and it amazed her.

Yes, he was old, nearly as ancient as his apparel, the girl decided; but although he moved with slow deliberation his gait was not feeble, by any means. With hands clasped behind him and head slightly bowed, as if in meditation, he paced the length of the well-worn path, reached the bridge and disappeared down the road toward the village.

"That," said a voice beside her, "is the Pooh-Bah of Cragg's Crossing. It is old Cragg himself."

Gran'pa Jim was leaning against the outer breast of the pavilion, book in hand.

"You startled me," she said, "but no more than that queer old man did. Was the village named after him, Gran'pa?"

"I suppose so; or after his father, perhaps, for the place seems even older than old Cragg. He has an 'office' in a bare little room over the store, and I rented this place from him. Whatever his former fortunes may have been – and I imagine the Craggs once owned all the land about here – old Hezekiah seems reduced to a bare existence."

"Perhaps," suggested Mary Louise, "he inherited those clothes with the land, from his father. Isn't it an absurd costume, Gran'pa Jim? And in these days of advanced civilization, too! Of course old Hezekiah Cragg is not strong mentally or he would refuse to make a laughingstock of himself in that way."

Colonel Hathaway stared across the river for a time without answering. Then he said:

"I do not think the natives here laugh at him, although I remember they called him 'Old Swallowtail' when I was directed to him as the only resident real estate agent. I found the old man quite shrewd in driving a bargain and thoroughly posted on all the affairs of the community. However, he is not a gossip, but inclined to be taciturn. There is a fathomless look in his eyes and he is cold and unresponsive. Country life breeds

strange characteristics in some people. The whimsical dress and mannerisms of old Mr. Cragg would not be tolerated in the cities, while here they seem regarded with unconcern because they have become familiar. I was rather, pleased with his personality because he is the Cragg of Cragg's Crossing. How much of the original plot of land he still owns I don't know."

"Why, he lives in that hovel!" said the girl.

"So it seems, although he may have been merely calling there."

"He fits the place," she declared. "It's old and worn and neglected, just as he and his clothes are. I'd be sorry, indeed, to discover that Mr. Cragg lives anywhere else."

The Colonel, his finger between the leaves of the book he held, to mark the place where he was reading, nodded somewhat absently and started to turn away. Then he paused to ask anxiously:

"Does this place please you, my dear?"

"Ever so much, Gran'pa Jim!" she replied with enthusiasm, leaning from her seat inside the pavilion to press a kiss upon his bare gray head. "I've a sense of separation from all the world, yet it seems good to be hidden away in this forgotten nook. Perhaps I wouldn't like it for always, you know, but for a summer it is simply delightful. We can rest – and rest – and rest! – and be as cozy as can be."

Again the old gentleman nodded, smiling at the girl this time. They were good chums, these two, and what pleased one usually pleased the other.

Colonel Hathaway had endured a sad experience recently and his handsome old face still bore the marks of past mental suffering. His only daughter, Beatrice Burrows, who was the mother of Mary Louise, had been indirectly responsible for the Colonel's troubles, but her death had lifted the burden; her little orphaned girl, to whom no blame could be attached, was very dear to "Gran'pa Jim's" heart. Indeed, she was all he now had to love and care for and he continually planned to promote her happiness and to educate her to become a noble woman. Fortunately he had saved considerable money from the remains of an immense estate he had once possessed and so was able to do anything for his grandchild that he desired. In New York and elsewhere Colonel James Hathaway had a host of influential friends, but he was shy of meeting them since his late unpleasant experiences.

Mary Louise, for her part, was devotedly attached to her grandfather and preferred his society to that of any other person. As the erect form of the old gentleman sauntered away through the trees she looked after him affectionately and wagged her little head with hearty approval.

"This is just the place for Gran'pa Jim," she mused. "There's no one to bother him with questions or sympathy and he can live as quietly as he likes and read those stuffy old books – the very name 'classics' makes me shudder – to his heart's content. He'll grow stronger and happier here, I'm sure."

Then she turned anew to revel in the constantly shifting view

of river and woodland that extended panoramically from her seat in the pavilion. As her eyes fell on the old cottage opposite she was surprised to see a dishpan sail through the open window, to fall with a clatter of broken dishes on the hard ground of the yard. A couple of dish-towels followed, and then a broom and a scrubbing-brush – all tossed out in an angry, energetic way that scattered them in every direction. Then on the porch appeared the form of a small girl, poorly dressed in a shabby gingham gown, who danced up and down for a moment as if mad with rage and then, observing the washtub, gave it a kick which sent it rolling off the porch to join the other utensils on the ground.

Next, the small girl looked around her as if seeking more inanimate things upon which to vent her anger, but finding none she dashed into the cottage and soon reappeared with a much-worn straw hat which she jammed on her flaxen head and then, with a determined air, walked down the plank and marched up the path toward the bridge – the same direction that old Cragg had taken a short time before.

Mary Louise gave a gasp of amazement. The scene had been dramatic and exciting while it lasted and it needed no explanation whatever. The child had plainly rebelled at enforced drudgery and was going – where?

Mary Louise sprang lightly from her seat and ran through the grounds to their entrance. When she got to the road she sped along until she came to the bridge, reaching one end of it just as the other girl started to cross from the opposite end. Then she

stopped and in a moment the two met.

"Where are you going?" asked Mary Louise, laying a hand on the child's arm as she attempted to pass her.

"None o' yer business," was the curt reply.

"Oh, it is, indeed," said Mary Louise, panting a little from her run. "I saw you throw things, a minute ago, so I guess you mean to run away."

The girl turned and stared at her.

"I don't know ye," said she. "Never saw ye before. Where'd ye come from anyway?"

"Why, my grandfather and I have taken the Kenton house for the summer, so we're to be your neighbors. Of course, you know, we must get acquainted."

"Ye kin be neighbors to my Gran'dad, if ye like, but not to me. Not by a ginger cookie! I've done wi' this place fer good an' all, I hev, and if ye ever see me here ag'in my name ain't Ingua Scammel!"

"Here; let's sit down on the bridge and talk it over," proposed Mary Louise. "There's plenty of time for you to run away, if you think you'd better. Is Mr. Cragg your grandfather, then?"

"Yes, Ol' Swallertail is. 'Ol' Humbug' is what *I* calls him."

"Not to his face, do you?"

"I ain't so foolish. He's got a grip on him like a lobster, an' when he's mad at me he grips my arm an' twists it till I holler. When Gran'dad's aroun' you bet I hev to knuckle down, er I gits the worst of it."

"So he's cruel, is he?"

"Uh-huh. Thet is, he's cruel when I riles him, as I got a habit o' doin'. When things runs smooth, Gran'dad ain't so bad; but I ain't goin' to stand that slave life no longer, I ain't. I've quit fer good."

"Wherever you go," said Mary Louise gently, "you will have to work for someone. Someone, perhaps, who treats you worse than your grandfather does. No one else is obliged to care for you in any way, so perhaps you're not making a wise change."

"I ain't, eh?"

"Perhaps not. Have you any other relatives to go to?"

"No."

"Or any money?"

"Not a red cent."

"Then you'll have to hire out as a servant. You're not big enough or strong enough to do much, so you'll search a long time before you find work, and that means being hungry and without shelter. I know more of the world than you do, Ingua – what an odd name you have! – and I honestly think you are making a mistake to run away from your own grandfather."

The girl stared into the water in sullen silence for a time. Mary Louise got a good look at her now and saw that her freckled face might be pretty if it were not so thin and drawn. The hands lying on her lap were red and calloused with housework and the child's whole appearance indicated neglect, from the broken-down shoes to the soiled and tattered dress. She seemed to be reflecting, for after a while she gave a short, bitter laugh at the

recollection of her late exhibition of temper and said:

"It's too late to back, down now. I've busted the dishes an' smashed things gen'rally."

"That *is* bad," said Mary Louise; "but it might be worse. Mr. Cragg can buy more dishes."

"Oh, he can, can he? Where's the money comin' from?"

"Is he poor?"

"He ain't got no money, if that's what ye mean. That's what he says, anyhow. Says it were a godsend you folks rented that house of him, 'cause it'll keep us in corn bread an' pork for six months, ef we're keerful. Bein' keerful means that he'll eat the pork an' I gits a chunk o' corn bread now an' then."

"Dear me!" exclaimed Mary Louise in a distressed voice. "Don't you get enough to eat?"

"Oh, I manages it somehow," declared Ingua, with indifference. "I be'n swipin' one egg a day fer weeks an' weeks. Gran'dad says he'll trim me good an' plenty if he catches me eatin' eggs, 'cause all that our chickens lays he takes down to the store an' sells. But he ain't home daytimes, to count what eggs is laid, an' so I watches out an' grabs one a day. He's mighty cute, I tell ye, Gran'dad is; but he ain't cute enough to catch me at the egg-swipin'."

Mary Louise was greatly shocked. Really, she decided, something must be done for this poor child. Looking at the matter from Ingua's report, the smashing of the dishes might prove serious. So she said:

"Come, dear, let's go together to your house and see if we can't restore the damage."

But the girl shook her head.

"Noth'n' can't mend them busted dishes," she said, "an' when Gran'dad sees 'em he'll hev a fit. That's why I did it; I wanted to show him I'd had revenge afore I quit him cold. He won't be home till night, but I gotta be a long way off, afore then, so's he can't ketch me."

"Give it up," suggested Mary Louise. "I've come here to live all summer, Ingua, and now that we're friends I'm going to help you to get along more comfortably. We will have some splendid times together, you and I, and you will be a good deal better off than wandering among strangers who don't care for you."

The girl turned and looked into Mary Louise's face long and earnestly. Her eyes wandered to her neatly arranged hair, to the white collar at her throat, then down to her blue serge dress and her dainty shoes. But mostly she looked straight into the eyes of her new friend and found there sincerity and evident good will. So she sighed deeply, cast a glance at her own bedraggled attire, and said:

"We ain't much alike, us two, but I guess we kin be friends. Other girls has come here, to the rich people's houses, but they all stuck up their noses at me. You're the first that's ever give me a word."

"All girls are not alike, you know," responded Mary Louise cheerfully. "So now, let's go to your house and see what damage

has been done."

CHAPTER IV
GETTING ACQUAINTED

The two girls had been sitting on the edge of the bridge, but Mary Louise now rose and took Ingua's arm in her own, leading the reluctant child gently toward the path. It wasn't far to the old cottage and when they reached the yard Ingua laughed again at the scene of disorder.

"It's a'most a pity Gran'dad can't see it," she chuckled. "He'd be so crazy he'd hev them claws o' his'n 'round my throat in a jiffy."

Mary Louise drew back, startled.

"Did he ever do that?" she asked.

"Only once; but that time near ended me. It were a long time ago, an' he was sorry, I guess, 'cause he bought me a new dress nex' day – an' new shoes! I ain't had any since," she added disconsolately, "so the other day I asked him wasn't it about time he choked me ag'in."

"What did he say to that?"

"Jes' growled at me. Gran'dad's got a awful temper when he's good an' riled, but usual' he's still as a mouse. Don't say a word to me fer days together, sometimes. Once I saw him – "

She suddenly checked herself and cast an uneasy, sidelong glance at her companion. Mary Louise was rolling the washtub

back to the stoop.

"The only thing that will bother us, Ingua," she said, "is those dishes. Let us try to count the broken ones. Do you know how many there were?"

"Sure I do," answered the girl, removing the battered dishpan from the heap of crockery. "Two plates, two cups-'n'-saucers, a oatmeal dish, a bread plate an' the pork platter. Gee! what a smash. One cup's whole – an' the oatmeal dish. The rest is gone-up."

"I'm going to dig a hole and bury the broken pieces," said Mary Louise. "Have you a spade?"

"There's an ol' shovel. But it won't do no good to bury of 'em. Gran'dad he counts ev'ry piece ev'ry day. He counts ev'ry thing, from the grains of salt to the chickens. Say, once I tried to play a trick on him. I'd got so hungry fer meat I jes' couldn't stand it, so one day I killed a chick'n, thinkin' he wouldn't miss it. My – my! Wha' d'ye s'pose? Say, ye never told me yer name yit."

"I am Mary Louise Burrows."

"Highflyin' name, ain't it? Well, I killed thet chick'n, an' cut it up an' fried it, an' et jes' a leg an' a wing, an' hid the rest under my bed in the peak up there, where Ol' Swallertail never goes. All the feathers an' the head I buried, an' I cleaned up the hatchet an' the fry-in'-pan so's there wasn't a smitch of anything left to prove I'd murdered one o' them chicks. I was feelin' kinder chirky when Gran'dad come home, 'cause I thought he'd never find out. But what did the ol' vill'n do but begin to sniff aroun'; an' he sniffed

an' he sniffed till he says: 'Ingua, what chick'n did ye kill, an' why did ye kill it?'

"'Yer crazy,' says I. 'What're ye talkin' 'bout?'

"Then he gives me one sour look an' marches out to count the chick'ns, an' when he comes back he says: 'It's the brown pullet with white on the wings. It were worth forty cents, an' forty cents'll buy ten pounds o' oatmeal. Where's the chick'n, girl?' 'Et up,' says I. 'Yer lyin',' says he. 'Go git it! Hustle!'

"Well, I saw his claws beginnin' to work an' it scared me stiff. So I goes to my room an' brings down the chick'n, an' he eyes it quiet-like fer a long time an' then eats some fer his supper. The rest he locks up in the cupboard that he allus carries the key to. Say, Mary Louise, I never got another taste o' that chick'n as long as it lasted! Ol' Swallertail et it all himself, an' took a week to do it."

During this recital the broom and mop and scrubbing-brush had been picked up and restored to their proper places. Then the two girls got out the old shovel and buried the broken dishes in a far corner of the yard, among high weeds. Mary Louise tried to get the dents out of the old dishpan, but succeeded only indifferently. It was so battered through long use, however, that Ingua thought the "jams" would not be noticed.

"Next," said Mary Louise, "we must replace the broken pieces. I suppose they sell dishes at the village store, do they not?"

"That's where these come from – long ago," replied Ingua; "but dishes cost money."

"I've a little money in my purse; enough for that, I'm sure. Will you go to town with me?"

Ingua stared at her as if bewildered. The proposition was wholly beyond her understanding. But she replied to her new friend's question, saying slowly:

"No; I won't go. Ol' Swallertail'd skin me alive if he caught me in the village."

"Then I'll go alone; and I'll soon be back, though I must run over to my own house first, to get my purse and my hat. Let me have one of the cups for a sample, Ingua."

She left the child sitting on the plank runway and looking rather solemn and thoughtful. Mary Louise was somewhat fearful that she might run away in her absence, so she hurried home and from there walked into the village, a tramp easily accomplished in ten minutes.

The store was the biggest building in town, but not very big at that. It was "clapboarded" and two stories in height, the upper floor being used by Sol Jerrems, the storekeeper, as a residence, except for two little front rooms which he rented, one to Miss Huckins, the dressmaker and milliner, who slept and ate in her shop, and the other to Mr. Cragg. A high platform had been built in front of the store, for the convenience of farmer customers in muddy weather, and there were steps at either end of the platform for the use of pedestrians.

When Mary Louise entered the store, which was cluttered with all sorts of goods, not arranged in very orderly manner, there

were several farmers present. But old Sol had his eye on her in an instant and shuffled forward to wait upon her.

"I want some crockery, please," she said.

He looked at the sample cup and led her to a corner of the room where a jumble of dishes crowded a single shelf.

"I take it you're one o' them new folks at the Kenton Place," he remarked.

"Yes," said she.

"Thought ther' was plenty o' dishes in that place," continued Mr. Jerrems, in a friendly tone. "But p'r'aps ye don't want the black folks t' eat off'n the same things ye do yerselves."

Mary Louise ignored this speech and selected the dishes she wanted. She had measured the broken platter and found another of the same size. Old Sol wouldn't sell a saucer without a cup, explaining that the two always went together: "the cup to hold the stuff an' the saucer to drink it out'n." Without argument, however, the girl purchased what she wanted. It was heavy, cheap ware of the commonest kind, but she dared not substitute anything better for it.

Then she went to the grocery counter and after considering what Ingua might safely hide and eat in secret she bought a tin of cooked corned beef, another of chipped beef, one of deviled ham and three tins of sardines. Also she bought a basket to carry her purchases in and although old Sol constantly sought to "pump" her concerning her past life, present history and future prospects, she managed to evade successfully his thirst for information. No

doubt the fellow was a great gossip, as old Eben had declared, but Mary Louise knew better than to cater to this dangerous talent.

The proprietor accompanied her to the door and she drew back, hesitating, as she observed an old man in a bottle-blue swallowtail coat pace in deliberate, dignified manner along the opposite side of the street.

"Who is that?" she asked, as an excuse for not going out until Ingua's grandfather had passed from sight.

"That? Why, that's Ol' Swallertail, otherwise Hezekiah Cragg, one o' our most interestin' citizens," replied Sol, glad of the chance to talk.

"Does he own Cragg's Crossing?" asked Mary Louise.

"Mercy, no! He owned a lot of it once, though, but that were afore my time. Sold it out an' squandered the money, I guess, for he lives like a rat in a hole. Mebbe, though, he's got some hid away; that's what some o' the folks here whispers – folks that's likely to know. But, if that's a fact, he's got a streak o' miser in him, for he don't spend more'n the law allows."

"He may have lost the money in speculations," suggested the girl.

"Say, ye've hit the nail square on the head!" he exclaimed admiringly. "Them's my own opinions to a T. I've told the boys so a hunderd times, but they can't git it. Wasn't Ol' Swal-lertail hand-in-glove wi' that slick Mister Joselyn, who they say has run away an' left his pore wife in the lurch? That's how you got a chance to rent the Kenton house. Joselyn were slick as

butter, an' high-strung. Wouldn't hobnob with any o' us but Ol' Swallertail, an' that's why I think Cragg was investin' money with him. Joselyn he came down here three year ago, havin' married Annabel Kenton in the winter, an' the way he swelled aroun' were a caution to snakes. But the pore devil run his rope an' lit out. Where he skipped to, I dunno. Nobuddy seems to know, not even his wife. But they say she didn't hev enough money left to count, an' by the glum looks o' Ol' Swallertail I'm guessin' he got nipped too."

"How long ago was that?" asked Mary Louise.

"Some time 'bout last Christmas, they say. Anyhow, that's when his wife missed him an' set up a hunt that didn't do no good. She came down here with red eyes an' tramped 'round in the deep snow askin' questions. But, sakes, Ned Joselyn wouldn't 'a' come to an out-o'-the-way place like this; we didn't never suit his style, ye see; so poor Ann Kenton – whose misfortun' made her Mrs. Ned Joselyn – cried an' wailed fer a day er two an' then crep' back to the city like a whipped dog. Funny how women'll care fer a wuthless, ne'er-do-well chap that happens to be good-lookin', ain't it?"

Mary Louise nodded rather absently. However distorted the story might be, it was curious what had become of Mr. Joselyn. But her thoughts reverted to another theme and she asked:

"Hasn't Mr. Cragg a granddaughter?"

"Oh, ye've seen little Ingua Scammel, hev ye? Or mebbe just heard tell of her. She's the cussedest little coal o' fire in seven

counties! Keeps Ol' Swallertail guessin' all the time, they say, jes' like her mom, Nan Cragg, did afore her. Gosh, what a woman her mom were! She didn't stay 'round here much, but whenever she run out o' cash an' didn't hev a square meal comin' to her, she camped on Ol' Swallertail an' made him board her. Las' time she come she left her young-un – that's Ingua, ye know – an' the kid's been here ever since; sort of a thorn in the side of ol' Hezekiah, we folks think, though he don't never complain. She ain't more'n twelve or thirteen year old, thet Ingua, but she keeps house fer her gran'dad – what they is to keep, which ain't much. I won't let the kid 'round my store, nohow, 'cause she swipes ev'rything, from dried apples to peanuts, thet she kin lay her hands on."

"Perhaps she is hungry," said Mary Louise, defending her new friend.

"Like enough. But I ain't feedin' starvin' kids, 'Tain't my business. If Ol' Swallertail don't feed her enough, thet's *his* lookout. I've warned him if she sets foot in this store I'll charge him ten cents, jes' fer safety, so he keeps her out. He's slick, Ol' Swallertail is, an' silent-like an' secret in all he does an' says; but he's got to git up earlier in the mornin' to git the best o' Sol Jerrems, he er his kid, either one."

As Mr. Cragg had now vanished from sight up the street, Mary Louise ventured out and after a brisk walk deposited her basket on the stoop of the Cragg cottage, where Ingua still sat, swinging her feet pensively, as if she had not stirred since Mary Louise had left her.

CHAPTER V
MARY LOUISE BECOMES A PEACEMAKER

"Here are the dishes, exactly like the broken ones," reported Mary Louise in a jubilant tone as she set down her heavy basket. "Let us go in and wash them, Ingua, and put them away where they belong."

The child followed her into the house. All her former pent-up energy seemed to have evaporated. She moved in a dull sort of way that betokened grim resignation.

"I've be'n plannin' fer months to make a run fer it," she remarked as she washed the new dishes and Mary Louise wiped them dry, "an' just when I'd mustered up courage to do the trick, along comes *you* an' queered the whole game."

"You'll thank me for that, some day, Ingua. Aren't you glad, even now, that you have a home and shelter?"

"I ain't tickled to death about it. Home!" with a scornful glance around the room, barren of all comforts. "A graveyard's a more cheerful place, to my notion."

"We must try to make it pleasanter, dear. I'm going to get acquainted with Mr. Cragg and coax him to brighten things up some, and buy you some new clothes, and take better care of you."

Ingua fell back on a stool, fairly choking twixt amazement and derision.

"You! Coax Ol' Swallertail? Make him spend money on *me!* Say, if ye wasn't a stranger here, Mary Louise, I'd jes' laugh; but bein' as how yer a poor innercent, I'll only say ther' ain't no power on earth kin coax Gran'dad to do anything better than to scowl an' box my ears. You don't know him, but *I* do."

"Meantime," said Mary Louise, refusing to argue the point, "here are some little things for you to hide away, and to eat whenever you please," and she took from the basket the canned goods she had bought and set them in an enticing row upon the table.

Ingua stared at the groceries and then stared at Mary Louise. Her wan face flushed and then grew hard.

"Ye bought them fer *me?*" she asked.

"Yes; so you won't have to steal eggs to satisfy your natural hunger."

"Well, ye kin take the truck away ag'in. An' you'd better go with it," said the girl indignantly. "We may be poor, but we ain't no beggars, an' we don't take charity from nobody."

"But your grandfather – "

"We'll pay our own bills an' buy our own fodder. The Craggs is jus' as good as yer folks, an' I'm a Cragg to the backbone," she cried, her eyes glinting angrily. "If we want to starve, it's none o' yer business, ner nobody else's," and springing up she seized the tins one by one and sent them flying through the window,

as she had sent the dishpan and dishes earlier in the morning. "Now, then, foller yer charity an' make yerself scarce!" and she stamped her foot defiantly at Mary Louise, who was dumb with astonishment.

It was hard to understand this queer girl. She had made no objection to replacing the broken dishes, yet a present of food aroused her to violent anger. Her temper was positively something terrible in so small a person and remembering her story of how Old Swallowtail had clenched his talon-like fingers and twisted Ingua's arm till she screamed with pain, Mary Louise could well believe the statement that the child was "a Cragg to the backbone."

But Mary Louise, although only a few years older than Ingua, had had a good deal more experience and was, moreover, a born diplomat. Astonished though she was, she quickly comprehended the peculiar pride exhibited in a refusal to accept food from a stranger and knew she must soothe the girl's outraged spirit of independence if they were to remain friends.

"I guess I'll have to beg your pardon, Ingua," she said quietly. "I was grieved that you are so often hungry, while I have so much more than I need, and the money which I spent was all my own, to do what I liked with. If I were in your place, and you in mine, and we were good chums, as I know we're going to be, I'd be glad to have you help me in any little way you could. True friends, Ingua, share and share alike and don't let any foolish pride come between them."

She spoke earnestly, with a ring of sincerity in her voice that impressed the other girl. Ingua's anger had melted as quickly as it had roused and with sudden impulsiveness she seized Mary Louise's hands in her own and began to cry.

"I'm as wicked as they make 'em!" she wailed. "I know I am! But I can't help it, Mary Louise; it's borned in me. I want to be friends with ye, but I won't take your charity if I starve. Not now, anyhow. Here; I'll go git the stuff an' put it back in yer basket, an' then ye kin lug it home an' do what ye please with it."

They picked up the cans together, Ingua growing more calm and cheerful each moment. She even laughed at Mary Louise's disappointed expression and said:

"I don't always hev tantrums. This is my bad day; but the devils'll work out o' me by termorrer and I'll be sweet as sugar. I'm sorry; but it's the Cragg blood that sets me crazy, at times."

"Won't you run over and see me?" asked Mary Louise, preparing to go home.

"When?"

"This afternoon."

Ingua shook her head.

"I dastn't," she said. "I gotta hold myself in, the rest o' the day, so's I won't fight with Ol' Swallertail when he comes home. Anyhow, I ain't fit t' show up aroun' yer swell place. That black coon o' yers'd turn me out, if he saw me comin', thinkin' I was a tramp."

Mary Louise had a bright idea.

"I'm going to have tea to-morrow afternoon in that summer-house across the creek," said she. "I will be all alone and if you will come over and join me we'll have a nice visit together. Will you, Ingua?"

"I guess so," was the careless answer. "When ye're ready, jes' wave yer han'ker'cher an if the devils ain't squeezin' my gizzard, like they is to-day, I'll be there in a jiffy."

CHAPTER VI
AFTERNOON TEA

Mary Louise, who possessed a strong sense of humor, that evening at dinner told Gran'pa Jim of her encounter with old Mr. Cragg's granddaughter and related their interview in so whimsical a manner that Colonel Hathaway laughed aloud more than once. But he also looked serious, at times, and when the recital was ended he gravely considered the situation and said:

"I believe, my dear, you have discovered a mine of human interest here that will keep you occupied all summer. It was most fortunate for the poor child that you interpreted her intent to run away from home and foiled it so cleverly. From the little girl's report, that grim and dignified grandsire of hers has another and less admirable side to his character and, unless she grossly exaggerates, has a temper so violent that he may do her a mischief some day."

"I'm afraid of that, too," declared Mary Louise, "especially as the child is so provoking. Yet I'm sure Ingua has a sweeter side to her nature, if it can be developed, and perhaps old Cragg has, too. Do you think, Gran'pa Jim, it would be advisable for me to plead with him to treat his orphaned grandchild more considerately?"

"Not at present, my dear. I'll make some inquiries concerning Cragg and when we know more about him we can better judge

how best to help Ingua. Are you sure that is her name?"

"Yes; isn't it an odd name?"

"Somewhere," said the Colonel, musingly, "I have heard it before, but just now I cannot recollect where. It seems to me, however, that it was a man's name. Do you think the child's mother is dead?"

"I gathered from what Ingua and the storekeeper said that she has simply disappeared."

"An erratic sort of creature, from the vague reports you have heard," commented Gran'pa Jim. "But, whatever her antecedents may have been, there is no reason why Ingua may not be rescued from her dreadful environments and be made to become a quite proper young lady, if not a model one. But that can only result from changing the existing character of her environment, rather than taking her out of them."

"That will be a big task, Gran'pa Jim, and it may prove beyond me, but I'll do the best I can."

He smiled.

"These little attempts to help our fellows," said the Colonel, "not only afford us pleasure but render us stronger and braver in facing our own tribulations, which none, however securely placed, seem able to evade."

Mary Louise gave him a quick, sympathetic glance. He had surely been brave and strong during his own period of tribulation and the girl felt she could rely on his aid in whatever sensible philanthropy she might undertake. She was glad, indeed, to have

discovered poor Ingua, for she was too active and of too nervous a temperament to be content simply to "rest" all summer. Rest was good for Gran'pa Jim, just now, but rest pure and simple, with no compensating interest, would soon drive Mary Louise frantic.

She conferred with Aunt Polly the next day and told the faithful black servant something of her plans. So, when the old cook lugged a huge basket to the pavilion for her in the afternoon, and set a small table with snowy linen and bright silver, with an alcohol arrangement for making tea, she said with an air of mystery:

"Don' yo' go open dat bastik, Ma'y 'Weeze, till de time comes fer eatin'. I jes' wants to s'prise yo' – yo' an' dat li'l' pooah girl what gits hungry so much."

So, when Aunt Polly had gone back to the house, Mary Louise arranged her table and then stood up and waved a handkerchief to signal that all was ready.

Soon Ingua appeared in her doorway, hesitated a moment, and then ran down the plank and advanced to the river bank instead of following the path to the bridge. Almost opposite the pavilion Mary Louise noticed that several stones protruded from the surface of the water. They were not in a line, but placed irregularly. However, Ingua knew their lie perfectly and was able to step from one to another until she had quickly passed the water. Then she ran up the dry bed of the river to the bank, where steps led to the top.

"Why, this is fine!" exclaimed Mary Louise, meeting her little friend at the steps. "I'd no idea one could cross the river in that way."

"Oh, we've known 'bout that always," was the reply. "Ned Joselyn used to come to our house ever so many times by the river stones, to talk with Ol' Swallertail, an' Gran'dad used to come over here, to this same summer-house, an' talk with Joselyn."

Mary Louise noticed that the old gingham dress had been washed, ironed and mended – all in a clumsy manner. Ingua's blond hair had also been trained in awkward imitation of the way Mary Louise dressed her own brown locks. The child, observing her critical gaze, exclaimed with a laugh:

"Yes, I've slicked up some. No one'll see me but you, will they?" she added suspiciously.

"No, indeed; we're to be all alone. How do you feel to-day, Ingua?"

"The devils are gone. Gran'dad didn't 'spicion anything las' night an' never said a word. He had one o' his dreamy fits an' writ letters till long after I went to bed. This mornin' he said as ol' Sol Jerrems has raised the price o' flour two cents, so I'll hev to be keerful; but that was all. No rumpus ner anything."

"That's nice," said Mary Louise, leading her, arm in arm, to the pavilion. "Aren't you glad you didn't run away?"

Ingua did not reply. Her eyes, big and round, were taking in every detail of the table. Then they wandered to the big basket and Mary Louise smiled and said:

"The table is set, as you see, but I don't know what we're to have to eat. I asked Aunt Polly to put something in the basket, as I was going to have company, and I'm certain there'll be *enough* for two, whatever it's like. You see, this is a sort of surprise party, for we won't know what we've got until we unpack the basket."

Ingua nodded, much interested.

"Ye said 'tea,'" she remarked, "an' I hain't tasted tea sence Marm left us. But I s'pose somethin' goes with tea?"

"Always. Tea means a lunch, you know, and I'm very hungry because I didn't eat much luncheon at noon. I hope you are hungry, too, Ingua," she added, opening the basket and beginning to place its contents upon the table.

Ingua may have considered a reply unnecessary, for she made none. Her eyes were growing bigger every moment, for here were dainty sandwiches, cakes, jelly, a pot of marmalade, an assortment of cold meats, olives, Saratoga chips, and last of all a chicken pie still warm from the oven – one of those chicken pies that Aunt Polly could make as no one else ever made them.

Even Mary Louise was surprised at the array of eatables. It was a veritable feast. But without comment she made the tea, the water being already boiling, and seating Ingua opposite her at the table she served the child as liberally as she dared, bearing in mind her sensitiveness to "charity."

But Ingua considered this a "party," where as a guest she was entitled to all the good things, and she ate with a ravenous haste that was pitiful, trying the while not to show how hungry she was

or how good everything tasted to her.

Mary Louise didn't burden her with conversation during the meal, which she prolonged until the child positively could eat no more. Then she drew their chairs to a place where they had the best view of the river and woodland – with the old Cragg cottage marring the foreground – and said:

"Now we will have a good, long talk together."

Ingua sighed deeply.

"Don't we hev to do the dishes?" she asked.

"No; Aunt Polly will come for them, by and by. All we have to do now is to enjoy your visit, which I hope you will repeat many times while I am living here."

Again the child sighed contentedly.

"I wish ye was goin' ter stay always," she remarked. "You folks is a sight nicer'n that Joselyn tribe. They kep' us stirred up a good deal till Ned – "

She stopped abruptly.

"What were the Joselyns like?" inquired Mary Louise, in a casual tone that was meant to mask her curiosity.

"Well, that's hard to say," answered Ingua thoughtfully. "Ol' Mis' Kenton were a good lady, an' ev'rybody liked her; but after she died Ann Kenton come down here with a new husban', who were Ned Joselyn, an' then things began to happen. Ned was slick as a ban'box an' wouldn't hobnob with nobody, at first; but one day he got acquainted with Ol' Swallertail an' they made up somethin' wonderful. I guess other folks didn't know 'bout their

bein' so close, fer they was sly 'bout it, gen'rally. They'd meet in this summer-house, or they'd meet at our house, crossin' the river on the steppin'-stones; but when Ned came over to us Gran'dad allus sent me away an' said he'd skin me if I listened. But one day – No, I mus'n't tell that," she said, checking herself quickly, as a hard look came over her face.

"Why not?" softly asked Mary Louise.

"'Cause if I do I'll git killed, that's why," answered the child, in a tone of conviction.

Something in her manner startled her hearer.

"Who would kill you, Ingua?" she asked.

"Gran'dad would."

"Oh, I'm sure he wouldn't do that, whatever you said."

"Ye don't know Gran'dad, Mary Louise. He'd as lief kill me as look at me, if I give him cause to."

"And he has asked you not to talk about Mr. Joselyn?"

"He tol' me ter keep my mouth shet or he'd murder me an' stick my body in a hole in the yard. An' he'd do it in a minute, ye kin bank on that."

"Then," said Mary Louise, looking troubled, "I advise you not to say anything he has forbidden you to. And, if anything ever happens to you while I'm here, I shall tell Gran'pa Jim to have Mr. Cragg arrested and put in prison."

"Will ye? Will ye – honest?" asked the girl eagerly. "Say! that'll help a lot. If I'm killed, I'll know I'll be revenged."

So tragic was her manner that Mary Louise could have

laughed outright had she not felt there was a really serious foundation for Ingua's fears. There was something about the silent, cold-featured, mysterious old man that led her to believe he might be guilty of any crime. But, after all, she reflected, she knew Mr. Cragg's character only from Ingua's description of it, and the child feared and hated him.

"What does your grandfather do in his office all day?" she inquired after a long pause.

"Writes letters an' reads the ones he gits, I guess. He don't let me go to his office."

"Does he get many letters, then?"

"Heaps an' heaps of 'em. You ask Jim Bennett, who brings the mail bag over from the station ev'ry day."

"Is Jim Bennett the postman?"

"His wife is. Jim lugs the mail 'tween the station an' his own house – that's the little white house next the church – where his wife, who's deef-'n'-dumb, runs the postoffice. I know Jim. He says there's 'bout six letters a year for the farmers 'round here, an' 'bout one a week for Sol Jerrems – which is mostly bills – an' all the rest belongs to Ol' Swallertail."

Mary Louise was puzzled.

"Has he a business, then?" she asked.

"Not as anybody knows of."

"But why does he receive and answer so many letters?"

"Ye'll hev to guess. I've guessed, myself; but what's the use? If he was as stingy of postage stamps as he is of pork an' oatmeal,

he wouldn't send a letter a year."

Mary Louise scented a mystery. Mysteries are delightful things to discover, and fascinating to solve. But who would have thought this quiet, retired village harbored a mystery?

"Does your grandfather ever go away from here? Does he travel much?" was her next question.

"He ain't never been out of Cragg's Crossing sence I've knowed him."

"Really," said Mary Louise, "it is perplexing."

Ingua nodded. She was feeling quite happy after her lunch and already counted Mary Louise a warm friend. She had never had a friend before, yet here was a girl of nearly her own age who was interested in her and her history and sweetly sympathetic concerning her woes and worries. To such a friend Ingua might confide anything, almost; and, while she was not fully aware of that fact just now, she said impulsively:

"Without tellin' what'd cost me my life, or lettin' anybody know what's become of Ned Joselyn, I'll say they was money – lots o' money! – passed atween him an' ol' Swallertail. Sometimes the heap went to one, an' sometimes to the other; I seen it with my own eyes, when Gran'dad didn't know I was spyin'. But it didn't stick to either one, for Ned was – " She stopped short, then continued more slowly: "When Ned dis'peared, he'd spent all his own an' his wife's money, an' Ol' Swallertail ain't got enough t' live decent."

"Are you sure of that, Ingua?"

"N-o, I ain't sure o' noth'n. But he don't spend no money, does he?"

"For stamps," Mary Louise reminded her.

Then the child grew silent and thoughtful again. Mary Louise, watching the changing expressions on her face, was convinced she knew more of the mystery than she dared confide to her new friend. There was no use trying to force her confidence, however; in her childish way she was both shrewd and stubborn and any such attempt would be doomed to failure. But after quite a period of silence Mary Louise asked gently:

"Did you like Mr. Joselyn, Ingua?"

"Sometimes. Only when – " Another self-interruption. She seemed often on the point of saying something her better judgment warned her not to. "Sometimes Ned were mighty good to me. Sometimes he brought me candy, when things was goin' good with him. Once, Mary Louise, he kissed me, an' never wiped off his mouth afterwards! Y-e-s, I liked Ned, 'ceptin' when – " Another break. "I thought Ned was a pretty decent gink."

"Where did you learn all your slang, dear?"

"What's slang?"

"Calling a man a 'gink,' and words like that."

"Oh. Marm was full o' them words," she replied with an air of pride. "They seem to suit things better than common words; don't you think so, Mary Louise?"

"Sometimes," with an indulgent smile. "But ladies do not use them, Ingua, because they soil the purity of our language."

"Well," said the girl, "it'll be a long time, yit, afore I'm a lady, so I guess I'll talk like Marm did. Marm weren't a *real* lady, to my mind, though she claimed she'd show anybody that said she wasn't. Real ladies don't leave the'r kids in the clutches of Ol' Swallertails."

Mary Louise did not think it wise to criticize the unknown Mrs. Scammel or to allow the woman's small daughter to do so. So she changed the subject to more pleasant and interesting topics and the afternoon wore speedily away.

Finally Ingua jumped up and said:

"I gotta go. If Gran'dad don't find supper ready there'll be another rumpus, an' I've been so happy to-day that I want to keep things pleasant-like."

"Won't you take the rest of these cakes with you?" urged Mary Louise.

"Nope. I'll eat one more, on my way home, but I ain't one o' them tramps that wants food pushed at 'em in a bundle. We ain't got much to home, but what we got's ours."

A queer sort of mistaken pride, Mary Louise reflected, as she watched the girl spring lightly over the stepping-stones and run up the opposite bank. Evidently Ingua considered old Mr. Cragg her natural guardian and would accept nothing from others that he failed to provide her with. Yet, to judge from her speech, she detested her grandfather and regarded him with unspeakable aversion.

CHAPTER VII
MARY LOUISE CALLS FOR HELP

All the queer hints dropped by the girl that afternoon, concerning the relations between Mr. Joselyn and Mr. Cragg, were confided by Mary Louise to her Gran'pa Jim that evening, while the old Colonel listened with grave interest.

"I'm sure there is some mystery here," declared Mary Louise, "and maybe we are going to discover some dreadful crime."

"And, on the contrary," returned Colonel Hathaway, "the two men may have been interested together in some business venture that resulted disastrously and led Mr. Joselyn to run away to escape his wife's reproaches. I consider that a more logical solution of your mystery, my dear."

"In that case," was her quick reply, "why is Mr. Cragg still writing scores of letters and getting bags full of replies? I don't believe that business deal – whatever it was – is ended, by any means. I think that Ned Joselyn and Old Swallowtail are still carrying it on, one in hiding and the other here – and to be here is to be in hiding, also. And it isn't an honest business, Gran'pa Jim, or they wouldn't be so secret about it."

The Colonel regarded his young granddaughter with surprise.

"You seem quite logical in your reasoning, my dear," he confessed, "and, should your conjectures prove correct, these

men are using the mails for illegal purposes, for which crime the law imposes a severe penalty. But consider, Mary Louise, is it our duty to trail criminals and through our investigations bring them to punishment?"

Mary Louise took time to consider this question, as she had been advised to do. When she replied she had settled the matter firmly in her mind.

"We are part of the Government, Gran'pa Jim," she asserted. "If we believe the Government is being wronged – which means the whole people is being wronged – I think we ought to uphold the law and bring the wrong-doer to justice."

"Allowing that," said her grandfather, "let us next consider what grounds you have for your belief that wrong is being committed. Are they not confined to mere suspicions? Suspicions aroused by the chatter of a wild, ungoverned child? Often the amateur detective gets into trouble through accusing the innocent. Law-abiding citizens should not attempt to uncover all the wrongs that exist, or to right them. The United States Government employs special officers for such duties."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.