

CHAPTER XI JASON JONES IS FRIGHTENED

When Alora had retired to her bedroom that night Mary Louise told to her grandfather, who was her trusted confidant, all that the unhappy girl had related.

"Of course," she added, "Alora's explanations dispel my half formed suspicion that there is some mystery about Jason Jones. I now see that you were right, Gran'pa Jim, to laugh at me when I suggested such a thing, for in truth the man is easily understood once you become acquainted with his history. However, I now dislike him more than ever."

"In justice to Jason Jones," remarked the old Colonel, "we must acquit him of being a hypocrite. He doesn't attempt to mask his nature and a stranger is bound to see him at his worst. Doubtless Antoinette Seaver understood the man better than we are able to and sixteen years ago, or so, when he had youth, talent and ambition, his disagreeable characteristics were probably not so marked. As for Alora, she is strongly prejudiced against her father and we must make due allowance for her bitterness. The feeling probably arose through her sudden transfer from the care of a generous and loving mother to that of an ungracious father--a parent she had never before known. A child of eleven is likely to form strong affections and passionate dislikes."

"Do you know," said Mary Louise, "it shocks me, this hatred of her father. It seems so unnatural. I wish we could bring them to understand one another better, Gran'pa Jim."

"That might prove a difficult task, my dear," he replied with a smile, gently stroking her hair the while, "and I do not think we are justified in undertaking it. How many times during our travels, Mary Louise, has your impulsive and tender heart urged you to assume the burdens of other people? You seem to pick up a trail of sorrow or unhappiness with the eagerness of a bloodhound and I have all I can do to call you off the scent. One small girl can't regulate the world, you know, and in this case we are likely to see very little of Alora Jones and her artist father. We will be nice to them during the few days we are here, but we must soon move on or we'll never get home for your birthday, as we have planned."

Mary Louise sighed.

"You're almost always right, Gran'pa Jim," she admitted; "but in all our European travels I've not met so interesting a person as Alora, and she's an American girl, which draws us still closer together. I'm going to make her promise that when she's of age and her own mistress she will let me know, and come to us for a visit. Wouldn't that be all right, Gran'pa?"

He assured her it would be quite proper and that he also admired Alora and was sorry for her.

On Sunday forenoon they went to the cathedral and in the afternoon took a boat to the blue grottoes. In the evening there was a concert in the hotel. All that day the two girls were arm in arm and chatting together, developing their mutual liking, while the old Colonel trudged along in their wake and was generally ignored in the conversation. On Monday they planned an excursion to Capri, "For you won't mind if we don't get you home until after dinner, will you?" asked Mary Louise.

"Not at all," said Alora. "I want to make the most of this vacation."

"Her father may mind, however," suggested the Colonel.

"I don't care whether he does or not," retorted the girl, tossing her head. "He has no consideration for me, so why should I consider him?"

"I don't like that attitude, dear," said Mary Louise frankly. "I--I don't wish to be snippy, you know, but you should not forget that he is your father."

"That," replied Alora doggedly, "is merely my misfortune, and I'm not going to allow it to ruin all my life."

On Monday morning they had scarcely finished breakfast when Jason Jones appeared at the hotel, having driven over from the villa in his little automobile--a tiny foreign contrivance that reminded one of a child's cart but could cover the ground with considerable speed. They were sitting on the big piazza when Alora's father came striding up to them with a white, fear-struck face. In his trembling hands he held the morning Naples newspaper and without a word of greeting he said abruptly:

"Have you heard the news?"

Colonel Hathaway rose and bowed.

"Good morning, Mr. Jones," said he. "I do not read the local newspapers, for my knowledge of Italian is indifferent."

"So is mine," responded the artist, "but I know enough of their lingo to make out that Italy has entered this fool war. She's going to fight the Austrians," he continued, his voice shaking nervously, "and do you know what that will mean, sir?"

"I can't imagine," replied the Colonel calmly.

"It means that presently we'll have all that horde of Germans overrunning Italy. They'll conquer this helpless land as sure as fate, and we'll all be burned out and tortured and mutilated in the fiendish German way!"

"My dear sir, you are frightened without warrant," declared Colonel Hathaway. "It will take some time to conquer Italy, and I cannot imagine the Austrians acting as you suggest."

"Back of the Austrians are the Germans, and those Prussians are worse than wild American Indians," insisted Jones. "If they got their clutches on my daughter it would be more horrible than death and I don't propose to leave her in danger a single minute. I'm going to quit this country. I've come for Alora. We must pack up and catch the first ship from Naples for America."

There was blank silence for a moment.

"I'm not afraid," said Alora, with a laugh, "but if it means our getting out of this tiresome place and sailing for home, I'm glad that Italy's gone into the war."

Colonel Hathaway was grave and thoughtful. The agitation of the artist seemed to increase with every moment.

"When does the next boat for America leave Naples?" asked Mary Louise.

"Tuesday," said Alora's father. "We've just time to pack our possessions and leave."

"Time!" cried his daughter, "why, I can pack all my possessions in an hour. Go home, sir, and fuss around as much as you like. I'll join you some time this evening."

He gave her a queer look, hesitating.

"We are surely safe enough for the present," remarked the Colonel. "The first act of war will be to send all the soldiers to the north border. The fighting will be done in the Trentino for some time to come."

"You don't know these people," said Jones, shifting uneasily from one foot to another. "They're all brigands by nature and many of them by profession. As soon as the soldiers are sent north, all law and order will cease and brigandage will be the order of the day!"

"This is absurd!" exclaimed the Colonel, testily. "You're not talking sense."

"That's a matter of opinion, sir; but I know my own business, and I'm going to get out of here."

"Wait a week longer," suggested Mary Louise. "We are to sail ourselves on the boat that leaves Naples a week from Tuesday, and it will be nice for Alora and me to travel home together."

"No; I won't wait. Get your things, Alora, and come with me at once."

"Have you made reservations on the boat?" inquired Colonel Hathaway, refusing to be annoyed by the man's brusque words and rough demeanor.

"I'll do that at once, by telephone. That's one reason I came over. I'll telephone the steamship office while the girl is getting ready."

"I will go with you," said the Colonel, as the artist turned away.

While Jones used the telephone booth of the hotel Colonel Hathaway conversed with the proprietor, and afterward with the hall porter, who was better posted and spoke better English.

"This is outrageous!" roared the artist, furiously bursting from the booth. "To-morrow's boat is abandoned! The government requires it as a transport. Why? Why? Why?" and he wrung his hands despairingly.

"I do not know, sir," returned the Colonel, smiling at his futile passion.

The smile seemed to strike Jones like a blow. He stopped abruptly and stared at the other man for a full minute--intently, suspiciously. Then he relaxed.

"You're right," said he coldly. "It's folly to quarrel with fate. I've booked for a week from Tuesday, Hathaway, and we must stick it out till then. Do you take the same boat?"

"That is my intention."

"Well, there's no objection. Now I'll go get Alora."

But Alora, hearing of the postponed sailing, positively refused to return home with him, and Mary Louise, supporting her new friend, urged her to extend her stay with her at the hotel. Strangely enough, the more he was opposed the more quiet and composed the artist became. He even ceased to tremble and an odd apathy settled over him.

"The hall porter," said the Colonel, "thinks this is the safest place in Italy. The troops have been on the border for months and their positions are strongly fortified. There is no brigandage outside of Sicily, where the Mafia is not yet wholly suppressed."

Jones grinned rather sheepishly.

"All right, take his word for it," said he. "And if you'll be responsible for the girl you may keep her till we're ready to sail. Perhaps that's the best way, after all." Then, without a word of good-bye, he entered his little motor car and started down the driveway.

"A strange man," said the Colonel, looking after him. "I wonder if it really was the war that frightened him--or something else--or if he was actually frightened at all?"

Alora laughed.

"You can't guess father, try as you may," she said. "Usually he is cold as ice, but once in awhile he gets these wild fits, which I find rather amusing. You can't understand that, of course, but if you were obliged to live under the same roof with Jason Jones you would welcome his outbursts as relief from the monotony of contemptuous silence."