

CHAPTER X MERE SPECULATION

The driver returned with the wheel. It fitted the axle but was some two or three inches larger in diameter than the other rear wheel and, moreover, it was flat on one side, so that when they started to conclude their journey the motion of the carriage was something startling--a "rock-a-bye baby ride" Mary Louise called it.

But the wheels turned and the carriage progressed and when they were well on their way the girl said:

"What do you think of that man, Gran'pa Jim?"

"Do you mean Alora's father, Jason Jones?"

"Yes, of course."

"I am surprised at two things," said the old Colonel. "First, it is curious that Tony Seaver, a rarely cultured woman, should have married such a man, and again it is amazing that she should have confided her daughter and her fortune to his care."

"Do you know," observed Mary Louise, sliding closer to him and dropping her voice, although there was absolutely no chance of being overheard, "I scent a mystery in that family, Gran'pa Jim!"

"That seems to be one of your regular diversions--to scent mysteries," he replied. "And usually, my dear, the suspicion is unwarranted. The most commonplace people frequently impress you with the idea that they are other than what they seem, are leading double lives, or are endeavoring to conceal some irregularity of conduct. You've a faculty of reading the natures and characteristics of strangers by studying their eyes, their facial expressions and their oddities of demeanor, which is interesting psychologically but too often----"

"You are unjust, Gran'pa!" declared Mary Louise indignantly. "Didn't you yourself say there are two curious and surprising things about this man Jones?"

"Not exactly. I said it was curious and astonishing that Antoinette Seaver should have trusted so fully a man who impresses me as a churl. His

own child, little Alora, appears to dislike and even to despise him, and----
"

"There!" cried Mary Louise. "I'm vindicated. Your observations fully justify my remark that there's a mystery in that family. Did you notice the books he brought home and laid upon the table?"

"No," said Colonel Hathaway, rather bewildered.

"They were novels by Marie Correlli, H. G. Wells and O. Henry. A student? Then a student of modern novels, a man who reads and reads to keep his mind from dwelling on past history. He is a disappointed artist, to begin with."

"That is certainly odd," rejoined the old gentleman, reflectively. "The one picture I ever saw by Jason Jones was certainly good. I remember that once when I was lunching with Bob Seaver--that was Antoinette's father, you know--he told me his daughter was interested in a young artist of exceptional talent, and he took me to a gallery to show me what this man could do. I am not an art critic, as you are aware, my dear, but this landscape of Jason Jones appealed to me as delightful. Captain Bob knew art, and so did Antoinette, so it is evident that Jones could paint, but for some reason became dissatisfied with his work and abandoned it. Perhaps his ambition was too lofty for human skill to realize, yet nothing less would content him."

Mary Louise sat silent for a while. Then she asked:

"Did Jason Jones impress you as a man capable of a great ambition? Would you guess him an artist who had once accomplished admirable things?"

"Artists are always peculiar," stated her grandfather. "They must be temperamental in order to be artists, and temperaments differ widely. Had I not known something of Jason Jones' history I might have felt, on making his acquaintance to-day, that he is not an ordinary man. For, gruff and churlish though he proved, it is undeniable that he has selected a charming and retired spot in which to live----"

"Or to hide," she interrupted.

"Or that, with considerable wealth at his command, he lives simply and unostentatiously, enjoying nature's choice gifts and content with the simple life he leads, with only the society of his young daughter."

"Whom he neglects and refuses to educate properly," declared the girl. "What makes you think he is wealthy?"

"I know that Antoinette made millions, after her father died, from the mines. By current report she retired and invested her money wisely, in sound securities, which accords with her excellent business reputation. Her daughter not being of age--let me see: she must have been but eleven when her mother passed away--there would be a guardian appointed for the heiress, and Alora told us that it was her mother's wish that her father act as her guardian. So the conclusion is evident that Mr. Jones has a large income at his command."

"All the more reason he should be generous, but he isn't spending much of it," said Mary Louise.

"No; he is probably living simply in order that his daughter's fortune may increase during the years of her minority. That is a point in his favor, you must admit."

"Nevertheless," asserted the young girl, "I think there is something wrong in the Jones family. It isn't due to Alora; she's a dear little thing, wild and untamed but very lovable, I'm sure; so the fault must lie with her boorish father. Allowing that once he was a big man, something has mysteriously soured him and rendered his life hateful not only to himself but to all around him."

"Look, Mary Louise; we're getting into Sorrento," said the Colonel. "Here the road leaves the sea and crosses the plateau to the town. You'll like Sorrento, I'm sure, for it is one of the quaintest places in old Italy--and the hotel is really comfortable."

CHAPTER XI ALORA SPEAKS FRANKLY

On Saturday forenoon the Colonel engaged a carriage--a substantial one, this time--and with Mary Louise drove to Jason Jones' villa, so that Alora might return with them in time for lunch. They did not see the artist, who was somewhere about the grounds but kept out of view; but Alora was ready and waiting, her cheeks flushed and her eyes alight, and she slipped her foreign little straw satchel in the carriage and then quickly followed it, as if eager to be off.

"Father is rather disagreeable this morning," she asserted in a sharp voice, when they were on the highway to Sorrento. "He repented his decision to let me go with you and almost forbade me. But I rebelled, and----" she paused; "I have found that when I assert myself I can usually win my way, for father is a coward at heart."

It pained Mary Louise to hear so unfilial a speech from the lips of a young girl. Colonel Hathaway's face showed that he, too, considered it unmannerly to criticise a parent in the presence of strangers. But both reflected that Alora's life and environments were unenviable and that she had lacked, in these later years at least, the careful training due one in her station in society. So they deftly changed the subject and led the girl to speak of Italy and its delightful scenery and romantic history. Alora knew little of the country outside of the Sorrento peninsula, but her appreciation of nature was artistic and innately true and she talked well and interestingly of the surrounding country and the quaint and amusing customs of its inhabitants.

"How long do you expect to remain here?" asked Mary Louise.

"I've no idea," was the reply. "Father seems entirely satisfied with our quarters, for he has no ambition in life beyond eating three simple meals a day, sleeping from nine at night until nine in the morning and reading all the romances he is able to procure. He corresponds with no one save his banker in America and sees no one but the servants and me. But to me the monotony of our existence is fast becoming unbearable and I often wonder if I can stand it for three years longer--until I'm eighteen. Then I shall be my own mistress and entitled to handle my own money, and you may rest assured I shall make up for lost time."

They let that remark pass, also, but later in the afternoon, when luncheon was over and the two girls were wandering in the lovely

gardens of the Hotel Vittoria, while the Colonel indulged in an afternoon siesta, Mary Louise led Alora to speak freely of her past life.

"My grandfather says that your mother must have left you a good deal of money," she remarked.

"Yes; mamma told me it was a large fortune and that I must guard it wisely and use it generously to help others less favored," replied Alora thoughtfully.

"And she left it all in your father's keeping?"

"Not the principal. That is all invested, and thank goodness my father cannot touch it in any way. But the income is paid to him regularly, and he may do as he pleases with it. I am sure mamma expected I would have every reasonable wish gratified, and be taught every womanly accomplishment; but I'm treated as a mere dependent. I'm almost destitute of proper clothing--really, Mary Louise, this is the best dress I possess!--and I've been obliged to educate myself, making a rather poor job of it, I fear. I read the best of father's books, when he is done with them, and note carefully the manner in which the characters express themselves and how they conduct themselves in society as well as in worldly contact. I do not wish to be wholly gauche when I come into my kingdom, you see, and the books are my only salvation. I don't care much for the stories, but some of the good writers are safe guides to follow in the matter of dialogue and deportment. Fortunately, father's books are all in English. He doesn't understand much Italian, although I have learned to speak the language like a native--like our native servants, you know."

Mary Louise reflected on this confession. "I'm afraid, Alora dear, that modern novels are not prone to teach morality, or to develop a girl's finer intuitions," she said gravely. "I think you express yourself very well--better than I do, indeed--but you need association with those who can convey to you the right principles of thought and thus encourage your mental development. Culture and refinement seem to come more from association than from books, although there is an innate tendency in all well-born people to acquire them spontaneously. But there! you'll accuse me of preaching and, after all, I think you've done just splendidly under rather trying circumstances."

"You don't know how trying they are," declared Alora, with a sigh. "Father and I are wholly uncongenial and we fight on the slightest provocation. This morning our trouble was over money. I wanted a little to take with me, for my purse hasn't a lira in it; but, no! not a centesimo would he give up. He insisted that if I was to be your guest you would pay all my expenses."

"Of course," said Mary Louise. "But what does he do with all that big income? Is he saving it for you?"

"No, indeed! he's saving it for himself. Mamma told me, the last time I saw her before she died, that if father was good to me, and kind and loving, I could provide for him in some way after I came into my money. She said she would leave the manner of it to my judgment. But he isn't kind, or loving, or good, and knows very well that when I'm of age he'll never see another cent of my money. So now he'd hoarding my income for future use."

"Isn't it strange that your mother should have trusted him so fully?" asked Mary Louise.

"Yes, it does seem strange. I remember her saying that he loved luxury and all the comfort that money will buy, and so she wanted him to have this income to spend, because he was my father and because she felt she had ruined his career as an artist by surrounding him with luxuries during their early married life, and afterward had embittered him by depriving him of them. But the man doesn't know what luxury means, Mary Louise. His tastes are those of a peasant."

"Yet once your mother loved him, and believed in him."

"I--I think she believed in him; I'm quite sure she did."

"Then his nature must have changed. I can imagine, Alora, that when your mother first knew him he was hard-working and ambitious. He was talented, too, and that promised future fame. But when he married a wealthy woman he lost his ambition, success being no longer necessary. After a period of ease and comfort in the society of his lovely wife-- for Gran'pa says your mother was very lovely--he lost both the wife and the luxuries he enjoyed. A big man, Alora, would have developed a new ambition, but it seems your father was not big. His return to poverty after your mother's desertion made him bitter and reckless; perhaps it

dulled his brain, and that is why he is no longer able to do good work. He was utterly crushed, I imagine, and hadn't the stamina to recover his former poise. He must have been ten years or so in this condition, despairing and disinterested, when the wheel of fortune turned and he was again in the possession of wealth. He had now the means to live as he pleased. But those years had so changed him that he couldn't respond to the new conditions. Doubtless he was glad, in a way, but he was now content merely to exist. Doesn't that seem logical, Alora?"

Indeed, Mary Louise was delighted with her solution of the problem. It was in keeping with her talent for deducing the truth from meagre facts by logically putting them together and considering them as a whole. It was seldom she erred in these deductions. But Alora seemed unimpressed and noting her glum look Mary Louise said again: "Doesn't all this seem logical, dear?"

"No," said Alora. "Father isn't the man to be crushed by anything. He's shrewd enough, in his bourgeois way. Once, long ago--back in New York--a woman made him give her money; it was money, you know; and I have often thought he ran away from America to escape her further demands."

"Who was the woman?"

"My mother's nurse."

"Oh. Was it her wages she demanded?"

"Perhaps so. I may have misjudged father in that case. But it seemed to me--I was a mere child then--that it must have been a larger sum than wages would have amounted to. Yet, perhaps not. Anyhow, he left America right afterward, and when we had wandered a year or so in various countries we settled down here."

"Won't he have to account for all the money he has spent and given away, when you come of age?" inquired Mary Louise.

"No. Mother distinctly told me I was to ask for no accounting whatever. Her will says he is to handle the income as he sees fit, just as if it were his own, so long as he provides properly for his daughter and treats her with fatherly consideration. That's the only reason he keeps me with him, guarding my person but neglecting the other injunctions. If he set me adrift, as I'm sure he'd like to do, I could appeal to the court and his income would cease and another guardian be appointed. I believe there is

something of that sort in the will, and that is why he is so afraid of losing me. But he gives me no chance to appeal to anyone, although I sometimes think I shall run away and leave him in the lurch. If I could get to Chicago and tell Judge Bernsted, my mother's lawyer, how I am treated, I believe he could make the court set aside my father's guardianship. But I can't get ten miles away from here, for lack of money."

"How your dear mother would grieve, if she knew her plans for your happiness have failed!" exclaimed Mary Louise.

Alora frowned, and somehow that frown reminded Mary Louise of the girl's father.

"My mother ought to have known my father better," she declared sullenly. "I must not criticize her judgment, for her memory is my most precious possession and I know she loved me devotedly. But there is one thing in her history I can never understand."

"And that?" questioned Mary Louise curiously, as Alora paused.

"My mother was an educated woman, well-bred and refined."

"Yes; Gran'pa Jim told me that."

"Then how could she have married my father, who is not a gentleman and never could have impressed a lady with the notion he was one?"

Mary Louise hesitated, for to admit this would send her deductions, so carefully constructed, tumbling in ruins. But Alora ought to know the man.

"If that is true, dear," said she, "it is the strangest part of your story; and, of course, we can only guess the reason, for the only one who could have explained it properly was your mother."