

### 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.