

## CHAPTER XX JANET'S TRIUMPH

Alora stood by the door, irresolute, wondering what to do. It occurred to her that she was not much afraid of Janet Orme. She had been trapped in order to bleed her father of money; it was all her father's fault-- his fault and Janet's.

"Suppose you help me get our breakfast," suggested the nurse, coolly. "It will take your mind off your trouble and keep you from brooding. I admit I'm hungry, and I'm sure you'll feel better for a cup of coffee."

She passed into another room, as she spoke, and Alora, realizing the hall door could not be forced by her puny strength, advanced into the living room. There were three other doorways opening from this apartment. She could hear Janet rattling dishes and pans, so the way she had gone led into the kitchen. The other two doors she found gave entrance to small bedrooms, neither having egress other than through the living room. The furniture in all the rooms was cheap and tawdry but fairly comfortable.

Alora sat down and tried to collect her thoughts. Janet got the breakfast unaided and then came to summon her. Alora quietly walked into the kitchen and sat down at a little table spread for two. There was a dish of crisp bacon, some toast and coffee. Alora silently ate and drank, determined to maintain her strength. Having finished her meal she sat back and asked:

"Do you mind explaining what all this means?"

"No, indeed; I'm glad to explain," replied the woman, raising her eyelids an instant to flash a glance of approval at her prisoner. "I have already said that I was obliged to annoy you in order to reach your father. The dear father is an elusive person, you know, and is determined to avoid paying the money he owes me. I haven't been able to locate him, lately, but I have located you, and you are mighty precious to him because if he loses you he loses the income from your fortune. Therefore it is my intention to hold you here until Jason Jones either pays my demands or allows the probate court to deprive him of his guardianship. The proposition is really very simple, as you see."

"Still," said Alora, "I do not quite understand. How did you know of my value to my father?"

"I witnessed your mother's will," was the reply.

Alora remembered that this was true.

"But why does my father still owe you money? You were paid for nursing my mother. And, if your demands are merely blackmail, why does not my father defy you?"

"I'll tell you," answered Janet. "It is a bit of ancient history, but it may interest you. Your mother renounced your father when you were scarcely a year old. I met Jason Jones soon afterward, and believing,--as your own deluded mother did--that he would become a great artist, I gambled with him on his career. In other words, I supported Jason Jones with all my earnings as a nurse for a period of six years and in return he signed an agreement which states that one-half of all the money he received in the future, from whatever source, must be paid to me in return for my investment. Doubtless we both thought, at the time, that any money he got would come from the sale of his pictures; neither could have dreamed that your mother would call him to her on her death-bed and present sent him with your income until you came of age--seven years' control of a fortune, with no other obligation than to look after a child and keep her with him. But the agreement between us covered even that astonishing event. Imagine, if you can, Jason Jones' amazement when he entered your mother's sick chamber to find me--his partner--acting as her nurse. He was also annoyed, for he realized I knew the terms of the will and would demand my share of his income. Can you blame me? He hadn't made good as an artist and this was my only chance to get back some of the hard earned savings I had advanced him. But Jason Jones isn't square, Alora; he's mean and shifty, as perhaps you have discovered. He gave me some money at first, when I followed him to New York, as you know; but after that the coward ran away. That provoked me and made me determined to run him down. I traced him to Europe and followed him there, but he evaded me for a full year, until my money was gone and I was forced to return to America. For nearly three years longer I worked as a nurse and hoarded my earnings. Then, through your father's banker in New York I managed to learn his address. The banker didn't tell me, but I did a little spy work and in the bank's mail I found a letter in Jason Jones' handwriting postmarked 'Positano, Italy.' That was all the clew I needed and I went to Italy and soon located my man. I faced him in his own villa--I believe you were away at the time--and when he found he was caught he cringed and begged for mercy and promised to

give me all that belonged to me. He said he had a lot of gold in his possession and he would pay me partly in gold and partly in drafts on his New York banker. Then he left the room to get the gold and returned with a husky Italian servant who seized and bound me and threw me into a stone house used to store grapes, where I was kept a prisoner for nearly ten days and treated like a dog.

"Finally the Italian released me, asserting that Jason Jones was on his way to America. I followed as soon as I could get passage in a ship, but your clever father had left New York before I arrived there and I could not discover where he had hidden himself. Once more he had beaten me."

Her voice was hard and angry. Alora was tempted to believe the story, for many of its details she knew were true. She remembered, for one thing, that queer letter from Silvio which she had discovered tucked inside one of her father's books. It stated that, according to orders, the Italian had "released the prisoner." So the prisoner had been Janet, and Alora could well understand her determination to secure revenge.

"It seems to me," she said, "that you should have taken your contract with my father to a lawyer, and brought suit to recover the money due you. Surely that would have been the easiest way to collect it."

Janet's face grew red; her lashes dropped still further over the eyes; but she answered after an instant's pause:

"I do not wish the world to know what a fool I was to support an imitation artist for six long years. A lawsuit means publicity, and I have a little pride left, I assure you. Besides," collecting her thoughts as she spoke, "I cannot see the wisdom of dividing my share with a lawyer when I can bring your father to terms myself. I know I have executed a bold stroke in seizing you and making you my prisoner, but it's a stroke that's bound to win. It was conceived last night, on the spur of the moment. Lately I have been nursing in Chicago, where I am better known than in New York and can get better wages. Since my return from Italy I've been saving to renew the search for Jason Jones. While nursing a Mrs. Tolliver at the Hotel Blackington, fortune suddenly smiled on me. I chanced to examine the hotel register last night and found you were registered with Colonel Hathaway's party. Your room number was marked opposite your name, so I had you properly located. During the night, while on duty in Mrs. Tolliver's room, I had ample time to figure out a plan of action. I knew you were fond of old Doctor Anstruther and so used his name for a

lure. I had already rented this flat; not with the idea of using it for a prison, but because it was cheap and so isolated that I could sleep during the daytime without being disturbed. I believe that's all that I need explain to you. Our little adventure of this morning you will now be able to understand perfectly. Also you will understand the fact that you must remain a prisoner until my purpose is accomplished. I'm sorry for you, but it can't be helped. Won't you have another cup of coffee, Alora?"

Alora had no answer ready. Janet's story did not satisfy her; she felt that somewhere there was a flaw in it; but she decided to bide her time.