

CHAPTER VI FLITTING

Once more they moved suddenly, and the second flitting came about in this way:

Alora stood beside the easel one morning, watching her father work on his picture. Not that she was especially interested in him or the picture, but there was nothing else for her to do. She stood with her slim legs apart, her hands clasped behind her, staring rather vacantly, when he looked up and noted her presence.

"Well, what do you think of it?" he asked rather sharply.

"Of the picture?" said Lory.

"Of course."

"I don't like it," she asserted, with childish frankness.

"Eh? You don't like it? Why not, girl?"

"Well," she replied, her eyes narrowing critically, "that cow's horn isn't on straight--the red cow's left horn. And it's the same size, all the way up."

He laid down his palette and brush and gazed at his picture for a long time. The scowl came on his face again. Usually his face was stolid and expressionless, but Alora had begun to observe that whenever anything irritated or disturbed him he scowled, and the measure of the scowl indicated to what extent he was annoyed. When he scowled at his own unfinished picture Lory decided he was honest enough to agree with her criticism of it.

Finally the artist took a claspknife from his pocket, opened the blade and deliberately slashed the picture from top to bottom, this way and that, until it was a mere mass of shreds. Then he kicked the stretcher into a corner and brought out another picture, which he placed on the easel.

"Well, how about that?" he asked, looking hard at it himself.

Alora was somewhat frightened at having caused the destruction of the cow picture. So she hesitated before replying: "I--I'd rather not say."

"How funny!" he said musingly, "but until now I never realized how stiff and unreal the daub is. Shall I finish it, Alora?"

"I think so, sir," she answered.

Again the knife slashed through the canvas and the remains joined the scrap-heap in the corner.

Jason Jones was not scowling any more. Instead, there was a hint of a humorous expression on his usually dull features. Only pausing to light his pipe, he brought out one after another of his canvases and after a critical look destroyed each and every one.

Lory was perplexed at the mad act, for although her judgment told her they were not worth keeping, she realized that her father must have passed many laborious hours on them. But now that it had dawned on him how utterly inartistic his work was, in humiliation and disgust he had wiped it out of existence. With this thought in mind, the girl was honestly sorry him.

But Jason Jones did not seem sorry. When the last ruined canvas had been contemptuously flung into the corner he turned to the child and said to her in a voice so cheerful that it positively startled her:

"Get your hat and let's take a walk. An artist's studio is no place for us, Lory. Doesn't it seem deadly dull in here? And outside the sun is shining!"

The rest of the day he behaved much like a human being. He took the girl to the park to see the zoo, and bought her popcorn and peanuts--a wild extravagance, for him. Later in the day they went to a picture show and finally entered a down-town restaurant, quite different from and altogether better than the one where they had always before eaten, and enjoyed a really good dinner. When they left the restaurant he was still in the restless and reckless mood that had dominated him and said:

"Suppose we go to a theatre? Won't you like that better than you would returning to our poky rooms?"

"Yes, indeed," responded Alora.

They had seats in the gallery, but could see very well. Just before the curtain rose Alora noticed a party being seated in one of the boxes. The

lady nearest the rail, dressed in an elaborate evening gown, was Janet Orme. There was another lady with her, conspicuous for blonde hair and much jewelry, and the two gentlemen who accompanied them kept in the background, as if not too proud of their company.

Alora glanced at her father's face and saw the scowl there, for he, too, had noted the box-party. But neither of the two made any remark and soon the child was fully absorbed in the play.

As they left the theatre Janet's party was entering an automobile, laughing and chatting gaily. Both father and daughter silently watched them depart, and then they took a street car and went home.

"Get to bed, girl," said Jason Jones, when they had mounted the stairs. "I'll smoke another pipe, I guess."

When she came out of her room next morning she heard her father stirring in the studio. She went to him and was surprised to find him packing his trunk, which he had drawn into the middle of the room.

"Now that you're up," said he in quite a cheerful tone, "we'll go to breakfast, and then I'll help you pack your own duds. Only one trunk, though, girl, for the other must go into storage and you may see it again, some time, and you may not."

"Are we going away?" she inquired, hoping it might be true.

"We are. We're going a long way, my girl. Do you care?"

"Of course," said she, amazed at the question, for he had never considered her in the least. "I'm glad. I don't like your studio."

He laughed, and the laugh shocked her. She could not remember ever to have heard Jason Jones laugh before.

"I don't like the place, either, girl, and that's why I'm leaving it. For good, this time. I was a fool to return here. In trying to economise, I proved extravagant."

Alora did not reply to that. She was eager to begin packing and hurried through her breakfast. All the things she might need on a journey she put into one trunk. She was not quite sure what she ought to take, and her father was still more ignorant concerning a little girl's wardrobe, but finally both trunks were packed and locked and then Mr. Jones called a

wagon and carted away the extra trunk of Alora's and several boxes of his own to be deposited in a storage warehouse.

She sat in the bare studio and waited for his return. The monotony of the past weeks, which had grown oppressive, was about to end and for this she was very grateful. For from a life of luxury the child had been dumped into a gloomy studio in the heart of a big, bustling city that was all unknown to her and where she had not a single friend or acquaintance. Her only companion had been a strange man who happened to be her father but displayed no affection for her, no spark of interest in her happiness or even comforts. For the first time in her life she lacked a maid to dress her and keep her clothes in order; there was no one to attend to her education, no one to amuse her, no one with whom to counsel in any difficulty. She had been somewhat afraid of her peculiar father and her natural reserve, derived from her mother, had deepened in his society. Yesterday and this morning he had seemed more human, more companionable, yet Alora felt that it was due to a selfish elation and recognized a gulf between them that might never be bridged. Her father differed utterly from her mother in breeding, in intelligence, in sympathy. He was not of the same world; even the child could realize that. And yet, he was her father--all she had left to depend upon, to cling to. She wondered if he really possessed the good qualities her mother had attributed to him. If so, when she knew him better, she might learn to like him.

He was gone a long time, it seemed, but as soon as he returned the remaining baggage was loaded on the wagon and sent away and then they left the flat and boarded a street car for down town. On lower Broadway Mr. Jones entered a bank and seemed to transact considerable business. Lory saw him receive several papers and a lot of money. Then they went to a steamship office near by, where her father purchased tickets.

Afterward they had lunch, and Jason Jones was still in high spirits and seemed more eager and excited than Alora had ever before known him.

"We're going across the big water--to Europe," he told her at luncheon, "so if there is anything you positively need for the trip, tell me what it is and I'll buy it. No frivolities, though," qualifying his generosity, "but just stern necessities. And you must think quick, for our boat leaves at four o'clock and we've no time to waste."

But Alora shook her head. Once she had been taken by her mother to London, Paris and Rome, but all her wants had been attended to and it was so long ago--four or five years--that that voyage was now but a dim remembrance.

No one noticed them when they went aboard. There was no one to see them off or to wish them "bon voyage." It saddened the child to hear the fervent good-byes of others, for it emphasized her own loneliness.

Yes, quite friendless was little Alora. She was going to a foreign land with no companion but a strange and uncongenial man whom fate had imposed upon her in the guise of a parent. As they steamed out to sea and Alora sat on deck and watched the receding shores of America, she turned to her father with the first question she had ventured to ask:

"Where are we going? To London?"

"Not now," he replied. "This ship is bound for the port of Naples. I didn't pick Naples, you know, but took the first ship sailing to-day. Having made up my mind to travel, I couldn't wait," he added, with a chuckle of glee. "You're not particular as to where we go, are you?"

"No," said Alora.

"That's lucky," he rejoined, "for it wouldn't have made any difference, anyhow."