

CHAPTER XIX DECOYED

The excitement of being once more in a big city rendered Alora Jones wakeful on that eventful Tuesday morning following her arrival in Chicago. At daybreak she rose and peered through the window into a gray and unimpressive side street; then, disinclined to return to bed, she slowly began dressing.

Presently a sharp knock sounded upon her door. Somewhat surprised, she opened it far enough to see a middle-aged woman attired in nurse's uniform standing in the dim hallway.

"Miss Jones? Miss Alora Jones?" questioned the woman in a soft voice.

"Yes; what is it?"

"I've a message for you. May I come in?"

Alora, fearful that Mary Louise or the Colonel might have been taken suddenly ill, threw wide the door and allowed the woman to enter. As the nurse closed the door behind her Alora switched on the electric light and then, facing her visitor, for the first time recognized her and gave a little cry of surprise.

"Janet!"

"Yes; I am Janet Orme, your mother's nurse."

"But I thought you abandoned nursing after you made my father give you all that money," an accent of scorn in her tone.

"I did, for a time," was the quiet answer. "'All that money' was not a great sum; it was not as much as your father owed me, so I soon took up my old profession again."

The woman's voice and attitude were meek and deprecating, yet Alora's face expressed distrust. She remembered Janet's jaunty insolence at her father's studio and how she had dressed, extravagantly and attended theatre parties and fashionable restaurants, scattering recklessly the money she had exacted from Jason Jones. Janet, with an upward sweep of her half veiled eyes, read the girl's face clearly, but she continued in the same subdued tones:

"However, it is not of myself I came here to speak, but on behalf of your mother's old friend, Doctor Anstruther."

"Oh; did he send you here?"

"Yes. I am his nurse, just now. He has always used me on his important cases, and now I am attending the most important case of all--his own."

"Is Dr. Anstruther ill, then?" asked Alora.

"He is dying. His health broke weeks ago, as you may have heard, and gradually he has grown worse. This morning he is sinking rapidly; we have no hope that he will last through the day."

"Oh, I'm sorry for that!" exclaimed Alora, who remembered the kindly old doctor with real affection. He had been not only her mother's physician but her valued friend.

"He learned, quite by accident, of your arrival here last evening," Janet went on, "and so he begged me to see you and implore you to come to his bedside. I advised him not to disturb you until morning, but the poor man is very restless and so I came here at this unusual hour. It seems he is anxious to tell you some secret which your dead mother confided to his keeping and, realizing his hours are numbered, he urges you to lose no time in going to him. That is the message entrusted to me."

There was no emotion in her utterance; the story was told calmly, as by one fulfilling a mission but indifferent as to its success. Alora did not hesitate.

"How far is it?" she quickly asked.

"A fifteen minute ride."

The girl glanced at her watch. It was not quite six o'clock. Mary Louise and the Colonel would not appear for breakfast for a good two hours yet and after breakfast they were all to go to the yacht. The hour was opportune, affording her time to visit poor Doctor Anstruther and return before her friends were up. Had Alora paused to give Janet's story more consideration she might have seen the inconsistencies in the nurse's statements, but her only thoughts were to learn her mother's secret and to show her sincere consideration for her kindly old friend.

Hastily completing her attire she added her hat and jacket and then said:

"I am ready, Janet."

"I hope we shall find him still alive," remarked the nurse, a cleverly assumed anxiety in her tone, as she took the key from inside the door and fitted it to the outer side of the lock.

Alora passed out, scarcely aware that Janet had pretended to lock the door. Halfway down the hall the woman handed her the key.

"Come this way, please," she said; "it is nearer to the carriage which is waiting for us."

At the rear of the building they descended the stairs and passed through an anteroom fitted with lockers for the use of the employees of the hotel. No one happened to be in the anteroom at that moment and they gained the alley without encountering a single person. Janet quickly led the girl through the alley and soon they came to a closed automobile which evidently awaited them. Janet opened the door for Alora and followed the girl inside the car, which started at once and sped along the quiet streets.

"You will find Doctor Anstruther very feeble," said the nurse, "for he has suffered greatly. But I am sure it will give him pleasure to see you again. I hope he will recognize you. I scarcely recognized you, myself, you have changed so much since last we saw you at the Voltaire. Your resemblance to your mother is quite marked, however."

And so, during the ride, she kept up a flow of desultory conversation, intended to distract Alora's attention from the section of the city through which they were passing. She spoke of Dr. Anstruther, mostly, and answered such questions as Alora put to her in a calm, unemotional manner well calculated to allay suspicion. The woman kept her eyes veiled by her lashes, as of yore, but her face seemed to have aged and grown harder in its lines. There was no hint now of her former gay life in New York; she had resumed the humble tones and manners peculiar to her profession, such as Alora remembered were characteristic of her at the time she nursed her mother.

"This is the place," said Janet, as the cab came to a stop. "Let us move softly, as noise disturbs my patient."

Alora had paid no attention to the direction they had driven but on leaving the car she found herself facing a three-storied brick flat building

of not very prepossessing appearance. Then were several vacant lots on either side of this building, giving it a lonely appearance, and in the lower windows were pasted placards: "To Let."

"Oh; does Doctor Anstruther live here?" asked Alora, somewhat astonished.

Without seeming to have heard the question Janet mounted the steps and opened the front door with a latch-key. Alora followed her inside and up two dingy flights to the third floor. Once she started to protest, for the deadly silence of the place impressed her with a vague foreboding that something was amiss, but Janet silenced her with a warning finger on her lips and on reaching the upper landing herself avoided making a noise as she cautiously unlocked the door. She stood listening a moment and then entered and nodded to the girl to follow.

They were in a short, dark passage which separated the landing from the rooms of the flat. Janet closed the outer door, startling her companion with the sharp "click" it made, and quickly opened another door which led into a shabby living room at the front of the building. Standing just within this room, Alora glanced around with the first real sensation of suspicion she had yet experienced. Janet raised her lids for a sweeping view of the girl's face and then with a light laugh began to remove her own cloak and cap, which she hung in a closet.

"Come, child, make yourself at home," she said in a mocking, triumphant voice, as she seated herself in a chair facing the bewildered girl. "I may as well inform you that this is to be your home for some time to come--until Jason Jones decides to rescue you. You won't object, I hope? Don't get nervous and you'll find your quarters very comfortable, if retired."

Alora, understanding now, first shuddered, then grew tense and cast a hurried glance at the hall door behind her.

"Have you lied to me, Janet?" she demanded.

"Yes."

"And this is a trap? Doctor Anstruther is not sick? He did not send for me? He is not here?"

"You have guessed correctly, Alora."

The girl wheeled and in a quick run reached the door to the landing. It was fast locked.

"Help!" she cried, and stopped to listen; "help! help!"

"Come in and take off your things," called Janet, undisturbed by the outcry. "This building hasn't a soul in it but ourselves, and you may yell for help until you are hoarse without being heard. But don't be frightened. I'm not going to hurt you. In fact, I'd like to make your confinement as cheerful as possible. Can't you understand the truth-- that I am simply holding your person in order to force Jason Jones to pay the money he owes me?"