

CHAPTER XXIII

THE CRISIS

Mershone and Fogerty plodded through the snow together, side by side. They were facing the wind, which cut their faces cruelly, yet neither seemed to mind the bitterness of the weather. "Keep watch along the roadside," suggested Mershone; "she may have fallen anywhere, you know. She couldn't endure this thing long. Poor Louise!"

"You were fond of her, Mr. Mershone?" asked Fogerty, not unsympathetically.

"Yes. That was why I made such a struggle to get her."

"It was a mistake, sir. Provided a woman is won by force or trickery she's never worth getting. If she doesn't care for you it's better to give her up."

"I know--now."

"You're a bright fellow, Mershone, a clever fellow. It's a pity you couldn't direct your talents the right way. They'll jug you for this."

"Never mind. The game of life isn't worth playing. I've done with it,

and the sooner I go to the devil the better. If only I could be sure Louise was safe I'd toss every care--and every honest thought--to the winds, from this moment."

During the silence that followed Fogerty was thoughtful. Indeed, his mind dwelt more upon the defeated and desperate man beside him than upon the waif he was searching for.

"What's been done, Mr. Mershone," he said, after a time, "can't be helped now. The future of every man is always a bigger proposition than his past--whoever he may be. With your talents and genius you could yet make of yourself a successful and prosperous man, respected by the community--if you could get out of this miserable rut that has helped to drag you down."

"But I can't," said the other, despondently.

"You can if you try. But you'll have to strike for a place a good way from New York. Go West, forget your past, and carve out an honest future under a new name and among new associates. You're equal to it."

Mershone shook his head.

"You forget," he said. "They'll give me a jail sentence for this folly, as sure as fate, and that will be the end of me."

"Not necessarily. See here, Mershone, it won't help any of those people to prosecute you. If the girl escapes with her life no real harm has been done, although you've caused a deal of unhappiness, in one way or another. For my part, I'd like to see you escape, because I'm sure this affair will be a warning to you that will induce you to give up all trickery in the future. Money wouldn't bribe me, as you know, but sympathy and good fellowship will. If you'll promise to skip right now, and turn over a new leaf, you are free."

"Where could I go?"

"There's a town a mile ahead of us; I can see the buildings now and then. You've money, for you offered it to me. I haven't any assistants here, I'm all alone on the job. That talk about four men was only a bluff. Push me over in the snow and make tracks. I'll tell Weldon you've escaped, and advise him not to bother you. It's very easy."

Mershone stopped short, seized the detective's hand and wrung it gratefully.

"You're a good fellow, Fogerty. I--I thank you. But I can't do it. In the first place, I can't rest in peace until Louise is found, or I know her fate. Secondly, I'm game to give an account for all my deeds, now that I've played the farce out, and lost. I--I really haven't the ambition, Fogerty, to make a new start in life, and try to reform.

What's the use?"

Fogerty did not reply. Perhaps he realized the case was entirely hopeless. But he had done what he could to save the misguided fellow and give him a chance, and he was sorry he had not succeeded.

Meantime Arthur Weldon, almost dazed by the calamity that had overtaken his sweetheart, found an able assistant in his chauffeur, who, when the case was explained to him, developed an eager and intelligent interest in the chase. Fortunately they moved with the storm and the snow presently moderated in volume although the wind was still blowing a fierce gale. This gave them a better opportunity than the others to observe the road they followed.

Jones had good eyes, and although the trail of the heavy wagon was lost at times he soon picked it up again and they were enabled to make fairly good speed.

"I believe," said Arthur, presently, "that the marks are getting clearer."

"I know they are, sir," agreed Jones.

"Then we've come in the right direction, for it is proof that the wagon was headed this way."

"Quite right, sir."

This back section was thinly settled and the occasional farm-houses they passed were set well back from the road. It was evident from the closed gates and drifted snowbanks that no teams had either left these places or arrived during a recent period. Arthur was encouraged, moreover, by the wagon ruts growing still more clear as they proceeded, and his excitement was great when Jones abruptly halted and pointed to a place where the wheels had made a turn and entered a farm yard.

"Here's the place, sir," announced the chauffeur.

"Can you get in?"

"It's pretty deep, sir, but I'll try."

The snow was crisp and light, owing to the excessive cold, and the machine plowed through it bravely, drawing up at last to the door of an humble cottage.

As Arthur leaped out of the car a man appeared upon the steps, closing the door softly behind him.

"Looking for the young lady, sir?" he asked.

"Is she here?" cried Arthur.

The man placed his finger on his lips, although the wind prevented any sound of voices being heard within.

"Gently, sir, don't make a noise--but come in."

They entered what seemed to be a kitchen. The farmer, a man of advanced years, led him to a front room, and again cautioning him to be silent, motioned him to enter.

A sheet-iron stove made the place fairly comfortable. By a window sat a meek-faced woman, bent over some sewing. On a couch opposite lay Louise, covered by a heavy shawl. She was fast asleep, her hair disheveled and straying over her crimson cheeks, flushed from exposure to the weather. Her slumber seemed the result of physical exhaustion, for her lips were parted and she breathed deeply.

Arthur, after gazing at her for a moment with a beating-heart, for the mysterious actions of the old farmer had made him fear the worst, softly approached the couch and knelt beside the girl he loved, thanking God in his inmost heart for her escape. Then he leaned over and pressed a kiss upon her cheek.

Louise slowly opened her eyes, smiled divinely, and threw her arms impulsively around his neck.

"I knew you would come for me, dear," she whispered.