

CHAPTER XXI THE PRICE OF LIBERTY

Alora, being in the main a sensible girl, strove to make the best of her unpleasant predicament. She longed to notify Mary Louise that she was safe and well and in answer to her pleadings Janet agreed she might write a letter to that effect, with no hint that she was imprisoned or where she could be found, and the nurse would mail it for her. So Alora wrote the letter and showed it to Janet, who could find no fault with its wording and promised to mail it when she went out to market, which she did every morning, carefully locking her prisoner in. It is perhaps needless to state that the letter never reached Mary Louise because the nurse destroyed it instead of keeping her agreement to mail it. Letters can be traced, and Janet did not wish to be traced just then.

The days dragged by with little excitement. Alora sought many means of escape but found none practical. Once, while Janet was unlocking the hall door to go to market, the girl made a sudden dash to get by her and so secure her freedom; but the woman caught her arm and swung her back so powerfully that Alora fell against the opposite wall, bruised and half stunned. She was no match for Janet in strength.

"I'm sorry," said Janet complacently, "but you brought it on yourself. I'm not brutal, but I won't be balked. Please remember, my girl, that to me this is a very important enterprise and I've no intention of allowing you to defeat my plans."

Usually the woman was not unpleasant in her treatment of Alora, but conversed with her frankly and cheerfully, as if striving to relieve her loneliness.

"Have you written to my father about me?" the girl asked one day.

"Not yet," was the reply. "I don't even know where Jason Jones may be found, for you haven't given me his address. But there's no hurry. You have been missing only a week, so far. Jason Jones has doubtless been notified of your disappearance and is beginning to worry. Of course he will imagine I am responsible for this misfortune and his alarm will grow with the days that pass. Finally, when his state of mind becomes desperate, you will give me his address and he will hear from me. I shall have no trouble, at that crisis, in bringing my dishonest partner to terms."

"I can't see the object of waiting so long," protested Alora. "How long do you intend to keep me here?"

"I think you should remain missing about fifty days, during which time they will search for you in vain. Your father's search for you will include a search for me, and I've figured on that and defy him to find me. The Sisters' Hospital, the only address known to the physicians who employ me, believe I've gone to some small Indiana town on a case, but I neglected to give them the name of the town. So there's a blind lead that will keep my pursuers busy without their getting anywhere. It's easy to hide in a big city. Here you are very safe, Alora, mid discovery is impossible."

Janet had abandoned her nurse's costume from the first day of the girl's imprisonment. When she went out, which was only to a near-by market and grocery, she wore an unobtrusive dress.

Every day seemed more dreary to Alora than the last. She soon became very restless under her enforced confinement and her nerves, as well as her general health, began to give way. She had been accustomed to out-of-door exercise, and these rooms were close and "stuffy" because Janet would not allow the windows open.

For twelve days and nights poor Alora constantly planned an escape, only to abandon every idea she conceived as foolish and impractical. She looked forward to fifty days of this life with horror and believed she would go mad if forced to endure her confinement so long.