

CHAPTER XXIII MARY LOUISE HAS AN INTUITION

"I wish, Josie," said Mary Louise dolefully, "you'd let me help in this search for Alora."

"I'd be glad to, dear, if I could think of a single thing you can do," replied her friend. "Just now I'm on the most tedious task imaginable-- visiting the army of cab-drivers--horse and taxi--here in Chicago and trying to find the one who carried a woman and a girl away from the Blackington at six o'clock that eventful Tuesday morning."

"Have you met with any success, at all?" asked Mary Louise.

"That question proves you're not fitted for detective work," Josie laughingly asserted. "A moment's reflection would assure you that when I found my man my search would be ended. Ergo, no success has yet attended my efforts. I've interviewed a couple of hundreds, however, and that leaves only a few hundreds left to question."

"But the whole thing drags terribly!" complained Mary Louise. "Days are passing, and who knows what may be happening to poor Alora while you are hanging around the cab-stands?"

Josie's face grew grave. In sober tones she said:

"I'm just as anxious as you are, Mary Louise. But this case is really puzzling, because Chicago is such a big city that criminals may securely hide themselves here for months--even for years--without being discovered. Mrs. Orme was clever enough to leave few traces behind her; as far as clues are concerned she might have evaporated into thin air, taking Alora with her--except for this matter of the cabman. That's why I am pinning my faith to this search, knowing all the time, nevertheless, that Mrs. Orme may have provided for even that contingency and rendered the discovery of the cabman impossible. To do that, however, she would have to use a private equipage, involving a confederate, and I believe she preferred to take chances with a hired cab."

"What are the police doing?" inquired Mary Louise nervously.

"Nothing. They were soon discouraged and lost interest in the matter when I took hold of the case. But I don't intend to get discouraged. I hate to be 'stumped,' as you know, and it seems to me, after careful

consideration, that success may follow the discovery of the cab-driver. I've not been neglecting other trails, I assure you. I've obtained a pretty fair record of the history of nurse Orme. She has the habit of drudging in sick rooms until she accumulates enough capital to lead a gay life for a month or so, after which she resumes nursing in order to replenish her purse. She's a good nurse and a wild spendthrift, but aside from the peculiarity mentioned there's nothing in her career of especial interest. The woman is pretty well known both in New York and Chicago, for she squanders in the first city and saves in the other, but of her early history there is no information available. In her wildest moods she has never done anything to warrant her arrest, yet the police have kept a suspicious eye on her for years."

"Poor Alora!" wailed Mary Louise, miserably; "I wish I could do something for her."

"You did a lot for her when you put me on her trail," declared Josie, with conviction. "I've a hunch I shall win. I've wired Daddy O'Gorman all about the case, but he says he can't advise me. In other words, he's watching to see whether I make good or cave in, and I just dare not fail. So keep your courage, Mary Louise, and muster all the confidence you are able to repose in me. I may not know all the tricks of the sleuths, but I know some of them. And now I'm off to interview more cabmen."

Mary Louise sighed as her friend left her. She was indeed very unhappy and restless during those days of tedious waiting. Peter Conant had come to Chicago on the Colonel's demand, but Mary Louise couldn't see how he was able to help them one bit.

"Of course," the lawyer had said in his terse, choppy manner, "whoever abducted the girl is, criminally liable. We can put the party in jail."

"When we get her," suggested Mary Louise impatiently. "The party is Mrs. Orme; we have established that fact without a doubt; and, if we could get her, we'd also get Alora."

"Just so," Peter replied; "and, between the O'Gorman girl and the police, we ought to capture the woman soon. I have a degree of confidence in Josie O'Gorman and somewhat more confidence in the police."

"Do you think we should notify Jason Jones?" inquired Colonel Hathaway.

"I have considered that, sir, in all its phases, and knowing the man's peculiar characteristics I believe such a course is not as yet desirable. Jones is so enthralled by his latest craze over aviation that he would be no fit adviser and could render no practical assistance in the search for his daughter. On the other hand, his association would be annoying, for he would merely accuse you of neglect in permitting Alora to be stolen while in your care. I have seen a copy of his wife's will and know that the girl's loss may cost him his guardianship and the perquisites that pertain to it. In that case he will probably sue you for the loss of the money, claiming Alora's abduction was due to your carelessness."

"He could not win such an absurd suit, however," declared the Colonel.

"Still, he might be awarded damages," asserted the lawyer. "Juries are uncertain; the law is somewhat elastic; judges are peculiar."

"Don't worry, Gran'pa Jim," said Mary Louise soothingly, as she sat on the arm of his chair and rubbed the wrinkles from his forehead; "there must be such a thing as justice, even in law."

"Law is justice," stated Mr. Conant, resenting the insinuation, "but justice is sometimes recognized by humans in one form, and sometimes in another. I do not say that Jason Jones could collect damages on such complaint, but he assuredly would have a case."

Mr. Conant had desired to return home after the first conference with his client, but he admitted that his wife was recovering from her indisposition and a kindly neighbor was assisting Irene in the care of her, so he yielded to his client's urgent request to remain. Colonel Hathaway was more alarmed by Alora's disappearance than he allowed Mary Louise to guess, and he wanted Mr. Conant to spur the police to renewed effort. In addition to this the Colonel and his lawyer usually spent the best part of each day pursuing investigations on their own account, with the result that Mary Louise was left to mope alone in the hotel rooms.

The young girl was fond of Alora and secretly terrified over her mysterious disappearance. She tried to embroider, as she sat alone and waited for something to happen, but her nerveless fingers would not hold the needle. She bought some novels but could not keep her mind on the stories. Hour by hour she gazed from the window into the crowded street below, searching each form and face for some resemblance to Alora. She had all the newspapers sent to her room, that she might scan the

advertisements and "personals" for a clew, and this led her to following the news of the Great War, in which she found a partial distraction from her worries. And one morning, after her grandfather and the lawyer had left her, she was glancing over the columns of the Tribune when an item caught her eye that drew from her a cry of astonishment. The item read as follows:

"The Grand Prize at the exhibition of American paintings being held in the Art Institute was yesterday awarded by the jury to the remarkable landscape entitled 'Poppies and Pepper Trees' by the California artist, Jason Jones. This picture has not only won praise from eminent critics but has delighted the thousands of visitors who have flocked to the exhibition, so the award is a popular one. The Associated Artists are tendering a banquet to-night to Jason Jones at the Congress Hotel, where he is staying. The future of this clever artist promises well and will be followed with interest by all admirers of his skillful technique and marvelous coloring."

Mary Louise read this twice, trying to understand what it meant. Then she read it a third time.

"How strangely we have all been deceived in Alora's father!" she murmured. "I remember that Gran'pa Jim once claimed that any man so eccentric might well possess talent, but even Mr. Jones' own daughter did not believe he was a true artist. And Alora never guessed he was still continuing to paint--alone and in secret--or that he had regained his former powers and was creating a masterpiece. We have all been sadly wrong in our judgment of Jason Jones. Only his dead wife knew he was capable of great things."

She dropped the paper, still somewhat bewildered by the remarkable discovery.

"And he is here in Chicago, too!" she mused, continuing her train of thought, "and we all thought he was stupidly learning to fly in Dorfield. Oh, now I understand why he allowed Alora to go with us. He wanted to exhibit his picture--the picture whose very existence he had so carefully guarded--and knew that with all of us out of the way, afloat upon the Great Lakes, he could come here without our knowledge and enter the picture in the exhibition. It may be he doubted its success--he is diffident in some ways--and thought if it failed none of us at home would be the wiser; but I'm sure that now he has won he will brag and bluster and be

very conceited and disagreeable over his triumph. That is the man's nature--to be cowed by failure and bombastic over success. It's singular, come to think it over, how one who has the soul to create a wonderful painting can be so crude and uncultured, so morose and--and--cruel."

Suddenly she decided to go and look at the picture. The trip would help to relieve her loneliness and she was eager to see what Jason Jones had really accomplished. The Institute was not far from her hotel; she could walk the distance in a few minutes; so she put on her hat and set out for the exhibition.

On her way, disbelief assailed her. "I don't see how the man did it!" she mentally declared. "I wonder if that item is just a huge joke, because the picture was so bad that the reporter tried to be ironical."

But when she entered the exhibition and found a small crowd gathered around one picture--it was still early in the day--she dismissed at once that doubtful supposition.

"That is the Jason Jones picture," said an attendant, answering her question and nodding toward the admiring group; "that's the prizewinner--over there."

Mary Louise edged her way through the crowd until the great picture was in full view; and then she drew a long breath, awestruck, delighted, filled with a sense of all-pervading wonder.

"It's a tremendous thing!" whispered a man beside her to his companion. "There's nothing in the exhibit to compare with it. And how it breathes the very spirit of California!"

"California?" thought Mary Louise. Of course; those yellow poppies and lacy pepper trees with their deep red berries were typical of no other place. And the newspaper had called Jason Jones a California artist. When had he been in California, she wondered. Alora had never mentioned visiting the Pacific Coast.

Yet, sometime, surely, her father must have lived there. Was it while Alora was a small child, and after her mother had cast him off? He could have made sketches then, and preserved them for future use.

As she stood there marveling at the superb genius required to produce such a masterpiece of art, a strange notion crept stealthily into her mind.

Promptly she drove it out; but it presently returned; it would not be denied; finally, it mastered her.

"Anyhow," she reflected, setting her teeth together, "I'll beard the wolf in his den. If my intuition has played me false, at worst the man can only sneer at me and I've always weathered his scornful moods. But if I am right----"

The suggestion was too immense to consider calmly. With quick, nervous steps she hastened to the Congress Hotel and sent up her card to Jason Jones. On it she had written in pencil: "I shall wait for you in the parlor. Please come to me."