

CHAPTER XVII THE DISAPPEARANCE

The train was late getting into Chicago that Monday night. Colonel Hathaway took Mary Louise and Alora to the Blackington, but the hotel was so crowded that the girls could not get adjoining rooms. However, they secured rooms just across the hall from one another and the Colonel's room was but two doors removed from that of his granddaughter, so the three were not greatly separated.

"Never mind, dear," said Mary Louise, as she kissed her friend good night; "to-morrow we go aboard the yacht, and that will be our home for a long time."

"What time will you breakfast?" asked Alora.

"Well, we're up late, and Gran'pa Jim likes to sleep mornings. Can you fast until half-past eight, Alora?"

"Yes, indeed," with a laugh. "I'm used to somewhat early hours, so I shall probably be dressed by seven. But I'll find plenty to amuse me until you are up, and I'll knock on your door at eight-thirty."

But in the morning Alora failed to knock on Mary Louise's door, as she had promised. The Colonel was ready for breakfast, having enjoyed a good night's rest, and Mary Louise said to him:

"Alora probably slept later than she expected to. Shall I risk wakening her, Gran'pa Jim?"

"I think so," he replied. "She has slept long enough, for a young girl."

Mary Louise ran across the hall and knocked at the door of 216. She knocked again, for there was no answer. She did not dare call out, for fear of disturbing other guests of the hotel. The Colonel now came and rapped upon the panels, but without any better result.

"I think she must have left her room and is perhaps in the parlor, or in the hotel lobby," he said.

A chambermaid was passing through the hall and overheard the remark.

"The party in 216 has been up a long time, sir," she asserted. "I found the door ajar at six o'clock, and so I went in and made up the room."

"Poor Alora!" exclaimed Mary Louise laughingly; "she was too excited to sleep, and, as you say, we shall probably find her somewhere about the hotel, enjoying the sights."

But they could not find the girl anywhere in the hotel. After a long and careful search for her, Colonel Hathaway left word at the desk that if his room or Mary Louise's room was called, to report that they would be found in the breakfast room.

The old gentleman was distinctly annoyed as they sat down to breakfast.

"The foolish girl is wandering about the streets, somewhere," he complained, "and it was unmannerly to leave the hotel without consulting me, since she is our guest and in my care."

Mary Louise's sweet face wore a troubled expression.

"It is not like Alora, Gran'pa Jim," she asserted in defense of her friend. "Usually I have found her quite considerate." Then, after a pause: "I--I hope nothing has happened to her."

"Don't worry," he replied. "She's a wide-awake girl and has a tongue in her head, so she can't get lost. Why, Mary Louise, Alora knows the city well, for she used to live in Chicago with her mother."

"Until she was eleven. That was four years ago. But I did not think of her getting lost. The automobiles, you know, are so thick----"

"Yes, dear; and there's the lake, and the railroad crossings, and the street cars; but the chances are against our little friend's being drowned or run over, especially so early in the day, when there isn't much traffic. Again I ask you not to worry."

But Mary Louise couldn't help worrying. They lingered over the breakfast, but Alora did not join them. Then they waited around the hotel until nearly noon, without receiving a word from her. Finally Colonel Hathaway, too, became nervous. He telephoned the central police station to inquire if a young girl of Alora's description had met with an accident. There was no record of such an accident, but in half an hour a detective came to the hotel and asked for the Colonel.

"Tell me all the particulars of the young lady's disappearance, please," he requested.

When he had received this information he said:

"Let us go to her room."

The key to No. 216 had not been turned in at the office, but was missing. With a pass-key they unlocked the door of Alora's room and found her suit case open, her toilet articles lying upon the dresser and her nightrobe neatly folded ready for packing. Her hat was missing, however, and the little jacket she wore with her tailored suit.

The detective touched nothing but examined the room and its contents with professional care.

"Let us call the chambermaid who made up the room," he suggested.

The woman was easily found and when she appeared the detective asked:

"Did you fold this nightrobe, or did you find it already folded?"

"Why, it was lyin' careless-like over the foot of the bed," said she, "so I folded it up."

"Why didn't you hang it in the closet?"

"The clerk had notified me the room would be vacated to-day. So I knew that when the young lady came back she'd want to pack it in her grip."

"And at what time did you find the door ajar?"

"At six-ten, sir. I come on duty at six."

"You did not see Miss Jones?"

"No, sir--if that were the lady's name."

"You found no one prowling about the halls?"

"Didn't see a soul, sir."

"Thank you; that's all."

When she had gone the detective said to the Colonel in a reassuring tone:

"I wouldn't worry, sir, although I'll admit this prolonged absence of Miss Jones is puzzling. But perhaps she has gone to call on an old friend and will presently return and apologize. I remember her mother-- a

remarkable woman, sir--who used to live at the Voltaire. She had a lot of friends in Chicago, did Mrs. Antoinette Seaver Jones, so it's likely her daughter is looking some of them up."

"I wish you would do all you can to locate her," pleaded Colonel Hathaway. "The young girl was placed in my care by her father and I feel personally responsible for her safety."

"She's safe enough, sir. No sign of a struggle in her room; no report of an accident in the city. Went out of her own volition and will probably come back the same way, when she's ready. I'm going back to the office now, but I'll instruct our men to keep a good lookout for Miss Jones. If we hear anything, I'll let you know at once. In the meantime, if the girl happens to turn up, you must telephone me of the fact."

He handed the Colonel his card and went away.

"This is dreadful, Gran'pa Jim!" exclaim Mary Louise. "That man can't help us a bit. What do you think we ought to do?"

"Why, we've done all in our power, already, it seems to me," he answered. "The police will keep a good lookout for Alora."

"I've no confidence in that detective."

"Why not, my dear? He seemed quite courteous and gentlemanly."

"But he isn't especially interested. He didn't probe far enough into the case. He never asked why the key to Alora's door was missing, yet the maid found the door ajar--half open," said Mary Louise. "Would she take the key and leave the door open?"

"Why--no; that is strange, Mary Louise."

"The detective didn't inquire at the office whether the night clerk had seen Alora pass through and go out. But I inquired, Gran'pa, and the night clerk goes off duty at six o'clock, when the relief clerk comes on, but neither saw any girl at all leave the office. No one was in the hotel lobby, at that hour."

"That is strange, too! How could Alora get out, otherwise?"

"I can't guess. Gran'pa, I'm going to telegraph Josie O'Gorman, and ask her advice," said Mary Louise.

"Do. It's a good idea, Josie might put us on the right track," approved the Colonel.

So Mary Louise went to the telegraph office in the hotel lobby and sent the following message:

"Josie O'Gorman, 1225 F Street, Washington, D. C.

"A girl friend has mysteriously disappeared from the Blackington, where we are stopping. What shall I do? Mary Louise Burrows."

Two hours later she received this answer:

"Miss Mary Louise Burrows, Hotel Blackington, Chicago.

"Notify police at once. Keep cool. I'm coming. Josie O'Gorman."

Mary Louise felt tremendously relieved when she read this. Josie was a girl of her own age, but she was the daughter of one of the most celebrated secret service men in the employ of the United States government, and John O'Gorman had trained Josie from babyhood in all the occult details of his artful profession. It was his ambition that some day this daughter would become a famous female detective, but he refused to allow her to assume professional duties until she had become thoroughly qualified to excel. He did not wish her to be ordinary, but extraordinary, and Josie's talents, so far, had seemed to justify his expectations. Mary Louise knew Josie very well and admired and loved her, for in her amateur way Josie had once helped to solve a stubborn mystery that threatened the happiness of both the old Colonel and his granddaughter, and through this experience the two girls had become friends. Josie O'Gorman was devoted to Mary Louise, who knew she could rely on Josie's judgment in this emergency but had scarcely expected her to come all the way from Washington to Chicago to render her personal assistance.

In appearance the young girl--who was destined some day to become a great detective--was not especially prepossessing. She was short of form and inclined to be stout--"chubby," she called herself. She had red hair, a freckled face and a turned-up nose. But her eyes, round and blue and innocent in expression as those of a baby, dominated her features and to an extent redeemed their plainness.

Mary Louise hurried to the Colonel.

"Gran'pa Jim," she cried excitedly, "Josie is coming!"

"That is very good of her," replied the Colonel, highly pleased. "Josie is very resourceful and while she may not be able to trace Alora she will at least do all in her power, and perhaps her clever little brain will be able to fathom the mystery of the girl's disappearance."

"She tells us to notify the police, but we did that at once. I don't know of anything else we can do, Gran'pa, until Josie comes."

Colonel Hathaway communicated with the police office several times that day and found the officials courteous but calm--prolific of assurances, but not especially concerned. This was but one of a number of peculiar cases that daily claimed their attention.

"I should hire a private detective, were not Josie coming," he told Mary Louise; "but of course it is possible we shall hear of Alora, directly or indirectly, before morning."

But they did not hear, and both passed a miserable, wakeful, anxious night.

"There is no use in our consulting Alora's father, for the present," remarked the old gentleman, next morning. "The news would only worry him. You remember how very particular he was in charging me to guard his daughter's safety."

"Yes, and I know why," replied Mary Louise. "Alora has told me that if she is lost, strayed or stolen for sixty days, her father might be relieved of his guardianship and lose the income he enjoys. Now, I wonder, Gran'pa Jim, if Alora has purposely lost herself, with mischievous intent, so as to get rid of her father, whom she abhors?"

The Colonel considered this thoughtfully.

"I think not," he decided. "The girl is impulsive and at times reckless, and doubtless she would like to be free from her father's guardianship; but I am sure she is too fond of you, and has too much respect for me, to run away from us without a word. Besides, she has no money."

"Really," said Mary Louise despondently, "it is the strangest thing I ever knew."

Josie O'Gorman arrived at the hotel at six o'clock in the afternoon, having caught the fast train from Washington the evening before. She came in as unconcernedly as if she had lived at the hotel and merely been out to attend a matinee and greeted the Colonel with a bright smile and Mary Louise with a kiss.

"My, but I'm hungry!" were her first words. "I hope you haven't dined yet?"

"Oh, Josie," began Mary Louise, on the verge of tears, "this dreadful----"

"I know, dear; but we must eat. And let's not talk or think of the trouble till our stomachs are in a comfortable condition. Which way is the dining room?"

Neither the Colonel nor Mary had eaten much since Alora's disappearance, but they took Josie in to dinner, realizing it would be impossible to get her to talk seriously or to listen to them until she was quite ready to do so. And during the meal Josie chattered away like a magpie on all sorts of subjects except that which weighed most heavily on their minds, and the little thing was so bright and entertaining that they were encouraged to dine more heartily than they otherwise would have done.

But afterward, when they had adjourned to a suite that had now been given them, and which included a cosy little sitting room, and after the Colonel had been ordered to light his cigar, which always composed his nerves, the O'Gorman girl suddenly turned serious and from the depths of an easy chair, with her hands clasped behind her red head, she said:

"Now to business. Begin at the beginning and tell me all there is to tell."

"Haven't I written you something about Alora, Josie?" asked Mary Louise.

"Never mind whether you have or haven't. Imagine I've forgotten it. I want every detail of the girl's history."

So Mary Louise told it, with a few comments from her grandfather. She began with their first meeting with Alora and her eccentric father in Italy, and related not only all the details of their acquaintance but such facts as Alora had confided to her of her mother's death and her subsequent unhappy relations with her father and guardian. Alora had often talked freely to Mary Louise, venting in her presence much bitterness and

resentment over her cruel fate--as she deemed it. So, knowing Josie's desire to obtain the most seemingly trifling detail of a case, Mary Louise told the story as connectedly and comprehensively as possible, avoiding all personal comment so as to leave Josie's mind free from prejudice.

During the recital Josie sat very still, with closed eyes, reclining lazily in her chair and refraining from any interruption.

"Now, Colonel," she said, "tell me all that Mary Louise has forgotten to mention."

"She has told you more than I knew myself," he declared. "Of course we informed the police of our friend's disappearance and they sent a detective here who went into the affair very carefully. Yet, so far----"

"I know," said Josie, nodding. "I called at the police station before I came here, on leaving the train. The detective is Al Howard, and he's a nice fellow but rather stupid. You mustn't expect any results from that source. To be sure, the department might stumble on a clew, but the chances are they wouldn't recognize it, even then."

"I'm certainly surprised to hear that!" said the Colonel.

"Because you are ignorant of police methods. They mean well, but have so much to handle, in a big city like this, that they exist in a state of perpetual bewilderment."

"But what are we to do?" pleaded Mary Louise. "Tell us, Josie!"

"How do I know?" asked the girl, with a smile. "I'm just Josie O'Gorman, a student detective, who makes as many blunders--alas!--as a full-fledged 'tec.' But I thought I'd be able to help, or I wouldn't have come. I've a personal interest in this case, Mary Louise, because it's your case and I love you. So let's get to work. Have you a photograph of Alora Jones?"

"No," was the reply.

"Then give me a word picture of her."

Both Mary Louise and the Colonel tried to do, this, and Josie seemed satisfied.

"Now, then," she said, rising, "let's go to her room. I hope it hasn't been disturbed since she left it."

"The police have taken the key and forbidden anyone to enter the room."

"Quite proper. But we'll go there, just the same."

The room was but a few steps away, in the same corridor, and when they arrived there Josie drew a bunch of slender keys from her purse and unlocked the door with no difficulty. Having entered, she turned on the electric lights and cast a curious glance around.

"Let's read Alora's room," said she, while her companions stood listening. "To begin with, we see her night-dress nicely folded and her toilet articles arranged in neat order on the dresser. Chambermaid did that, for Alora is not neat. Proving that her stuff was just strewn around and the orderly maid put things straight. Which leads to the supposition that Alora was led away rather suddenly."

"Oh, do you think so?"

"She left the door ajar, but took the key. Intended, of course, to lock her room, but was so agitated by what she saw or heard that she forgot and just walked away."

"But no one saw her leave the hotel," observed Mary Louise.

"Then she didn't pass through the office, but through the less used Ladies' Entrance at the side."

"That was not unlocked, they told me, until after seven o'clock."

"Then she left by the servants' entrance."

"The servants'!"

"Quite likely. You'll say she didn't know anything about it, or where it was; but the fact remains that Alora left the hotel. I'd like to see that chambermaid. I believe you told me she comes on duty at six o'clock in the morning. All right. I'll catch her at six a. m. to-morrow."

"The detective interviewed her," stated Colonel.

"I know, and she answered all his questions. My questions will be different. If Alora used the servants' entrance, she went out with a servant or with someone who knew the ways of the hotel intimately."

"I don't see that," objected Mary Louise.

"Nor do I, but there lies our trail. Alora didn't pass out through the office, nor did she make her exit through the less public Ladies' Entrance. There are only two other ways to get out of here: through the baggage door and by the servants' entrance at the rear, which lets into an alley. The head porter will know whether Alora went out the baggage door, but as it's usually very high--on a level with the platform of a baggage-wagon--I don't believe she jumped it. That leaves the servants' entrance as the probable exit for our missing one, and as she was a perfect stranger to the arrangements of this hotel, she couldn't have gone that way unless someone guided her. So our course is clear, Mary Louise. Find out who enticed Alora from the hotel and it won't be difficult to trace her and discover what has become of her."

"Enticed, Josie?"

"Had force been used, she would have screamed and attracted attention. Let us say she was decoyed."

"You think, then, that Alora was kidnapped?"

"Let us reason. The girl couldn't have had an enemy in Chicago, according to her history, for she was only eleven when she left here and no one hates an eleven year old child. Having no enemy, she has doubtless escaped personal harm. But Alora is an heiress, and a lot of people in Chicago know that. You suggest kidnapping. Well, perhaps that's the solution: held for ransom."

"That would be the first idea of Jason Jones!" exclaimed Mary Louise. "He has always seemed afraid of such a thing."

"In that case, however, I do not believe her father would pay a ransom," declared Colonel Hathaway.

"Oh, indeed he would!" asserted Mary Louise, emphatically; "we mustn't forget that if Alora isn't found and restored to him within a given time he will lose all her income for the next three years."

Josie looked at her friend admiringly. Then she laughed.

"You're a better detective than any of us," she remarked. "What I've been groping for is the object of the abduction, and you've hit the nail squarely on the head. Now we're getting down to brass tacks, so to speak. The whole thing is explained by the one word--'blackmail.' Girl disappears; papa is threatened with the lose of thousands. Very well, Papa! pay up. Relinquish a part of the income and you may keep the rest. Refuse, and you lose it all. Ergo, papa pays."

"That certainly seems a logical conclusion," admitted the Colonel.

"Then," said Josie, thoughtfully, "we must decide whether to put it up to Mr. Jones, and let him pay, or to go on with the search."

"We'll go on!" exclaimed Mary Louise. "We may be wrong, and poor Alora may be in danger, or suffering. We must rescue her as soon as possible."

"The girl was in my care," said the Colonel, "and I feel responsible for her safety. Moreover blackmail is a crime against society, and the plot should be foiled even were we not interested in the victim of it. I am anxious to find Alora before her father is approached."

"Then," Josie decided, "we will leave no stone unturned in our efforts to locate and recover her. If we have diagnosed the case correctly, we have to deal with a shrewd and unprincipled, if not clever person. Cleverness, too, we may encounter, and then our task will be doubly hard."

"Poor, dear Alora!" sighed Mary Louise. "It's a shame she should suffer because some cruel person wants her father's money. The fortune her mother left her has been a misfortune to her daughter, instead of a blessing."

"Money," said Josie sententiously, "is a dangerous thing. Its possession, or the lack of it, leads to four-fifths of the world's crimes. The other one-fifth is charged to hatred and jealousy. But-- dear me!--here I am philosophizing, when I ought to be thinking."

"Then think, Josie, and think to some purpose," pleaded Mary Louise.

"If our hastily constructed theory is correct," remarked John O'Gorman's daughter, "Papa Jones will soon hear from Alora's abductor, with a financial proposition."

"I hope we shall find her before then," returned the Colonel earnestly. "We ought not to delay an instant, with that idea in view. Indeed, our theory may be quite wrong and Alora be in desperate need of immediate assistance."

"Correct, sir," agreed Josie. "But we won't abandon our theory until we evolve a better one and in following this lead we must first discover who in Chicago is aware of the terms of the will of Antoinette Seaver Jones. Also who is familiar enough with Papa Jones' love of money to believe he can be successfully blackmailed. What information can either of you give me along those lines?"

"Alora has talked to Irene a good deal about that dreadful will," replied Mary Louise, "Irene has repeated many of her statements to me. Also Alora has frankly spoken to me, at times, and her queer history has interested us all. But I cannot remember that any such person as you describe is in any way mixed up with the story. Judge Bernsted drew up the will for Alora's mother. He was her lawyer, and she trusted him fully."

"She was justified," declared Josie. "I know of Judge Bernsted, by reputation. He died a year ago."

"Then," continued Mary Louise, reflectively, "there was Mrs. Jones' doctor, who was very kind to Alora and who also enjoyed her mother's confidence. His name was Anstruther--Dr. Anstruther."

"He is a prominent physician in Chicago," declared Josie, who seemed to know every important person of every locality, for this had been part of her education. "It is impossible that Dr. Anstruther could have any knowledge of this plot. Moreover, it doesn't seem to me like a man's plot. I don't believe Alora would have accompanied a strange man, under any circumstances, for she's knocked around the world enough to have learned prudence. The crime is feminine. What woman knew of this will, and was an intimate friend of Mrs. Jones, or of Mr. Jones?"

"Really," said Mary Louise, "I don't know."

"Nor you, Colonel?"

"I do not recollect hearing of any woman connected with the Jones history--except Alora's former governess, a Miss Gorham, who was discharged by Mr. Jones at the time he took his daughter from Chicago to New York."

"That isn't such a bad clew!" Josie quickly returned, sitting up straight and staring reflectively at the old gentleman. "Miss Gorham, eh? Now, how long had she been Alora's governess?"

"For some years, I believe." It was Mary Louise who answered this question.

"Then she doubtless knew the family secrets. Was Alora fond of her?"

"I think not. She has told me that at the time they separated she was glad to be rid of the woman."

"Then the woman may be the kind that would resort to blackmail. Discharged from a good place, where she had drawn pay for years, she would be angry. Brooded during the last four years on her imagined wrongs and figured out a neat revenge. Had sized up Papa Jones and knew he clung to money with a desperate grip and would pay some rather than lose all. Couldn't get another job; was poor; had no money to chase up Jones, but figured he would some time return to Chicago and give her an opportunity play her game. Discovered that Alora had arrived at this hotel, and---See here! What would prevent the former governess, now in reduced circumstances, from being employed as a servant in this very hotel? Perhaps as a night chambermaid. May have seen Alora enter her room and recognized her former pupil. During the long night she figured and planned how to take advantage of the fortunate circumstances. Early in the morning, before she left here, went to Alora and in some way induced the girl to go out with her. Alora would accompany her old governess without suspicion. So--there's the whole story, in a nutshell, rather cleverly figured out."

"Oh, Josie, it must be true!" cried Mary Louise, who had eagerly followed this plausible reasoning.

"And it may not," laughed Josie. "It's just a theory, and good detectives distrust theories, which often befog clever brains. Still, the deduction sounds mighty logical. I'm going to my room, now, to give the suggestion some serious thought. I'll try to tear it to pieces, or at least to pick holes in it. When I came away Daddy said to me: 'Josie, beware that imagination of yours. If it asserts itself, sit on it.' Daddy was glad to have me tackle the case, and try to help you, for these little affairs give me practice; but he hates to have me make a flat failure. So, for dear old Daddy's sake, I'm not going to let any good-looking theory lead me

astray. Good night. You'd both better go to bed, for I can see you had little sleep last night. But your strain must now relax, for you've pushed the responsibility onto my poor little shoulders and now it's up to me to worry."