

## CHAPTER XXIV AN INTERRUPTION

"Before you sign this promissory note," remarked Janet Orme, as Alora reluctantly seated herself at the table, "you must perform the other part of your agreement and give me the present address of your father, Jason Jones."

"He lives in Dorfield," said Alora.

"Write his street number--here, on this separate sheet."

The girl complied.

"Is it a private house, or is it a studio?"

"A cottage. Father doesn't paint any more."

"That is very sensible of him," declared the nurse; "yet I wonder how he can resist painting. He has always had a passion for the thing and in the old days was never happy without a brush in his hand. He had an idea he could do something worth while, but that was mere delusion, for he never turned out anything decent or that would sell in the market. Therefore the money he spent for paints, brushes and canvas--money I worked hard to earn--was absolutely wasted. Does your father keep any servants?"

"One maid, an Irish girl born in the town."

"Still economical, I see. Well, that's all the information I require. You have given your word of honor not to notify him that I have discovered his whereabouts. Is it not so?"

"Yes," said Alora.

"Now sign the note."

Alora, pen in hand, hesitated while she slowly read the paper again. She hated to give fifty thousand dollars to this scheming woman, even though the loss of such a sum would not seriously impair her fortune. But what could she do?

"Sign it, girl!" exclaimed Janet, impatiently.

Alora searched the note for a loophole that would enable her afterward to repudiate it. She knew nothing of legal phrases, yet the wording seemed cleverly constructed to defeat any attempt to resist payment.

"Sign!" cried the woman. With pen hovering over the place where she had been told to write her name, Alora still hesitated and seeing this the nurse's face grew dark with anger. A sudden "click" sounded from the hall door, but neither heard it.

"Sign!" she repeated, half rising with a threatening gesture.

"No, don't sign, please," said a clear voice, and a short, stumpy girl with red hair and freckled face calmly entered the room and stood smilingly before them.

Janet uttered an exclamation of surprise and annoyance and sank back in her chair, glaring at the intruder. Alora stared in speechless amazement at the smiling girl, whom she had never seen before.

"How did you get in here?" demanded Janet angrily.

"Why, I just unlocked the door and walked in," was the reply, delivered in a cheery and somewhat triumphant voice.

"This is a private apartment."

"Indeed! I thought it was a prison," said the girl. "I imagined you, Mrs. Orme, to be a jailer, and this young person--who is Miss Alora Jones, I believe--I supposed to be your prisoner. Perhaps I'm wrong, but I guess I'm right."

The nurse paled. The look she flashed from her half-veiled eyes was a dangerous look. She knew, in the instant, that the stranger had come to liberate Alora, but the next instant she reflected that all was not lost, for she had already decided to release her prisoner without compulsion. It was important to her plans, however, that she obtain the promissory note; so, instantly controlling herself, she lightly touched Alora's arm and said in her usual soft voice:

"Sign your name, my dear, and then we will talk with this person."

Alora did not move to obey, for she had caught a signal from the red-headed girl.

"I object to your signing that paper," protested the stranger, seating herself in a vacant chair. "I haven't the faintest idea what it is you're about to sign, but if I were you I wouldn't do it."

"It is the price of my liberty," explained Alora.

"Well, this is a free country and liberty doesn't cost anything. I've a carriage waiting outside, and I will drive you back to the Colonel and Mary Louise free of charge. You won't even have to whack up on the cab hire."

The nurse slowly rose and faced the girl.

"Who are you?" she demanded.

"No one of importance," was the answer. "I'm just Josie O'Gorman, the daughter of John O'Gorman, of Washington, who is a lieutenant in the government's secret service."

"Then you're a detective!"

"The aforesaid John O'Gorman declares I'm not. He says I must learn a lot before I become a real detective, so at present I'm just practicing. Mary Louise is my friend, you know," she continued, now addressing Alora, "and you are a friend of Mary Louise; so, when you mysteriously disappeared, she telegraphed me and I came on to hunt you up. That wasn't an easy job for an amateur detective, I assure you, and it cost me a lot of time and some worry, but glory be! I've now got you located and Mrs. Orme's jig is up."

The nurse moved softly to the door that led into the passage and locked it, putting the key into her pocket.

"Now," said she, with another flash of those curious eyes, "I have two prisoners."

Josie laughed.

"I could almost have sworn you'd try that trick," she remarked. "It was on the cards and you couldn't resist it. Permit me to say, Mrs. Orme, that you're a rather clever woman, and I admire cleverness even when it's misdirected. But my Daddy has taught me, in his painstaking way, not to be caught napping. A good soldier provides for a retreat as well as an advance. I've been on your trail for a long time and only this morning

succeeded in winning the confidence of the cabman who drove you here. Wasn't sure, of course, that you were still here, until I saw Alora's face at the window a while ago. Then I knew I'd caught you. The cab is a closed one and holds four inside, so I invited three policeman to accompany me. One is at the back of this house, one at the front door and the third is just outside here on the landing. Probably he can hear us talking. He's a big man, that third policeman, and if I raise my voice to cry out he could easily batter down the door you have locked and come to my rescue. Now will you be good, Mrs. Orme?"

The nurse realized her defeat. She deliberately took the note from the table and tore it up.

"You have really foiled me, my girl," she said philosophically, "although if you knew all you would not blame me for what I have done."

"You've decided not to dig any money out of Alora, then?"

"It wouldn't matter to her, but I have abandoned the idea. However, I shall insist on making Jason Jones pay me liberally for my disappointment. Now take the girl and go. Get your things on, Alora."

Josie regarded her thoughtfully.

"I had intended to arrest you, Mrs. Orme," she remarked; "but, honestly, I can't see what good it would do, while it would cause Mary Louise and the dear Colonel a heap of trouble in prosecuting you. So, unless Miss Jones objects----"

"All I want it to get away from here, to be out of her clutches," asserted Alora.

"Then let us go. The woman deserves punishment, but doubtless she'll get her just deserts in other ways. Get your things on, my dear; the cab and the policemen are waiting."

Janet Orme unlocked the door to the passage. Then she stood motionless, with drooping eyelids, while the two girls passed out. Alora, greatly unnerved and still fearful, clung to the arm of her rescuer.

When they had gained the street and were about to enter the closed automobile she asked: "Where are the three policemen?"

"Invisible," returned Josie, very cheerfully. "I had to invent that story, my dear, and the Recording Angel is said to forgive detectives for lying."

She followed Alora into the car and closed the door.

"Drive to the Blackington, please," she called to the driver.

And, as they whirled away, she leaned from the window and waved a parting signal to Mrs. Orme, who stood in the upper window, her face contorted and scowling with chagrin at the discovery that she had been outwitted by a mere girl.