

CHAPTER VIII MARY LOUISE MEETS ALORA

The two stood motionless a moment, looking at the girl, and Mary Louise marked the graceful figure and attractive features with real delight. The Signorina Alora, as the man had called her, was nearly her own age--fifteen, Mary Louise judged her to be--and her golden hair and fair complexion proclaimed her an American. But now the girl's quick ears had detected presence, and she looked up with a startled expression, half fearful and half shy, and turned as if to fly. But in the next moment she had collected herself and advanced with hesitating steps to meet them.

"Pardon our intrusion," said Colonel Hathaway, raising his hat. "Our carriage broke down on the Amalfi road, a little while ago, and our driver has gone to Positano for a new wheel. Meantime we were exploring our surroundings and stumbled upon the path leading to this spot. Forgive the trespass, if you will, and allow me to present my granddaughter, Mary Louise Burrows. I am Colonel James Hathaway, of New York, although we usually reside at a little town called Dorfield."

The girl's bow was stiff and awkward. She blushed in an embarrassed way as she replied:

"I am Alora Jones, sir, and am living here for a time with my father, Jason Jones. We, also, are Americans; at least, we used to be."

"Then doubtless you are yet," responded the Colonel, with a smile. "May we pay our respects to your father?"

"He--he is not home yet," she answered more embarrassed than before. "He went to Sorrento for some books, this morning, and has not yet returned. But perhaps he will be back soon," she added, seeming to ponder the matter. "Will you not come in and--and have some refreshment? In my father's absence I--I am glad to--welcome you."

She glanced shyly at Mary Louise, as if to implore her to forgive any seeming lack of hospitality and accept her coldly worded invitation. No one could look at Mary Louise without gaining confidence and the friendly smile and warm handclasp made Alora feel instantly that here was a girl who would prove congenial under any circumstances. Really, it would not take them long to become friends, and poor Alora had no girl friends whatever.

She led them into a cool and comfortable living room and called to Leona to fetch tea and biscuits.

"We are entirely shut in, here," she explained. "It seems to me worse than a convent, for there I would see other girls while here I see no one but the servants--and my father," as an afterthought, "year in and year out."

"It's a pretty place," declared Mary Louise cheerfully.

"But it's an awfully dreary place, too, and sometimes I feel that I'd like to run away--if I knew where to go," said Alora frankly.

"You have lived here three years?" asked Colonel Hathaway.

"Yes. We left New York more than four years ago and traveled a year in different places, always stopping at the little towns, where there is not much to interest one. Then my father found this place and rented it, and here we've stayed--I can't say 'lived'--ever since. I get along pretty well in the daytime, with my flowers and the chickens to tend, but the evenings are horribly lonely. Sometimes I feel that I shall go mad."

Mary Louise marked her wild look and excited manner and her heart went out in sympathy to the lonely girl. Colonel Hathaway, too, intuitively recognized Alora's plaint as a human cry for help, and did not need to guess the explanation. The man in the vineyard had called her father "the Student" and said he was a reserved man and never was seen without a book in his hand. This would mean that he was not companionable and Alora's protest plainly indicated that her father devoted small time, if any, to the cultivation of his daughter's society.

"I suppose," remarked the old gentleman, "that Mr. Jones is so immersed in his studies that he forgets his daughter lacks society and amusement."

Mary Louise caught the slight, scornful smile that for a moment curled Alora's lips. But the girl replied very seriously:

"My father dislikes society. I believe he would be quite content to live in this little cooped-up place forever and see no one but the servants, to whom he seldom speaks. Also, he ignores me, and I am glad he does. But before my mother died," her voice breaking a little, "I was greatly loved and petted, and I can't get used to the change. I ought not to say this to strangers, I know, but I am very lonely and unhappy, because--because my father is so different from what my mother was."

Mary Louise was holding her trembling hand now and stroking it sympathetically.

"Tell us about your mother," she said softly. "Is it long since you lost her?"

"More than four years," returned Alora. "I was her constant companion and she taught me to love art and music and such things, for art was her hobby. I did not know my father in those days, you see, for--for-- they did not live together. But in her last illness mamma sent for him and made him my guardian. My mother said that my father would love me, but she must have misjudged him."

Colonel Hathaway had listened with interest.

"Tell me your mother's name," said he.

"She was Mrs. Antoinette Seaver Jones, and--"

"Indeed!" exclaimed the Colonel. "Why, I knew Antoinette Seaver before she married, and a more beautiful and cultured woman I never met. Her father, Captain Seaver, was my friend, and I met his daughter several times, both at his mining camp and in the city. So you see, my dear, we must be friends."

Alora's eyes fairly glistened with delight and Mary Louise was as pleased as she was surprised.

"Of course we're friends!" she cried, pressing the girl's hand, "and isn't it queer we have come together in this singular manner? In a foreign country! And just because our carriage-wheel happened to break."

"I thought your mother married an artist," said Mary Louise's grandfather, reflectively.

"She did. At least, she thought Jason Jones was an artist," answered Alora with bitter emphasis. "But he was, in fact, a mere dauber. He became discouraged in his attempts to paint and soon after he took me to New York he destroyed all his work--really, it was dreadful!--and since then he has never touched a brush."

"That is strange," mused the Colonel. "I once saw a landscape by Jason Jones that was considered a fine conception, skillfully executed. That

was the opinion of so good a judge as Captain Seaver himself. Therefore, for some reason the man's genius must have forsaken him."

"I think that is true," agreed Alora, "for my mother's estimate of art was undoubtedly correct. I have read somewhere that discouragement sometimes destroys one's talent, though in after years, with proper impulse, it may return with added strength. In my father's case," she explained, "he was not able to sell his work--and no wonder. So now he does nothing at all but read, and even that doesn't seem to amuse him much."

The Colonel had now remembered that Antoinette Seaver Jones was a woman of great wealth, and therefore her daughter must be an heiress. What a shame to keep the girl hidden in this out-of-the-way place, when she should be preparing to assume an important position in the world.

"May I ask your age, my dear?" he said.

"I am fifteen, sir," replied Alora.

"And your father is the guardian of your fortune?"

"Yes; by my mother's wish."

"I suppose you are receiving proper instruction?"

"None at all, sir. Since I have been in my father's care I have had no instruction whatever. That isn't right, is it?"

"What isn't right?" demanded a gruff voice, and all three turned to find Jason Jones standing in the doorway.