

CHAPTER XV THE PUZZLE BECOMES INTRICATE

Alora formed an immediate friendship for crippled Irene Macfarlane, first based on sympathy and afterward on genuine admiration. That one condemned to pass her entire life in a wicker wheel-chair should be so bright and cheerful, with no word of protest or even a reference to her own misfortune, was deemed wonderful by Alora, and she soon found that Irene had an excuse or explanation for every seeming annoyance her friends suffered and delighted to console them. At the same time she allowed no one to console her, because she declared she needed no consolation.

Such a disposition invited confidence, and soon Irene knew more of Alora's past history, including her trials and tribulations, than even Mary Louise had yet learned, and was shocked and grieved at the girl's vengeful defiance of her father, due to his neglect and coldness as well as to his contemptible selfishness. But Irene had an excuse ready even for the artist.

"Poor Mr. Jones!" she said one day, when the three girls were together and had been discussing Alora's troubles; "think what a trial must have been to him to be saddled with the care of a child he had not seen since babyhood and had no especial interest in. As for affection between them, it could not sprout nor grow because there was no mutual understanding to germinate it. Your father's life, my dear, had been wrecked by his separation from your mother and the money meant little to him at that period of his life when you were left to his care. But did he refuse the obligation so inconsiderately thrust upon him? No. Although a man of reserved nature--almost a recluse--self absorbed and shrinking from association others, he accepted the care of an eleven year old child and, without being able to change his disposition to suit her requirements, has guarded her health and safety ever since."

"So that he can use my money," added Alora, with a shrug.

"But you admit that he doesn't squander money on himself."

"I don't know what he does with it. If he wants books, he buys them; he bought a rickety automobile in Italy and never took me to ride in it; but his extravagance seems to end there. I've read some letters that he left

around, showing that he is investing thousands in his own name-- what for, I can't guess, as he is too miserly ever to have a use for it."

"Well, he may be intending to endow some deserving charity," suggested Irene. "And, as for his not loving you, Alora, I fancy you have never tried to win your father's love."

"No one could love that man."

"You have never been able to get beneath his reserve. You came to him from a luxurious life, a petted and pampered child, and his simple tastes and unemotional nature repelled you from the first. Is it not so?"

"I'm not sure, Irene. I needed sympathy and affection. Had my father been different, had he shown love for me, or even fatherly consideration, I would have responded eagerly. But he ignored me. There has never been any companionship between us. He has guarded my personal safety because I was of financial value to him. Once, when I contracted a fever, he was really worried, and hired a skillful doctor and a trained nurse; but he never entered my sickroom. When I was well, he reproached me for costing him so much money. I told him it was my money, and he was costing me more than I could ever cost him. I reminded him he would have been a beggar, but for my income, and that shut him up at once."

"There's the whole trouble," declared Irene. "Constant friction and a lack of consideration for one another. Such remarks could not have made him more gracious toward you, Alora, and you did not appreciate his care in furnishing you with the means of recovery."

"Had I died," said the girl, "my fortune would have gone to a bunch of third-cousins whom I have never seen. That would have stopped father's right to the income, you see."

Irene sighed and Mary Louise smiled. It was almost impossible to defend Mr. Jones consistently, with Alora present to accuse him.

The artist at first took little interest in his new home. The cottage was small and not very cheerful, but it was cheap, and all that Jason Jones seemed to care for was a place to stay that was not expensive. He continued his reading and had a book in his hand from morning till night. He seldom left the cottage except for a trip to the public library or to a book-store, and never spoke to anyone unless it was necessary.

Their maid was Jane Gladys O'Donnel, stout and good-natured, an indifferent cook and rather untidy. She was twenty years old and the eldest of a large and impoverished family. Her mother was a laundress--"took in washin"--and her earnings, with the wages of Jane Gladys, must suffice to feed many hungry mouths. That was why Mrs. Conant had hired Jane Gladys. Aunt Hannah knew the girl was not very competent, but she was cheap, so Mr. Jones accepted her without protest. Alora had lived so long abroad that she did not know what a competent American housemaid is.

One forenoon--they had now been a month at Dorfield--Mr. Jones was seated on the little front porch, reading as usual, when a queer buzzing in the air overhead aroused his attention.

"What's that?" he called sharply, and Jane Gladys, who was dusting in the little room behind him, replied:

"That, sor, is only Steve Kane's flyin' machine."

"A what?"

"A flyin'-machine, sor. Kane has a facthry fer makin' the crazy things in the town yonder--over by the South Side."

"Indeed!" He got up and went into the yard to watch the far-away speck in the sky that was humming so persistently. "Why, there's another! There are two of them," he exclaimed, as if to himself.

"There might be a dozen, sor, 'cause there's a school for airy--airy-- airy-flyin' over by Kane's facthry, where they teaches the folks to fly that buy the machines."

He stood a long time, watching the sky. When the last aeroplane had disappeared he resumed his reading. But the next day he watched for the machines again, abandoning his book to follow the course of the flyers.

"Where did you say that factory is located?" he asked Jane Gladys.

"Over by the gas works, sor, be the South Side. Ye takes the Ellem street car, at the four corners. On a Sunday there be crowds a-watchin' the air-divils."

He started to read again, but gave it up and glanced nervously up and down the little porch. Jane Gladys noted this with surprise, for he was

usually quiet and unobservant, "like th' toad in th' garden, what squats under a bush all day an' fergits he's alive till a fly lights on his nose," as she expressed it to the family at home.

After lunch Mr. Jones went to town and after making inquiries took the car to the aviation works and field. He watched the construction of flying machines in the factory and saw one or two pupils take short flights in the air. And Jason Jones was so interested that he was late to dinner that evening.

Next day he was at the aviation field again, and from that time he haunted the place, silent and composed but watching every detail of manufacture and listening to the experts as they instructed the pupils. These were not many--three altogether--although Stephen Kane's aeroplane was now admitted to be one of the safest and most reliable ever invented. And one day one of the instructors, noticing the silent man who had watched so long, invited him to take a flight, thinking perhaps to frighten him; but Jason Jones promptly accepted the invitation and with perfect composure endured the strange experience and returned to ground with heightened color but no other evidence of excitement. Could Alora have seen him that day she would have acquitted him of cowardice.

But Alora knew nothing of her father's odd fancy for some time after he became interested in aeroplanes. She was not often at home during the day, frequently taking lunch with Mary Louise or Irene and passing much of her time in their company. She had no interest whatever in her father's movements and Jane Gladys didn't think to mention the matter to her, for "flyin'-machines" had ceased to be a novelty in Dorfield and the sound of their buzzing through the air was heard many times a day. But in turning over a pile of her father's books one day in his absence, Alora found several treatises on aviation and was almost startled to find that Jason Jones cared for any reading aside from light novels.

She had been hunting, at the time, for a novel to read herself, so turning from the aviation literature to a shelf of fiction she began searching for an interesting title. Presently, as she drew out one of her father's books, it opened by accident at a place where a letter had been tucked in--a letter written on soiled and coarse paper of a foreign make. It was addressed: "Sig. Jaysn Jones, at the Steamer Hercules to sail for New York, U.S.A." Opening it, she found it signed: "Silvio Alleghero."

That was their man-servant in Italy, so with a smile of anticipated amusement she read the letter. It was brief, indeed, but the girl's expression soon changed to a puzzled look, for the scrawl said:

"Honored Signore: At your command I have this morning, three hours after your departure for Naples, allowed the prisoner to escape."

"How funny!" she exclaimed, knitting her brows. "I can't remember any prisoner at the villa. Perhaps it was the cat. It would be just like Silvio to consider the release of a cat a important event."

She replaced the letter in the book and after selecting another novel forgot Silvio's epistle entirely.

Another time, when Alora happened to be at home for their noon-day luncheon and her father did not appear, Jane Gladys quietly remarked in answer to her query that "th' ol' man was prob'ly over to the flyin'-machine works."

"Does he go there often?" she asked in surprise.

"Why, he mostly lives there," asserted the maid.

Alora laughed, and afterward told Mary Louise, as a bit of humorous gossip, that the man who had heretofore failed to find any interest in life had at last succumbed to the fascination of the aeroplane.

"Well, I'm glad of it," said Mary Louise. "I've often wondered, Lory, how your father could be so infatuated with novel-reading, absorbing stories of human interest, if they have any interest at all, with such avidity, while the real people all around him failed to interest him at all. I have thought perhaps he read to keep his mind from--from other things that it would make him unhappy to dwell upon."

"I have thought so, too," replied Alora, musingly. "And this queer fancy of his for a new and unusual invention may serve the same purpose. But I, too, am glad he has found a diversion that will keep him away from home. That barn of a cottage will become more homelike without his eternal presence."

Peter Conant, the lawyer, had paid little heed to Jason Jones since the latter's arrival in Dorfield. He had heard his wife and Irene gossip about the girl and her father and state that Alora was an heiress and Mr. Jones

merely the guardian of her fortune until she came of age, but his legal mind decided that the girl's "fortune" must be a modest one, since they lived so economically and dressed so plainly. Colonel Hathaway, who might have undeceived him in this regard, seldom spoke to the lawyer of anything but his own affairs and had forbore to mention Mr. Jones and his personal affairs in any way.

Therefore Mr. Conant was somewhat surprised when one morning Jason Jones called at his office and asked for an interview. The lawyer was busy that day, and attaching little importance to his caller he demanded brusquely:

"Well, sir, what can I do for you?"

The man seated himself and glanced around the room before replying. The big desk, littered with papers, the cabinet files and stiff chairs seemed to meet his approval. In the outer office a girl was busily clicking a typewriter.

"You are Colonel Hathaway's lawyer, I believe?" said Jones.

"I have that honor, sir."

"That's why I came to you. The Colonel is a prosperous man and has judgment. I want your advice about investing some money."

Peter Conant regarded him with a speculative gaze. The thought flashed through his mind that if Jones had any money to invest he might better buy himself a new necktie and have his shoes repaired, or even invest in a new dress for his daughter, who needed it. But he merely said in his peculiar way of chopping each word off short as he uttered it:

"How much have you to invest?"

"Not a great deal at this moment, but I am constantly receiving dividends and interest on my daughter's securities and so, if I am going to live in Dorfield, I shall need a lawyer to advise me how to reinvest the money, as well as how to make out the papers properly. I don't want to make any mistakes and get robbed--even by my lawyer. But I'll pay you a fair price. Perhaps I should explain that while the income is derived from my daughter's property the investments are to be made in my name."

"Why so?"

"The income belongs to me, by my dead wife's will, as long as Alora is alive and in my keeping. When the girl is eighteen she will manage her own affairs, and I'll be quit of her--and out of any further income, as well. So I'm investing now to secure my future."

"I see. How old is your daughter at this time?"

"Fifteen."

"So you've three years more to grab the income."

"Exactly."

"How much money do you wish to invest to-day?"

"Twelve thousand dollars."

Peter Conant sat up straight in his chair.

"And you say this is but part of the income?"

"The estate is valued at nearly two million dollars."

The lawyer gave a low whistle of amazement. Beside this enormous sum, even Colonel Hathaway's holdings shrank into insignificance.

"You surprise me," he said. "I imagine, then, that you can afford to live somewhat better than you do."

"That is none of your business."

"True. Good day, Mr. Jones."

"Eh?"

"I won't accept you as a client."

"Why not, sir?"

"Thank you for asking. In the first place, I don't like you," said Peter Conant. "Nor do I approve of your treating your daughter--a great heiress--as you do, and hoarding all her enormous income for your personal use. You're not toting fair. It is an unjust arrangement and I'll have nothing to do with it."

Jason Jones sat still and stared at him.

"Good day, sir!" repeated the lawyer, curtly.

The man did not move. Peter turned to his papers.

"See here," the artist presently remarked; "let's come to an understanding. I don't like you, either. You're insulting. But you're honest, and I think I could trust you."

"I'm not especially honest," retorted the lawyer, "but I'm particular. I don't need clients, and I don't want a client I'm ashamed of."

Still the man did not offer to go. Instead, he reflected for awhile in his stolid, unemotional way, while Peter Conant frowned and examined the papers on his desk.

"I believe you'll see the thing in a different light if you read my wife's will," said Jones. "I've brought a copy of it with me, thinking it might help you to understand my affairs."

"Is it an attested copy?" asked the lawyer, turning around again.

"Yes."

"Let me see it."

Mr. Conant decided to read the will, with the idea that he might find in it some way to assist Alora. When he had finished the document he was disappointed. Mrs. Antoinette Seaver Jones, a woman clever enough to make a fortune, had been foolish enough to give her former husband autocratic power over her money during her daughter's minority. Had the man been a gentleman, the folly would have been mitigated, but Jason Jones, in Mr. Conant's opinion, was a selfish, miserly, conscienceless rascal. Enjoying a yearly income that was a small fortune in itself, he had neglected to educate his daughter properly, to clothe her as befitted her station in life or to show her ordinary fatherly consideration. Affection and kindness seemed foreign to the man's nature. He handed the will back and said:

"You have taken an unfair advantage of the confidence reposed in you by your dead wife, who doubtless loved her child. Legally your actions cannot be assailed, but morally they should ostracize you from decent society. As I said before, I do not want your business. I'll have nothing to do with you."

Jones remained unruffled.

"I'm a stranger in the city," he remarked. "Perhaps you will recommend me to some good lawyer."

"No. There are a score of lawyers in town. Make your own choice."

The man rose and put on his hat.

"I said you were honest, and I was right," he calmly remarked. "I'll say now that you are a fool, and I'm right in that, also," and with these words he walked away.

That was his only protest to the humiliating rebuff. He showed no anger. He did not seem annoyed. He simply rode down in the elevator, examined the directory, and selected another lawyer in the same building.