

CHAPTER XXII

GONE

The grim face of Madame Cerise relaxed to allow a quaint smile to flit across it. She returned Fogerty's bow with a deep curtsy.

Mershone, after one brief exclamation of dismay, wrested from him by surprise, threw himself into the chair again and stared at the fire.

For a few moments there was intense stillness in the little room.

"How easy it is," said Fogerty, in soft, musing tones, "to read one's thoughts--under certain circumstances. You are thinking, Mr. Mershone, that I'm a boy, and not very strong, while you are an athlete and can easily overpower me. I have come at a disagreeable time, and all your plans depend on your ability to get rid of me. But I've four good men within call, who are just now guarding the approaches to this house. They'd like to come in, I know, because it's very cold and disagreeable outside; but suppose we allow them to freeze for a time? Ah, I thought you'd agree with me, sir--I overheard you say you were about to visit Miss Merrick, who is confined in a room upstairs, but I'd like you to postpone that while we indulge in a little confidential chat together. You see--"

The door-bell rang violently. Fogerty glanced at Madame Cerise. "Will

you see who it is?" he asked.

She arose at once and left the room. Mershone turned quickly.

"What's your price, Fogerty?" he asked, meaningly.

"For what?"

"For getting out of here--making tracks and leaving me alone. Every man has his price, and I'm trapped--I'm willing to pay anything--I'll--"

"Cut it out, sir. You've tried this once before. I'm not to be bribed."

"Have you really a warrant for my arrest?"

"I've carried it since Friday. It's no use, Mershone, the game's up and you may as well grin and bear it."

Mershone was about to reply when the door opened and Diana Von Taer came

in with a swift, catlike tread and confronted him with flaming eyes.

"You coward! You low, miserable scoundrel! How dare you come here to annoy and browbeat that poor girl?" she cried in clear, cutting accents, without noticing the presence of Fogerty.

"Oh, shut up, Di, you're in it as deep as I am," he retorted, turning away with a flushed face.

"I'm not, sir! Never have I countenanced this wicked, criminal act," she declared. "I have come here to-day to save Louise from your wiles and carry her back to her friends. I dare you, or your confederates," with a scornful look at the detective, "to interfere with me in any way." Then she turned to Cerise and continued: "Where is Miss Merrick now?"

"In your own room, ma'm'seile."

"Come with me, then."

With a defiant glance at Mershone she turned haughtily and left the room. Cerise followed obediently, somewhat astonished at the queer turn of events.

Left alone with Mershone, Fogerty chuckled gleefully.

"Why, it seems I wasn't needed, after all," said he, "and we've both of us taken a lot of trouble for nothing, Mershone. The chances are Miss Von Taer would have turned the trick in any event, don't you think so?"

"No, you don't understand her. She wouldn't have interfered if she hadn't been scared out," growled the other. "She's sacrificed me to save herself, that's all."

"You may be right about that," admitted Fogerty; and then he got up to answer the door-bell, which once more rang violently.

An automobile stood outside, and from it an excited party trooped into the hallway, disregarding the cutting wind and blinding snowflakes that assailed them as they passed in. There was Arthur Weldon and Uncle John, Patricia and Beth; and all, as they saw the detective, cried with one voice:

"Where's Louise?"

Fogerty had just managed to close the door against the wintry blast when the answer came from the stairway just above:

"She is gone!"

The voice was shrill and despairing, and looking up they saw Diana standing dramatically posed upon the landing, her hands clasped over her heart and a look of fear upon her face. Over her shoulder the startled black eyes of old Cerise peered down upon the group below.

The newcomers were evidently bewildered by this reception. They had come to rescue Louise, whom they imagined confined in a lonely deserted villa with no companion other than the woman who guarded her. Arthur's own detective opened the door to them and Diana Von Taer, whom they certainly did not expect to meet here, confronted them with the

thrilling statement that Louise had gone.

Arthur was the first to recover his wits.

"Gone!" he repeated; "gone where?"

"She had escaped--run away!" explained Diana, in real distress.

"When?" asked Uncle John.

"Just now. Within an hour, wasn't it, Cerise?"

"At ten o'clock I left her, now she is gone," said the old woman, who appeared as greatly agitated as her mistress.

"Good gracious! you don't mean to say she's left the house in this storm?" exclaimed Patsy, aghast at the very thought.

"What shall we do? What can we do?" demanded Beth, eagerly.

Fogerty started up the stairs. Cerise turned to show him the way, and the others followed in an awed group.

The key was in the lock of the door to the missing girl's room, but the door itself now stood ajar. Fogerty entered, cast a sharp look around and walked straight to the window. As the others came in, glancing

curiously about them and noting the still smouldering fire and the evidences of recent occupation, the detective unlatched the French window and stepped out into the snow that covered the roof of the little porch below. Arthur sprang out beside him, leaving the rest to shiver in the cold blast that rushed in upon them from the open window.

Fogerty, on his knees, scanned the snow carefully, and although Weldon could discover no sign of a footprint the young detective nodded his head sagaciously and slowly made his way to the trellis at the end. Here it was plain that the accumulation of snow had recently been brushed away from the frail framework. "It was strong enough to hold her, though," declared Fogerty, looking over the edge of the roof. "I'll descend the same way, sir. Go back by the stairs and meet me below."

He grasped the lattice and began cautiously to lower himself to the ground, and Arthur turned to rejoin his friends in the room.

"That is the way she escaped, without doubt," he said to them. "Poor child, she had no idea we were about to rescue her, and her long confinement had made her desperate."

"Did she have a cloak, or any warm clothes?" asked Beth. Madame Cerise hurriedly examined the wardrobe in the closets.

"Yes, ma'm'selle; she has taken a thick coat and a knit scarf," she answered. But I am sure she had no gloves, and her shoes were very

thin."

"How long do you think she has been gone?" Patsy enquired.

"Not more than an hour. I was talking with Mr. Mershone, and--"

"Mershone! Is he here?" demanded Arthur.

"He is in my room downstairs--or was when you came," said the woman.

"That accounts for her sudden flight," declared the young man, bitterly.

"She doubtless heard his voice and in a sudden panic decided to fly. Did Mershone see her?" he asked.

"No, m'sieur," replied Cerise.

With one accord they descended to the lower hall and the caretaker led the way to her room. To their surprise they found Mershone still seated in the chair by the fire, his hands clasped behind his head, a cigarette between his lips.

"Here is another crime for you to account for!" cried Arthur, advancing upon him angrily. "You have driven Louise to her death!"

Mershone raised one hand in mild protest.

"Don't waste time cursing me," he said. "Try to find Louise before it is too late."

The reproach seemed justified. Arthur paused and turning to Mr. Merrick said:

"He is right. I'll go help Fogerty, and you must stay here and look after the girls until we return." As he went out he passed Diana without a look. She sat in a corner of the room sobbing miserably. Beth was thoughtful and quiet, Patsy nervous and indignant. Uncle John was apparently crushed by the disaster that had overtaken them. Mershone's suggestion that Louise might perish in the storm was no idle one; the girl was not only frail and delicate but worn out with her long imprisonment and its anxieties. They all realized this.

"I believe," said Mershone, rising abruptly, "I'll go and join the search. Fogerty has arrested me, but you needn't worry about my trying to escape. I don't care what becomes of me, now, and I'm going straight to join the detective."

They allowed him to go without protest, and he buttoned his coat and set out in the storm to find the others. Fogerty and Arthur were by this time in the lane back of the grounds, where the detective was advancing slowly with his eyes fixed on the ground.

"The tracks are faint, but easily followed," he was saying, "The high

heels of her shoes leave a distinct mark."

When Mershone joined them Arthur scowled at the fellow but said nothing. Fogerty merely smiled.

From the lane the tracks, already nearly obliterated by the fast falling snow, wandered along nearly a quarter of a mile to a crossroads, where they became wholly lost.

Fogerty looked up and down the roads and shook his head with a puzzled expression.

"We've surely traced her so far," said he, "but now we must guess at her further direction. You'll notice this track of a wagon. It may have passed fifteen minutes or an hour ago. The hoof tracks of the horses are covered, so I'm not positive which way they headed; I only know there are indications of hoof tracks, which proves it a farmer's wagon. The question is, whether the young lady met it, and caught a ride, or whether she proceeded along some of the other trails. I can't find any indication of those high-heeled shoes from this point, in any direction. Better get your car, Mr. Weldon, and run east a few miles, keeping sharp watch of the wagon tracks on the way. It was a heavy wagon, for the wheels cut deep. Mershone and I will go west. When you've driven far enough to satisfy yourself you're going the wrong direction, you may easily overtake us on your return. Then, if we've discovered nothing on this road, we'll try the other." Arthur ran back at once to the house

and in a few minutes had started on his quest. The motor car was powerful enough to plow through the deep snow with comparative ease.

Those left together in Madam Cerise's little room were more to be pitied than the ones engaged in active search, for there was nothing to relieve their fears and anxieties. Diana, unable to bear the accusing looks of Patsy and Beth, resolved to make a clean breast of her complicity in the affair and related to them every detail of her connection with her cousin's despicable plot. She ended by begging their forgiveness, and wept so miserably that Uncle John found himself stroking her hair while Patsy came close and pressed the penitent girl's hand as if to comfort and reassure her.

Beth said nothing. She could not find it in her heart as yet to forgive Diana's selfish conspiracy against her cousin's happiness. If Louise perished in this dreadful storm the proud Diana Von Taer could not escape the taint of murder. The end was not yet.