



Chapter VII

At last Indian Summer settled in with its clear, mild days. The community planned an afternoon and evening of pleasure and feasting to welcome their young teacher from the West. There was much excitement. The children whispered, then hushed and took on an innocent air when Teacher came near.

The day of the celebration was crisp and pleasant in its respite from the cold. The schoolhouse must be shining clean, the children's slates stacked neatly away, the kitchen in order. There was to be no school that day, but Kathleen went as usual to give last minute touches. She was a little nervous about meeting the families of her pupils.

Early in the afternoon the Judge, with Harold's help, and the eager but somewhat dubious assistance of Little Tubby, loaded Mary's organ into the big wagon and transported it to the schoolhouse. They wrapped and padded it with quilts to protect the fancy scrollwork and the ornamented panels and treadles. "Mary enjoys playing at the gatherings," the Judge said. He also carefully wrapped his Spanish guitar and took it along. There would be music, they said.

At the beginning of each school day it had become a ritual for the children to sing to Kathleen's accompaniment on the piano. It gave the day a happy start, for the sorrowful nature of the favored music of the time was disguised as the jolly voices carried – cheerful and loud.

Now it was time to mount the sidesaddle, ride home, and get ready for the occasion. As they were dressing Sarah suggested, "Kathleen, would you let me fix your hair? I've been thinking it would be so pretty if I'd loosen your bun and try a different fashion. I think I could fix it like I saw on a stylish lady in town. Do you mind if I try?"

"I don't know if there's much you can do with my hair. I just washed it but I know it can never be as beautiful as yours. You may certainly do what you can."

"We'll see. You have nice hair. I think you might like the way I fix it."

Lighting the lamp, Sarah held the curling iron above the chimney top to let it heat. She fashioned luxuriant waves lifting and mingling above the brow and at the temples, then formed a softly twisted coil reaching from high on the back of the head to a tapering at the nape of the neck. She pinned it in place with large tortoise-shell hairpins, taking care to conceal them under the silken golden hair.

Kathleen chose her most becoming dress with its demure high neckline and soft fullness at the bosom. Looking into the mirror she was surprised at the transformation from her habitual puritanical style, and was pleased that she appeared more grownup, more like a genuine teacher should look. The warm highlights of her hair, the youthful freshness of her skin and the elegant curve of her neck, bared by the uplifted style, brought forth a touch of beauty that she had never suspected she possessed. Her dark eyes glowed as she expressed to Sarah her appreciation. The realization that she was suddenly attractive bolstered her confidence. She was ready to meet the members of the community.

Sarah regarded her, "Gracious sakes, Kathleen! You look beautiful. The other girls will have to watch their beaux tonight."

"Oh, Sarah, you are being kind."

"No, Kathleen. You'll make them sit up and take notice tonight. I'll bet you can take your pick of the young fellows. You know, every young teacher we've ever had got married the first year she was here and then we had to find a new one to take her place." As if on sudden thought she added, "Except lately – except the last two – and Miss Harvey was planning to be married. . . when it happened again." Her face grew grave. She threw a quick glance at Kathleen and pressing her lips together, she turned away, hiding her distress. Kathleen wondered at her strange manner, but Sarah offered no explanation.

They rode to the schoolhouse in the Robinson's two-seated rig pulled by their matched team of spirited, blood bay horses. With black satin manes lifting in the breeze of their passage and ebony tails carried proudly, the gleaming red coats and arched necks of the team drawing the black carriage made a striking picture. The harness jingled its shining metal rings, and the bridles sported their floating red horsehair tassels. The Judge was justly proud of his beautiful team and rig.

In the schoolyard horses waited patiently, an occasional one resting a hind foot, the relaxed leg bent at the hock and the hoof daintily touching the ground. Teams of horses switched flies drowsily, their twitching hides setting into lazy motion the hanging strings of their flynets. On the playground stakes had been set and men were pitching horseshoes, while boys climbed the great spreading trees that were off

limits during the noon hour and recesses. Young folks played party games – Skip to M'Lou and Jolly is the Miller Boy, the directions being sung to accompany their lively activity.

*Jolly is the miller boy who lives by the mill
The wheel turns around with a right good will
One hand in the hopper and the other in the sack
Ladies step forward and the gents fall back.*

It was surprising to see German children participating in the party games for the report was that they considered dancing dreadfully sinful. The manner of dress of these people separated them from the style-conscious women of the upper valley where the Robinsons lived. Although freshly starched, neatly ironed and spotlessly clean, the German women's dresses were of a plain and serviceable nature. Since the low fertile valley was more productive than that of the upper valley and the German men known to be excellent farmers and good providers, one might expect their families to display more evidence of wealth. But they were frugal and simple folk and spurned frivolous fashions. The women's hands were never idle, and even while sitting and visiting with neighbors, their knitting needles clicked briskly in the production of shawls, stockings and other items of apparel. In the seclusion of the kitchen area an occasional mother nursed her baby, her breast covered modestly. The children, many children of all ages, had shining, cleanly scrubbed faces. The girls' dresses seemed to have been cut from a single outmoded pattern, as did those of their mothers. Mary had reported that there was not one button on their clothing, but hooks and eyes were used as fasteners, for in the Old Country, buttons had been made from the bones of people who had been slaughtered, and therefore they were banned by the sect.

The Hill People had a manner of dressing that was all their own. Some of the men made do with only one suspender that hitched their trousers unevenly high, leaving the lower extremities in want of a bit more length. The girls favored dresses that were rather scanty and provocative. Or so it seemed to Kathleen, accustomed as she was to the complete coverage and generous skirts she had been led to consider respectable.

It was a merry gathering. In the schoolyard men discussed crops and recent events while women and older girls, laughing and calling greetings, carried their loads of food into the kitchen area. Children scampered here and there.

Kathleen had no difficulty in understanding the broken English of the German women, accustomed as she was to Hilda's way of

speaking. Their cheerful, friendly manner was familiar and pleasing to her. They smiled often and laughed robustly as they worked at finishing the preparation of food they had brought.

Late in the afternoon, all gathered in the schoolroom for a bit of singing. Kathleen had rung the bell to call the children in, and lined them up to sing two of the songs they often opened the school day with. Mary played along, her organ giving an added quality to the music. One of the men of the lower valley offered books for the accompaniment to their church songs, the words of which were printed in German. As they sang, the folks from the Hill Country followed the melody, carrying the hymn with their English version – or perhaps “American” would be a more descriptive word. Soon all were singing, making of it a resounding, soul inspiring tribute to God. Last of all the German men gave, a cappella, a harmonic German hymn.

After the singing was over tables were set up, snowy white tablecloths were spread and women went about the task of setting out their contributions of food. The understanding was that the German people would go home shortly after supper for there would be dancing later and they did not participate.

As the day drew to a close, men drifted in and took up banjos, French harps, mandolins, and other assorted instruments including one Jew’s harp. A delicate-featured, dark eyed, hauntingly beautiful young woman of the hills brought forth a stringed instrument, different in shape from any Kathleen had ever seen, and produced a small hammer with which she struck the strings lightly. She sang with simple clarity. The fragile notes of the instrument accompanying the high, clear voice gave a simple purity to her song.

Musicians continued to gather on the low platform that stretched across the far end of the large room. The teacher’s desk had been moved aside, and except for chairs arranged for the convenience of the musicians, only the piano and Mary’s organ remained on the stage. A solemn faced bearded man arrived lugging a large stringed instrument. “Oh good! There’s Hank with his bullfiddle.” someone cried. Bits of melody ventured forth as chords were tested and matched to pickings on the banjo or mandolin.

What nameless quality enables music to sway the human heart? The snatches of harmony gave enchantment to the dusky evening; and with the mellow glow of lamplight came a thrill of anticipation. The fading day was charged with expectancy. Magic came stealing in with the deepening night.

The witching spell was broken for Kathleen as girls came to lead their teacher to meet more of their family members. Especially proud

of baby brothers and sisters, they carried the chubby little ones, exhibiting them to friends, tickling their cheeks to make them smile and show emerging teeth, encouraging them to speak the new words they had learned, and laughing gaily at their amusing efforts. Few boys offered to share their families. They were busily engaged otherwise – planning pranks or teasing the girls they secretly admired. Only Willie, in his outgrown, neatly mended clothing led Kathleen to his mother who sat alone, holding a sickly baby. A thin, shy little girl stood by her side, refusing to venture out to play with the other children.

Willie said, “Mam, here is our teacher.”

“I’m so happy to meet you, Mrs. Welty. I must tell you your son is a very industrious student. He learns quickly.”

Evident in the young woman’s face was the ravages of sorrow, but in spite of the drawn and hollow cheeks, a bit of beauty still lingered. There seemed a dearth of emotional and spiritual fulfillment, and as evidenced by the hollow cheeks perhaps actual hunger. Still there remained a resolution that denied defeat.

“’Tis very good to meet you, Miss Wallace. Yes, Willie is a good worker. He is very like his father.”

“My name is Kathleen. I’d be pleased if you would call me that.”

“And my name is Veldie.”

Kathleen felt a growing sympathy for this unfortunate woman, and when more children came to claim their teacher, she threw back a smile that was answered with a warm response.

Kerstan had come. Her aversion to him became even greater and she hoped to avoid him. She made an effort to stay in the company of the children or in the security of the group of women where few men ventured. He did not socialize with the men, but stood watching, an inscrutable repression on his face. Kathleen felt uneasy as she sensed that he often kept his brooding eyes on her in a disquieting manner. It was a mystery as to why she distrusted him to such an extent. It was purely instinctual. Something about him repelled her and warned her of danger. The nightmares she had been experiencing nagged at the fringes of her mind. With an effort she banished them from her thoughts.

“Miss Wallace!” Effie Stanton of the upper valley descended upon her with a reluctant young man in tow. “Let me introduce my son. You two should meet. Albert is very studious and you will find much in common. He reads many books – very difficult books that most can’t comprehend.”

Kathleen felt sympathy for the unwilling young man, ensnared by his ambitious mother.