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Mary Louise Solves a Mystery

By

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CHAPTER I DOCTOR AND PATIENT

A little girl sat shivering in a corner of a reception room in the fashionable Hotel Voltaire. It was one of a suite of rooms occupied by Mrs. Antoinette Seaver Jones, widely known for her wealth and beauty, and this girl--a little thing of eleven--was the only child of Mrs. Antoinette Seaver Jones, and was named Alora.

It was not cold that made her shiver, for across the handsomely furnished room an open window gratefully admitted the summer sunshine and the summer breeze. Near the window, where the draught came coolest, a middle-aged woman in a sober dress sat reading. Alora did not look at this person but kept her gaze fixed anxiously upon the doorway that led to the corridor, and the spasmodic shudders that at times shook her little body seemed due to nervous fear.

The room was so still that every tick of the Dresden clock could be distinctly heard. When Miss Gorham, Alora's governess, turned a page of her book, the rustle was appallingly audible. And the clock ticked on, and Miss Gorham turned page after page, and still the child sat bowed upon her chair and eagerly eyed the passageway.

It seemed ages before the outer door of the suite finally opened and a man moved softly down the passage and paused at the entrance of the reception room. The man was white-haired, dignified and distinguished in appearance. Hat in hand, he stood as if undecided while Alora bounded from her seat and came to him, her eyes, big and pleading, reading his face with dramatic intentness.

"Well, well, my dear; what is it?" he said in a kindly voice.

"May I see my mamma now, Doctor?" she asked.

He shook his head, turning to the table to place his hat and gloves upon it.

"Not just yet, little one," he gently replied, and noting her quick-drawn breath of disappointment he added: "Why, I haven't seen her myself, this morning."

"Why do you keep me from her, Doctor Anstruther? Don't you know it's-- it's wicked, and cruel?"--a sob in her voice.

The old physician looked down upon the child pityingly.

"Mamma is ill--very ill, you know--and to disturb her might--it might--well, it might make her worse," he explained lamely.

"I won't disturb her. There's a nurse in there, all the time. Why should I disturb my mamma more than a nurse?" asked Alora pleadingly.

He evaded the question. The big eyes disconcerted him.

"When I have seen your mother," said he, "I may let you go to her for a few minutes. But you must be very quiet, so as not to excite her. We must avoid anything of an exciting nature. You understand that, don't you, Lory?"

She studied his face gravely. When he held out a hand to her she clung to it desperately and a shudder again shook her from head to foot.

"Tell me, Doctor Anstruther," in low, passionate tones, "is my mother dying?"

He gave an involuntary start.

"Who put that notion into your head, Lory?"

"Miss Gorham."

He frowned and glanced reprovingly at the governess, who had lowered her book to her lap and was regarding the scene with stolid unconcern.

"You mustn't mind such idle gossip, my dear. I am the doctor, you know, and I am doing all that can be done to save your mother's life. Don't worry until I tell you to, Lory; and now let me go to see my patient."

He withdrew his hand from her clasp and turned into the passage again. The girl listened to his footsteps as he approached her mother's bedchamber, paused a moment, and then softly opened the door and entered. Silence again pervaded the reception room. The clock resumed its loud ticking. Miss Gorham raised her book. Alora went back to her chair, trembling.

The front bedchamber was bright and cheery, a big room fitted with every modern luxury. The doctor blinked his eyes as he entered from the dim passage, for here was sunlight and fresh air in plenty. Beside the bed stood a huge vase of roses, their delicate fragrance scented the atmosphere. Upon the bed, beneath a costly lace coverlid, lay a woman thirty-five years of age, her beautiful face still fresh and unlined, the deep blue eyes turned calmly upon the physician.

"Welcome, Doctor Anstruther," she said. "Do you realize you have kept me waiting?"

"I am sorry, Mrs. Jones," he replied, approaching her. "There are so many demands upon my time that----"

"I know," a little impatiently; "but now that you are here please tell me how I am this morning."

"How do you feel?"

"I do not suffer, but it takes more morphine to quiet the pain. Janet has used the hypodermic four times since midnight," with a glance at the gray-robed nurse who stood silently by the table.

The doctor nodded, thoughtfully looking down her. There was small evidence of illness in her appearance, but he knew that her hours were numbered and that the dread disease that had fastened upon her was creeping on with ever increasing activity. She knew it, too, and smiled a grim little smile as she added: "How long can I last, at this rate?"

"Do not anticipate, my dear," he answered gravely. "Let us do all that may be done, and----"

"I must know!" she retorted. "I have certain important arrangements to make that must not be needlessly delayed."

"I can understand that, Mrs. Jones."

"Then tell me frankly, how long have I to live?"

"Perhaps a month; possibly less; but----"

"You are not honest with me, Doctor Anstruther! What I wish to know--what I must know--is how soon this disease will be able to kill me. If we

manage to defer the end somewhat, all the better; but the fiend must not take me unaware, before I am ready to resign my life."

He seated himself beside the bed and reflected. This was his most interesting patient; he had attended her constantly for more than a year and in this time had learned to admire not only her beauty of person but her "gameness" and wholesome mentality. He knew something of her past life and history, too, as well from her own lips as from common gossip, for this was no ordinary woman and her achievements were familiar to many.

She was the daughter of Captain Bob Seaver, whose remarkable career was known to every man in the West. Captain Bob was one "forty-niners" and had made fortunes and lost them with marvelous regularity. He had a faculty for finding gold, but his speculations were invariably unwise, so his constant transitions from affluence to poverty, and vice versa, were the subject of many amusing tales, many no doubt grossly exaggerated. And the last venture of Captain Bob Seaver, before he died, was to buy the discredited "Ten-Spot" mine and start to develop it.

At that time he was a widower with one motherless child--Antoinette--a girl of eighteen who had been reared partly in mining camps and partly at exclusive girls' schools in the East, according to her father's varying fortunes. "Tony" Seaver, as she was generally called in those days, combined culture and refinement with a thorough knowledge of mining, and when her father passed away and left her absolute mistress of the tantalizing "Ten-Spot," she set to work to make the mine a success, directing her men in person and displaying such shrewd judgment and intelligence, coupled with kindly consideration for her assistants, that she became the idol of the miners, all of whom were proud to be known as employees of Tony Seaver's "Ten-Spot" would have died for their beautiful employer if need be.

And the "Ten-Spot" made good. In five years Tony had garnered a million or two of well-earned dollars, and then she sold out and retired from business. Also, to the chagrin of an army of suitors, she married an artist named Jason Jones, whose talent, it was said, was not so great as his luck. So far, his fame rested on his being "Tony Seaver's husband." But Tony's hobby was art, and she had recognized real worth, she claimed, in Jason Jones' creations. On her honeymoon she carried her artist husband to Europe and with him studied the works of the masters in all

the art centers of the Continent. Then, enthusiastic and eager for Jason's advancement, she returned with him to New York and set him up in a splendid studio where he had every convenience and incentive to work.

So much the world at large knew. It also knew that within three years Mrs. Antoinette Seaver Jones separated from her husband and, with her baby girl, returned West to live. The elaborate Jones studio was abandoned and broken up and the "promising young artist" disappeared from the public eye. Mrs. Jones, a thorough business woman, had retained her fortune in her own control and personally attended to her investments. She became noted as a liberal patron of the arts and a generous donor to worthy charities. In spite of her youth, wealth, and beauty, she had no desire to shine in society and lived a somewhat secluded life in luxurious family hotels, attending with much solicitude to the training and education of her daughter Alora.

At first she had made Denver her home, but afterward migrated from one middle-west city to another until she came to Chicago, where she had now lived for nearly three years, occupying the most expensive suite of rooms at the very exclusive Hotel Voltaire.

Alora fairly worshipped her beautiful mother and although Mrs. Antoinette Seaver Jones was considered essentially cold and unemotional by those who knew her casually, there was no doubt she prized her child as her dearest possession and lavished all the tenderness and love of which she was capable upon her.

Retrospectively, Doctor Anstruther considered this historical revue of his fair patient as he sat facing her. It seemed a most unhappy fate that she should be cut off in the flower of her womanhood, but her case was positively hopeless, and she knew it and had accepted the harsh verdict without a murmur. Bravery had always been Tony Seaver's prime characteristic. To Doctor Anstruther it seemed that she might as well know the truth which she had demanded from his lips.

"This disease is one that accelerates toward the end," he said. "Within the past few days we have noted its more virulent tendency. All we can do now is to keep you from suffering until--the end."

"And that will be--when?" she demanded.

"I think I can safely give you a week but----"

"Then I must act at once," she said, as he hesitated. "I must, first of all, make provision for Alora's future, and in this I require your help."

"You know you may depend upon me," he said simply.

"Please telegraph at once to my husband Jason Jones, in New York."

The request startled him, for never before had she mentioned her husband's name in his presence. But he asked, calmly enough:

"What is his address?"

"Hand me that small memorandum-book," pointing to the stand beside him. He obeyed, and as she turned the leaves slowly she said:

"Doctor Anstruther, you have been my good and faithful friend, and you ought to know and to understand why I am now sending for my husband, from whom I have been estranged for many years. When I first met Jason Jones he was a true artist and I fell in love with his art rather than with the man. I was ambitious that he should become a great painter, world-famous. He was very poor until he married me, and he had worked industriously to succeed, but as soon as I introduced him to a life of comfort--I might even add, of luxury--his ambition to work gradually deserted him. With his future provided for, as he thought, he failed to understand the necessity of devoting himself to his brush and palette, but preferred a life of ease--of laziness, if you will. So we quarreled. I tried to force him back to his work, but it was no use; my money had ruined his career. I therefore lost patience and decided to abandon him, hoping that when he was again thrown upon his own resources he would earnestly resume his profession and become a master, as I believed him competent to be. We were not divorced: we merely separated. Finding I had withdrawn his allowance he was glad to see me go, for my unmerciful scoldings had killed any love he may have had for me. But he loved Lory, and her loss was his hardest trial. I may have been as much to blame as he for our lack of harmony, but I have always acted on my impulses.

"I'll give Jason Jones the credit for not whimpering," she resumed thoughtfully, after a brief pause, "nor has he ever since appealed to me for money. I don't know how well he has succeeded, for we do not correspond, but I have never heard his name mentioned in the art circles I have frequented. He remained in New York, I believe, and so I chose to

keep away from New York. A year or two ago, however, I met a man who had known Jason Jones and who gave me his address. Here it is: 1744 East Sixty-seventh street. Will you make a copy of it, Doctor?"

He nodded.

"What shall I say in the telegram?" he asked, writing the address in his notebook.

"Tell him I am dying and seek a reconciliation before I pass away. Beg him to come to me at once."

Dr. Anstruther jotted down the instructions underneath the address.

"You must understand," she continued, "that Jason Jones is an honorable man and in many ways a high-minded gentleman. I have lived with him as his wife and I know that he is well fitted to care for our child and to rear her properly. I have left my entire fortune to Alora, but I have made Jason my sole executor, and he is to have control, under certain restrictions, of all the income until Alora is eighteen. I think he will be glad to accept the responsibility, both on Alora's account and for the money."

"Doubtless, if he has not been a success as an artist since your separation," remarked the doctor, drily.

"The man I spoke of said Jason was living in quite modest circumstances. He said that although he had succeeded in selling a few paintings they had brought rather insignificant sums--which surprised me, as I know they must have possessed a degree of merit. However, I may be mistaken in thinking his talent exceptional. Anyhow, my experiment in leaving him to his own devices seems not to have resulted as I had hoped, and I now am willing he should handle Alora's income and live comfortably while he is educating her. She will probably provide for her father when she comes of age, but I have not included such a request in my will and I have endeavored, in case he proves inclined to neglect her, to require the court to appoint another guardian. That is, of course, merely a precaution, for I know his nature is gentle and kind, and he adores--or at least he used to adore children."

The doctor sat, notebook in hand, musing. The matter-of-fact, businesslike way in which she referred to her marital relations and her assumed unconcern over her own dreadful fate impressed the good man

as extraordinary. But he was relieved to know that little Alora, of whom he had grown quite fond, was to have the guardianship of a parent, and glad that the character of Jason Jones was above reproach. The man's failure to succeed as an artist, while it might have been a source of chagrin to his art-loving wife, did not lower him to any extent in Dr. Anstruther's opinion.

"I suppose Alora does not remember her father?" he presently remarked.

"She was about two years old when we separated."

"And you say your will is already drawn?"

"Judge Bernsted, my lawyer, has attended to it. It is now in his possession, properly signed and witnessed."

"If Bernsted drew the will, it is doubtless legal and in accordance with your wishes. But who witnessed it?"

"My nurse, Janet."

He glanced at the motionless figure of the attendant, who had remained so inert at her post by the window that he had quite forgotten her presence. She was a young woman, perhaps thirty years of age, and not unprepossessing in appearance, in spite of her modest uniform.

Janet's one peculiarity was her downcast eyes. They were good eyes, bright and intelligent, but she kept them veiled by their long lashes and drooping lids. Dr. Anstruther attached no significance to this trait, doubtless a habit of modest reserve acquired in her profession. He had himself recommended the woman to Mrs. Jones, having frequently employed her on other cases and found her deft, skillful and thoroughly reliable. Janet Orme's signature to the will he regarded as satisfactory, since Judge Bernsted had accepted it.

A moan from his patient suddenly aroused the doctor. Her face was beginning to twitch spasmodically with pain. In an instant Janet was at her side, hypodermic needle in hand, and the opiate was soon administered.

"Send the telegram," muttered Mrs. Jones, still breathing hard; "and, as you go out, Doctor, send Alora to me. I shall have relief in a few moments."

"To be sure," he said, rising. "Lory has been begging to see you, and I'll attend to the telegram at once."

CHAPTER II MOTHER AND DAUGHTER

The child crept softly to her mother's bedside, but once there she impulsively threw her arms about "Mamma Tone's" neck and embraced her so tightly that the sick woman was obliged to tear the little arms away. She did this tenderly, though, and holding the trembling hands in her own kissed both of Lory's cheeks before she said:

"I've news for you, dear."

"Are you better, mamma?" asked Lory.

"Of course not," was the calm reply. "You mustn't expect mamma ever to get well, my darling. But that shouldn't worry you--not too much, you know. One of the queer things about life is that it has an end, sooner or later, and in mamma's case it comes to an end a little sooner than you and I might wish it to."

"Oh, Mamma Tone!" An agonized cry, with the small hands clasped tightly over her throbbing heart. But Tony Seaver did not flinch.

"The news I have will surprise you, Lory dear. Your father, who loved you devotedly when you were a baby, but whom you have never known till now, is coming here to see us."

Alora's eyes grew big with wonder, but other thoughts drove even this strange news from her mind.

"I can't let you go, Mamma Tone," she wailed, sobbing; "I can't let you die and leave me all alone!"

The woman's breast heaved. She was silent a moment and then said quietly:

"Even kings and queens, sweetheart, have no command over life and death. When it is too late to help it, we realize we have been born; when it is too late to help it, we realize we must die. But why complain, when it is the fate of all humanity? To be true to our Creator, who directs all things, we must bow to His will without protest. You will love your father, Lory, because he will love you; and he is a good man, and kindly, so I believe he will make your life as happy as I could have done."

"I don't want him; I want you, Mamma--I want you!"

The mother sighed wearily and the alert nurse advanced and said to the child in grave, cold tones:

"You must control yourself, Miss Alora, if you wish to remain."

The threat quieted the little girl at once.

"I'll be good, Mamma Tone," she whispered softly. "Talk to me, and tell me what I must do."

So the dying woman talked to her, not of herself, but of Alora's father, and of how she would like her child to conduct herself while she grew in womanhood. She spoke of her will, and told Lory what it meant to her and how she had safe-guarded her interests as well as she was able. To this Lory listened intently and, although she still trembled at times, she had Tony Seaver's blood in her veins and could be brave in spite of the terrors that faced her. Dimly she realized that her mother was suffering through the knowledge of their inevitable parting, even as Alora was suffering, and felt she could comfort that beloved mother more by controlling her grief bravely than by giving way to it in her mother's presence.

Meantime, Dr. Anstruther had returned to his office and had written and dispatched the following telegram:

"Jason Jones, 1744 East 67th St., New York City.

"Your wife is dying at the Hotel Voltaire and wishes reconciliation before she passes away. Come quickly, as any delay may prove dangerous. Notify me by wire when to expect you. Edward Anstruther, M. D."

He left orders that the answer be delivered to him at his office or residence, as soon as received, but the day and the night passed without a word from Jason Jones. Dr. Anstruther telephoned the telegraph office and was assured his message had been delivered to the party in New York, as otherwise they would be notified to that effect.

Knowing Mrs. Jones' dangerous condition, the good doctor was worried, but the following morning brought the delayed answer:

"If necessary for me to come, you must send money for expenses."

It was signed "Jason Jones" and its tone and its demand annoyed Dr. Anstruther exceedingly.

"Confound the fellow!" he exclaimed. "Any decent man would have borrowed the money, or even pawned his watch and jewelry, to get to a dying wife who calls for him. Either Mrs. Jones is mistaken in her husband's kindly character or--well, he may have changed since last she knew him."

He did not hesitate, however, to go to the office and send money by telegraph to Jason Jones, furnishing the required sum from his own pocket rather than allow Antoinette to see her husband's telegram. He even sent more than was necessary, muttering to himself: "The poor devil may have some bills to settle before he can get away, and in any event she must not be disappointed because her impecunious husband lacks a few dollars. I fancy the poor artist will be amazed to find himself suddenly raised from poverty to affluence, for little Lory's income will be enormous and he will have seven years, at least, to enjoy it unrestrained. I hope," he added thoughtfully, as he drove back to his office, "that Mrs. Jones has made no error in her judgment of this man, for it is considerable power to place in anyone's hands and Alora is such a dear that I want her properly taken care of."

When he made his next visit to his patient he said in answer to her questioning look:

"Mr. Jones will be here to-morrow, I think. He will notify me of his arrival and I will be here to meet him. I believe it will be advisable for me to see him first, you know, in order to--eh--eh--to post him a bit," he added, meaningly.

"Yes," she replied, "I fear it will be something of a shock to Jason. Even though we have practically been strangers for years, he is sure to be grieved and sympathetic. But do not bore him with particulars, Doctor. Send him to me as soon as you have prepared him for the interview."

CHAPTER III ALORA'S FATHER

A man slouched into the lofty foyer of the Hotel Voltaire and paused uncertainly, as if awed by the splendor of the place. A boy in uniform hastened to relieve him of his hand baggage, which consisted of a "roll-me-up" or "carryall" of brown canvas, strapped around the middle, such as one often sees in traveling on the Continent. It seemed a much used and abused affair and painted upon the ends were the dimmed initials: "J. J."

This man was plainly dressed. His clothing was of the cheap, ready-made variety, worn nearly to shabbiness and matched by a gray flannel shirt with a flowing black tie, knotted at the throat, and a soft gray hat that was a bit weatherstained. His shoes were shabby and unshined. His whole appearance was out of keeping with the palatial hotel he had entered.

Without relinquishing his baggage to the boy he asked sharply:

"Is Dr. Anstruther here?"

But now Dr. Anstruther, who had been impatiently waiting, espied the arrival and after a glance at the initials on the traveling-roll said in hesitating tones:

"Mr. Jason Jones?"

"Yes. You must be the doctor who telegraphed me."

"I am Doctor Anstruther."

"All right. Where's my wife?"

There was no especial anxiety in his tones, which were slow and distinct and a trifle sharp. He seemed ill at ease and looked around the foyer again, as if fearing he had entered the wrong place.

"I will lead you to her presently," replied the physician gravely; "but first, sir, I must acquaint you with her condition, which is serious. I have engaged a room for you here and if you will please register we will go there together and talk undisturbed."

"All right," said Jason Jones. He registered at the desk and then turned and announced: "I'm ready. Go ahead."

Those present in the foyer cast curious glances at the stranger as he passed them and followed Dr. Anstruther to the elevator. The boy accompanied them, now carrying the roll of baggage. The grandeur of the room they entered, which was convenient to the suite of Mrs. Jones, seemed to astonish the artist, although it was as simply furnished as any the great hotel contained. However, he made no remark but removed his hat, seated himself, and looked inquiringly at the physician.

"Mrs. Jones," began Dr. Anstruther, "is really dying. I cannot say how long she may survive, but it is a matter of days--perhaps hours. Her greatest anxiety at present is to be reconciled with you, whom she has not seen or even communicated with for years."

"Did she say that?"

"Yes."

"And she wants to be reconciled?"

"She does."

"Rather a queer notion, that," remarked Mr. Jones, musingly.

"Very natural, I think, under the circumstances," stiffly replied the doctor. "She has every confidence in you and admires your character exceedingly, although it was her desire that you live apart."

The man's stolid countenance relaxed in a grin--a somewhat scornful and unbelieving expression--but he did not speak. He was not a very tall man; he was thin of figure and hardened of muscle; his head was bald in front, giving him the appearance of a high forehead, and the hair at the back and around the ears was beginning to gray. His eyes were light blue; his nose was shapely and his jaws prominent and tightly set in repose. His age was about forty.

"Mrs. Jones," continued the doctor, "knows that you are due to arrive at this time and is eagerly counting the minutes; not that you are so dear to her," he asserted in retaliation for the sneer upon his hearer's lips, "but because she has important business matters to arrange with you before she passes away."

"Business matters?"

"So she has told me. I believe," he said, after a brief period of hesitation, during which he considered how best to handle this peculiar artist, "that I will allow you to see your wife at once, that you may learn her plans from her own lips."

Indeed, he had already decided that Jason Jones must have changed materially, and for the worse, since Antoinette Seaver had known him. Perhaps, when she had talked with the man, she would revise her opinion of him and make other disposition of her finances and the guardianship of her child. In that case it would not be well for him to give her husband any inkling of her present plans. Having reached this conclusion, Dr. Anstruther rose abruptly and said: "Come with me, please."

Jason Jones made no demur. Without remark he followed his conductor into the hallway and to the entrance to the suite occupied by his wife. The governess had been instructed to take Alora out for a ride; there was no one in the little reception room. Here, however, the doctor halted, and pointing to the door at the further end of the passage he said:

"That is your wife's sick chamber. Please enter quietly and remember the danger of exciting Mrs. Jones unduly. Be gentle, and--considerate."

Jason Jones nodded. A moment he regarded the door with curious intentness, savoring of reluctance. Then he slowly advanced, opened it and went in, closing the door softly behind him.

Dr. Anstruther seated himself in the reception room. The artist puzzled him greatly, although he prided himself--through long professional experience--on being able to read human nature with some accuracy. This summons to his dying-wife ought to seem the most natural thing in the world to Jason Jones, yet the man appeared dazed and even bewildered by the event, and while he had once lived in luxurious surroundings his later experiences must have been so wholly different that the splendor of his wife's mode of living quite embarrassed him. Yes, the contrast was sharp, it must be admitted; the man had formerly shared Tony Seaver's immense wealth; he had enjoyed the handsomest studio in New York; and then--back to poverty, to drudgery, to a struggle for mere food and clothing! Years of hardship were likely to have had a

decided effect upon the character of a man who was doubtless weak in the beginning; it would make him hard, and bitter, and----

A shrill scream startled him. It came from the sick chamber and was echoed by another cry--hoarse and terrified--in a man's voice.

Dr. Anstruther sprang to his feet and hurried into the patient's bedchamber.

"The woman's dead, Doctor," cried Jason Jones, standing in the middle of the room. "She's dead!"

The physician hastened to the bedside, where Janet Orme, the nurse, was bending over the still form. Pushing her away, Dr. Anstruther made a hurried examination.

It was true; the woman was dead. At the very moment of reunion with the husband from whom she had so long been parted, she had passed on to another life, leaving reconciliation in abeyance.

Mrs. Antoinette Seaver Jones lay beneath her lace covered with features contorted, mouth half open and eyes staring wildly. A paroxysm of pain had carried her off, the good doctor well knew; the pain, and the excitement of the moment. Very tenderly he bent down and closed the eyes and pressed the lips together. He smoothed the lines from the cheeks, so that the face became more natural in appearance. Then, with a sigh--for he had become fond of this brave, beautiful patient--he turned away to find Jason Jones and the nurse Janet confronting one another in tense attitudes. The man stared wonderingly into the nurse's face; Janet, her eyes now unveiled, returned the stare with an expression that Dr. Anstruther could not fathom.

They seemed to feel the doctor's observation, for Janet turned her back abruptly, while the man swung around and tiptoed hastily from the room.

Dr. Anstruther looked at the nurse reflectively.

"Who was it that screamed? Was it you, or Mrs. Jones?" he asked.

She hesitated a moment.

"It was I," she replied. "I saw her face and knew that--that the end had come."

It was a lie, and the nurse knew that the shrewd doctor recognized it as a lie. But he made no comment and with a last regretful look toward the bed he followed Jason Jones out.

CHAPTER IV ALORA'S NEW LIFE

Time sears all heart wounds. The scars remain, perhaps, but as the clock ticks on the ache is stilled and the soreness finally passes away.

At first Alora was heart-broken over her mother's loss. She lived in a sort of stupor for weeks after the funeral. Her father's presence she accepted without comment or emotion, for it had been arranged by "Mamma Tone." She did not consider, in those first weeks, whether she cared for her newly found father or not. Her mother's statement that he was a "good man" and would love Alora dearly was taken by the child as a matter of fact, while her mother's injunction to love him and confide in him in her stead was for the present ignored.

Indeed, during those first weeks Lory had no fault to find with her new protector, for she saw little of him. Jason Jones retained his room at the hotel and allowed Alora and her governess to inhabit the handsome suite her mother had occupied, although they were much too small for the big apartments. However, Lory would have felt uncomfortable, just then, in any other place. Her mother's chamber was closed and the curtains drawn, but every night before she retired to her own little room the child would steal in, in the dark, and feel her way to the empty bed and kiss the pillow on which her dear mother's head had rested. Miss Gorham, the governess, was aware of these evening excursions, but offered no objection. Indeed, the woman objected to nothing that did not interfere with her own personal comfort and convenience. Under the eyes of Mrs. Jones she had been prim and dutiful, but there was no one to chide her now, however neglectful she chose to be, and it was true that during these days the little girl required no particular care. Alora resumed her morning studies with meekness a week after her mother had been laid away, and in the afternoons she rode or walked with Miss Gorham or received the callers who came to "console poor Antoinette Seaver Jones' child."

Despite her haughty reserve, Mrs. Antoinette Seaver Jones had accumulated a wide circle of acquaintances--if not friends--who sincerely mourned her untimely death and would have been glad to befriend her little girl were such services needed. But it was known that Alora's father had now appeared to guard her welfare and there was "so much money

in the Jones family" that no financial aid was required; therefore, these acquaintances could only call to see Alora and profess their friendship.

The child listened gravely to their stilted praises of her mother and accepted their platitudes in good faith. It was indeed comforting to hear so many nice things said of her loved one.

Her father was never present on these occasions. He was by no means a sociable man. Sometimes he came in for a few minutes, in the morning, and sat down and stared at the girl in a way half curious and half speculative, and said little, and presently went away as quietly as he had come.

The nurse, Janet Orme, left on the day that Mrs. Jones died, and Alora had almost forgotten the young woman when one afternoon she came to see her. Janet no longer wore her nurse's uniform but was dressed in ultra-fashionable apparel and to the child's amusement affected the manners of a lady. She talked more with Miss Gorham than with the little girl and was keen to know what arrangements had been made for their future. Miss Gorham admitted that she had no idea of Mr. Jones' intentions. Of course they could not remain long in this elaborate suite; a smaller one would be more satisfactory in every way; but Mr. Jones had not as yet mentioned the subject.

A few days afterward, during one of their walks, Alora was surprised to see her father and nurse Janet riding past in a hired automobile. The two seemed engaged in earnest conversation and neither noticed Alora or her governess. Miss Gorham snorted rather disdainfully but without remark, and Lory was not especially interested in the matter.

Meantime, letters of administration had been issued to Jason Jones and the control of his wife's--now Alora's--property legally placed in his hands. Judge Bernsted attended to all the necessary details and, while he did not admire the artist and secretly believed he was unfitted for the task of handling so much money, he loyally insisted that the dead woman's wishes be obeyed to the letter.

Dr. Anstruther had called on the attorney and had ventured to state his misgivings concerning Jason Jones, pleading that Alora was likely to suffer through the man's indifference and lack of culture, but Judge Bernsted declared it was not his duty to criticise character but to see that the wishes of his clients were obeyed. In this case doubtless the

man's wife knew him more intimately than anyone else and if she trusted him, aware as she must be of his faults and virtues, it would be presumptuous for anyone to try to break her will or otherwise interfere with her carefully planned arrangements.

But Jason Jones was improving, in a way. He had bought new clothes and a supply of linen, and although he did not wear them with the ease of one accustomed to modish dress they certainly improved his appearance. He was quiet and unassuming; he made no friends and few acquaintances; he never mentioned himself or his personal history and never referred to his wife except when forced to do so by some of "her meddling friends"--well meaning people who sought his acquaintance to condole with him or perhaps to attempt to "cultivate" him for Antoinette Seaver Jones' sake. But these found him so unresponsive that they soon left him alone.

The legal business, even though it progressed smoothly, required time for consummation, so it was somewhat more than three months before all the details were complete. Alora, a sad-faced child with no especial interest in life, kept no track of time and plodded along in her morning-studies and took her afternoon drives or walks in a perfunctory manner that rendered Miss Gorham's duties light indeed. But all this ended suddenly, and Jason Jones ended it.

He came to the rooms one morning and said to the governess in his abrupt way: "Pack up."

"What do you mean, sir?" was the startled query.

"Just what I say. Get the child's things and your own ready to move out of this place by Saturday. Also pack the personal belongings of Mrs. Jones. Put them in separate trunks and boxes, so I can have them stored. Do you understand me?"

"I--I shall need assistance," gasped the bewildered Miss Gorham.

"Then get a maid--or a porter--or both--to help you."

Alora was present and listened with awakening interest. A change of any sort would be pleasant, she reflected.

"Where are we going?" she asked, as her father turned away.

It was the one question Miss Gorham wanted to ask, too, but Mr. Jones left the room without reply.

Three days was little enough time to gather up and pack the accumulation of years. The governess knew there were many big trunks in the storeroom of the hotel belonging to Mrs. Jones, and these she ordered brought up to the rooms. Then she procured two maids, told them what and how to pack, and composedly resumed her reading.

"I am no menial," she told Alora, with a lofty air of superiority; "these persons will do their work properly, I'm sure."

On Saturday morning Mr. Jones appeared again.

"Is everything ready?" he demanded.

"Ask Susan and Jane," replied Miss Gorham.

Susan and Jane declared everything was packed, even to the suit cases and traveling satchels.

"But where are we going?" inquired the governess.

"You are going wherever you please," said Jason Jones. "I do not require your services longer."

"You're going to discharge me?" she said, startled.

"You are already discharged."

"But who will look after poor Lory? Who will attend to her education, and to--to--her comforts?"

"I will. Here is your money. I have paid you a week in advance, in lieu of notice."

"A week? Pooh! I'm hired by the year," asserted the woman defiantly.

"Have you a written contract?"

"No; a verbal contract is just as good."

"It won't hold in law. Take your traps and go--at once."

The governess looked at him. He was absolutely calm and determined. Instinctively she knew that any protest would be unavailing.

Alora regarded the dismissal of her governess with as much unconcern as her father displayed. Miss Gorham had been her companion for years, but had never won the smallest corner of the girl's heart. Although she was not aware of the fact, the woman's constant presence and lack of interest in her had become oppressive. The child's first sensation, on realizing their future separation, was one of distinct relief.

When Miss Gorham had gone, seeming to begrudge the terse "good-bye" she gave her pupil, the girl's father quietly said: "Come, Alora," and walked away.

She followed him to a waiting taxicab, in which had been heaped her hand luggage and his own, and they drove away from the grand hotel where she had lived in luxury for so long, and where so many indelible memories had been impressed upon her childish mind, with as little ado as if they had been transient guests.

When the cab drew up at a railway station, Alora asked:

"Are we leaving town, then, father?"

"Yes," he replied; "I am returning to New York."

She felt a slight sinking of the heart, just then, but it was followed by a sense of elation. The old life, in which her adored mother had played so prominent a part, was being abandoned forever, and this troubled her, she knew not why.

But since Mamma Tone had gone away the old life had lost its charm and become dull and stupid. Lory was not sure she could be happier elsewhere, but her crushed and dispirited nature responded to the suggestion of change. It was interesting to have something different to look forward to.

The man beside her was no more congenial than Gorham had been, but he was her father; he was the guardian selected by her dead mother, and in obeying his wishes she might find her future life more grateful than had been the dreadful dreary months since Mamma Tone had left her.

Somehow, Jason Jones seemed uneasy in the presence of his daughter. During the journey to New York he rode most of the time in the smoking compartment, only appearing to take Alora to the diner for her meals.

The child was equally uncomfortable in her father's society and was well pleased to be left so much alone.

So, with very little questioning or conversation on either side, father and daughter came to their destination and Alora found herself deposited in a small suite of rooms on the third floor of a grimy and dingy house in East Sixty-seventh Street--one of a long row of similar houses that were neither residences nor business establishments, but hovered between the two. There were several little tin signs nailed beside the entrance and Lory noticed that one of these read: "Jason Jones. Studio. 3rd Floor." It was an old sign, scarcely legible, while others beside it seemed bright and new, and when the girl had climbed laboriously up the three flights and the artist had unlocked the door at the head of the stairs, with a key which he took from his pocket, she found everything about the rooms she entered as old and faded as the sign on the door.

CHAPTER V IN THE STUDIO

The fact that it was beginning to grow dark prevented Alora from observing all the tawdriness of her new home and what she saw inspired her more with curiosity than dismay. The little girl had been reared from babyhood in an atmosphere of luxury; through environment she had become an aristocrat from the top of her head to the tips of her toes; this introduction to shabbiness was unique, nor could she yet understand that such surroundings were familiar to many who battle for existence in a big city. The very fact that her father's humble flat was "different" made it far more interesting to the child than new apartments such as she had been accustomed to. Therefore she had no thought, at this time, of protest. Her own little room contained a small iron bed, one straight chair with a wooden bottom and a broken-legged dresser over which hung a cracked mirror. The small rag rug was worn threadbare.

While she stood in the doorway of this room, solemnly regarding it, her father said over her shoulder:

"You won't need both those big trunks here, I'm sure. I'll store them somewhere in the studio. Covered with drapes, they won't be noticed. I can't imagine what that woman packed them with."

"My dresses," replied Alora. "Even then, I left a lot at the Voltaire, for the maids to sell or give away. Mamma used to send them to the Salvation Army."

"Two trunks of dresses ought to last for a good many years," he remarked in a reflective tone.

"Oh, no indeed," said Lory. "Miss Gorham was about to engage a dressmaker for me when--when--you said we'd go away. I'm growing fast, you know, and I was to have a dozen or fifteen summer frocks made, and a lot of lingerie."

"Then we moved just in time to save that expense," he declared, setting his stern jaws together. "There's been a terrible waste of money through that woman Gorham. We're well rid of her."

He turned away to the studio and the child followed him there. He turned on the electric lights, which were not very bright, and Alora took a look at

the workroom and thought it seemed more comfortable than the other rooms of the flat.

Her father began dusting and arranging half a dozen paintings of various sizes, mounted on stretchers. None was finished; some were scarcely begun. Lory tried to see what they represented. Perhaps she had inherited from her mother a bit of artistic instinct; if so, it was that which prompted her to shrug her small shoulders slightly and then turn away to the window.

In the dimly lighted street outside a man drove up with the baggage. Mr. Jones had purchased for himself in Chicago a new trunk--a small and inexpensive one--and there were two big trunks and a suitcase belonging to Alora. After these had been carried up and placed in the studio--the only room that would hold them--her father said:

"We will go out now and get some dinner. You won't need your coat, for the restaurant is just around the corner."

Alora marveled at the restaurant even more than at the studio furnishings. It looked a hundred years old and the atmosphere still retained the fumes of much ancient cookery. The linen was coarse, the plating worn from the forks and spoons through constant use, the dishes thick and clumsy and well nicked. Alora was hungry and she ate what her father ordered for her, although she decided it did not taste very nice.

When they sat down a man from behind the counter approached them and bending low said in a quiet tone:

"You know, Jones, it's to be a cash deal from now on."

"Of course," replied Alora's father, with a slight frown. "Also I'll pay you the old account, if you'll make out the bill."

The man smiled, patted Alora's head--a liberty she indignantly resented--and went back to his desk.

During the meal and, indeed, ever since their arrival in New York, Jason Jones cast frequent puzzled glances into the face of his little daughter, who until now had accepted her changed conditions with evident indifference. But as they ate together in silence her small features grew grave and thoughtful and her father shrank from meeting the inquiring glances of her big eyes. Yet even now she made no complaint. Neither did

she ask questions. Her look was expectant, however, and that was what embarrassed him.

After the dinner they went back to the dingy studio, where the man lighted a pipe and sat opposite his small daughter, puffing uneasily. They were both reserved; there was an indefinable barrier between them which each was beginning to recognize. Presently Alora asked to go to bed and he sent her to her room with a nod of relief.

Next morning they had breakfast at the same stuffy little restaurant and afterward Alora unpacked some things from her trunks and put them in the drawers of the broken-legged dresser. It seemed odd to have no maid to wait upon her, but she was glad to have something to do. As she passed to and from the studio she noticed that her father had resumed work on a picture that represented two cows eating a broken pumpkin that lay in a cornfield. He worked slowly and never seemed satisfied with what he did, as if lacking confidence in his ability. Lory decided he couldn't be blamed for that.

The child plodded drearily along in her new life for a full week. Then she began to grow restless, for the place was hateful and repulsive to her. But now an incident occurred that gave her new cause for wonder.

One day the door opened and a woman walked into the studio. It was Janet Orme, her mother's former nurse, but what a new and astonishing Janet it was! Her silken gown was very "fashionable," somewhat too modish for good taste, for it was elaborately trimmed and embroidered. She wore considerable jewelry, including diamonds; her shoes were elegant and her hose daintily clocked; her hat must have been a French milliner's choicest creation. If good clothes could make Janet Orme a lady, there was no question of her social standing, yet even little Alora felt that Janet was out of her element--that she fell short, in some vague way, of being what she was ambitious to appear.

"So," said the nurse, glancing around the room with frank disdain, "this is where you hang out, Jason, is it?"

Alora's father confronted the woman with a menacing frown.

"What do you mean by coming here?" he demanded.

"I had two reasons," she answered carelessly, seating herself in the only easy chair the room contained. "In the first place, I wanted to see how a rich man lives."

"Well, you see, don't you?" a muttering growl.

"I certainly do, and I realize you are quite comfortable and ought to be happy here, Jason--you and the millionaire heiress, your daughter Alora."

As she spoke she turned to glance sharply at the child, who met her look with disconcerting gravity. Alora's eyes expressed wonder, tinged with a haughty tolerance of an inferior that struck home to Janet and made her flush angrily.

"Your sneers," said Jason Jones, still frowning but now speaking with composure, "must indicate that you have graduated from servitude. I cannot admit that my mode of living is any of your business, Janet. In these retired but respectable rooms I have worked and been contented for years, until----"

"Until you came into your money and found you didn't have to worry over your next meal," she interjected. "Well, that ought to make you still more content. And that reminds me of the second object of my visit. I want some money."

"So soon?"

"Don't try to crawl; it was agreed you should give me a check whenever I asked for it. I want it now, and for the full amount--every single penny of it!"

He stared at her fixedly, seeming fearful and uncertain how to answer.

"I cannot spare it all today."

"Humbug!" she snapped. "You can and will spare it. I must have the money, or----"

Her significant pause caused him to wriggle in his seat.

"You're a miserly coward," she declared. "I'm not robbing you; you will have an abundance for your needs. Why do you quarrel with Dame Fortune? Don't you realize you can pay your rent now and eat three

square meals a day, and not have to work and slave for them? You can smoke a good cigar after your dinner, instead of that eternal pipe, and go to a picture show whenever the mood strikes you. Why, man, you're independent for the first time in your life, and the finances are as sure as shooting for a good seven years to come."

He glanced uneasily at Alora.

"Owing to my dead wife's generosity," he muttered.

Janet laughed.

"Of course," said she; "and, if you play your cards skillfully, when Alora comes of age she will provide for you an income for the rest of your life. You're in luck. And why? Just because you are Jason Jones and long ago married Antoinette Seaver and her millions and are now reaping your reward! So, for decency's sake, don't grumble about writing me that check."

All this was frankly said in the presence of Alora Jones, the heiress, of whose person and fortune, her father, Jason Jones, was now sole guardian. It was not strange that the man seemed annoyed and ill at ease. His scowl grew darker and his eyes glinted in an ugly way as he replied, after a brief pause:

"You seem to have forgotten Alora's requirements and my duty to her."

"Pooh, a child! But we've allowed liberally for her keep, I'm sure. She can't keep servants and three dressmakers, it's true, but a simple life is best for her. She'll grow up a more sensible and competent woman by waiting on herself and living; as most girls do. At her age I didn't have shoes or stockings. Alora has been spoiled, and a bit of worldly experience will do her good."

"She's going to be very rich, when she comes into her fortune," said Alora's father, "and then----"

"And then she can do as she likes with her money. Just now her income is too big for her needs, and the best thing you can do for her is to teach her economy--a virtue you seem to possess, whether by nature or training, in a high degree. But I didn't come here to argue. Give me that check."

He walked over to his little desk, sat down and drew a check book from his pocket.

Alora, although she had listened intently to the astonishing conversation, did not quite comprehend what it meant. Janet's harsh statement bewildered her as much as did her father's subject subservience to the woman. All she realized was that Janet Orme, her dead mother's nurse, wanted money--Alora's money--and her father was reluctant to give it to her but dared not refuse. Money was an abstract quantity to the eleven year old child; she had never handled it personally and knew nothing of its value. If her father owed Janet some of her money, perhaps it was for wages, or services rendered her mother, and Alora was annoyed that he haggled about it, even though the woman evidently demanded more than was just. There was plenty of money, she believed, and it was undignified to argue with a servant.

Jason Jones wrote the check and, rising, handed it to Janet.

"There," said he, "that squares our account. It is what I agreed to give you, but I did not think you would demand it so soon. To pay it just now leaves me in an embarrassing position."

"I don't believe it," she rejoined. "You're cutting coupons every month or so, and you may thank your stars I don't demand a statement of your income. But I know you, Jason Jones, and you can't hoodwink me, try as you may. You hid yourself in this hole and thought I wouldn't know where to find you, but you'll soon learn that you can't escape my eagle eye. So take your medicine like a man, and thank your lucky stars that you're no longer a struggling, starving, unrecognized artist. Good-bye until I call again."

"You're not to call again!" he objected.

"Well, we'll see. Just for the present I'm in no mood to quarrel with you, and you'd better not quarrel with me, Jason Jones. Good-bye."

She tucked the check into her purse and ambled out of the room after a supercilious nod to Alora, who failed to return the salutation. Jason Jones stood in his place, still frowning, until Janet's high-heeled shoes had clattered down the two flights of stairs. Alora went to the window and looking down saw that a handsome automobile stood before the

house, with a chauffeur and footman in livery. Janet entered this automobile and was driven away.

Alora turned to look at her father. He was filing his pipe and scowling more darkly than ever.

CHAPTER VI FLITTING

Once more they moved suddenly, and the second flitting came about in this way:

Alora stood beside the easel one morning, watching her father work on his picture. Not that she was especially interested in him or the picture, but there was nothing else for her to do. She stood with her slim legs apart, her hands clasped behind her, staring rather vacantly, when he looked up and noted her presence.

"Well, what do you think of it?" he asked rather sharply.

"Of the picture?" said Lory.

"Of course."

"I don't like it," she asserted, with childish frankness.

"Eh? You don't like it? Why not, girl?"

"Well," she replied, her eyes narrowing critically, "that cow's horn isn't on straight--the red cow's left horn. And it's the same size, all the way up."

He laid down his palette and brush and gazed at his picture for a long time. The scowl came on his face again. Usually his face was stolid and expressionless, but Alora had begun to observe that whenever anything irritated or disturbed him he scowled, and the measure of the scowl indicated to what extent he was annoyed. When he scowled at his own unfinished picture Lory decided he was honest enough to agree with her criticism of it.

Finally the artist took a claspknife from his pocket, opened the blade and deliberately slashed the picture from top to bottom, this way and that, until it was a mere mass of shreds. Then he kicked the stretcher into a corner and brought out another picture, which he placed on the easel.

"Well, how about that?" he asked, looking hard at it himself.

Alora was somewhat frightened at having caused the destruction of the cow picture. So she hesitated before replying: "I--I'd rather not say."

"How funny!" he said musingly, "but until now I never realized how stiff and unreal the daub is. Shall I finish it, Alora?"

"I think so, sir," she answered.

Again the knife slashed through the canvas and the remains joined the scrap-heap in the corner.

Jason Jones was not scowling any more. Instead, there was a hint of a humorous expression on his usually dull features. Only pausing to light his pipe, he brought out one after another of his canvases and after a critical look destroyed each and every one.

Lory was perplexed at the mad act, for although her judgment told her they were not worth keeping, she realized that her father must have passed many laborious hours on them. But now that it had dawned on him how utterly inartistic his work was, in humiliation and disgust he had wiped it out of existence. With this thought in mind, the girl was honestly sorry him.

But Jason Jones did not seem sorry. When the last ruined canvas had been contemptuously flung into the corner he turned to the child and said to her in a voice so cheerful that it positively startled her:

"Get your hat and let's take a walk. An artist's studio is no place for us, Lory. Doesn't it seem deadly dull in here? And outside the sun is shining!"

The rest of the day he behaved much like a human being. He took the girl to the park to see the zoo, and bought her popcorn and peanuts--a wild extravagance, for him. Later in the day they went to a picture show and finally entered a down-town restaurant, quite different from and altogether better than the one where they had always before eaten, and enjoyed a really good dinner. When they left the restaurant he was still in the restless and reckless mood that had dominated him and said:

"Suppose we go to a theatre? Won't you like that better than you would returning to our poky rooms?"

"Yes, indeed," responded Alora.

They had seats in the gallery, but could see very well. Just before the curtain rose Alora noticed a party being seated in one of the boxes. The

lady nearest the rail, dressed in an elaborate evening gown, was Janet Orme. There was another lady with her, conspicuous for blonde hair and much jewelry, and the two gentlemen who accompanied them kept in the background, as if not too proud of their company.

Alora glanced at her father's face and saw the scowl there, for he, too, had noted the box-party. But neither of the two made any remark and soon the child was fully absorbed in the play.

As they left the theatre Janet's party was entering an automobile, laughing and chatting gaily. Both father and daughter silently watched them depart, and then they took a street car and went home.

"Get to bed, girl," said Jason Jones, when they had mounted the stairs. "I'll smoke another pipe, I guess."

When she came out of her room next morning she heard her father stirring in the studio. She went to him and was surprised to find him packing his trunk, which he had drawn into the middle of the room.

"Now that you're up," said he in quite a cheerful tone, "we'll go to breakfast, and then I'll help you pack your own duds. Only one trunk, though, girl, for the other must go into storage and you may see it again, some time, and you may not."

"Are we going away?" she inquired, hoping it might be true.

"We are. We're going a long way, my girl. Do you care?"

"Of course," said she, amazed at the question, for he had never considered her in the least. "I'm glad. I don't like your studio."

He laughed, and the laugh shocked her. She could not remember ever to have heard Jason Jones laugh before.

"I don't like the place, either, girl, and that's why I'm leaving it. For good, this time. I was a fool to return here. In trying to economise, I proved extravagant."

Alora did not reply to that. She was eager to begin packing and hurried through her breakfast. All the things she might need on a journey she put into one trunk. She was not quite sure what she ought to take, and her father was still more ignorant concerning a little girl's wardrobe, but finally both trunks were packed and locked and then Mr. Jones called a

wagon and carted away the extra trunk of Alora's and several boxes of his own to be deposited in a storage warehouse.

She sat in the bare studio and waited for his return. The monotony of the past weeks, which had grown oppressive, was about to end and for this she was very grateful. For from a life of luxury the child had been dumped into a gloomy studio in the heart of a big, bustling city that was all unknown to her and where she had not a single friend or acquaintance. Her only companion had been a strange man who happened to be her father but displayed no affection for her, no spark of interest in her happiness or even comforts. For the first time in her life she lacked a maid to dress her and keep her clothes in order; there was no one to attend to her education, no one to amuse her, no one with whom to counsel in any difficulty. She had been somewhat afraid of her peculiar father and her natural reserve, derived from her mother, had deepened in his society. Yesterday and this morning he had seemed more human, more companionable, yet Alora felt that it was due to a selfish elation and recognized a gulf between them that might never be bridged. Her father differed utterly from her mother in breeding, in intelligence, in sympathy. He was not of the same world; even the child could realize that. And yet, he was her father--all she had left to depend upon, to cling to. She wondered if he really possessed the good qualities her mother had attributed to him. If so, when she knew him better, she might learn to like him.

He was gone a long time, it seemed, but as soon as he returned the remaining baggage was loaded on the wagon and sent away and then they left the flat and boarded a street car for down town. On lower Broadway Mr. Jones entered a bank and seemed to transact considerable business. Lory saw him receive several papers and a lot of money. Then they went to a steamship office near by, where her father purchased tickets.

Afterward they had lunch, and Jason Jones was still in high spirits and seemed more eager and excited than Alora had ever before known him.

"We're going across the big water--to Europe," he told her at luncheon, "so if there is anything you positively need for the trip, tell me what it is and I'll buy it. No frivolities, though," qualifying his generosity, "but just stern necessities. And you must think quick, for our boat leaves at four o'clock and we've no time to waste."

But Alora shook her head. Once she had been taken by her mother to London, Paris and Rome, but all her wants had been attended to and it was so long ago--four or five years--that that voyage was now but a dim remembrance.

No one noticed them when they went aboard. There was no one to see them off or to wish them "bon voyage." It saddened the child to hear the fervent good-byes of others, for it emphasized her own loneliness.

Yes, quite friendless was little Alora. She was going to a foreign land with no companion but a strange and uncongenial man whom fate had imposed upon her in the guise of a parent. As they steamed out to sea and Alora sat on deck and watched the receding shores of America, she turned to her father with the first question she had ventured to ask:

"Where are we going? To London?"

"Not now," he replied. "This ship is bound for the port of Naples. I didn't pick Naples, you know, but took the first ship sailing to-day. Having made up my mind to travel, I couldn't wait," he added, with a chuckle of glee. "You're not particular as to where we go, are you?"

"No," said Alora.

"That's lucky," he rejoined, "for it wouldn't have made any difference, anyhow."

CHAPTER VII MARY LOUISE INTRUDES

It was four years later when on a sunny afternoon in April a carriage broke down on the Amalfi Road, between Positano and Sorrento, in Italy. A wheel crumpled up and the driver stopped his horses and explained to his passengers in a jumble of mixed Italian and English that he could go no farther. The passengers, an old gentleman of distinguished appearance and a young girl as fresh and lovely as a breath of spring, clambered out of the rickety vehicle and after examining the wheel admitted that their driver spoke truly. On one side the road was a steep descent to the sea; opposite, the hillside was masked by a trellis thick with grapevines. The road curved around the mountain, so there was no other vista.

"Here's a nice fix, Gran'pa Jim!" exclaimed the girl, with an amused laugh. "Where are we and what's going to become of us?"

"That is somewhat of a complicated problem, Mary Louise, and I can't guess it offhand, without due reflection," replied "Gran'pa Jim," whom others called Colonel Hathaway. "I imagine, however, that we are about three miles from Positano and five or six from Sorrento, and it's a stiff walk, for old legs or young, in either direction. Besides, there's our luggage, which I am loth to abandon and disinclined to carry."

The driver interposed.

"Give-a me the moment, Signore--perhaps the hour--an' I return to Positano for more carriage-wheel--some other. My Cousin L'uigi, he leeve in Positano, an' L'uigi have a-many carriage-wheel in he's shed. I sure, Signore, I getta the wheel."

"That is a sensible idea," said the old gentleman. "Make haste, my man, and we will wait here."

The driver unhitched his horses from the vehicle and after strapping a blanket on one of them for a saddle mounted it and departed.

"I take-a the two horse," he explained, "for one to ride-a me, an' one for to ride-a the wheel."

They watched him amble away down the road and Mary Louise shook her head and remarked:

"He will never make it in an hour, at that rate, Gran'pa Jim, and in two hours the sun will have set and it will be dinner time. Already I feel the pangs of hunger."

"Those who travel in Italy," said her grandfather, "should be prepared to accept any happening in a spirit of resignation. A moment ago we were jogging merrily along toward a good hotel and a savory dinner, but now--"

"This entire carriage seems ready to fall apart," declared the girl, standing in the road and viewing the ancient vehicle critically; "so it's a wonder something didn't break sooner. Now, if we could get to the other side of that trellis, Gran'pa Jim, we might find a shady spot to rest while our charioteer is searching for a new wheel."

"There must be a gate, somewhere about," he answered, eyeing the vine-clad barrier. "Come, Mary Louise, let us investigate."

A hundred yards down the road they came to some rude stone steps and a wicket. The old gentleman lifted the wooden latch and found the gate unlocked. Followed by Mary Louise, he entered the vineyard and discovered a narrow, well-beaten path leading up the hillside.

"Perhaps there is a house near by," said the girl. "Shall we go on, Gran'pa Jim?"

"Why not, my dear? These Italians are hospitable folk and we may get a cake and a cup of goat's milk to stay our appetite."

So they climbed the hill, following the little path, and presently came upon a laborer who was very deliberately but methodically cultivating the vines with a V-shaped hoe. Seeing the strangers the man straightened up and, leaning upon his hoe, eyed them with evident suspicion.

"Good afternoon," said the old gentleman in Italian--one of the few phrases in the language he had mastered.

"Oh, I speak the English, Signore," replied the man, doffing his hat. "I am Silvio Allegheri, you must know, and I live in America some time."

"Why, this is like meeting an old friend!" exclaimed Mary Louise, winning the fellow instantly with her smile. "But why did you leave America, Silvio?"

"Because I have make my fortune there," was the solemn reply. "It is easy to make the fortune in America, Signorina. I am chef in the restaurant in Sandusky--you know Sandusky?--most excellent! In a few years I save much money, then I return here an' purchase an estate. My estate is three miles across the hill, yonder, and there is a road to it which is not much used. However, it is a fine estate, an' I am rent it to my cousin for five hundred lira a year. Such good business habit I learn in America."

"Why don't you live on your estate yourself?" inquired the girl.

"It is not yet the time," answered the man, with a shake of his head. "I am but fifty-two years alive, and while I am still so young I shall work for others, and save the money my estate brings me. When I get old and can no longer work for the others, then I will go to my estate an' be happy."

"Very sensible," commented the old gentleman. "And whom do you work for now?"

"The student Americano, Signore; the one who has rented this valuable estate. I am the Signore Student's valet, his gardener, and at times his chef. I grease his automobile, which is a very small chug-chug, but respectable, and I clean his shoes--when I can catch him with them off. I am valuable to him and for three years he has paid me fair wages."

"Is this a big estate?" asked Mary Louise.

"Enormous, Signorina. It comprises three acres!"

"And where is the house?"

"Just over the hill, yonder, Signore.

"Does the student Americano live here all alone?"

"With his daughter, who is the Signorina Alora."

"Oh; there is a daughter, then? And you say they are Americans?"

"Surely, Signorina. Who else would pay the great price for this estate for three years? The land pays nothing back--a few oranges; some grapes, when they are cared for; a handful of almonds and olives. And there is a servant besides myself, my niece Leona, who is housemaid and assists the young lady."

"This sounds promising," said Mary Louise, turning to her grandfather. "Suppose we go up to the house? Are the people at home, Silvio?--the Signore Student and his daughter?"

The man reflected, leaning on his hoe.

"I think they are both at the mansion, Signorina, although the student Americano may not yet have returned from Sorrento. The road to the mansion is beyond the hill, on the other side of the estate, so I am not sure the Signore Student has returned. But you will find the Signorina Alora there, if you decide to venture on. But perhaps you are the friends of my employer and his daughter?"

"What is his name?" asked Colonel Hathaway.

"It is Jones. The American saying is Mister Jason Jones, but here he is only called the Signore Student Americano."

"Why?" asked Mary Louise.

"Because his occupation is reading. He does nothing else. Always there is a book in his hand and always he is thinking of the things he reads. He does not often speak, even to his daughter; he does not have friends who visit him. If you should call at the mansion, then you will be the first people who have done so for three years."

There was something in this report--in the manner of the man as well as his words--that caused the strangers to hesitate. The description of "the Student" led them to suspect he was a recluse who might not welcome them cordially, but Mary Louise reflected that there was a daughter and decided that any American girl shut up on this three-acre "estate" for three years would be glad to meet another American girl. So she said abruptly:

"Come on, Gran'pa Jim. Let's call. It is possible that Americans will have something better in the larder than cakes and goat's milk."

The hilltop was reached sooner than they expected, and in a little vale was the old mansion--a really attractive vine-clad villa that might have stood a century or so. It was not very big, but there were numerous outbuildings which rendered the size of the house proper unimportant. As Mary Louise and her grandfather drew nearer they discovered a

charming flower garden, carefully tended, and were not surprised to find a young girl bending over a rosebush.

CHAPTER VIII MARY LOUISE MEETS ALORA

The two stood motionless a moment, looking at the girl, and Mary Louise marked the graceful figure and attractive features with real delight. The Signorina Alora, as the man had called her, was nearly her own age--fifteen, Mary Louise judged her to be--and her golden hair and fair complexion proclaimed her an American. But now the girl's quick ears had detected presence, and she looked up with a startled expression, half fearful and half shy, and turned as if to fly. But in the next moment she had collected herself and advanced with hesitating steps to meet them.

"Pardon our intrusion," said Colonel Hathaway, raising his hat. "Our carriage broke down on the Amalfi road, a little while ago, and our driver has gone to Positano for a new wheel. Meantime we were exploring our surroundings and stumbled upon the path leading to this spot. Forgive the trespass, if you will, and allow me to present my granddaughter, Mary Louise Burrows. I am Colonel James Hathaway, of New York, although we usually reside at a little town called Dorfield."

The girl's bow was stiff and awkward. She blushed in an embarrassed way as she replied:

"I am Alora Jones, sir, and am living here for a time with my father, Jason Jones. We, also, are Americans; at least, we used to be."

"Then doubtless you are yet," responded the Colonel, with a smile. "May we pay our respects to your father?"

"He--he is not home yet," she answered more embarrassed than before. "He went to Sorrento for some books, this morning, and has not yet returned. But perhaps he will be back soon," she added, seeming to ponder the matter. "Will you not come in and--and have some refreshment? In my father's absence I--I am glad to--welcome you."

She glanced shyly at Mary Louise, as if to implore her to forgive any seeming lack of hospitality and accept her coldly worded invitation. No one could look at Mary Louise without gaining confidence and the friendly smile and warm handclasp made Alora feel instantly that here was a girl who would prove congenial under any circumstances. Really, it would not take them long to become friends, and poor Alora had no girl friends whatever.

She led them into a cool and comfortable living room and called to Leona to fetch tea and biscuits.

"We are entirely shut in, here," she explained. "It seems to me worse than a convent, for there I would see other girls while here I see no one but the servants--and my father," as an afterthought, "year in and year out."

"It's a pretty place," declared Mary Louise cheerfully.

"But it's an awfully dreary place, too, and sometimes I feel that I'd like to run away--if I knew where to go," said Alora frankly.

"You have lived here three years?" asked Colonel Hathaway.

"Yes. We left New York more than four years ago and traveled a year in different places, always stopping at the little towns, where there is not much to interest one. Then my father found this place and rented it, and here we've stayed--I can't say 'lived'--ever since. I get along pretty well in the daytime, with my flowers and the chickens to tend, but the evenings are horribly lonely. Sometimes I feel that I shall go mad."

Mary Louise marked her wild look and excited manner and her heart went out in sympathy to the lonely girl. Colonel Hathaway, too, intuitively recognized Alora's plaint as a human cry for help, and did not need to guess the explanation. The man in the vineyard had called her father "the Student" and said he was a reserved man and never was seen without a book in his hand. This would mean that he was not companionable and Alora's protest plainly indicated that her father devoted small time, if any, to the cultivation of his daughter's society.

"I suppose," remarked the old gentleman, "that Mr. Jones is so immersed in his studies that he forgets his daughter lacks society and amusement."

Mary Louise caught the slight, scornful smile that for a moment curled Alora's lips. But the girl replied very seriously:

"My father dislikes society. I believe he would be quite content to live in this little cooped-up place forever and see no one but the servants, to whom he seldom speaks. Also, he ignores me, and I am glad he does. But before my mother died," her voice breaking a little, "I was greatly loved and petted, and I can't get used to the change. I ought not to say this to strangers, I know, but I am very lonely and unhappy, because--because my father is so different from what my mother was."

Mary Louise was holding her trembling hand now and stroking it sympathetically.

"Tell us about your mother," she said softly. "Is it long since you lost her?"

"More than four years," returned Alora. "I was her constant companion and she taught me to love art and music and such things, for art was her hobby. I did not know my father in those days, you see, for--for-- they did not live together. But in her last illness mamma sent for him and made him my guardian. My mother said that my father would love me, but she must have misjudged him."

Colonel Hathaway had listened with interest.

"Tell me your mother's name," said he.

"She was Mrs. Antoinette Seaver Jones, and--"

"Indeed!" exclaimed the Colonel. "Why, I knew Antoinette Seaver before she married, and a more beautiful and cultured woman I never met. Her father, Captain Seaver, was my friend, and I met his daughter several times, both at his mining camp and in the city. So you see, my dear, we must be friends."

Alora's eyes fairly glistened with delight and Mary Louise was as pleased as she was surprised.

"Of course we're friends!" she cried, pressing the girl's hand, "and isn't it queer we have come together in this singular manner? In a foreign country! And just because our carriage-wheel happened to break."

"I thought your mother married an artist," said Mary Louise's grandfather, reflectively.

"She did. At least, she thought Jason Jones was an artist," answered Alora with bitter emphasis. "But he was, in fact, a mere dauber. He became discouraged in his attempts to paint and soon after he took me to New York he destroyed all his work--really, it was dreadful!--and since then he has never touched a brush."

"That is strange," mused the Colonel. "I once saw a landscape by Jason Jones that was considered a fine conception, skillfully executed. That

was the opinion of so good a judge as Captain Seaver himself. Therefore, for some reason the man's genius must have forsaken him."

"I think that is true," agreed Alora, "for my mother's estimate of art was undoubtedly correct. I have read somewhere that discouragement sometimes destroys one's talent, though in after years, with proper impulse, it may return with added strength. In my father's case," she explained, "he was not able to sell his work--and no wonder. So now he does nothing at all but read, and even that doesn't seem to amuse him much."

The Colonel had now remembered that Antoinette Seaver Jones was a woman of great wealth, and therefore her daughter must be an heiress. What a shame to keep the girl hidden in this out-of-the-way place, when she should be preparing to assume an important position in the world.

"May I ask your age, my dear?" he said.

"I am fifteen, sir," replied Alora.

"And your father is the guardian of your fortune?"

"Yes; by my mother's wish."

"I suppose you are receiving proper instruction?"

"None at all, sir. Since I have been in my father's care I have had no instruction whatever. That isn't right, is it?"

"What isn't right?" demanded a gruff voice, and all three turned to find Jason Jones standing in the doorway.

CHAPTER IX MARY LOUISE SCENTS A MYSTERY

Colonel Hathaway instantly rose.

"I beg your pardon," said he. "I am Colonel James Hathaway, an American, and this is my granddaughter, Mary Louise Burrows. Our carriage met with an accident on the main road below and we wandered in here while waiting for repairs and chanced to meet your daughter. You are Mr. Jones, I believe?"

He nodded, still standing in his place and regarding his visitors with unconcealed suspicion. Under his arm he held several books.

"Who informed you that I was living here?" he demanded.

"I was wholly unaware of the fact," said the Colonel, stiffly. "I did not know you were in Italy. I did not know such an important person existed, strange to say, although I can remember that an artist named Jason Jones once married Antoinette Seaver, the daughter of my old friend Captain Robert Seaver."

"Oh, you remember that, do you?"

"This is the first time I have had the distinguished honor of meeting you, sir, and I trust it will be the last time."

"That's all right," said Jason Jones, more cordially. "I can't see that it's any of my affair, either way."

"We have been making the acquaintance of Tony Seaver's daughter, Miss Alora Jones, in your absence. But we will not intrude farther, Mr. Jones. Come, Mary Louise."

"Oh, don't go!" pleaded Alora, catching Mary Louise's arm. And just then Leona entered with the tea and biscuits.

"Sit down, man," said Jason Jones in a less aggressive tone. "I've no objection to your coming here, under the circumstances, and you are our first visitors in three years. That's often enough, but now that you are here, make yourself at home. What's happening over in America? Have you been there lately?"

He laid his books on a table and sat down. But after that one speech, which he perhaps considered conciliatory, he remained glum and allowed the others to do the talking.

Colonel Hathaway had stayed because he noted the leading look in Mary Louise's eyes. He was himself interested in Alora and indignant over her evident neglect. For her sake he would bear the insolence of his host, an insolence he recognized as characteristic of the man.

Alora, in her father's presence, lost her fluent speech and no longer dared mention personal matters to her guests. Both Mary Louise and her grandfather tried to lead Alora and Jason Jones to speak of themselves-- of their life and future plans--but the man evaded direct answers and the girl had suddenly become silent and reserved.

Finally, however, Mary Louise had an idea.

"We are bound for Sorrento," said she, "where we intend to stay a week at the Hotel Vittoria. Will you let Alora come to us for ever Sunday, as our guest? We will drive here and get her the day after to-morrow-- that's Saturday, you know--and fetch her home on Monday."

"No," said Jason Jones.

"Oh, why not, father?" pleaded the girl.

"You've no fit clothes. I don't want you hanging around Sorrento," he replied.

"It will be a nice change for your daughter and it will give us much pleasure to entertain her," said Mary Louise.

"It's a capital idea," declared the Colonel positively, and looking the other man straight in the eye he added: "I am sure you will withdraw your objections, Mr. Jones."

The man dropped his eyes, frowning. But presently he said to Alora:

"Go, if you want to. But keep out of the town. Don't leave the hotel grounds."

"Why not?" asked his daughter in a defiant tone.

"It's not safe. I know Sorrento, and these rascally Italians would be glad to steal you, if they had the chance, and then blackmail me a ransom."

Mary Louise laughed.

"What a fine adventure that would be!" she exclaimed. "But we will promise to guard Alora and keep her from the clutches of bandits. I didn't know there were any left in Italy."

"To get rid of them you'd have to depopulate the country," said Jason Jones. "It is no laughing matter, young woman, and--my daughter is somewhat valuable."

CHAPTER X MERE SPECULATION

The driver returned with the wheel. It fitted the axle but was some two or three inches larger in diameter than the other rear wheel and, moreover, it was flat on one side, so that when they started to conclude their journey the motion of the carriage was something startling--a "rock-a-bye baby ride" Mary Louise called it.

But the wheels turned and the carriage progressed and when they were well on their way the girl said:

"What do you think of that man, Gran'pa Jim?"

"Do you mean Alora's father, Jason Jones?"

"Yes, of course."

"I am surprised at two things," said the old Colonel. "First, it is curious that Tony Seaver, a rarely cultured woman, should have married such a man, and again it is amazing that she should have confided her daughter and her fortune to his care."

"Do you know," observed Mary Louise, sliding closer to him and dropping her voice, although there was absolutely no chance of being overheard, "I scent a mystery in that family, Gran'pa Jim!"

"That seems to be one of your regular diversions--to scent mysteries," he replied. "And usually, my dear, the suspicion is unwarranted. The most commonplace people frequently impress you with the idea that they are other than what they seem, are leading double lives, or are endeavoring to conceal some irregularity of conduct. You've a faculty of reading the natures and characteristics of strangers by studying their eyes, their facial expressions and their oddities of demeanor, which is interesting psychologically but too often----"

"You are unjust, Gran'pa!" declared Mary Louise indignantly. "Didn't you yourself say there are two curious and surprising things about this man Jones?"

"Not exactly. I said it was curious and astonishing that Antoinette Seaver should have trusted so fully a man who impresses me as a churl. His

own child, little Alora, appears to dislike and even to despise him, and----
"

"There!" cried Mary Louise. "I'm vindicated. Your observations fully justify my remark that there's a mystery in that family. Did you notice the books he brought home and laid upon the table?"

"No," said Colonel Hathaway, rather bewildered.

"They were novels by Marie Correlli, H. G. Wells and O. Henry. A student? Then a student of modern novels, a man who reads and reads to keep his mind from dwelling on past history. He is a disappointed artist, to begin with."

"That is certainly odd," rejoined the old gentleman, reflectively. "The one picture I ever saw by Jason Jones was certainly good. I remember that once when I was lunching with Bob Seaver--that was Antoinette's father, you know--he told me his daughter was interested in a young artist of exceptional talent, and he took me to a gallery to show me what this man could do. I am not an art critic, as you are aware, my dear, but this landscape of Jason Jones appealed to me as delightful. Captain Bob knew art, and so did Antoinette, so it is evident that Jones could paint, but for some reason became dissatisfied with his work and abandoned it. Perhaps his ambition was too lofty for human skill to realize, yet nothing less would content him."

Mary Louise sat silent for a while. Then she asked:

"Did Jason Jones impress you as a man capable of a great ambition? Would you guess him an artist who had once accomplished admirable things?"

"Artists are always peculiar," stated her grandfather. "They must be temperamental in order to be artists, and temperaments differ widely. Had I not known something of Jason Jones' history I might have felt, on making his acquaintance to-day, that he is not an ordinary man. For, gruff and churlish though he proved, it is undeniable that he has selected a charming and retired spot in which to live----"

"Or to hide," she interrupted.

"Or that, with considerable wealth at his command, he lives simply and unostentatiously, enjoying nature's choice gifts and content with the simple life he leads, with only the society of his young daughter."

"Whom he neglects and refuses to educate properly," declared the girl. "What makes you think he is wealthy?"

"I know that Antoinette made millions, after her father died, from the mines. By current report she retired and invested her money wisely, in sound securities, which accords with her excellent business reputation. Her daughter not being of age--let me see: she must have been but eleven when her mother passed away--there would be a guardian appointed for the heiress, and Alora told us that it was her mother's wish that her father act as her guardian. So the conclusion is evident that Mr. Jones has a large income at his command."

"All the more reason he should be generous, but he isn't spending much of it," said Mary Louise.

"No; he is probably living simply in order that his daughter's fortune may increase during the years of her minority. That is a point in his favor, you must admit."

"Nevertheless," asserted the young girl, "I think there is something wrong in the Jones family. It isn't due to Alora; she's a dear little thing, wild and untamed but very lovable, I'm sure; so the fault must lie with her boorish father. Allowing that once he was a big man, something has mysteriously soured him and rendered his life hateful not only to himself but to all around him."

"Look, Mary Louise; we're getting into Sorrento," said the Colonel. "Here the road leaves the sea and crosses the plateau to the town. You'll like Sorrento, I'm sure, for it is one of the quaintest places in old Italy--and the hotel is really comfortable."

CHAPTER XI ALORA SPEAKS FRANKLY

On Saturday forenoon the Colonel engaged a carriage--a substantial one, this time--and with Mary Louise drove to Jason Jones' villa, so that Alora might return with them in time for lunch. They did not see the artist, who was somewhere about the grounds but kept out of view; but Alora was ready and waiting, her cheeks flushed and her eyes alight, and she slipped her foreign little straw satchel in the carriage and then quickly followed it, as if eager to be off.

"Father is rather disagreeable this morning," she asserted in a sharp voice, when they were on the highway to Sorrento. "He repented his decision to let me go with you and almost forbade me. But I rebelled, and----" she paused; "I have found that when I assert myself I can usually win my way, for father is a coward at heart."

It pained Mary Louise to hear so unfilial a speech from the lips of a young girl. Colonel Hathaway's face showed that he, too, considered it unmannerly to criticise a parent in the presence of strangers. But both reflected that Alora's life and environments were unenviable and that she had lacked, in these later years at least, the careful training due one in her station in society. So they deftly changed the subject and led the girl to speak of Italy and its delightful scenery and romantic history. Alora knew little of the country outside of the Sorrento peninsula, but her appreciation of nature was artistic and innately true and she talked well and interestingly of the surrounding country and the quaint and amusing customs of its inhabitants.

"How long do you expect to remain here?" asked Mary Louise.

"I've no idea," was the reply. "Father seems entirely satisfied with our quarters, for he has no ambition in life beyond eating three simple meals a day, sleeping from nine at night until nine in the morning and reading all the romances he is able to procure. He corresponds with no one save his banker in America and sees no one but the servants and me. But to me the monotony of our existence is fast becoming unbearable and I often wonder if I can stand it for three years longer--until I'm eighteen. Then I shall be my own mistress and entitled to handle my own money, and you may rest assured I shall make up for lost time."

They let that remark pass, also, but later in the afternoon, when luncheon was over and the two girls were wandering in the lovely

gardens of the Hotel Vittoria, while the Colonel indulged in an afternoon siesta, Mary Louise led Alora to speak freely of her past life.

"My grandfather says that your mother must have left you a good deal of money," she remarked.

"Yes; mamma told me it was a large fortune and that I must guard it wisely and use it generously to help others less favored," replied Alora thoughtfully.

"And she left it all in your father's keeping?"

"Not the principal. That is all invested, and thank goodness my father cannot touch it in any way. But the income is paid to him regularly, and he may do as he pleases with it. I am sure mamma expected I would have every reasonable wish gratified, and be taught every womanly accomplishment; but I'm treated as a mere dependent. I'm almost destitute of proper clothing--really, Mary Louise, this is the best dress I possess!--and I've been obliged to educate myself, making a rather poor job of it, I fear. I read the best of father's books, when he is done with them, and note carefully the manner in which the characters express themselves and how they conduct themselves in society as well as in worldly contact. I do not wish to be wholly gauche when I come into my kingdom, you see, and the books are my only salvation. I don't care much for the stories, but some of the good writers are safe guides to follow in the matter of dialogue and deportment. Fortunately, father's books are all in English. He doesn't understand much Italian, although I have learned to speak the language like a native--like our native servants, you know."

Mary Louise reflected on this confession. "I'm afraid, Alora dear, that modern novels are not prone to teach morality, or to develop a girl's finer intuitions," she said gravely. "I think you express yourself very well--better than I do, indeed--but you need association with those who can convey to you the right principles of thought and thus encourage your mental development. Culture and refinement seem to come more from association than from books, although there is an innate tendency in all well-born people to acquire them spontaneously. But there! you'll accuse me of preaching and, after all, I think you've done just splendidly under rather trying circumstances."

"You don't know how trying they are," declared Alora, with a sigh. "Father and I are wholly uncongenial and we fight on the slightest provocation. This morning our trouble was over money. I wanted a little to take with me, for my purse hasn't a lira in it; but, no! not a centesimo would he give up. He insisted that if I was to be your guest you would pay all my expenses."

"Of course," said Mary Louise. "But what does he do with all that big income? Is he saving it for you?"

"No, indeed! he's saving it for himself. Mamma told me, the last time I saw her before she died, that if father was good to me, and kind and loving, I could provide for him in some way after I came into my money. She said she would leave the manner of it to my judgment. But he isn't kind, or loving, or good, and knows very well that when I'm of age he'll never see another cent of my money. So now he'd hoarding my income for future use."

"Isn't it strange that your mother should have trusted him so fully?" asked Mary Louise.

"Yes, it does seem strange. I remember her saying that he loved luxury and all the comfort that money will buy, and so she wanted him to have this income to spend, because he was my father and because she felt she had ruined his career as an artist by surrounding him with luxuries during their early married life, and afterward had embittered him by depriving him of them. But the man doesn't know what luxury means, Mary Louise. His tastes are those of a peasant."

"Yet once your mother loved him, and believed in him."

"I--I think she believed in him; I'm quite sure she did."

"Then his nature must have changed. I can imagine, Alora, that when your mother first knew him he was hard-working and ambitious. He was talented, too, and that promised future fame. But when he married a wealthy woman he lost his ambition, success being no longer necessary. After a period of ease and comfort in the society of his lovely wife-- for Gran'pa says your mother was very lovely--he lost both the wife and the luxuries he enjoyed. A big man, Alora, would have developed a new ambition, but it seems your father was not big. His return to poverty after your mother's desertion made him bitter and reckless; perhaps it

dulled his brain, and that is why he is no longer able to do good work. He was utterly crushed, I imagine, and hadn't the stamina to recover his former poise. He must have been ten years or so in this condition, despairing and disinterested, when the wheel of fortune turned and he was again in the possession of wealth. He had now the means to live as he pleased. But those years had so changed him that he couldn't respond to the new conditions. Doubtless he was glad, in a way, but he was now content merely to exist. Doesn't that seem logical, Alora?"

Indeed, Mary Louise was delighted with her solution of the problem. It was in keeping with her talent for deducing the truth from meagre facts by logically putting them together and considering them as a whole. It was seldom she erred in these deductions. But Alora seemed unimpressed and noting her glum look Mary Louise said again: "Doesn't all this seem logical, dear?"

"No," said Alora. "Father isn't the man to be crushed by anything. He's shrewd enough, in his bourgeois way. Once, long ago--back in New York--a woman made him give her money; it was money, you know; and I have often thought he ran away from America to escape her further demands."

"Who was the woman?"

"My mother's nurse."

"Oh. Was it her wages she demanded?"

"Perhaps so. I may have misjudged father in that case. But it seemed to me--I was a mere child then--that it must have been a larger sum than wages would have amounted to. Yet, perhaps not. Anyhow, he left America right afterward, and when we had wandered a year or so in various countries we settled down here."

"Won't he have to account for all the money he has spent and given away, when you come of age?" inquired Mary Louise.

"No. Mother distinctly told me I was to ask for no accounting whatever. Her will says he is to handle the income as he sees fit, just as if it were his own, so long as he provides properly for his daughter and treats her with fatherly consideration. That's the only reason he keeps me with him, guarding my person but neglecting the other injunctions. If he set me adrift, as I'm sure he'd like to do, I could appeal to the court and his income would cease and another guardian be appointed. I believe there is

something of that sort in the will, and that is why he is so afraid of losing me. But he gives me no chance to appeal to anyone, although I sometimes think I shall run away and leave him in the lurch. If I could get to Chicago and tell Judge Bernsted, my mother's lawyer, how I am treated, I believe he could make the court set aside my father's guardianship. But I can't get ten miles away from here, for lack of money."

"How your dear mother would grieve, if she knew her plans for your happiness have failed!" exclaimed Mary Louise.

Alora frowned, and somehow that frown reminded Mary Louise of the girl's father.

"My mother ought to have known my father better," she declared sullenly. "I must not criticize her judgment, for her memory is my most precious possession and I know she loved me devotedly. But there is one thing in her history I can never understand."

"And that?" questioned Mary Louise curiously, as Alora paused.

"My mother was an educated woman, well-bred and refined."

"Yes; Gran'pa Jim told me that."

"Then how could she have married my father, who is not a gentleman and never could have impressed a lady with the notion he was one?"

Mary Louise hesitated, for to admit this would send her deductions, so carefully constructed, tumbling in ruins. But Alora ought to know the man.

"If that is true, dear," said she, "it is the strangest part of your story; and, of course, we can only guess the reason, for the only one who could have explained it properly was your mother."

CHAPTER XI JASON JONES IS FRIGHTENED

When Alora had retired to her bedroom that night Mary Louise told to her grandfather, who was her trusted confidant, all that the unhappy girl had related.

"Of course," she added, "Alora's explanations dispel my half formed suspicion that there is some mystery about Jason Jones. I now see that you were right, Gran'pa Jim, to laugh at me when I suggested such a thing, for in truth the man is easily understood once you become acquainted with his history. However, I now dislike him more than ever."

"In justice to Jason Jones," remarked the old Colonel, "we must acquit him of being a hypocrite. He doesn't attempt to mask his nature and a stranger is bound to see him at his worst. Doubtless Antoinette Seaver understood the man better than we are able to and sixteen years ago, or so, when he had youth, talent and ambition, his disagreeable characteristics were probably not so marked. As for Alora, she is strongly prejudiced against her father and we must make due allowance for her bitterness. The feeling probably arose through her sudden transfer from the care of a generous and loving mother to that of an ungracious father--a parent she had never before known. A child of eleven is likely to form strong affections and passionate dislikes."

"Do you know," said Mary Louise, "it shocks me, this hatred of her father. It seems so unnatural. I wish we could bring them to understand one another better, Gran'pa Jim."

"That might prove a difficult task, my dear," he replied with a smile, gently stroking her hair the while, "and I do not think we are justified in undertaking it. How many times during our travels, Mary Louise, has your impulsive and tender heart urged you to assume the burdens of other people? You seem to pick up a trail of sorrow or unhappiness with the eagerness of a bloodhound and I have all I can do to call you off the scent. One small girl can't regulate the world, you know, and in this case we are likely to see very little of Alora Jones and her artist father. We will be nice to them during the few days we are here, but we must soon move on or we'll never get home for your birthday, as we have planned."

Mary Louise sighed.

"You're almost always right, Gran'pa Jim," she admitted; "but in all our European travels I've not met so interesting a person as Alora, and she's an American girl, which draws us still closer together. I'm going to make her promise that when she's of age and her own mistress she will let me know, and come to us for a visit. Wouldn't that be all right, Gran'pa?"

He assured her it would be quite proper and that he also admired Alora and was sorry for her.

On Sunday forenoon they went to the cathedral and in the afternoon took a boat to the blue grottoes. In the evening there was a concert in the hotel. All that day the two girls were arm in arm and chatting together, developing their mutual liking, while the old Colonel trudged along in their wake and was generally ignored in the conversation. On Monday they planned an excursion to Capri, "For you won't mind if we don't get you home until after dinner, will you?" asked Mary Louise.

"Not at all," said Alora. "I want to make the most of this vacation."

"Her father may mind, however," suggested the Colonel.

"I don't care whether he does or not," retorted the girl, tossing her head. "He has no consideration for me, so why should I consider him?"

"I don't like that attitude, dear," said Mary Louise frankly. "I--I don't wish to be snippy, you know, but you should not forget that he is your father."

"That," replied Alora doggedly, "is merely my misfortune, and I'm not going to allow it to ruin all my life."

On Monday morning they had scarcely finished breakfast when Jason Jones appeared at the hotel, having driven over from the villa in his little automobile--a tiny foreign contrivance that reminded one of a child's cart but could cover the ground with considerable speed. They were sitting on the big piazza when Alora's father came striding up to them with a white, fear-struck face. In his trembling hands he held the morning Naples newspaper and without a word of greeting he said abruptly:

"Have you heard the news?"

Colonel Hathaway rose and bowed.

"Good morning, Mr. Jones," said he. "I do not read the local newspapers, for my knowledge of Italian is indifferent."

"So is mine," responded the artist, "but I know enough of their lingo to make out that Italy has entered this fool war. She's going to fight the Austrians," he continued, his voice shaking nervously, "and do you know what that will mean, sir?"

"I can't imagine," replied the Colonel calmly.

"It means that presently we'll have all that horde of Germans overrunning Italy. They'll conquer this helpless land as sure as fate, and we'll all be burned out and tortured and mutilated in the fiendish German way!"

"My dear sir, you are frightened without warrant," declared Colonel Hathaway. "It will take some time to conquer Italy, and I cannot imagine the Austrians acting as you suggest."

"Back of the Austrians are the Germans, and those Prussians are worse than wild American Indians," insisted Jones. "If they got their clutches on my daughter it would be more horrible than death and I don't propose to leave her in danger a single minute. I'm going to quit this country. I've come for Alora. We must pack up and catch the first ship from Naples for America."

There was blank silence for a moment.

"I'm not afraid," said Alora, with a laugh, "but if it means our getting out of this tiresome place and sailing for home, I'm glad that Italy's gone into the war."

Colonel Hathaway was grave and thoughtful. The agitation of the artist seemed to increase with every moment.

"When does the next boat for America leave Naples?" asked Mary Louise.

"Tuesday," said Alora's father. "We've just time to pack our possessions and leave."

"Time!" cried his daughter, "why, I can pack all my possessions in an hour. Go home, sir, and fuss around as much as you like. I'll join you some time this evening."

He gave her a queer look, hesitating.

"We are surely safe enough for the present," remarked the Colonel. "The first act of war will be to send all the soldiers to the north border. The fighting will be done in the Trentino for some time to come."

"You don't know these people," said Jones, shifting uneasily from one foot to another. "They're all brigands by nature and many of them by profession. As soon as the soldiers are sent north, all law and order will cease and brigandage will be the order of the day!"

"This is absurd!" exclaimed the Colonel, testily. "You're not talking sense."

"That's a matter of opinion, sir; but I know my own business, and I'm going to get out of here."

"Wait a week longer," suggested Mary Louise. "We are to sail ourselves on the boat that leaves Naples a week from Tuesday, and it will be nice for Alora and me to travel home together."

"No; I won't wait. Get your things, Alora, and come with me at once."

"Have you made reservations on the boat?" inquired Colonel Hathaway, refusing to be annoyed by the man's brusque words and rough demeanor.

"I'll do that at once, by telephone. That's one reason I came over. I'll telephone the steamship office while the girl is getting ready."

"I will go with you," said the Colonel, as the artist turned away.

While Jones used the telephone booth of the hotel Colonel Hathaway conversed with the proprietor, and afterward with the hall porter, who was better posted and spoke better English.

"This is outrageous!" roared the artist, furiously bursting from the booth. "To-morrow's boat is abandoned! The government requires it as a transport. Why? Why? Why?" and he wrung his hands despairingly.

"I do not know, sir," returned the Colonel, smiling at his futile passion.

The smile seemed to strike Jones like a blow. He stopped abruptly and stared at the other man for a full minute--intently, suspiciously. Then he relaxed.

"You're right," said he coldly. "It's folly to quarrel with fate. I've booked for a week from Tuesday, Hathaway, and we must stick it out till then. Do you take the same boat?"

"That is my intention."

"Well, there's no objection. Now I'll go get Alora."

But Alora, hearing of the postponed sailing, positively refused to return home with him, and Mary Louise, supporting her new friend, urged her to extend her stay with her at the hotel. Strangely enough, the more he was opposed the more quiet and composed the artist became. He even ceased to tremble and an odd apathy settled over him.

"The hall porter," said the Colonel, "thinks this is the safest place in Italy. The troops have been on the border for months and their positions are strongly fortified. There is no brigandage outside of Sicily, where the Mafia is not yet wholly suppressed."

Jones grinned rather sheepishly.

"All right, take his word for it," said he. "And if you'll be responsible for the girl you may keep her till we're ready to sail. Perhaps that's the best way, after all." Then, without a word of good-bye, he entered his little motor car and started down the driveway.

"A strange man," said the Colonel, looking after him. "I wonder if it really was the war that frightened him--or something else--or if he was actually frightened at all?"

Alora laughed.

"You can't guess father, try as you may," she said. "Usually he is cold as ice, but once in awhile he gets these wild fits, which I find rather amusing. You can't understand that, of course, but if you were obliged to live under the same roof with Jason Jones you would welcome his outbursts as relief from the monotony of contemptuous silence."

CHAPTER XII SILVIO'S GOLD

Jason Jones urged his little car to its best speed until he gained his villa. Entering the ground, he was confronted by his factotum, the Italian, Silvio.

He sprang out and approached the man.

"Is the prisoner safe?" he whispered.

"Certainly, Signore."

"Is she still in the grape-house?"

"With the wine presses, Signore."

"And she can't get out?"

"Unless she becomes small, like a rat, Signore."

Jones glanced around suspiciously, then fixed his gaze on a little outbuilding of stone, with a tiled roof, which stood quite removed from the others of the group.

"Has she screamed, or cried out?" he asked the man.

"Not since I put her in, las' night, Signore."

"Good. You've fed her?"

"The plenty. She eat very well. It's a nice lady, Signore."

"She's dangerous. Listen, Silvio: we must keep her there a week longer."

"If I am jailer a week, I mus' double my price," he asserted, shrugging his shoulders.

"Nonsense!"

"The lady will offer me more to let her out. She say so."

"What! You'd betray me?"

"Not if I have the gold--here, in my hand--now, Signore."

Jones grew red and then white. He eyed the man wickedly. He scowled, and Silvio smiled pleasantly. Silvio was big for an Italian; big and brawny; as his smile faded his face assumed a look of stubborn determination.

"So you want the gold now, Silvio?"

"At once, if it please the Signore. The gendarmes are ugly if the law is broken. Their jails are not as pleasant as the grape-house. So the gold must be twice the amount we had spoken of, Signore."

"And you will promise she shall not escape; that you'll keep her safe until--until I tell you to let her go?"

"That is our bargain, Signore."

Jones sighed regretfully.

"Very well, then, Silvio," he said. "You're a robber--the son of a brigand--the spawn of a bandit! But come with me to the house, and you shall have your gold."

* * * * *

Alora stayed all that week with Mary Louise, hearing nothing of her father and almost forgetting her unhappiness in the society of her delightful new friend. It was Sunday evening when the Colonel and Mary Louise drove their guest over to the villa and the two parties did not see one another again until they met on the deck of the steamer in Naples on the following Tuesday morning.

The Joneses came aboard very quietly just at the last moment and at the gang-plank Alora's father was confronted by a grimy Italian boy who handed him a letter. Without pausing to read it, Jones hurried below, and he kept his stateroom until the ship was well out in the blue Mediterranean, on its way to Gibraltar and New York. But no one missed him, for Alora and Mary Louise were happy at being reunited and Gran'pa Jim was happy in seeing them happy.

CHAPTER XIII DORFIELD

In one of the middle-west states there is a delightful little city called Dorfield. It hasn't so many thousand inhabitants, but in all its aspects and its municipal equipment it is indeed a modern city. It has factories and a big farming community to support its streets of neat and progressive shops, and at the west side of the business district is a residence section where broad, wooded streets furnish the setting for many cozy homes. Some of the houses are old and picturesque, and some are new and imposing, but each has its flower-lit garden, its fruit and shade trees and its little garage or barn tucked away in the back yard.

When you come to Oak Street there is a rambling frame house on the corner, set well back, where Peter Conant, the lawyer, lives with his good wife and his niece Irene Macfarlane, who is seventeen. This is one of the ancient dwellings of Dorfield, for the Conants are "old inhabitants." Right next them stands a more modern and expensive, if less attractive, mansion, with grounds twice as large and a velvet lawn that puts the Conants' carelessly-cropped grass to shame. But the two families are neighbors and friends nevertheless, for in the new house lives Colonel James Hathaway and his granddaughter Mary Louise Burrows. At least, they live there when at home and, although they seem persistent ramblers, they are glad to have this refuge to return to when wearied with traveling and sight-seeing.

One morning in June Mr. Conant was just seating himself at the breakfast table when a messenger-boy delivered a telegram--a "night letter" from New York. The lawyer, a short, thick-set man of middle age, with a stern countenance but mild blue eyes, laid aside his morning paper and read the telegram with his usual deliberation. Mrs. Conant silently poured the coffee, knowing any interference would annoy him. Irene, the niece, was a cripple and sat in her wheeled chair at the table, between her uncle and aunt. She was a pleasant-faced, happy little maid, consistently ignoring her withered limbs and thankful that from her knees up she was normal and that her wheeled chair rendered her fairly independent of assistance in all ordinary activities. Everyone loved Irene Macfarlane because of her brave and cheery acceptance of her misfortune, and her merry speech and spontaneous laughter rendered

her, as "Aunt Hannah" often declared, "the light of the house." Irene was, moreover, an intimate and highly valued friend of her next door neighbor, Mary Louise Burrows.

Mr. Peter Conant, sipping his coffee reflectively, read the lengthy telegram a second time. Then he said, somewhat irritably and chopping his words into distinct syllables, as was his habit at all times:

"I wonder why people imagine a lawyer's duties cover every phase of life? My clients use me as a real-estate agent, a horse trader, a purchasing agent, a father confessor, an automobile expert, a medical adviser, and sometimes--in their simplicity--as a banker!"

"What's wrong now, Peter?" inquired Mrs. Conant with wifely sympathy.

"Colonel Hathaway wants to know--"

"Oh, is Mary Louise coming back?" cried Irene eagerly.

He frowned at her.

"What does the Colonel wish to know, Peter?"

"I object to this unwarrantable cross-examination," said he. "It is customary to first allow one to state his case."

"Forgive me, Uncle Peter!"

"Take your time," said Aunt Hannah, composedly buttering the toast.

"You will, anyhow, and I'm sure Irene and I have both learned to curb our feminine curiosity."

He glanced at the telegram again.

"Do you know if the Pelton place has been rented, my dear?"

"The Pelton place? Why, it wasn't rented yesterday, for I passed by there and saw the rent sign still in the window. Mr. Harlan is the agent."

"I know. And where can we find a female house-servant, Hannah?"

"Now, see here, Peter; it's all very well for you to keep your own counsel, when there's a professional secret to be guarded, but if you want any help from me you've got to open your mouth and talk out plainly, so I can answer you in a sensible way."

"You're always sensible, Hannah," he observed, quite unruffled by her demand. And then he ate a whole slice of toast and drank his coffee and handed his cup for more before he spoke another word.

Irene devoted herself to her breakfast. She knew Uncle Peter's ways and that it was useless to attempt to hurry him or force him to explain, until he was quite ready to do so. Aunt Hannah bided her time. Peter was a thoughtful man, and he was doubtless thinking. His wife was not only a clever helpmate but was noted for her consideration of her erratic spouse.

"The Colonel," said Mr. Conant at last, "has run across a man who wants to make his home in Dorfield. A very sensible idea. The Colonel met the man in Europe. The man----"

"What's the man's name?" inquired Mrs. Conant.

He referred to the telegram.

"Jones. Jason Jones."

"I never heard of him."

He looked at her reproachfully.

"Why should you, my dear? The Colonel found the man in Europe. We live in Dorfield. The man, it seems, has a daughter----"

"Oh, goody!" cried Irene.

"Who has become a friend of Mary Louise, therefore the Colonel wires to ask if there is a furnished house to rent at a modest price and if a competent female servant can be secured for the man and his daughter. He requests me to wire an answer promptly. That is the gist of the telegram, although the Colonel, in his usual extravagant way, has paid for more words than were required to express his meaning."

"And what are you going to do about it?" demanded Mrs. Conant.

"I am endeavoring to gain information from my wife."

"Very well. What does he mean by 'a modest price'? The Pelton place is expensive. The rent is sixty dollars a month, while a comfortable house like that of the Widow Harrington rents for fifteen dollars, with good, solid furniture."

"Is Mrs. Harrington's house for rent?" he asked.

"Yes. She'll go to live with her married daughter as soon as she can find a tenant. The poor creature needs the money, and her house is just around the corner from here and her back yard backs up to the Colonel's back yard. Now, the Pelton place is two blocks from here, and the Peltons don't need the money, because they're already too rich and aristocratic to live in Dorfield any longer."

"H-m-m!" murmured Mr. Conant. "It occurs to me that a friend of Colonel Hathaway might desire a more luxurious home than that of the Widow Harrington."

"Doesn't the telegram say 'a modest price'?"

"It does. I'll quote both places and let the man Jones take his choice. And how about the female servant, Hannah?"

"Leave that to me; I can hire plenty. But if Mr. Jason Jones takes the Pelton place he will want one kind of a servant, and if he takes Mrs. Harrington's house he'll want a different sort."

He gazed at her admiringly and passed his cup again, saying:

"You've a logical mind, my dear. Had you been a man you might have become a fairly good lawyer."

"No, Peter; not another drop. You've two cups already."

"Are you sure, Hannah?"

"Absolutely positive!"

"Then," said he, rising with a sigh, "I'll go to the office."

To Mr. Conant's disappointment, to Mrs. Conant's delight, to Irene's satisfaction and the astonishment of all, Mr. Jason Jones selected Mrs. Harrington's modest house and ordered it rented and prepared for his arrival on the following Thursday. This was conveyed in a second telegram from Colonel Hathaway, who requested the lawyer to inform old Uncle Eben and Aunt Sally, the Colonel's own faithful colored servants and caretakers, that he and Mary Louise would return home on the same day.

"You see," said Aunt Hannah, triumphantly, "I sized the Joneses up pretty well. It isn't necessary for a man to be rich to be a friend of the dear Colonel, for he considers a man, rather than a man's pocketbook."

"Yet a man who can afford to travel abroad, with his daughter," began Mr. Conant, argumentatively, "should certainly be able and willing----"

"What do you know about him, Peter? Perhaps he has spent his ready money in Europe and is now obliged to economize. Unless that is the case, why does he come to a sleepy little town like Dorfield, which is almost forgotten by the big world, to settle down?"

"Why, he's the Colonel's friend," retorted the lawyer, stiffly.

"And Mary Louise is his daughter's friend," said Irene. "That accounts for it, of course, and they couldn't have picked a prettier place. Dorfield may be sleepy, and quiet, and half forgotten by the rest of the big world, but it's simply delightful as a residence. Didn't Colonel Hathaway choose it for a home? And the Colonel could afford to live at the Waldorf-Astoria, if he wanted to."

"I know why you are pleased, Irene," remarked Aunt Hannah, smiling upon her niece. "You're going to have another girl friend."

"She won't be as nice as Mary Louise, though," was the reply. "There's no girl in the world as sweet and lovely as Mary Louise!"

"Or one that innocently gets into more trouble," declared Mr. Conant.

"That," said Aunt Hannah, "is because she can't let other people's troubles alone."

CHAPTER XIV HOME AGAIN

Mr. Conant, who was Colonel Hathaway's lawyer and confidential agent, was at the train to meet his important client on his return to Dorfield. The first to alight from the coach was the Colonel, who greeted his lawyer with a cordial handclasp. Mary Louise kissed Peter Conant upon his impassive cheek and presented him to a pretty young girl who clung to her arm smiling, yet half bewildered by her arrival in a strange town. There seemed no one else with the party and Mr. Conant glanced over the crowd of passengers and said:

"Mr. Jones did not accompany you, then?"

"Why, yes; I suppose he's here," answered the Colonel carelessly. "I believe he traveled another car."

"I don't see him anywhere," added Mary Louise. "I wonder if anyone reminded him that this is the place to get off?"

"Never mind," said Alora; "if father can't keep track of himself, let him go on to another station. I can't lose him for long, that's certain."

"There he is, up ahead," announced Mara Louise. "He's quarreling with his porter about something."

"To save the tip," suggested Alora, scornfully.

Mary Louise rushed to greet an old colorful man with snow-white hair, who was picking up their hand baggage.

"Oh, Uncle Eben, I'm so glad to see again!" she exclaimed. "And how's Aunt Sallie? And is my pony well? And are the goldfish still alive? And----"

"Bress yo' soul, Ma'y Weeze!" said the delighted old servant, "ev'body's well an' joyful to see you-all back ag'in."

The Colonel shook Uncle Eben's hands--both of them--in a kindly but dignified manner. "I suppose the automobile is still running, Uncle?"

"Not jes' dis yere minnit, Kun'l," with a glad chuckle, "but dat car's gwine ter run jes' as soon as we-all gits aboahd. What yo' think I's be'n doin' all

winter, Kun'l, in dat lonesomeness house, 'cept keepin' dat car greased up?"

"Did you grease it in the house, then, Uncle?" asked Mary Louise gravely, but with twinkling eyes.

Old Eben chuckled again, for this was a happy hour for him, but while he chuckled he led them to where the automobile stood waiting. Behind the others slowly followed Jason Jones, carrying his own luggage and eyeing every detail of his surroundings in the manner of a countryman paying his first visit to town. He was inwardly sizing up Dorfield as a place of residence. When Jones got into the car the Colonel briefly introduced him to the lawyer.

"This is Mr. Jones, Mr. Conant."

He looked at the lawyer and gave a slight nod, and Mr. Conant's bow was very stiff and formal. Already he had, with fair accuracy, grasped the relationship of the man to the others. Alora Jones seemed a fine girl-- the right sort--and Mary Louise was evidently fond of her. The Colonel barely tolerated the man Jones, whom he did not like, for the daughter's sake. The girl herself lacked in respect for her father, and this unfilial attitude seemed condoned by both Mary Louise and the Colonel, which was evidence that there was something wrong about Jason Jones. With such a cue for guidance, Mr. Conant decided he had no use for Jason Jones, either.

Uncle Eben first drove the car to the Widow Harrington's cottage, where Mrs. Conant awaited the new tenants to introduce them to their servant and to assure them that everything was prepared for their convenience. Then they drove to Colonel Hathaway's home, where Irene was at the gate in her wheeled chair, a bunch of her choicest roses in her hand, ready to welcome her friend Mary Louise and to be kissed and hugged with girlish enthusiasm.

It was a happy homecoming, indeed, for Mary Louise. And Colonel Hathaway breathed a deep sigh of relief as he entered his own portals.

"From now on," he said to his granddaughter that evening, "I am under no obligation to assist that impossible person, Jones, or to even associate with him. For your sake, my darling, I have suffered the infliction of his presence with fortitude, even going to the extent of locating him in our

beloved town of Dorfield, that you and Alora might enjoy one another's society. But from this time forward Jason Jones is to be a distant acquaintance rather than a companion. Congratulate me, Mary Louise!"

"I do, Gran'pa Jim," she replied soberly, "and I thank you, too. It has been a trial for both of us, but we've been really helpful to poor Alora. I want to try to bring a little happiness into her life and encourage her to become as sweet and lovable a girl as she has the nature to be, and this could never have been accomplished had we allowed her to drift in the sole companionship of her disagreeable father."

CHAPTER XV THE PUZZLE BECOMES INTRICATE

Alora formed an immediate friendship for crippled Irene Macfarlane, first based on sympathy and afterward on genuine admiration. That one condemned to pass her entire life in a wicker wheel-chair should be so bright and cheerful, with no word of protest or even a reference to her own misfortune, was deemed wonderful by Alora, and she soon found that Irene had an excuse or explanation for every seeming annoyance her friends suffered and delighted to console them. At the same time she allowed no one to console her, because she declared she needed no consolation.

Such a disposition invited confidence, and soon Irene knew more of Alora's past history, including her trials and tribulations, than even Mary Louise had yet learned, and was shocked and grieved at the girl's vengeful defiance of her father, due to his neglect and coldness as well as to his contemptible selfishness. But Irene had an excuse ready even for the artist.

"Poor Mr. Jones!" she said one day, when the three girls were together and had been discussing Alora's troubles; "think what a trial must have been to him to be saddled with the care of a child he had not seen since babyhood and had no especial interest in. As for affection between them, it could not sprout nor grow because there was no mutual understanding to germinate it. Your father's life, my dear, had been wrecked by his separation from your mother and the money meant little to him at that period of his life when you were left to his care. But did he refuse the obligation so inconsiderately thrust upon him? No. Although a man of reserved nature--almost a recluse--self absorbed and shrinking from association others, he accepted the care of an eleven year old child and, without being able to change his disposition to suit her requirements, has guarded her health and safety ever since."

"So that he can use my money," added Alora, with a shrug.

"But you admit that he doesn't squander money on himself."

"I don't know what he does with it. If he wants books, he buys them; he bought a rickety automobile in Italy and never took me to ride in it; but his extravagance seems to end there. I've read some letters that he left

around, showing that he is investing thousands in his own name-- what for, I can't guess, as he is too miserly ever to have a use for it."

"Well, he may be intending to endow some deserving charity," suggested Irene. "And, as for his not loving you, Alora, I fancy you have never tried to win your father's love."

"No one could love that man."

"You have never been able to get beneath his reserve. You came to him from a luxurious life, a petted and pampered child, and his simple tastes and unemotional nature repelled you from the first. Is it not so?"

"I'm not sure, Irene. I needed sympathy and affection. Had my father been different, had he shown love for me, or even fatherly consideration, I would have responded eagerly. But he ignored me. There has never been any companionship between us. He has guarded my personal safety because I was of financial value to him. Once, when I contracted a fever, he was really worried, and hired a skillful doctor and a trained nurse; but he never entered my sickroom. When I was well, he reproached me for costing him so much money. I told him it was my money, and he was costing me more than I could ever cost him. I reminded him he would have been a beggar, but for my income, and that shut him up at once."

"There's the whole trouble," declared Irene. "Constant friction and a lack of consideration for one another. Such remarks could not have made him more gracious toward you, Alora, and you did not appreciate his care in furnishing you with the means of recovery."

"Had I died," said the girl, "my fortune would have gone to a bunch of third-cousins whom I have never seen. That would have stopped father's right to the income, you see."

Irene sighed and Mary Louise smiled. It was almost impossible to defend Mr. Jones consistently, with Alora present to accuse him.

The artist at first took little interest in his new home. The cottage was small and not very cheerful, but it was cheap, and all that Jason Jones seemed to care for was a place to stay that was not expensive. He continued his reading and had a book in his hand from morning till night. He seldom left the cottage except for a trip to the public library or to a book-store, and never spoke to anyone unless it was necessary.

Their maid was Jane Gladys O'Donnel, stout and good-natured, an indifferent cook and rather untidy. She was twenty years old and the eldest of a large and impoverished family. Her mother was a laundress--"took in washin"--and her earnings, with the wages of Jane Gladys, must suffice to feed many hungry mouths. That was why Mrs. Conant had hired Jane Gladys. Aunt Hannah knew the girl was not very competent, but she was cheap, so Mr. Jones accepted her without protest. Alora had lived so long abroad that she did not know what a competent American housemaid is.

One forenoon--they had now been a month at Dorfield--Mr. Jones was seated on the little front porch, reading as usual, when a queer buzzing in the air overhead aroused his attention.

"What's that?" he called sharply, and Jane Gladys, who was dusting in the little room behind him, replied:

"That, sor, is only Steve Kane's flyin' machine."

"A what?"

"A flyin'-machine, sor. Kane has a facthry fer makin' the crazy things in the town yonder--over by the South Side."

"Indeed!" He got up and went into the yard to watch the far-away speck in the sky that was humming so persistently. "Why, there's another! There are two of them," he exclaimed, as if to himself.

"There might be a dozen, sor, 'cause there's a school for airy--airy-- airy-flyin' over by Kane's facthry, where they teaches the folks to fly that buy the machines."

He stood a long time, watching the sky. When the last aeroplane had disappeared he resumed his reading. But the next day he watched for the machines again, abandoning his book to follow the course of the flyers.

"Where did you say that factory is located?" he asked Jane Gladys.

"Over by the gas works, sor, be the South Side. Ye takes the Ellem street car, at the four corners. On a Sunday there be crowds a-watchin' the air-divils."

He started to read again, but gave it up and glanced nervously up and down the little porch. Jane Gladys noted this with surprise, for he was

usually quiet and unobservant, "like th' toad in th' garden, what squats under a bush all day an' fergits he's alive till a fly lights on his nose," as she expressed it to the family at home.

After lunch Mr. Jones went to town and after making inquiries took the car to the aviation works and field. He watched the construction of flying machines in the factory and saw one or two pupils take short flights in the air. And Jason Jones was so interested that he was late to dinner that evening.

Next day he was at the aviation field again, and from that time he haunted the place, silent and composed but watching every detail of manufacture and listening to the experts as they instructed the pupils. These were not many--three altogether--although Stephen Kane's aeroplane was now admitted to be one of the safest and most reliable ever invented. And one day one of the instructors, noticing the silent man who had watched so long, invited him to take a flight, thinking perhaps to frighten him; but Jason Jones promptly accepted the invitation and with perfect composure endured the strange experience and returned to ground with heightened color but no other evidence of excitement. Could Alora have seen him that day she would have acquitted him of cowardice.

But Alora knew nothing of her father's odd fancy for some time after he became interested in aeroplanes. She was not often at home during the day, frequently taking lunch with Mary Louise or Irene and passing much of her time in their company. She had no interest whatever in her father's movements and Jane Gladys didn't think to mention the matter to her, for "flyin'-machines" had ceased to be a novelty in Dorfield and the sound of their buzzing through the air was heard many times a day. But in turning over a pile of her father's books one day in his absence, Alora found several treatises on aviation and was almost startled to find that Jason Jones cared for any reading aside from light novels.

She had been hunting, at the time, for a novel to read herself, so turning from the aviation literature to a shelf of fiction she began searching for an interesting title. Presently, as she drew out one of her father's books, it opened by accident at a place where a letter had been tucked in--a letter written on soiled and coarse paper of a foreign make. It was addressed: "Sig. Jaysn Jones, at the Steamer Hercules to sail for New York, U.S.A." Opening it, she found it signed: "Silvio Alleghero."

That was their man-servant in Italy, so with a smile of anticipated amusement she read the letter. It was brief, indeed, but the girl's expression soon changed to a puzzled look, for the scrawl said:

"Honored Signore: At your command I have this morning, three hours after your departure for Naples, allowed the prisoner to escape."

"How funny!" she exclaimed, knitting her brows. "I can't remember any prisoner at the villa. Perhaps it was the cat. It would be just like Silvio to consider the release of a cat a important event."

She replaced the letter in the book and after selecting another novel forgot Silvio's epistle entirely.

Another time, when Alora happened to be at home for their noon-day luncheon and her father did not appear, Jane Gladys quietly remarked in answer to her query that "th' ol' man was prob'ly over to the flyin'-machine works."

"Does he go there often?" she asked in surprise.

"Why, he mostly lives there," asserted the maid.

Alora laughed, and afterward told Mary Louise, as a bit of humorous gossip, that the man who had heretofore failed to find any interest in life had at last succumbed to the fascination of the aeroplane.

"Well, I'm glad of it," said Mary Louise. "I've often wondered, Lory, how your father could be so infatuated with novel-reading, absorbing stories of human interest, if they have any interest at all, with such avidity, while the real people all around him failed to interest him at all. I have thought perhaps he read to keep his mind from--from other things that it would make him unhappy to dwell upon."

"I have thought so, too," replied Alora, musingly. "And this queer fancy of his for a new and unusual invention may serve the same purpose. But I, too, am glad he has found a diversion that will keep him away from home. That barn of a cottage will become more homelike without his eternal presence."

Peter Conant, the lawyer, had paid little heed to Jason Jones since the latter's arrival in Dorfield. He had heard his wife and Irene gossip about the girl and her father and state that Alora was an heiress and Mr. Jones

merely the guardian of her fortune until she came of age, but his legal mind decided that the girl's "fortune" must be a modest one, since they lived so economically and dressed so plainly. Colonel Hathaway, who might have undeceived him in this regard, seldom spoke to the lawyer of anything but his own affairs and had forbore to mention Mr. Jones and his personal affairs in any way.

Therefore Mr. Conant was somewhat surprised when one morning Jason Jones called at his office and asked for an interview. The lawyer was busy that day, and attaching little importance to his caller he demanded brusquely:

"Well, sir, what can I do for you?"

The man seated himself and glanced around the room before replying. The big desk, littered with papers, the cabinet files and stiff chairs seemed to meet his approval. In the outer office a girl was busily clicking a typewriter.

"You are Colonel Hathaway's lawyer, I believe?" said Jones.

"I have that honor, sir."

"That's why I came to you. The Colonel is a prosperous man and has judgment. I want your advice about investing some money."

Peter Conant regarded him with a speculative gaze. The thought flashed through his mind that if Jones had any money to invest he might better buy himself a new necktie and have his shoes repaired, or even invest in a new dress for his daughter, who needed it. But he merely said in his peculiar way of chopping each word off short as he uttered it:

"How much have you to invest?"

"Not a great deal at this moment, but I am I constantly receiving dividends and interest on my daughter's securities and so, if I am going to live in Dorfield, I shall need a lawyer to advise me how to reinvest the money, as well as how to make out the papers properly. I don't want to make any mistakes and get robbed--even by my lawyer. But I'll pay you a fair price. Perhaps I should explain that while the income is derived from my daughter's property the investments are to be made in my name."

"Why so?"

"The income belongs to me, by my dead wife's will, as long as Alora is alive and in my keeping. When the girl is eighteen she will manage her own affairs, and I'll be quit of her--and out of any further income, as well. So I'm investing now to secure my future."

"I see. How old is your daughter at this time?"

"Fifteen."

"So you've three years more to grab the income."

"Exactly."

"How much money do you wish to invest to-day?"

"Twelve thousand dollars."

Peter Conant sat up straight in his chair.

"And you say this is but part of the income?"

"The estate is valued at nearly two million dollars."

The lawyer gave a low whistle of amazement. Beside this enormous sum, even Colonel Hathaway's holdings shrank into insignificance.

"You surprise me," he said. "I imagine, then, that you can afford to live somewhat better than you do."

"That is none of your business."

"True. Good day, Mr. Jones."

"Eh?"

"I won't accept you as a client."

"Why not, sir?"

"Thank you for asking. In the first place, I don't like you," said Peter Conant. "Nor do I approve of your treating your daughter--a great heiress--as you do, and hoarding all her enormous income for your personal use. You're not toting fair. It is an unjust arrangement and I'll have nothing to do with it."

Jason Jones sat still and stared at him.

"Good day, sir!" repeated the lawyer, curtly.

The man did not move. Peter turned to his papers.

"See here," the artist presently remarked; "let's come to an understanding. I don't like you, either. You're insulting. But you're honest, and I think I could trust you."

"I'm not especially honest," retorted the lawyer, "but I'm particular. I don't need clients, and I don't want a client I'm ashamed of."

Still the man did not offer to go. Instead, he reflected for awhile in his stolid, unemotional way, while Peter Conant frowned and examined the papers on his desk.

"I believe you'll see the thing in a different light if you read my wife's will," said Jones. "I've brought a copy of it with me, thinking it might help you to understand my affairs."

"Is it an attested copy?" asked the lawyer, turning around again.

"Yes."

"Let me see it."

Mr. Conant decided to read the will, with the idea that he might find in it some way to assist Alora. When he had finished the document he was disappointed. Mrs. Antoinette Seaver Jones, a woman clever enough to make a fortune, had been foolish enough to give her former husband autocratic power over her money during her daughter's minority. Had the man been a gentleman, the folly would have been mitigated, but Jason Jones, in Mr. Conant's opinion, was a selfish, miserly, conscienceless rascal. Enjoying a yearly income that was a small fortune in itself, he had neglected to educate his daughter properly, to clothe her as befitted her station in life or to show her ordinary fatherly consideration. Affection and kindness seemed foreign to the man's nature. He handed the will back and said:

"You have taken an unfair advantage of the confidence reposed in you by your dead wife, who doubtless loved her child. Legally your actions cannot be assailed, but morally they should ostracize you from decent society. As I said before, I do not want your business. I'll have nothing to do with you."

Jones remained unruffled.

"I'm a stranger in the city," he remarked. "Perhaps you will recommend me to some good lawyer."

"No. There are a score of lawyers in town. Make your own choice."

The man rose and put on his hat.

"I said you were honest, and I was right," he calmly remarked. "I'll say now that you are a fool, and I'm right in that, also," and with these words he walked away.

That was his only protest to the humiliating rebuff. He showed no anger. He did not seem annoyed. He simply rode down in the elevator, examined the directory, and selected another lawyer in the same building.

CHAPTER XVI ALORA WINS HER WAY

Mary Louise decided that Alora Jones improved on acquaintance. There were many admirable traits in her character that had lain dormant until developed by association with two girls of her own age who were themselves gentle and considerate. It is true that Alora at times was still headstrong and willful and unable to bridle her tongue when irritated, but neither Mary Louise nor Irene ever reproved her by word or look, so that she grew ashamed of her outbursts and when at home her father aroused her to anger she fled to her girl friends and sought in their companionship the antidote to her vexation. The two friends had decided it was unwise to comment on Alora's unhappy family relations and soon she discovered this and refrained from burdening them with her home quarrels.

No one could witness Irene's patient resignation to misfortune without admiring her character and being touched by her bravery and gentleness, and association with this crippled girl was softening Alora's hard and defiant nature wonderfully. Had the association continued it might have redeemed the prospective heiress from many of the faults she had acquired through years of neglect and rebellion against fate, but the close triumvirate of girl friends was suddenly dissolved, early in July, by no less a person than Will Morrison--a wealthy and kindly natured gentleman who was a friend of both the Conants and Colonel Hathaway.

Will Morrison had purchased a yacht; it was anchored in the breakwater near the Chicago Yacht Club, and its owner intended making a summer trip through the Great Lakes and cordially invited the Conants and Irene, and Mary Louise and Colonel Hathaway to accompany his party.

Unfortunately, Mrs. Conant at that time was ill. She had contracted a lingering but mild form of spring fever that would keep her in bed for weeks, and Irene, who was devoted to her aunt, would not leave her to the mercies of a nurse. Mary Louise wanted to go, though, for the Morrisons were delightful people and any yacht they purchased would be sure to be safe and comfortable.

Since the Conants could not go, Mary Louise suggested to her grandfather that they ask Will Morrison to invite Alora Jones, and the Colonel approved the idea because he thought it would do Alora much

good to mingle with refined people such as were sure to form the yacht party. So, when he answered Mr. Morrison's letter, he told him something of Alora and asked permission to fetch her along.

"I'm not at all sure," he said to Mary Louise, "that Mr. Jones will permit Alora to go with us."

"Nor am I," the girl replied; "but perhaps Alora can coax him to consent. It might be a good idea for you to ask him, too, Gran'pa Jim."

"My dear!" he remonstrated, "do you think I ought to hazard that man's sneers and insults, even to favor your friend Alora?"

"No; I do not, Gran'pa Jim," she laughingly rejoined. "That was a foolish suggestion, and I withdraw it. If Alora fails, I'll speak to him myself. I'm not afraid of Jason Jones, and he doesn't growl at me as he does at poor Lory."

They did not mention the proposal to Alora until the Colonel had received a telegram from Will Morrison saying: "By all means invite Miss Jones to join us. Knew her mother, once, and will be glad to have her with us."

Alora was delighted at the prospect of a yachting trip and decided at once that she would go, especially as Colonel Hathaway said she would be Mary Louise's guest on the trip to Chicago and no money would be needed for expenses. So she attacked her father in a somewhat original manner.

Mr. Jones had conceived a passion for flying and had just purchased an aeroplane. He was to begin his lessons at once and was so thoroughly immersed in his strange fancy that he paid little heed to anything else. His books were neglected. His former quiet life--amounting almost to physical inertion--had given place to a nervous and all-consuming desire to master the rather strenuous art of aviation. Alora was quite unaware of this transformation, for as usual Jason Jones kept his own counsel and followed his inclinations without conference with anyone. The girl knew that her father haunted the aviation field, but anything that kept him amused away from home was gratefully approved by her.

Usually the two breakfasted together in silence. Lately Mr. Jones had hurried through with the meal so as to get away, and he did not return for lunch. So on this important morning Alora said casually:

"I'm going away for three or four weeks."

"Where to?" he asked sharply, suddenly rousing from his abstraction.

"I'm going on a yachting trip with Mary Louise and Colonel Hathaway. We're to be the guests of a Mr. Morrison and his wife, who own the yacht."

"Morrison? Morrison?" he repeated suspiciously. Then, as if relieved: "I don't know any Morrisons."

"Nor do I. They are old friends of the Hathaways and the Conants, however."

"Well, you can't go. It's nonsense."

"Why?"

"Yachts are dangerous. I don't want you drowned."

"I'd be as safe on a yacht as I would be in this house," she declared. "Do you think I intend to take any chances with my life? Please remember that when I'm eighteen I shall have a fortune and be able to lead an independent life--a pleasant life--a life in sharp contrast to this one. Therefore, I'm going to live to enjoy my money."

He gave her a shrewd look of approval. The argument seemed to appeal to him. It quieted, to an extent, his fears for her safety.

"Anyhow," said Alora bluntly, "I'm going, and I dare you to stop me."

He was silent a while, considering the proposition. Just now he would be busy at the aviation field and in Colonel Hathaway's charge the girl was likely to be quite safe. He was inclined to relax his vigilance over his precious daughter, on this occasion.

"How long do the Hathaways expect to be away?" he inquired.

"Mary Louise says we will surely be home three weeks from the day we leave."

"Surely?"

"Without fail."

"H-m-m. It's a risk. Something might delay you. Do you know what would happen if you left me for sixty days or more?"

"Of course I do. That will of my mother's states that if at any time my devoted father develops any neglect of me, or lack of interest in his darling daughter, such as allowing me to become separated from him for longer than sixty days at one time, the court has the privilege, at its option, of deposing him as administrator of my estate and appointing another guardian. The other guardian, however, is to be paid a salary and the income, in that case, is to accrue to the benefit of my estate."

"How did you learn all that?" he demanded.

"You left a copy of the will lying around, and I read it and made a copy of it for myself. I now know my mother's will by heart. She suggests that if we must live together, 'in loving companionship,' you will probably have me educated by tutors, at home, and her objection to girls' schools--I wonder why?--was the principal reason she inserted the clause that we must never be separated. It would prevent you from sending me away to school. But as for the tutors, I haven't yet made their acquaintance."

"Tutors cost money," he said in a surly tone.

"I realize that; and while there is an abundance of money, the will states that it is to be entirely in your control. But we've quarreled on that subject too many times already, without your loosening your grip on the dollars. To get back to our subject, I assure you I shall not be gone longer than twenty-one days, and the trip won't cost you a single penny."

"When did you propose going?"

"We take the noon train on Monday for Chicago."

He got his hat and left the house without another word, leaving Alora exultant. She hurried over to tell Mary Louise the good news.

"Did he really consent?" asked Mary Louise.

"Well, he didn't forbid it," said the girl, "and that's the same thing."

CHAPTER XVII THE DISAPPEARANCE

The train was late getting into Chicago that Monday night. Colonel Hathaway took Mary Louise and Alora to the Blackington, but the hotel was so crowded that the girls could not get adjoining rooms. However, they secured rooms just across the hall from one another and the Colonel's room was but two doors removed from that of his granddaughter, so the three were not greatly separated.

"Never mind, dear," said Mary Louise, as she kissed her friend good night; "to-morrow we go aboard the yacht, and that will be our home for a long time."

"What time will you breakfast?" asked Alora.

"Well, we're up late, and Gran'pa Jim likes to sleep mornings. Can you fast until half-past eight, Alora?"

"Yes, indeed," with a laugh. "I'm used to somewhat early hours, so I shall probably be dressed by seven. But I'll find plenty to amuse me until you are up, and I'll knock on your door at eight-thirty."

But in the morning Alora failed to knock on Mary Louise's door, as she had promised. The Colonel was ready for breakfast, having enjoyed a good night's rest, and Mary Louise said to him:

"Alora probably slept later than she expected to. Shall I risk wakening her, Gran'pa Jim?"

"I think so," he replied. "She has slept long enough, for a young girl."

Mary Louise ran across the hall and knocked at the door of 216. She knocked again, for there was no answer. She did not dare call out, for fear of disturbing other guests of the hotel. The Colonel now came and rapped upon the panels, but without any better result.

"I think she must have left her room and is perhaps in the parlor, or in the hotel lobby," he said.

A chambermaid was passing through the hall and overheard the remark.

"The party in 216 has been up a long time, sir," she asserted. "I found the door ajar at six o'clock, and so I went in and made up the room."

"Poor Alora!" exclaimed Mary Louise laughingly; "she was too excited to sleep, and, as you say, we shall probably find her somewhere about the hotel, enjoying the sights."

But they could not find the girl anywhere in the hotel. After a long and careful search for her, Colonel Hathaway left word at the desk that if his room or Mary Louise's room was called, to report that they would be found in the breakfast room.

The old gentleman was distinctly annoyed as they sat down to breakfast.

"The foolish girl is wandering about the streets, somewhere," he complained, "and it was unmannerly to leave the hotel without consulting me, since she is our guest and in my care."

Mary Louise's sweet face wore a troubled expression.

"It is not like Alora, Gran'pa Jim," she asserted in defense of her friend. "Usually I have found her quite considerate." Then, after a pause: "I--I hope nothing has happened to her."

"Don't worry," he replied. "She's a wide-awake girl and has a tongue in her head, so she can't get lost. Why, Mary Louise, Alora knows the city well, for she used to live in Chicago with her mother."

"Until she was eleven. That was four years ago. But I did not think of her getting lost. The automobiles, you know, are so thick----"

"Yes, dear; and there's the lake, and the railroad crossings, and the street cars; but the chances are against our little friend's being drowned or run over, especially so early in the day, when there isn't much traffic. Again I ask you not to worry."

But Mary Louise couldn't help worrying. They lingered over the breakfast, but Alora did not join them. Then they waited around the hotel until nearly noon, without receiving a word from her. Finally Colonel Hathaway, too, became nervous. He telephoned the central police station to inquire if a young girl of Alora's description had met with an accident. There was no record of such an accident, but in half an hour a detective came to the hotel and asked for the Colonel.

"Tell me all the particulars of the young lady's disappearance, please," he requested.

When he had received this information he said:

"Let us go to her room."

The key to No. 216 had not been turned in at the office, but was missing. With a pass-key they unlocked the door of Alora's room and found her suit case open, her toilet articles lying upon the dresser and her nightgown neatly folded ready for packing. Her hat was missing, however, and the little jacket she wore with her tailored suit.

The detective touched nothing but examined the room and its contents with professional care.

"Let us call the chambermaid who made up the room," he suggested.

The woman was easily found and when she appeared the detective asked:

"Did you fold this nightgown, or did you find it already folded?"

"Why, it was lyin' careless-like over the foot of the bed," said she, "so I folded it up."

"Why didn't you hang it in the closet?"

"The clerk had notified me the room would be vacated to-day. So I knew that when the young lady came back she'd want to pack it in her grip."

"And at what time did you find the door ajar?"

"At six-ten, sir. I come on duty at six."

"You did not see Miss Jones?"

"No, sir--if that were the lady's name."

"You found no one prowling about the halls?"

"Didn't see a soul, sir."

"Thank you; that's all."

When she had gone the detective said to the Colonel in a reassuring tone:

"I wouldn't worry, sir, although I'll admit this prolonged absence of Miss Jones is puzzling. But perhaps she has gone to call on an old friend and will presently return and apologize. I remember her mother-- a

remarkable woman, sir--who used to live at the Voltaire. She had a lot of friends in Chicago, did Mrs. Antoinette Seaver Jones, so it's likely her daughter is looking some of them up."

"I wish you would do all you can to locate her," pleaded Colonel Hathaway. "The young girl was placed in my care by her father and I feel personally responsible for her safety."

"She's safe enough, sir. No sign of a struggle in her room; no report of an accident in the city. Went out of her own volition and will probably come back the same way, when she's ready. I'm going back to the office now, but I'll instruct our men to keep a good lookout for Miss Jones. If we hear anything, I'll let you know at once. In the meantime, if the girl happens to turn up, you must telephone me of the fact."

He handed the Colonel his card and went away.

"This is dreadful, Gran'pa Jim!" exclaim Mary Louise. "That man can't help us a bit. What do you think we ought to do?"

"Why, we've done all in our power, already, it seems to me," he answered. "The police will keep a good lookout for Alora."

"I've no confidence in that detective."

"Why not, my dear? He seemed quite courteous and gentlemanly."

"But he isn't especially interested. He didn't probe far enough into the case. He never asked why the key to Alora's door was missing, yet the maid found the door ajar--half open," said Mary Louise. "Would she take the key and leave the door open?"

"Why--no; that is strange, Mary Louise."

"The detective didn't inquire at the office whether the night clerk had seen Alora pass through and go out. But I inquired, Gran'pa, and the night clerk goes off duty at six o'clock, when the relief clerk comes on, but neither saw any girl at all leave the office. No one was in the hotel lobby, at that hour."

"That is strange, too! How could Alora get out, otherwise?"

"I can't guess. Gran'pa, I'm going to telegraph Josie O'Gorman, and ask her advice," said Mary Louise.

"Do. It's a good idea, Josie might put us on the right track," approved the Colonel.

So Mary Louise went to the telegraph office in the hotel lobby and sent the following message:

"Josie O'Gorman, 1225 F Street, Washington, D. C.

"A girl friend has mysteriously disappeared from the Blackington, where we are stopping. What shall I do? Mary Louise Burrows."

Two hours later she received this answer:

"Miss Mary Louise Burrows, Hotel Blackington, Chicago.

"Notify police at once. Keep cool. I'm coming. Josie O'Gorman."

Mary Louise felt tremendously relieved when she read this. Josie was a girl of her own age, but she was the daughter of one of the most celebrated secret service men in the employ of the United States government, and John O'Gorman had trained Josie from babyhood in all the occult details of his artful profession. It was his ambition that some day this daughter would become a famous female detective, but he refused to allow her to assume professional duties until she had become thoroughly qualified to excel. He did not wish her to be ordinary, but extraordinary, and Josie's talents, so far, had seemed to justify his expectations. Mary Louise knew Josie very well and admired and loved her, for in her amateur way Josie had once helped to solve a stubborn mystery that threatened the happiness of both the old Colonel and his granddaughter, and through this experience the two girls had become friends. Josie O'Gorman was devoted to Mary Louise, who knew she could rely on Josie's judgment in this emergency but had scarcely expected her to come all the way from Washington to Chicago to render her personal assistance.

In appearance the young girl--who was destined some day to become a great detective--was not especially prepossessing. She was short of form and inclined to be stout--"chubby," she called herself. She had red hair, a freckled face and a turned-up nose. But her eyes, round and blue and innocent in expression as those of a baby, dominated her features and to an extent redeemed their plainness.

Mary Louise hurried to the Colonel.

"Gran'pa Jim," she cried excitedly, "Josie is coming!"

"That is very good of her," replied the Colonel, highly pleased. "Josie is very resourceful and while she may not be able to trace Alora she will at least do all in her power, and perhaps her clever little brain will be able to fathom the mystery of the girl's disappearance."

"She tells us to notify the police, but we did that at once. I don't know of anything else we can do, Gran'pa, until Josie comes."

Colonel Hathaway communicated with the police office several times that day and found the officials courteous but calm--prolific of assurances, but not especially concerned. This was but one of a number of peculiar cases that daily claimed their attention.

"I should hire a private detective, were not Josie coming," he told Mary Louise; "but of course it is possible we shall hear of Alora, directly or indirectly, before morning."

But they did not hear, and both passed a miserable, wakeful, anxious night.

"There is no use in our consulting Alora's father, for the present," remarked the old gentleman, next morning. "The news would only worry him. You remember how very particular he was in charging me to guard his daughter's safety."

"Yes, and I know why," replied Mary Louise. "Alora has told me that if she is lost, strayed or stolen for sixty days, her father might be relieved of his guardianship and lose the income he enjoys. Now, I wonder, Gran'pa Jim, if Alora has purposely lost herself, with mischievous intent, so as to get rid of her father, whom she abhors?"

The Colonel considered this thoughtfully.

"I think not," he decided. "The girl is impulsive and at times reckless, and doubtless she would like to be free from her father's guardianship; but I am sure she is too fond of you, and has too much respect for me, to run away from us without a word. Besides, she has no money."

"Really," said Mary Louise despondently, "it is the strangest thing I ever knew."

Josie O'Gorman arrived at the hotel at six o'clock in the afternoon, having caught the fast train from Washington the evening before. She came in as unconcernedly as if she had lived at the hotel and merely been out to attend a matinee and greeted the Colonel with a bright smile and Mary Louise with a kiss.

"My, but I'm hungry!" were her first words. "I hope you haven't dined yet?"

"Oh, Josie," began Mary Louise, on the verge of tears, "this dreadful----"

"I know, dear; but we must eat. And let's not talk or think of the trouble till our stomachs are in a comfortable condition. Which way is the dining room?"

Neither the Colonel nor Mary had eaten much since Alora's disappearance, but they took Josie in to dinner, realizing it would be impossible to get her to talk seriously or to listen to them until she was quite ready to do so. And during the meal Josie chattered away like a magpie on all sorts of subjects except that which weighed most heavily on their minds, and the little thing was so bright and entertaining that they were encouraged to dine more heartily than they otherwise would have done.

But afterward, when they had adjourned to a suite that had now been given them, and which included a cosy little sitting room, and after the Colonel had been ordered to light his cigar, which always composed his nerves, the O'Gorman girl suddenly turned serious and from the depths of an easy chair, with her hands clasped behind her red head, she said:

"Now to business. Begin at the beginning and tell me all there is to tell."

"Haven't I written you something about Alora, Josie?" asked Mary Louise.

"Never mind whether you have or haven't. Imagine I've forgotten it. I want every detail of the girl's history."

So Mary Louise told it, with a few comments from her grandfather. She began with their first meeting with Alora and her eccentric father in Italy, and related not only all the details of their acquaintance but such facts as Alora had confided to her of her mother's death and her subsequent unhappy relations with her father and guardian. Alora had often talked freely to Mary Louise, venting in her presence much bitterness and

resentment over her cruel fate--as she deemed it. So, knowing Josie's desire to obtain the most seemingly trifling detail of a case, Mary Louise told the story as connectedly and comprehensively as possible, avoiding all personal comment so as to leave Josie's mind free from prejudice.

During the recital Josie sat very still, with closed eyes, reclining lazily in her chair and refraining from any interruption.

"Now, Colonel," she said, "tell me all that Mary Louise has forgotten to mention."

"She has told you more than I knew myself," he declared. "Of course we informed the police of our friend's disappearance and they sent a detective here who went into the affair very carefully. Yet, so far----"

"I know," said Josie, nodding. "I called at the police station before I came here, on leaving the train. The detective is Al Howard, and he's a nice fellow but rather stupid. You mustn't expect any results from that source. To be sure, the department might stumble on a clew, but the chances are they wouldn't recognize it, even then."

"I'm certainly surprised to hear that!" said the Colonel.

"Because you are ignorant of police methods. They mean well, but have so much to handle, in a big city like this, that they exist in a state of perpetual bewilderment."

"But what are we to do?" pleaded Mary Louise. "Tell us, Josie!"

"How do I know?" asked the girl, with a smile. "I'm just Josie O'Gorman, a student detective, who makes as many blunders--alas!--as a full-fledged 'tec.' But I thought I'd be able to help, or I wouldn't have come. I've a personal interest in this case, Mary Louise, because it's your case and I love you. So let's get to work. Have you a photograph of Alora Jones?"

"No," was the reply.

"Then give me a word picture of her."

Both Mary Louise and the Colonel tried to do, this, and Josie seemed satisfied.

"Now, then," she said, rising, "let's go to her room. I hope it hasn't been disturbed since she left it."

"The police have taken the key and forbidden anyone to enter the room."

"Quite proper. But we'll go there, just the same."

The room was but a few steps away, in the same corridor, and when they arrived there Josie drew a bunch of slender keys from her purse and unlocked the door with no difficulty. Having entered, she turned on the electric lights and cast a curious glance around.

"Let's read Alora's room," said she, while her companions stood listening. "To begin with, we see her night-dress nicely folded and her toilet articles arranged in neat order on the dresser. Chambermaid did that, for Alora is not neat. Proving that her stuff was just strewn around and the orderly maid put things straight. Which leads to the supposition that Alora was led away rather suddenly."

"Oh, do you think so?"

"She left the door ajar, but took the key. Intended, of course, to lock her room, but was so agitated by what she saw or heard that she forgot and just walked away."

"But no one saw her leave the hotel," observed Mary Louise.

"Then she didn't pass through the office, but through the less used Ladies' Entrance at the side."

"That was not unlocked, they told me, until after seven o'clock."

"Then she left by the servants' entrance."

"The servants'!"

"Quite likely. You'll say she didn't know anything about it, or where it was; but the fact remains that Alora left the hotel. I'd like to see that chambermaid. I believe you told me she comes on duty at six o'clock in the morning. All right. I'll catch her at six a. m. to-morrow."

"The detective interviewed her," stated Colonel.

"I know, and she answered all his questions. My questions will be different. If Alora used the servants' entrance, she went out with a servant or with someone who knew the ways of the hotel intimately."

"I don't see that," objected Mary Louise.

"Nor do I, but there lies our trail. Alora didn't pass out through the office, nor did she make her exit through the less public Ladies' Entrance. There are only two other ways to get out of here: through the baggage door and by the servants' entrance at the rear, which lets into an alley. The head porter will know whether Alora went out the baggage door, but as it's usually very high--on a level with the platform of a baggage-wagon--I don't believe she jumped it. That leaves the servants' entrance as the probable exit for our missing one, and as she was a perfect stranger to the arrangements of this hotel, she couldn't have gone that way unless someone guided her. So our course is clear, Mary Louise. Find out who enticed Alora from the hotel and it won't be difficult to trace her and discover what has become of her."

"Enticed, Josie?"

"Had force been used, she would have screamed and attracted attention. Let us say she was decoyed."

"You think, then, that Alora was kidnapped?"

"Let us reason. The girl couldn't have had an enemy in Chicago, according to her history, for she was only eleven when she left here and no one hates an eleven year old child. Having no enemy, she has doubtless escaped personal harm. But Alora is an heiress, and a lot of people in Chicago know that. You suggest kidnapping. Well, perhaps that's the solution: held for ransom."

"That would be the first idea of Jason Jones!" exclaimed Mary Louise. "He has always seemed afraid of such a thing."

"In that case, however, I do not believe her father would pay a ransom," declared Colonel Hathaway.

"Oh, indeed he would!" asserted Mary Louise, emphatically; "we mustn't forget that if Alora isn't found and restored to him within a given time he will lose all her income for the next three years."

Josie looked at her friend admiringly. Then she laughed.

"You're a better detective than any of us," she remarked. "What I've been groping for is the object of the abduction, and you've hit the nail squarely on the head. Now we're getting down to brass tacks, so to speak. The whole thing is explained by the one word--'blackmail.' Girl disappears; papa is threatened with the lose of thousands. Very well, Papa! pay up. Relinquish a part of the income and you may keep the rest. Refuse, and you lose it all. Ergo, papa pays."

"That certainly seems a logical conclusion," admitted the Colonel.

"Then," said Josie, thoughtfully, "we must decide whether to put it up to Mr. Jones, and let him pay, or to go on with the search."

"We'll go on!" exclaimed Mary Louise. "We may be wrong, and poor Alora may be in danger, or suffering. We must rescue her as soon as possible."

"The girl was in my care," said the Colonel, "and I feel responsible for her safety. Moreover blackmail is a crime against society, and the plot should be foiled even were we not interested in the victim of it. I am anxious to find Alora before her father is approached."

"Then," Josie decided, "we will leave no stone unturned in our efforts to locate and recover her. If we have diagnosed the case correctly, we have to deal with a shrewd and unprincipled, if not clever person. Cleverness, too, we may encounter, and then our task will be doubly hard."

"Poor, dear Alora!" sighed Mary Louise. "It's a shame she should suffer because some cruel person wants her father's money. The fortune her mother left her has been a misfortune to her daughter, instead of a blessing."

"Money," said Josie sententiously, "is a dangerous thing. Its possession, or the lack of it, leads to four-fifths of the world's crimes. The other one-fifth is charged to hatred and jealousy. But-- dear me!--here I am philosophizing, when I ought to be thinking."

"Then think, Josie, and think to some purpose," pleaded Mary Louise.

"If our hastily constructed theory is correct," remarked John O'Gorman's daughter, "Papa Jones will soon hear from Alora's abductor, with a financial proposition."

"I hope we shall find her before then," returned the Colonel earnestly. "We ought not to delay an instant, with that idea in view. Indeed, our theory may be quite wrong and Alora be in desperate need of immediate assistance."

"Correct, sir," agreed Josie. "But we won't abandon our theory until we evolve a better one and in following this lead we must first discover who in Chicago is aware of the terms of the will of Antoinette Seaver Jones. Also who is familiar enough with Papa Jones' love of money to believe he can be successfully blackmailed. What information can either of you give me along those lines?"

"Alora has talked to Irene a good deal about that dreadful will," replied Mary Louise, "Irene has repeated many of her statements to me. Also Alora has frankly spoken to me, at times, and her queer history has interested us all. But I cannot remember that any such person as you describe is in any way mixed up with the story. Judge Bernsted drew up the will for Alora's mother. He was her lawyer, and she trusted him fully."

"She was justified," declared Josie. "I know of Judge Bernsted, by reputation. He died a year ago."

"Then," continued Mary Louise, reflectively, "there was Mrs. Jones' doctor, who was very kind to Alora and who also enjoyed her mother's confidence. His name was Anstruther--Dr. Anstruther."

"He is a prominent physician in Chicago," declared Josie, who seemed to know every important person of every locality, for this had been part of her education. "It is impossible that Dr. Anstruther could have any knowledge of this plot. Moreover, it doesn't seem to me like a man's plot. I don't believe Alora would have accompanied a strange man, under any circumstances, for she's knocked around the world enough to have learned prudence. The crime is feminine. What woman knew of this will, and was an intimate friend of Mrs. Jones, or of Mr. Jones?"

"Really," said Mary Louise, "I don't know."

"Nor you, Colonel?"

"I do not recollect hearing of any woman connected with the Jones history--except Alora's former governess, a Miss Gorham, who was discharged by Mr. Jones at the time he took his daughter from Chicago to New York."

"That isn't such a bad clew!" Josie quickly returned, sitting up straight and staring reflectively at the old gentleman. "Miss Gorham, eh? Now, how long had she been Alora's governess?"

"For some years, I believe." It was Mary Louise who answered this question.

"Then she doubtless knew the family secrets. Was Alora fond of her?"

"I think not. She has told me that at the time they separated she was glad to be rid of the woman."

"Then the woman may be the kind that would resort to blackmail. Discharged from a good place, where she had drawn pay for years, she would be angry. Brooded during the last four years on her imagined wrongs and figured out a neat revenge. Had sized up Papa Jones and knew he clung to money with a desperate grip and would pay some rather than lose all. Couldn't get another job; was poor; had no money to chase up Jones, but figured he would some time return to Chicago and give her an opportunity play her game. Discovered that Alora had arrived at this hotel, and---See here! What would prevent the former governess, now in reduced circumstances, from being employed as a servant in this very hotel? Perhaps as a night chambermaid. May have seen Alora enter her room and recognized her former pupil. During the long night she figured and planned how to take advantage of the fortunate circumstances. Early in the morning, before she left here, went to Alora and in some way induced the girl to go out with her. Alora would accompany her old governess without suspicion. So--there's the whole story, in a nutshell, rather cleverly figured out."

"Oh, Josie, it must be true!" cried Mary Louise, who had eagerly followed this plausible reasoning.

"And it may not," laughed Josie. "It's just a theory, and good detectives distrust theories, which often befog clever brains. Still, the deduction sounds mighty logical. I'm going to my room, now, to give the suggestion some serious thought. I'll try to tear it to pieces, or at least to pick holes in it. When I came away Daddy said to me: 'Josie, beware that imagination of yours. If it asserts itself, sit on it.' Daddy was glad to have me tackle the case, and try to help you, for these little affairs give me practice; but he hates to have me make a flat failure. So, for dear old Daddy's sake, I'm not going to let any good-looking theory lead me

astray. Good night. You'd both better go to bed, for I can see you had little sleep last night. But your strain must now relax, for you've pushed the responsibility onto my poor little shoulders and now it's up to me to worry."

CHAPTER XVIII ON THE TRAIL

Josie O'Gorman loved mysteries for their own sake. She loved them because they required solutions, and to solve a mystery is not only interesting but requires a definite amount of talent. Since she was a wee thing perched on her father's knee, Officer O'Gorman had flooded her ears with the problems he daily encountered, had turned the problems inside out and canvassed them from every possible viewpoint, questioning the child if this, or that, was most probable. By this odd method he not only enjoyed the society of his beloved daughter but argued himself, through shrewd reasoning, into a lucid explanation of many puzzling cases. To his pleased surprise, as little Josie grew older she began to answer his questions, taking a part in his professional arguments with himself, and from that time her training as a detective began.

John O'Gorman had never been quite sure whether his fatherly adoration unduly influenced him or whether Josie was indeed an exceptionally talented girl; so, having firmly determined to train her to become a girl detective, he had so far held her in leash, permitting her to investigate various private cases but refusing to place her in professional work--such as the secret service--until she had gained experience and acquired confidence in herself. Confidence was the one thing Josie lacked most. She took her mistakes too much to heart.

The girl was full of enthusiasm, however, and now meant to untangle the mystery of Alora Jones if it were possible to do so, both to please Mary Louise and to enjoy the satisfaction of success. After saying good night to her friends, and before going to her own room, the girl wandered about the big hotel making casual inquiries and obtaining more or less useful information. Afterward, she sat in her room and arranged in her mind the complete history of Alora, so far as she was informed of it, and made notes of all facts which seemed to bear on the present problem.

Next morning she inquired for the housekeeper and found that lady seated in her little office on the third floor of the hotel.

"I'm trying to trace one of the servants who left you Monday night, or early Tuesday morning," she said, after informing the woman that she

was engaged in tracing the missing girl, Alora Jones. "I am not sure what name you knew her by, but her real name was Gorham."

"No one has left us this week," returned the housekeeper, who seemed disposed to converse freely with her visitor.

"Are you sure of that?"

"Why, I'm positive. We treat our help well and they seldom leave us. I'm sure no woman employed in this hotel, down to the lowest kitchen scullion, has resigned or been discharged during the last few days."

"And there is no one still in your service named Gorham?"

"No one. It's an unusual name and I should have remembered it."

"Do any of the guests ever use the servants' entrance?"

"Certainly not. It is reserved exclusively for the employees. Some of our guests have private maids, who occasionally use the rear entrances, and Mrs. Tolliver's trained nurses are allowed to pass out that way, too; but--"

She stopped abruptly, as if some new thought had occurred to her.

"What is it?" asked Josie, who was watching her face.

"Why, I have just recollected that Mrs. Tolliver's night nurse did not show up Tuesday evening, for some reason, and they were obliged to telephone for another."

"Who is Mrs. Tolliver?"

"One of our permanent guests, who is suffering just now from a severe attack of rheumatism. She employs two trained nurses, a day nurse and a night nurse."

"And the night nurse left her post Tuesday morning and did not return in the evening, as she was expected to do?"

"That's it, miss. Mrs. Tolliver was greatly annoyed, but fortunately she was able to secure another nurse at once."

"What was the nurse's name--the one who abandoned her job without notice?"

"Let me see. It wasn't Gorham. I'll call Alice, my assistant; I feel quite sure that she will know."

Alice promptly answered the bell and on being questioned said:

"The nurse was Mrs. Orme. She'd been with Mrs. Tolliver ever since she was took sick, and was the best nurse she's had."

"Why did she leave?" asked Josie.

"I don't know, miss, I'm sure. She were a quiet body, never sayin' much to no one. But quite ladylike, she were, an' most of us liked her."

"Can you describe her?"

"Well, she isn't tall--not so very tall, you know--an' she's got a good form an' good manners. I take it she's about thirty-five, an' handsome for her age. Good eyes, but mostly looks down an' don't show 'em. Very neat an' tidy. Brown hair. She wore gray clothes, you know--the reg'lar nurse's uniform."

"Do you know where Mrs. Orme lives?"

"No, miss; haven't the faintest idea."

"Who is Mrs. Tolliver's doctor?"

"The house physician, Dr. Pease. His office is No. 633, in this hotel."

"Thank you, Alice."

Josie hunted up Mary Louise.

"Have you ever heard that a trained nurse named Mrs. Orme is in any way connected with Alora's history?" she asked.

"No; I'm pretty sure Alora has never mentioned such a person. What about her, Josie?"

"I think Alora went away with her. Have you any description of Miss Gorham, the governess?"

"Not especially," said Mary Louise, trying to remember. "Alora has sometimes referred to her as 'Old Skinny,' but that doesn't mean anything."

"It means she isn't Mrs. Orme, anyhow," answered Josie, in a disappointed tone.

Mary Louise considered this in her usual careful way. She would like to help Josie, if she could.

"Who do you suppose this Mrs. Orme could be?" she presently asked.

"Some one whom Alora knew years ago, when her mother was alive. Of course her name may not have been Orme, then, and she may not have been a trained nurse. That's why I was inclined to connect her with Gorham."

"Wait a minute, Josie! A nurse, do you say? Why, I remember something about a nurse, no--Alora's mother's nurse. When we were in Italy, where I first knew Alora, she told me that her father, at one time when they lived in New York, had been forced to give money to a woman, and Alora believed he had left America to escape this person's further demands. When I asked who the woman was, she said it was her mother's nurse; but I'm pretty sure she didn't mention her name."

Josie's freckled face now wore a broad smile.

"How simple any enigma proves when you have the key," she remarked, with an air of relief. "The mystery is solved, my dear! It's all as easy as A. B. C."

"In that case," said Mary Louise, more mystified than ever, "kindly oblige me with the key."

"With pleasure. You haven't given me much time to forge a chain, so I'll add each link as it occurs to me. Mrs. Jones, during her last illness, had a nurse; a good nurse, too, in whom she had confidence. When Mrs. Jones sent for her husband, from whom she had been estranged, the nurse was aware of the action. When the husband came--Alora's father--without doubt the nurse remained in the sick room during the interview. Husband and wife quarreled, instead of making up--this guess is justified by the man's disagreeable disposition--and Mrs. Jones hastily wrote a codicil to her will and gave it into the nurse's keeping, with instructions to deliver it to her lawyer. Then the poor lady over-excited, lay back and died, and the man Jason Jones--realized that his lack of diplomacy had euchred him out of a big income for seven years. But he put up a job with the nurse who held his fate in her hands in the shape

of scrap of paper. If she'd give him that codicil--no! that isn't right--if she'd keep it to herself and not let anyone know of its existence, Mr. Jones proposed to give her a share of the money. She considered this easier than working and the bargain was struck. Isn't that a logical chain of events, so far, Mary Louise?"

"But what a terrible thing to do, Josie!"

"Yes, human nature in its worst aspect selfishness, greed, unscrupulousness--and still human nature. Well, the woman followed him to New York and got some of the money, as Alora said; but the nurse wanted more, and was likely to bleed the man more liberally than he liked; so, being afraid of her, he ran away to Europe. Nurse spent her money, couldn't find Jason Jones to get more, and so returned to Chicago and practiced her profession again. Any dummy could figure that out."

"I cannot see," responded Mary Louise, "how that accounts for Alora's disappearance."

"Why, of course the woman knew all about the terms of the will. She was nursing a Mrs. Tolliver in this hotel when she discovered Alora's arrival. How she discovered it doesn't matter. In the morning, when the day nurse arrived to take her place, she left Mrs. Tolliver and went directly to Alora's room. The girl instantly recognized her and would probably have a warm place in her heart for her mother's old nurse. Decided to walk part of the way home with her so they could talk over old times--you and the Colonel being still asleep--but was enticed to the nurse's house and promptly locked up and held as a weapon to force old Jones to pay up. This completes the chain. A woman who would enter into such an ugly deal with Jason Jones as I have described would not hesitate to capture Alora, especially as it proved an easy thing to do."

Mary Louise drew a long breath. "If I could believe that theory, Josie," she said, "it would relieve me of much worry, for I'd know Alora is safe. But--what was it your father said about your imagination?"

Josie laughed. "This isn't wholly imagination, you goose, for it's based on a knowledge of human nature, as I've hinted. Also it's a scientific matching of the pieces in the puzzle. Why, Mary Louise, in this deduction we have all the necessary elements of the usual crime. A woman--always look for a woman in a mystery, my dear--money, the cause of four-fifths

of all crimes, and a guilty man who is afraid of being forced to disgorge his ill-gotten gains. Then we will add an innocent girl who suffers through the machinations of others. Some of my conclusions may not be exactly correct, but in the main the story is absolutely logical."

"That's what you said last night, Josie, when you thought the governess, Gorham, had abducted Alora."

"True, but I have later information which doesn't entirely upset the theory but changes the actors in the drama. I don't say that further investigations may not alter this present plot in some of its details, but the main facts are too lucid and undeniable to get far away from. I'm now going to interview the house physician and get Mrs. Orme's address."

When she had gone, Mary Louise went to Gran'pa Jim with the tale of Josie's latest discoveries and Colonel Hathaway was so impressed by the theory that he decided to telegraph Peter Conant to catch the noon train and come straight to Chicago.

"The complications suggested by Josie will require a lawyer's advice," he said, "and Mr. Conant knows law and can advise us how to handle the case when we have discovered where Alora is confined."

Meanwhile Josie went to the doctor's office and after waiting some time, was finally admitted to his private room.

"I came to ask for the address of a trained nurse--a Mrs. Orme--whom you recommended to Mrs. Tolliver," she began, her innocent eyes regarding the physician gravely.

Dr. Pease frowned.

"I cannot recommend her again," said he. "Although she's a good nurse, she is unreliable, and left my patient without notice when she was badly needed."

"I merely want to find her," declared Josie. "I'm a stranger in town and I've a letter of introduction to Mrs. Orme."

"I don't know her address. I got the woman through Dr. Anstruther."

"Oh. May I telephone Dr. Anstruther, then?"

"I've no objection. There's a telephone in the outer office. But you're not likely to catch him much before noon. Dr. Anstruther is a very busy man."

Josie went to her own room to telephone. She telephoned Dr. Anstruther's office at intervals all the morning, but did not succeed in getting him until nearly two o'clock. Then he answered that he did not know Mrs. Orme's address, having always secured her services through the Sisters' Hospital.

Josie tried the Sisters' Hospital and learned that Mrs. Orme lived in an apartment at 524 Morgan Avenue. She took a taxicab and drove there, determining to obtain an interview with the woman by posing as a nurse who desired assistance in securing employment. But disappointment confronted her. Mrs. Orme had moved from the apartment ten days ago and her present address was unknown.

"She has taken considerable pains to cover her traces," said Josie to Mary Louise, when she returned from her futile trip.

"I hope you're not discouraged, dear," returned Mary Louise anxiously. "The local detectives have done nothing at all, so you are our only hope, Josie."

The embryo detective smiled sweetly.

"I'm not here on a pleasure trip," she said, "although I enjoy travel and good hotel fodder as well as anyone. This is business, but so far I'm just feeling my way and getting a start. You can't open a mystery as you do a book, Mary Louise; it has to be pried open. The very fact that this Mrs. Orme has so carefully concealed her hiding-place is assurance that she's the guilty party who abducted Alora. Being positive of that, it only remains to find her--not an impossibility, by any means--and then we shall have no difficulty in liberating her prisoner."

"But to find her; can you do that, Josie?"

"Certainly, with a little help from the police, which they will gladly furnish. They know I'm Daddy's daughter, for I have already introduced myself to them, and while they may be slow to take the initiative they are always quite willing to aid in an affair of this sort. Now, it stands to reason, Mary Louise, that the nurse didn't use the streets to promenade with. Alora. That would have been dangerous to her plans. There are so

few people abroad in Chicago at six o'clock in the morning that those who met the two would have noted and remembered them. For the same reason Mrs. Orme did not take a street car, or the elevated. Therefore, she took a cab, and the cabman who drove them will know Mrs. Orme's address."

"But who was the cabman?" asked Mary Louise.

"That," said Josie, "is to be my next discovery."

CHAPTER XIX DECOYED

The excitement of being once more in a big city rendered Alora Jones wakeful on that eventful Tuesday morning following her arrival in Chicago. At daybreak she rose and peered through the window into a gray and unimpressive side street; then, disinclined to return to bed, she slowly began dressing.

Presently a sharp knock sounded upon her door. Somewhat surprised, she opened it far enough to see a middle-aged woman attired in nurse's uniform standing in the dim hallway.

"Miss Jones? Miss Alora Jones?" questioned the woman in a soft voice.

"Yes; what is it?"

"I've a message for you. May I come in?"

Alora, fearful that Mary Louise or the Colonel might have been taken suddenly ill, threw wide the door and allowed the woman to enter. As the nurse closed the door behind her Alora switched on the electric light and then, facing her visitor, for the first time recognized her and gave a little cry of surprise.

"Janet!"

"Yes; I am Janet Orme, your mother's nurse."

"But I thought you abandoned nursing after you made my father give you all that money," an accent of scorn in her tone.

"I did, for a time," was the quiet answer. "'All that money' was not a great sum; it was not as much as your father owed me, so I soon took up my old profession again."

The woman's voice and attitude were meek and deprecating, yet Alora's face expressed distrust. She remembered Janet's jaunty insolence at her father's studio and how she had dressed, extravagantly and attended theatre parties and fashionable restaurants, scattering recklessly the money she had exacted from Jason Jones. Janet, with an upward sweep of her half veiled eyes, read the girl's face clearly, but she continued in the same subdued tones:

"However, it is not of myself I came here to speak, but on behalf of your mother's old friend, Doctor Anstruther."

"Oh; did he send you here?"

"Yes. I am his nurse, just now. He has always used me on his important cases, and now I am attending the most important case of all--his own."

"Is Dr. Anstruther ill, then?" asked Alora.

"He is dying. His health broke weeks ago, as you may have heard, and gradually he has grown worse. This morning he is sinking rapidly; we have no hope that he will last through the day."

"Oh, I'm sorry for that!" exclaimed Alora, who remembered the kindly old doctor with real affection. He had been not only her mother's physician but her valued friend.

"He learned, quite by accident, of your arrival here last evening," Janet went on, "and so he begged me to see you and implore you to come to his bedside. I advised him not to disturb you until morning, but the poor man is very restless and so I came here at this unusual hour. It seems he is anxious to tell you some secret which your dead mother confided to his keeping and, realizing his hours are numbered, he urges you to lose no time in going to him. That is the message entrusted to me."

There was no emotion in her utterance; the story was told calmly, as by one fulfilling a mission but indifferent as to its success. Alora did not hesitate.

"How far is it?" she quickly asked.

"A fifteen minute ride."

The girl glanced at her watch. It was not quite six o'clock. Mary Louise and the Colonel would not appear for breakfast for a good two hours yet and after breakfast they were all to go to the yacht. The hour was opportune, affording her time to visit poor Doctor Anstruther and return before her friends were up. Had Alora paused to give Janet's story more consideration she might have seen the inconsistencies in the nurse's statements, but her only thoughts were to learn her mother's secret and to show her sincere consideration for her kindly old friend.

Hastily completing her attire she added her hat and jacket and then said:

"I am ready, Janet."

"I hope we shall find him still alive," remarked the nurse, a cleverly assumed anxiety in her tone, as she took the key from inside the door and fitted it to the outer side of the lock.

Alora passed out, scarcely aware that Janet had pretended to lock the door. Halfway down the hall the woman handed her the key.

"Come this way, please," she said; "it is nearer to the carriage which is waiting for us."

At the rear of the building they descended the stairs and passed through an anteroom fitted with lockers for the use of the employees of the hotel. No one happened to be in the anteroom at that moment and they gained the alley without encountering a single person. Janet quickly led the girl through the alley and soon they came to a closed automobile which evidently awaited them. Janet opened the door for Alora and followed the girl inside the car, which started at once and sped along the quiet streets.

"You will find Doctor Anstruther very feeble," said the nurse, "for he has suffered greatly. But I am sure it will give him pleasure to see you again. I hope he will recognize you. I scarcely recognized you, myself, you have changed so much since last we saw you at the Voltaire. Your resemblance to your mother is quite marked, however."

And so, during the ride, she kept up a flow of desultory conversation, intended to distract Alora's attention from the section of the city through which they were passing. She spoke of Dr. Anstruther, mostly, and answered such questions as Alora put to her in a calm, unemotional manner well calculated to allay suspicion. The woman kept her eyes veiled by her lashes, as of yore, but her face seemed to have aged and grown harder in its lines. There was no hint now of her former gay life in New York; she had resumed the humble tones and manners peculiar to her profession, such as Alora remembered were characteristic of her at the time she nursed her mother.

"This is the place," said Janet, as the cab came to a stop. "Let us move softly, as noise disturbs my patient."

Alora had paid no attention to the direction they had driven but on leaving the car she found herself facing a three-storied brick flat building

of not very prepossessing appearance. Then were several vacant lots on either side of this building, giving it a lonely appearance, and in the lower windows were pasted placards: "To Let."

"Oh; does Doctor Anstruther live here?" asked Alora, somewhat astonished.

Without seeming to have heard the question Janet mounted the steps and opened the front door with a latch-key. Alora followed her inside and up two dingy flights to the third floor. Once she started to protest, for the deadly silence of the place impressed her with a vague foreboding that something was amiss, but Janet silenced her with a warning finger on her lips and on reaching the upper landing herself avoided making a noise as she cautiously unlocked the door. She stood listening a moment and then entered and nodded to the girl to follow.

They were in a short, dark passage which separated the landing from the rooms of the flat. Janet closed the outer door, startling her companion with the sharp "click" it made, and quickly opened another door which led into a shabby living room at the front of the building. Standing just within this room, Alora glanced around with the first real sensation of suspicion she had yet experienced. Janet raised her lids for a sweeping view of the girl's face and then with a light laugh began to remove her own cloak and cap, which she hung in a closet.

"Come, child, make yourself at home," she said in a mocking, triumphant voice, as she seated herself in a chair facing the bewildered girl. "I may as well inform you that this is to be your home for some time to come--until Jason Jones decides to rescue you. You won't object, I hope? Don't get nervous and you'll find your quarters very comfortable, if retired."

Alora, understanding now, first shuddered, then grew tense and cast a hurried glance at the hall door behind her.

"Have you lied to me, Janet?" she demanded.

"Yes."

"And this is a trap? Doctor Anstruther is not sick? He did not send for me? He is not here?"

"You have guessed correctly, Alora."

The girl wheeled and in a quick run reached the door to the landing. It was fast locked.

"Help!" she cried, and stopped to listen; "help! help!"

"Come in and take off your things," called Janet, undisturbed by the outcry. "This building hasn't a soul in it but ourselves, and you may yell for help until you are hoarse without being heard. But don't be frightened. I'm not going to hurt you. In fact, I'd like to make your confinement as cheerful as possible. Can't you understand the truth-- that I am simply holding your person in order to force Jason Jones to pay the money he owes me?"

CHAPTER XX JANET'S TRIUMPH

Alora stood by the door, irresolute, wondering what to do. It occurred to her that she was not much afraid of Janet Orme. She had been trapped in order to bleed her father of money; it was all her father's fault-- his fault and Janet's.

"Suppose you help me get our breakfast," suggested the nurse, coolly. "It will take your mind off your trouble and keep you from brooding. I admit I'm hungry, and I'm sure you'll feel better for a cup of coffee."

She passed into another room, as she spoke, and Alora, realizing the hall door could not be forced by her puny strength, advanced into the living room. There were three other doorways opening from this apartment. She could hear Janet rattling dishes and pans, so the way she had gone led into the kitchen. The other two doors she found gave entrance to small bedrooms, neither having egress other than through the living room. The furniture in all the rooms was cheap and tawdry but fairly comfortable.

Alora sat down and tried to collect her thoughts. Janet got the breakfast unaided and then came to summon her. Alora quietly walked into the kitchen and sat down at a little table spread for two. There was a dish of crisp bacon, some toast and coffee. Alora silently ate and drank, determined to maintain her strength. Having finished her meal she sat back and asked:

"Do you mind explaining what all this means?"

"No, indeed; I'm glad to explain," replied the woman, raising her eyelids an instant to flash a glance of approval at her prisoner. "I have already said that I was obliged to annoy you in order to reach your father. The dear father is an elusive person, you know, and is determined to avoid paying the money he owes me. I haven't been able to locate him, lately, but I have located you, and you are mighty precious to him because if he loses you he loses the income from your fortune. Therefore it is my intention to hold you here until Jason Jones either pays my demands or allows the probate court to deprive him of his guardianship. The proposition is really very simple, as you see."

"Still," said Alora, "I do not quite understand. How did you know of my value to my father?"

"I witnessed your mother's will," was the reply.

Alora remembered that this was true.

"But why does my father still owe you money? You were paid for nursing my mother. And, if your demands are merely blackmail, why does not my father defy you?"

"I'll tell you," answered Janet. "It is a bit of ancient history, but it may interest you. Your mother renounced your father when you were scarcely a year old. I met Jason Jones soon afterward, and believing,--as your own deluded mother did--that he would become a great artist, I gambled with him on his career. In other words, I supported Jason Jones with all my earnings as a nurse for a period of six years and in return he signed an agreement which states that one-half of all the money he received in the future, from whatever source, must be paid to me in return for my investment. Doubtless we both thought, at the time, that any money he got would come from the sale of his pictures; neither could have dreamed that your mother would call him to her on her death-bed and present sent him with your income until you came of age--seven years' control of a fortune, with no other obligation than to look after a child and keep her with him. But the agreement between us covered even that astonishing event. Imagine, if you can, Jason Jones' amazement when he entered your mother's sick chamber to find me--his partner--acting as her nurse. He was also annoyed, for he realized I knew the terms of the will and would demand my share of his income. Can you blame me? He hadn't made good as an artist and this was my only chance to get back some of the hard earned savings I had advanced him. But Jason Jones isn't square, Alora; he's mean and shifty, as perhaps you have discovered. He gave me some money at first, when I followed him to New York, as you know; but after that the coward ran away. That provoked me and made me determined to run him down. I traced him to Europe and followed him there, but he evaded me for a full year, until my money was gone and I was forced to return to America. For nearly three years longer I worked as a nurse and hoarded my earnings. Then, through your father's banker in New York I managed to learn his address. The banker didn't tell me, but I did a little spy work and in the bank's mail I found a letter in Jason Jones' handwriting postmarked 'Positano, Italy.' That was all the clew I needed and I went to Italy and soon located my man. I faced him in his own villa--I believe you were away at the time--and when he found he was caught he cringed and begged for mercy and promised to

give me all that belonged to me. He said he had a lot of gold in his possession and he would pay me partly in gold and partly in drafts on his New York banker. Then he left the room to get the gold and returned with a husky Italian servant who seized and bound me and threw me into a stone house used to store grapes, where I was kept a prisoner for nearly ten days and treated like a dog.

"Finally the Italian released me, asserting that Jason Jones was on his way to America. I followed as soon as I could get passage in a ship, but your clever father had left New York before I arrived there and I could not discover where he had hidden himself. Once more he had beaten me."

Her voice was hard and angry. Alora was tempted to believe the story, for many of its details she knew were true. She remembered, for one thing, that queer letter from Silvio which she had discovered tucked inside one of her father's books. It stated that, according to orders, the Italian had "released the prisoner." So the prisoner had been Janet, and Alora could well understand her determination to secure revenge.

"It seems to me," she said, "that you should have taken your contract with my father to a lawyer, and brought suit to recover the money due you. Surely that would have been the easiest way to collect it."

Janet's face grew red; her lashes dropped still further over the eyes; but she answered after an instant's pause:

"I do not wish the world to know what a fool I was to support an imitation artist for six long years. A lawsuit means publicity, and I have a little pride left, I assure you. Besides," collecting her thoughts as she spoke, "I cannot see the wisdom of dividing my share with a lawyer when I can bring your father to terms myself. I know I have executed a bold stroke in seizing you and making you my prisoner, but it's a stroke that's bound to win. It was conceived last night, on the spur of the moment. Lately I have been nursing in Chicago, where I am better known than in New York and can get better wages. Since my return from Italy I've been saving to renew the search for Jason Jones. While nursing a Mrs. Tolliver at the Hotel Blackington, fortune suddenly smiled on me. I chanced to examine the hotel register last night and found you were registered with Colonel Hathaway's party. Your room number was marked opposite your name, so I had you properly located. During the night, while on duty in Mrs. Tolliver's room, I had ample time to figure out a plan of action. I knew you were fond of old Doctor Anstruther and so used his name for a

lure. I had already rented this flat; not with the idea of using it for a prison, but because it was cheap and so isolated that I could sleep during the daytime without being disturbed. I believe that's all that I need explain to you. Our little adventure of this morning you will now be able to understand perfectly. Also you will understand the fact that you must remain a prisoner until my purpose is accomplished. I'm sorry for you, but it can't be helped. Won't you have another cup of coffee, Alora?"

Alora had no answer ready. Janet's story did not satisfy her; she felt that somewhere there was a flaw in it; but she decided to bide her time.

CHAPTER XXI THE PRICE OF LIBERTY

Alora, being in the main a sensible girl, strove to make the best of her unpleasant predicament. She longed to notify Mary Louise that she was safe and well and in answer to her pleadings Janet agreed she might write a letter to that effect, with no hint that she was imprisoned or where she could be found, and the nurse would mail it for her. So Alora wrote the letter and showed it to Janet, who could find no fault with its wording and promised to mail it when she went out to market, which she did every morning, carefully locking her prisoner in. It is perhaps needless to state that the letter never reached Mary Louise because the nurse destroyed it instead of keeping her agreement to mail it. Letters can be traced, and Janet did not wish to be traced just then.

The days dragged by with little excitement. Alora sought many means of escape but found none practical. Once, while Janet was unlocking the hall door to go to market, the girl made a sudden dash to get by her and so secure her freedom; but the woman caught her arm and swung her back so powerfully that Alora fell against the opposite wall, bruised and half stunned. She was no match for Janet in strength.

"I'm sorry," said Janet complacently, "but you brought it on yourself. I'm not brutal, but I won't be balked. Please remember, my girl, that to me this is a very important enterprise and I've no intention of allowing you to defeat my plans."

Usually the woman was not unpleasant in her treatment of Alora, but conversed with her frankly and cheerfully, as if striving to relieve her loneliness.

"Have you written to my father about me?" the girl asked one day.

"Not yet," was the reply. "I don't even know where Jason Jones may be found, for you haven't given me his address. But there's no hurry. You have been missing only a week, so far. Jason Jones has doubtless been notified of your disappearance and is beginning to worry. Of course he will imagine I am responsible for this misfortune and his alarm will grow with the days that pass. Finally, when his state of mind becomes desperate, you will give me his address and he will hear from me. I shall have no trouble, at that crisis, in bringing my dishonest partner to terms."

"I can't see the object of waiting so long," protested Alora. "How long do you intend to keep me here?"

"I think you should remain missing about fifty days, during which time they will search for you in vain. Your father's search for you will include a search for me, and I've figured on that and defy him to find me. The Sisters' Hospital, the only address known to the physicians who employ me, believe I've gone to some small Indiana town on a case, but I neglected to give them the name of the town. So there's a blind lead that will keep my pursuers busy without their getting anywhere. It's easy to hide in a big city. Here you are very safe, Alora, and discovery is impossible."

Janet had abandoned her nurse's costume from the first day of the girl's imprisonment. When she went out, which was only to a near-by market and grocery, she wore an unobtrusive dress.

Every day seemed more dreary to Alora than the last. She soon became very restless under her enforced confinement and her nerves, as well as her general health, began to give way. She had been accustomed to out-of-door exercise, and these rooms were close and "stuffy" because Janet would not allow the windows open.

For twelve days and nights poor Alora constantly planned an escape, only to abandon every idea she conceived as foolish and impractical. She looked forward to fifty days of this life with horror and believed she would go mad if forced to endure her confinement so long.

CHAPTER XXII A COMPROMISE

"If I had any money of my own," Alora said to Janet Orme on the morning of the twelfth day of imprisonment, "I would gladly pay it to free."

Janet flashed a quick glance at her. "Do you mean that?" she asked with ill-suppressed eagerness.

"I do, indeed," declared the girl, moaning dismally; "but I never have a cent to call my own."

Janet sat still, for some time, thinking.

"I, too, wish you were free," she admitted, resuming the conversation, "for my position as jailer obliges me to share your confinement, and it's wearing on me, as it is on you. But you have unconsciously given me a thought--an idea that seems likely to lead to a compromise between us. I'm going to consider it seriously, and if it still looks good to me I'll make you a proposition."

Saying this, she retired to her bedroom and closed the door after her, leaving Alora in a fit of nervous trembling through half-formed hopes that she might gain her release.

It was nearly an hour before Janet returned. When she came from her room she stood before the girl for a time and seemed to study her face. Alora was anxious and did not endeavor to conceal the fact. In her hand the woman held a paper, which she presently laid upon the center-table.

"I have decided to make you a proposition," she said, turning to seat herself near the table. "If it interests you, all right; if it doesn't, you may of course reject it. My offer is this: If you will tell me where to find your father and will promise not to mention me to him or to warn him of my intentions, and if you will sign this paper which I have prepared, I will allow you to return to your friends to-day. You are not especially fond of Jason Jones, I believe?"

"Not especially, although he is my father," returned Alora, eyeing the woman expectantly.

"Then you can have no objection to my forcing him to disgorge my share of his income, which you would not get in any event. I don't know how much of an allowance he makes you, but----"

"I don't get any allowance," said Alora, "In fact, he gives me nothing."

"Then my demands on your father will not affect your interests. Are you willing to give me his address, and promise not to warn him?"

"Under the circumstances, yes."

"Very well. I accept your plighted word--your word of honor. Now sign this paper and you may go."

She took the paper from the table and handed it to Alora, who read as follows:

"For value received, in services faithfully rendered and which I hereby freely and without coercion acknowledge, I hereby promise and agree to pay to Janet Orme Jones on the day that I attain my majority the sum of Fifty Thousand Dollars, which sum is to be paid from my estate without recourse, equivocation or attempt to repudiate the said obligation, inasmuch as I willingly admit the said sum to be justly due the said Janet Orme Jones. "(Signed:):....."

Alora read the paper twice, with, growing indignation. Then she glanced up at her jailer and muttered questioningly: "Jones? Janet Orme Jones?"

"A family name, my dear. The Joneses are so thick and so unimportant that generally I do not use the name, but this is a legal document. I hope you won't try to claim relationship," she added with a light laugh.

"I'm not going to promise you so enormous a sum as fifty thousand dollars, even to secure my liberty," said Alora. "It's out of all reason--it's--it's--outrageous!"

"Very well," returned Janet, coolly; "that's your own affair. This is merely a compromise proposition, suggested by yourself, as I told you. Let us say no more about it."

Alora was greatly disheartened. After allowing her hopes to run so high the disappointment was now doubly keen. Her defiance melted away with the thought of all the weary days of imprisonment she must endure until Janet was ready to act.

"I--I might agree to give you five thousand dollars," she ventured.

"Nonsense. I'm not gunning for small game, Alora. Did you but realize it, I am quite considerate in exacting only fifty thousand. Your estate is worth two millions. Your income is something like eighty thousand a year, and this payment would leave you thirty thousand to use the first year after you come into your fortune. I don't believe you could spend thirty thousand in a year, when you are eighteen years of age."

Alora turned away and going to the front window, looked through its stained and unwashed panes into the gloomy street below. The sight emphasized her isolation from the world. Her imprisonment was becoming unbearable. After all, she reflected, in reckless mood, what did so small a share of her prospective fortune weigh against her present comfort--and health--and happiness?

Janet was stealthily watching her.

"Should you decide to sign the paper," said the nurse, "you must make up your mind not to raise a row when pay-day comes. The money will come out of your income, and instead of investing it in more bonds, you will have invested it in your liberty. You won't be inconvenienced in the slightest degree. On the other hand, this money will mean everything to me--a modest competence for my old age and relief from the drudgery of working. I've had a hard life, my girl, for nursing is mere slavery to the whims of sick people. Consider, also, that for six years Jason Jones squandered all my savings in trying to paint pictures that were not worth the canvas he ruined. If I had that money now I wouldn't need to descend to this disgraceful mode of recouping my bank account; but, under the circumstances, don't you think I am justly entitled to some of the Jones money?"

"You're going to get a lot from my father."

"True; but that is for his indebtedness, while this amount is for your freedom. A scrape of the pen and you secure liberty, fresh air and the privilege of rejoining your friends, who are probably getting anxious about you. If you are the sensible girl I take you to be, you won't hesitate."

Alora knew the woman was pleading her own case, but the arguments appealed to her. She was weak and nervous and her longing for liberty outweighed her natural judgment.

"I suppose I'm a fool, but----"

Slowly she approached the table where the written promissory note still lay. Janet had placed a pen and inkstand beside it.

CHAPTER XXIII MARY LOUISE HAS AN INTUITION

"I wish, Josie," said Mary Louise dolefully, "you'd let me help in this search for Alora."

"I'd be glad to, dear, if I could think of a single thing you can do," replied her friend. "Just now I'm on the most tedious task imaginable-- visiting the army of cab-drivers--horse and taxi--here in Chicago and trying to find the one who carried a woman and a girl away from the Blackington at six o'clock that eventful Tuesday morning."

"Have you met with any success, at all?" asked Mary Louise.

"That question proves you're not fitted for detective work," Josie laughingly asserted. "A moment's reflection would assure you that when I found my man my search would be ended. Ergo, no success has yet attended my efforts. I've interviewed a couple of hundreds, however, and that leaves only a few hundreds left to question."

"But the whole thing drags terribly!" complained Mary Louise. "Days are passing, and who knows what may be happening to poor Alora while you are hanging around the cab-stands?"

Josie's face grew grave. In sober tones she said:

"I'm just as anxious as you are, Mary Louise. But this case is really puzzling, because Chicago is such a big city that criminals may securely hide themselves here for months--even for years--without being discovered. Mrs. Orme was clever enough to leave few traces behind her; as far as clues are concerned she might have evaporated into thin air, taking Alora with her--except for this matter of the cabman. That's why I am pinning my faith to this search, knowing all the time, nevertheless, that Mrs. Orme may have provided for even that contingency and rendered the discovery of the cabman impossible. To do that, however, she would have to use a private equipage, involving a confederate, and I believe she preferred to take chances with a hired cab."

"What are the police doing?" inquired Mary Louise nervously.

"Nothing. They were soon discouraged and lost interest in the matter when I took hold of the case. But I don't intend to get discouraged. I hate to be 'stumped,' as you know, and it seems to me, after careful

consideration, that success may follow the discovery of the cab-driver. I've not been neglecting other trails, I assure you. I've obtained a pretty fair record of the history of nurse Orme. She has the habit of drudging in sick rooms until she accumulates enough capital to lead a gay life for a month or so, after which she resumes nursing in order to replenish her purse. She's a good nurse and a wild spendthrift, but aside from the peculiarity mentioned there's nothing in her career of especial interest. The woman is pretty well known both in New York and Chicago, for she squanders in the first city and saves in the other, but of her early history there is no information available. In her wildest moods she has never done anything to warrant her arrest, yet the police have kept a suspicious eye on her for years."

"Poor Alora!" wailed Mary Louise, miserably; "I wish I could do something for her."

"You did a lot for her when you put me on her trail," declared Josie, with conviction. "I've a hunch I shall win. I've wired Daddy O'Gorman all about the case, but he says he can't advise me. In other words, he's watching to see whether I make good or cave in, and I just dare not fail. So keep your courage, Mary Louise, and muster all the confidence you are able to repose in me. I may not know all the tricks of the sleuths, but I know some of them. And now I'm off to interview more cabmen."

Mary Louise sighed as her friend left her. She was indeed very unhappy and restless during those days of tedious waiting. Peter Conant had come to Chicago on the Colonel's demand, but Mary Louise couldn't see how he was able to help them one bit.

"Of course," the lawyer had said in his terse, choppy manner, "whoever abducted the girl is, criminally liable. We can put the party in jail."

"When we get her," suggested Mary Louise impatiently. "The party is Mrs. Orme; we have established that fact without a doubt; and, if we could get her, we'd also get Alora."

"Just so," Peter replied; "and, between the O'Gorman girl and the police, we ought to capture the woman soon. I have a degree of confidence in Josie O'Gorman and somewhat more confidence in the police."

"Do you think we should notify Jason Jones?" inquired Colonel Hathaway.

"I have considered that, sir, in all its phases, and knowing the man's peculiar characteristics I believe such a course is not as yet desirable. Jones is so enthralled by his latest craze over aviation that he would be no fit adviser and could render no practical assistance in the search for his daughter. On the other hand, his association would be annoying, for he would merely accuse you of neglect in permitting Alora to be stolen while in your care. I have seen a copy of his wife's will and know that the girl's loss may cost him his guardianship and the perquisites that pertain to it. In that case he will probably sue you for the loss of the money, claiming Alora's abduction was due to your carelessness."

"He could not win such an absurd suit, however," declared the Colonel.

"Still, he might be awarded damages," asserted the lawyer. "Juries are uncertain; the law is somewhat elastic; judges are peculiar."

"Don't worry, Gran'pa Jim," said Mary Louise soothingly, as she sat on the arm of his chair and rubbed the wrinkles from his forehead; "there must be such a thing as justice, even in law."

"Law is justice," stated Mr. Conant, resenting the insinuation, "but justice is sometimes recognized by humans in one form, and sometimes in another. I do not say that Jason Jones could collect damages on such complaint, but he assuredly would have a case."

Mr. Conant had desired to return home after the first conference with his client, but he admitted that his wife was recovering from her indisposition and a kindly neighbor was assisting Irene in the care of her, so he yielded to his client's urgent request to remain. Colonel Hathaway was more alarmed by Alora's disappearance than he allowed Mary Louise to guess, and he wanted Mr. Conant to spur the police to renewed effort. In addition to this the Colonel and his lawyer usually spent the best part of each day pursuing investigations on their own account, with the result that Mary Louise was left to mope alone in the hotel rooms.

The young girl was fond of Alora and secretly terrified over her mysterious disappearance. She tried to embroider, as she sat alone and waited for something to happen, but her nerveless fingers would not hold the needle. She bought some novels but could not keep her mind on the stories. Hour by hour she gazed from the window into the crowded street below, searching each form and face for some resemblance to Alora. She had all the newspapers sent to her room, that she might scan the

advertisements and "personals" for a clew, and this led her to following the news of the Great War, in which she found a partial distraction from her worries. And one morning, after her grandfather and the lawyer had left her, she was glancing over the columns of the Tribune when an item caught her eye that drew from her a cry of astonishment. The item read as follows:

"The Grand Prize at the exhibition of American paintings being held in the Art Institute was yesterday awarded by the jury to the remarkable landscape entitled 'Poppies and Pepper Trees' by the California artist, Jason Jones. This picture has not only won praise from eminent critics but has delighted the thousands of visitors who have flocked to the exhibition, so the award is a popular one. The Associated Artists are tendering a banquet to-night to Jason Jones at the Congress Hotel, where he is staying. The future of this clever artist promises well and will be followed with interest by all admirers of his skillful technique and marvelous coloring."

Mary Louise read this twice, trying to understand what it meant. Then she read it a third time.

"How strangely we have all been deceived in Alora's father!" she murmured. "I remember that Gran'pa Jim once claimed that any man so eccentric might well possess talent, but even Mr. Jones' own daughter did not believe he was a true artist. And Alora never guessed he was still continuing to paint--alone and in secret--or that he had regained his former powers and was creating a masterpiece. We have all been sadly wrong in our judgment of Jason Jones. Only his dead wife knew he was capable of great things."

She dropped the paper, still somewhat bewildered by the remarkable discovery.

"And he is here in Chicago, too!" she mused, continuing her train of thought, "and we all thought he was stupidly learning to fly in Dorfield. Oh, now I understand why he allowed Alora to go with us. He wanted to exhibit his picture--the picture whose very existence he had so carefully guarded--and knew that with all of us out of the way, afloat upon the Great Lakes, he could come here without our knowledge and enter the picture in the exhibition. It may be he doubted its success--he is diffident in some ways--and thought if it failed none of us at home would be the wiser; but I'm sure that now he has won he will brag and bluster and be

very conceited and disagreeable over his triumph. That is the man's nature--to be cowed by failure and bombastic over success. It's singular, come to think it over, how one who has the soul to create a wonderful painting can be so crude and uncultured, so morose and--and--cruel."

Suddenly she decided to go and look at the picture. The trip would help to relieve her loneliness and she was eager to see what Jason Jones had really accomplished. The Institute was not far from her hotel; she could walk the distance in a few minutes; so she put on her hat and set out for the exhibition.

On her way, disbelief assailed her. "I don't see how the man did it!" she mentally declared. "I wonder if that item is just a huge joke, because the picture was so bad that the reporter tried to be ironical."

But when she entered the exhibition and found a small crowd gathered around one picture--it was still early in the day--she dismissed at once that doubtful supposition.

"That is the Jason Jones picture," said an attendant, answering her question and nodding toward the admiring group; "that's the prizewinner--over there."

Mary Louise edged her way through the crowd until the great picture was in full view; and then she drew a long breath, awestruck, delighted, filled with a sense of all-pervading wonder.

"It's a tremendous thing!" whispered a man beside her to his companion. "There's nothing in the exhibit to compare with it. And how it breathes the very spirit of California!"

"California?" thought Mary Louise. Of course; those yellow poppies and lacy pepper trees with their deep red berries were typical of no other place. And the newspaper had called Jason Jones a California artist. When had he been in California, she wondered. Alora had never mentioned visiting the Pacific Coast.

Yet, sometime, surely, her father must have lived there. Was it while Alora was a small child, and after her mother had cast him off? He could have made sketches then, and preserved them for future use.

As she stood there marveling at the superb genius required to produce such a masterpiece of art, a strange notion crept stealthily into her mind.

Promptly she drove it out; but it presently returned; it would not be denied; finally, it mastered her.

"Anyhow," she reflected, setting her teeth together, "I'll beard the wolf in his den. If my intuition has played me false, at worst the man can only sneer at me and I've always weathered his scornful moods. But if I am right----"

The suggestion was too immense to consider calmly. With quick, nervous steps she hastened to the Congress Hotel and sent up her card to Jason Jones. On it she had written in pencil: "I shall wait for you in the parlor. Please come to me."

CHAPTER XXIV AN INTERRUPTION

"Before you sign this promissory note," remarked Janet Orme, as Alora reluctantly seated herself at the table, "you must perform the other part of your agreement and give me the present address of your father, Jason Jones."

"He lives in Dorfield," said Alora.

"Write his street number--here, on this separate sheet."

The girl complied.

"Is it a private house, or is it a studio?"

"A cottage. Father doesn't paint any more."

"That is very sensible of him," declared the nurse; "yet I wonder how he can resist painting. He has always had a passion for the thing and in the old days was never happy without a brush in his hand. He had an idea he could do something worth while, but that was mere delusion, for he never turned out anything decent or that would sell in the market. Therefore the money he spent for paints, brushes and canvas--money I worked hard to earn--was absolutely wasted. Does your father keep any servants?"

"One maid, an Irish girl born in the town."

"Still economical, I see. Well, that's all the information I require. You have given your word of honor not to notify him that I have discovered his whereabouts. Is it not so?"

"Yes," said Alora.

"Now sign the note."

Alora, pen in hand, hesitated while she slowly read the paper again. She hated to give fifty thousand dollars to this scheming woman, even though the loss of such a sum would not seriously impair her fortune. But what could she do?

"Sign it, girl!" exclaimed Janet, impatiently.

Alora searched the note for a loophole that would enable her afterward to repudiate it. She knew nothing of legal phrases, yet the wording seemed cleverly constructed to defeat any attempt to resist payment.

"Sign!" cried the woman. With pen hovering over the place where she had been told to write her name, Alora still hesitated and seeing this the nurse's face grew dark with anger. A sudden "click" sounded from the hall door, but neither heard it.

"Sign!" she repeated, half rising with a threatening gesture.

"No, don't sign, please," said a clear voice, and a short, stumpy girl with red hair and freckled face calmly entered the room and stood smilingly before them.

Janet uttered an exclamation of surprise and annoyance and sank back in her chair, glaring at the intruder. Alora stared in speechless amazement at the smiling girl, whom she had never seen before.

"How did you get in here?" demanded Janet angrily.

"Why, I just unlocked the door and walked in," was the reply, delivered in a cheery and somewhat triumphant voice.

"This is a private apartment."

"Indeed! I thought it was a prison," said the girl. "I imagined you, Mrs. Orme, to be a jailer, and this young person--who is Miss Alora Jones, I believe--I supposed to be your prisoner. Perhaps I'm wrong, but I guess I'm right."

The nurse paled. The look she flashed from her half-veiled eyes was a dangerous look. She knew, in the instant, that the stranger had come to liberate Alora, but the next instant she reflected that all was not lost, for she had already decided to release her prisoner without compulsion. It was important to her plans, however, that she obtain the promissory note; so, instantly controlling herself, she lightly touched Alora's arm and said in her usual soft voice:

"Sign your name, my dear, and then we will talk with this person."

Alora did not move to obey, for she had caught a signal from the red-headed girl.

"I object to your signing that paper," protested the stranger, seating herself in a vacant chair. "I haven't the faintest idea what it is you're about to sign, but if I were you I wouldn't do it."

"It is the price of my liberty," explained Alora.

"Well, this is a free country and liberty doesn't cost anything. I've a carriage waiting outside, and I will drive you back to the Colonel and Mary Louise free of charge. You won't even have to whack up on the cab hire."

The nurse slowly rose and faced the girl.

"Who are you?" she demanded.

"No one of importance," was the answer. "I'm just Josie O'Gorman, the daughter of John O'Gorman, of Washington, who is a lieutenant in the government's secret service."

"Then you're a detective!"

"The aforesaid John O'Gorman declares I'm not. He says I must learn a lot before I become a real detective, so at present I'm just practicing. Mary Louise is my friend, you know," she continued, now addressing Alora, "and you are a friend of Mary Louise; so, when you mysteriously disappeared, she telegraphed me and I came on to hunt you up. That wasn't an easy job for an amateur detective, I assure you, and it cost me a lot of time and some worry, but glory be! I've now got you located and Mrs. Orme's jig is up."

The nurse moved softly to the door that led into the passage and locked it, putting the key into her pocket.

"Now," said she, with another flash of those curious eyes, "I have two prisoners."

Josie laughed.

"I could almost have sworn you'd try that trick," she remarked. "It was on the cards and you couldn't resist it. Permit me to say, Mrs. Orme, that you're a rather clever woman, and I admire cleverness even when it's misdirected. But my Daddy has taught me, in his painstaking way, not to be caught napping. A good soldier provides for a retreat as well as an advance. I've been on your trail for a long time and only this morning

succeeded in winning the confidence of the cabman who drove you here. Wasn't sure, of course, that you were still here, until I saw Alora's face at the window a while ago. Then I knew I'd caught you. The cab is a closed one and holds four inside, so I invited three policeman to accompany me. One is at the back of this house, one at the front door and the third is just outside here on the landing. Probably he can hear us talking. He's a big man, that third policeman, and if I raise my voice to cry out he could easily batter down the door you have locked and come to my rescue. Now will you be good, Mrs. Orme?"

The nurse realized her defeat. She deliberately took the note from the table and tore it up.

"You have really foiled me, my girl," she said philosophically, "although if you knew all you would not blame me for what I have done."

"You've decided not to dig any money out of Alora, then?"

"It wouldn't matter to her, but I have abandoned the idea. However, I shall insist on making Jason Jones pay me liberally for my disappointment. Now take the girl and go. Get your things on, Alora."

Josie regarded her thoughtfully.

"I had intended to arrest you, Mrs. Orme," she remarked; "but, honestly, I can't see what good it would do, while it would cause Mary Louise and the dear Colonel a heap of trouble in prosecuting you. So, unless Miss Jones objects----"

"All I want it to get away from here, to be out of her clutches," asserted Alora.

"Then let us go. The woman deserves punishment, but doubtless she'll get her just deserts in other ways. Get your things on, my dear; the cab and the policemen are waiting."

Janet Orme unlocked the door to the passage. Then she stood motionless, with drooping eyelids, while the two girls passed out. Alora, greatly unnerved and still fearful, clung to the arm of her rescuer.

When they had gained the street and were about to enter the closed automobile she asked: "Where are the three policemen?"

"Invisible," returned Josie, very cheerfully. "I had to invent that story, my dear, and the Recording Angel is said to forgive detectives for lying."

She followed Alora into the car and closed the door.

"Drive to the Blackington, please," she called to the driver.

And, as they whirled away, she leaned from the window and waved a parting signal to Mrs. Orme, who stood in the upper window, her face contorted and scowling with chagrin at the discovery that she had been outwitted by a mere girl.

CHAPTER XXV JASON JONES

The Colonel and Peter Conant had just entered the drawing room of the suite at the hotel and found Mary Louise absent. This was unusual and unaccountable and they were wondering what could have become of the girl when the door suddenly burst open and Josie's clear voice cried triumphantly:

"I've got her! I've captured the missing heiress at last!"

Both men, astonished, rose to their feet as Alora entered and with a burst of tears threw her arms around the old Colonel's neck. For a few moments the tableau was dramatic, all being speechless with joy at the reunion. Colonel Hathaway patted Alora's head and comforted the sobbing girl as tenderly as if she had been his own grandchild--or Mary Louise.

Josie perched herself lightly on the center-table and swinging her legs complacently back and forth explained her discovery in a stream of chatter, for she was justly elated by her success.

"And to think," she concluded, "that I never missed a clew! That it was really the nurse, Mrs. Orme--Mrs. Jones' old nurse--who stole Alora, according to our suspicions, and that her object was just what I thought, to get money from that miser Jason Jones! Daddy will be pleased with this triumph; I'm pleased; Mary Louise will be pleased, and--By the way, where is Mary Louise?"

"I don't know," confessed the Colonel, who had just placed Alora, now more self-possessed, in a chair. "I was beginning to worry about her when you came in. She seldom leaves these rooms, except for a few moments, and even then she tells me, or leaves word, where she is going. I spoke to the clerk, when I returned, and he said she had left the hotel early this morning, and it's now four o'clock."

Josie's smile faded and her face became grave.

"Now, who," she said, "could have an object in stealing Mary Louise? Complications threaten us in this matter and the first thing we must do is----"

"Oh, Alora!" exclaimed Mary Louise, who had softly opened the door and caught sight of her friend. Next moment the two girls were locked in an embrace and Josie, a shade of disappointment struggling with her sunny smile, remarked coolly:

"Very well; that beats the champion female detective out of another job. But I might have known Mary Louise wouldn't get herself stolen; no such adventure ever happens to her."

Mary Louise turned to the speaker with an earnest look on her sweet face.

"An adventure has happened to me, Josie, and--and--I hardly know how to break the news."

She held Alora at arms' length and looked gravely into her friend's face. Alora noted the serious expression and said quickly:

"What is it? Bad news for me?"

"I--I think not," replied Mary Louise, hesitatingly; "but it's--it's wonderful news, and I hardly know how to break it to you."

"The best way," remarked Josie, much interested, "is to let it out in a gush. 'Wonderful' stuff never causes anyone to faint."

"Alora," said Mary Louise solemnly, "your father is here."

"Where?"

"He is just outside, in the corridor."

"Why doesn't he come in?" asked the Colonel.

"He needn't have worried about me," said Alora, in sullen tone, "but I suppose it was the danger of losing his money that----"

"No," interrupted Mary Louise; "you mistake me. Jason Jones, the great artist--a splendid, cultured man and----"

A sharp rap at the door made her pause. Answering the Colonel's summons a bellboy entered.

"For Mr. Conant, sir," he said, offering a telegram.

The lawyer tore open the envelope as the boy went out and after a glance at it exclaimed in shocked surprise: "Great heavens!"

Then he passed the message to Colonel Hathaway, who in turn read it and passed it to Josie O'Gorman. Blank silence followed, while Mary Louise and Alora eyed the others expectantly.

"Who did you say is outside in the corridor?" demanded Josie in a puzzled tone.

"Alora's father," replied Mary Louise.

"Jason Jones?"

"Jason Jones," repeated Mary Louise gravely.

"Well, then, listen to this telegram. It was sent to Mr. Peter Conant from Dorfield and says: 'Jason Jones killed by falling from an aeroplane at ten o'clock this morning. Notify his daughter.'"

Alora drew a quick breath and clasped her hands over her heart. Uncongenial as the two had been, Jason Jones was her father--her only remaining parent--and the suddenness of his death shocked and horrified the girl. Indeed, all present were horrified, yet Mary Louise seemed to bear the news more composedly than the others--as if it were a minor incident in a great drama. She slipped an arm around her girl friend's waist and said soothingly:

"Never mind, dear. It is dreadful, I know. What an awful way to die! And yet--and yet, Alora--it may be all for the best."

Josie slid down from the table. Her active brain was the first to catch a glimmering of what Mary Louise meant.

"Shall I call that man in?" she asked excitedly, "the man whom you say is Alora's father?"

"No," answered Mary Louise. "Let me go for him, please. I--I must tell him this strange news myself. Try to quiet yourself, Alora, and--and be prepared. I'm going to introduce to you--Jason Jones."

She uttered the last sentence slowly and with an earnestness that bewildered all her hearers--except, perhaps, Josie O'Gorman. And then she left the room.

The little group scarcely moved or spoke.

It seemed an age to them, yet it was only a few moments, when Mary Louise came back, leading by the hand a tall, handsome gentleman who bore in every feature, in every movement, the mark of good birth, culture, and refinement, and in a voice that trembled with, nervous excitement the girl announced:

"This is Jason Jones--a California artist--the man who married Antoinette Seaver. He is Alora's father. And the other--the other----"

"Why, the other was a fraud, of course," exclaimed Josie.

CHAPTER XXVI WHAT MARY LOUISE ACCOMPLISHED

I am quite sure it is unnecessary to relate in detail the scene that followed Mary Louise's introduction or the excited inquiries and explanations which naturally ensued. To those present the scene was intensely dramatic and never to be forgotten, but such a meeting between father and daughter is considered too sacred to be described here.

Mary Louise's intuition had not played her false. She had found at the Congress Hotel another Jason Jones, far different from the one she had known, and a few questions elicited the fact that he was indeed the father of Alora. So, as briefly as she could, she told him how another man had usurped his place and seized all of Alora's income, at the same time willfully depriving the girl of such comforts and accomplishments as one in her position should enjoy.

"And to think," she added indignantly, "that he is not Jason Jones at all!"

"I believe you are mistaken there," replied the artist thoughtfully. "Jason is a family name, derived from one of our most eminent ancestors, and in my generation it is also borne, I have learned, by one of my second cousins, a Jason Jones who is also a painter and aspires to fame as an artist. I have never met the man, but his indifferently executed canvases, offered for sale under our common name, formerly caused me considerable annoyance and perhaps interfered with my career. But of late I have not heard of this Jason Jones, for soon after my separation from my wife I went to Southern California and located in a little bungalow hidden in a wild canyon of the Santa Monica mountains. There I have secluded myself for years, determined to do some really good work before I returned East to prove my ability. Some time after Antoinette died I saw a notice to that effect in a newspaper, but there were no comments and I did not know that she had made me guardian of our child. That was like Antoinette," he continued, in gentler tones; "she was invariably generous and considerate of my shortcomings, even after we realized we were not fitted to live together. Her renunciation of me seemed harsh, at first, for I could not understand her ambitions, but in fact she drove me to success. I have won the Grand Prize, after all these years of patient labor, and from now on my future is assured."

"Have you never longed for your child?" asked Mary Louise reproachfully.

"I have, indeed. In imagination I have followed Alora's growth and development year by year, and one of my most cherished anticipations when coming here was to seek out my daughter and make myself known to her. I knew she had been well provided for in worldly goods and I hoped to find her happy and content. If my picture received favorable comment at the exhibition I intended to seek Alora. I did not expect to win the Grand Prize."

* * * * *

It was this newly discovered Jason Jones and his daughter--who already loved him and shyly clung to this responsive and congenial parent--who went to Dorfield with the Colonel and Mary Louise and Peter Conant and Josie O'Gorman to attend the obsequies of the other less fortunate Jason Jones. Mrs. Orme was there, too; Mrs. Janet Orme Jones; for she admitted she was the dead man's wife and told them, in a chastened but still defiant mood, how the substitution of her husband for the other artist had come about.

"Many years ago, when I was nursing in a New York hospital," she said, "a man was brought in with both arms broken, having been accidentally knocked down by a street-car. I was appointed to nurse him and learned from him that he was Jason Jones, a poor artist who was, however, just about to win recognition. He showed me a newspaper clipping that highly praised a painting then being exhibited at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, which was signed Jason Jones. I know now that it wasn't his picture at all, but the work of his cousin, but at the time the clipping deceived me.

"I was ambitious to become something more than a nurse. I thought that to be the wife of a famous artist would bring me wealth and a position in society, so I married Jason Jones--without love--and he married me--also without love--in order to get my wages. He won where I lost, for during several years I foolishly supported him with my savings, always expecting him to become famous. At first he attributed his failures to his broken arms, although they had healed perfectly, and I ignorantly accepted the excuse. It was only after years of waiting for the man to prove his ability that I finally woke to the truth--that he had no talent--and I then left him to his own devices. In Chicago I sought to forget my unfortunate past and found regular employment there in my profession.

"It was while nursing Mrs. Jones that I overheard her give to Doctor Anstruther the supposed address of her husband, which had been furnished her by a casual acquaintance, and tell him to wire Jason Jones to come to her at once. I well knew a mistake had been made and that she had given the doctor my own husband's address--the address of an entirely different Jason Jones. My first impulse was to undeceive her, but that would involve humiliating explanations, so I hesitated and finally decided to remain silent. When the doctor had gone to telegraph and the die was cast, I reflected that my husband, whom I knew to be sunk in poverty, would ignore the request to come to Chicago to be reconciled to his dying wife. My Jason wouldn't care whether I lived or died and wouldn't have spent a cent to be reconciled with me. For of course he would think it was I who asked for him, since he would know nothing of Antoinette Seaver Jones or that she was the wife of his distant relative, the other Jason Jones.

"He did, indeed, answer Doctor Anstruther by saying he would not come unless his expenses were advanced, so the good doctor launched the future deception by sending him ample funds. I knew of this action and wondered what I ought to do. There would be a terrible mix-up when my husband appeared, and I realized how disappointed the sick woman would be. Knowing her condition to be dangerous, I feared the shock would kill her, which it really did, for still I kept silent. I told myself that I had not aided in the deception in any way, that it was a trick of fate, and I could not be blamed. I thought that when Doctor Anstruther met my husband there would be explanations and the truth would come out, but somehow that did not happen. Jason Jones walked into Antoinette Seaver Jones' room expecting to find me dying, and saw a strange woman in the bed and his wife--in good health--standing before him. He let out an oath in his surprise and my patient, who had raised up in bed to stare at him, uttered a low moan and fell back on her pillow, dead. I saw the tragedy and involuntarily screamed, and Jason Jones saw she was dead and cried out in fear. I had just time to recover my wits and whisper to him to keep his mouth shut and I would make him rich when Doctor Anstruther hurried into the room.

"The whole thing was unpremeditated up to that time, but now I assisted fate, for I had witnessed Mrs. Jones' will and knew well its contents. No one seemed to know there were two artists named Jason Jones and

everyone accepted my husband as Alora's father and the one entitled to her guardianship and to profit by the terms of the will.

"An hour after Mrs. Jones died I secured a secret interview with my husband, who until then had been thoroughly bewildered, and explained to him that the mistake in identity would, if he took prompt advantage of it, give him the control of an enormous income for seven years-- until the child reached the age of eighteen. He was fearful, at first, that the other Jason Jones would appear and prosecute him for swindling, but as the husband of Antoinette Seaver had not been heard from in years, even by his own wife, I induced him to accept the risk. It was I who virtually put that income into my husband's hands, and in return he agreed to supply me with whatever money I demanded, up to a half of his receipts. But he proved that there is not always honor among thieves, for after he had been made legal executor of the estate and his fears had somewhat subsided he endeavored to keep all the money for himself and begrudged me the one or two instalments I forced him to give me. Strangely enough, this formerly poverty-stricken artist now developed a love of accumulation--a miserly love for the money itself, and hated to spend any of it even on himself or on the girl to whom he owed his good fortune. The coward actually ran away and hid himself in Europe, and I, having spent all the money he had given me, with the idea I had an inexhaustible fund to draw upon, was forced to turn nurse again.

"After three years I had saved enough to follow him to Europe, where I located him at a lonely villa in Italy. Its very loneliness was my undoing, for he made a husky servant lock me up in an outhouse and there I was held a prisoner until Jason had again escaped to America. He thought he could hide better in the United States and that I wouldn't have the money to follow him there, but I had fortunately saved enough for my return passage. By the time I got home, however, he had completely disappeared and all my efforts failed to locate him. So I returned to Chicago and again resumed my profession.

"You will say I might have denounced him as an impostor and made the police hunt him up, but that would have ruined my chances of ever getting another penny of the money and might have involved me personally. Jason knew that, and it made him bold to defy me. I silently bided my time, believing that fate would one day put the man in my power.

"You know how I happened to find Alora in Chicago and how I lured her to my home and kept her there a prisoner."

It was found that the dead man had made large investments in his own name, and as he had left no will Janet declared that this property now belonged to her, as his widow. Lawyer Conant, however, assured her that as the money had never been legally her husband's, but was secured by him under false pretenses, all the investments and securities purchased with it must be transferred to the real Jason Jones, to whom they now belonged. The court would attend to that matter.

"And it serves you right, madam," added Peter Conant, "for concocting the plot to swindle Alora's father out of the money his dead wife intended him to have. You are not properly punished, for you should be sent to jail, but your disappointment will prove a slight punishment, at least."

"So far as I knew," answered Janet, defending her crime, "Alora's father was either dead or hidden in some corner of the world where he could never be found. To my knowledge there was no such person existent, so the substitution of my husband for him did him no injury and merely kept the income out of the clutches of paid executors. Had the right man appeared, at any time during these four years, to claim his child and the money, he might easily have secured them by proving his identity. So the fault was his as much as mine."

Jason Jones had personally listened to the woman's confession, which filled him with wonder. While severely condemning her unscrupulous methods he refused to prosecute her, although Mr. Conant urged him to do so, and even carried his generosity to the extent of presenting her with one of her dead husband's small investments, obtaining from her in return the promise to lead an honest and respectable life.

It had been the artist's intention to return to his California bungalow, but after the probate court had acknowledged him and transferred to him the guardianship of his daughter, he decided to devote the coming years to Alora and endeavor to recompense her with fatherly devotion for the privations and unhappiness she had formerly endured.

Alora did not wish to be separated from Mary Louise, so her father purchased the handsome residence of Senator Huling, which was situated directly opposite to that of Colonel Hathaway in Dorfield, and succeeded in making it a real home for his daughter.

Josie O'Gorman went back to Washington well pleased with her success, although she said with a little grimace of feigned regret:

"I did pretty well, for an amateur, for I tackled a tough case and won out; but, after all, it was Mary Louise who solved the mystery and restored Alora to her honest-for-true father."