

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.