

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.