

CHAPTER XXV JASON JONES

The Colonel and Peter Conant had just entered the drawing room of the suite at the hotel and found Mary Louise absent. This was unusual and unaccountable and they were wondering what could have become of the girl when the door suddenly burst open and Josie's clear voice cried triumphantly:

"I've got her! I've captured the missing heiress at last!"

Both men, astonished, rose to their feet as Alora entered and with a burst of tears threw her arms around the old Colonel's neck. For a few moments the tableau was dramatic, all being speechless with joy at the reunion. Colonel Hathaway patted Alora's head and comforted the sobbing girl as tenderly as if she had been his own grandchild--or Mary Louise.

Josie perched herself lightly on the center-table and swinging her legs complacently back and forth explained her discovery in a stream of chatter, for she was justly elated by her success.

"And to think," she concluded, "that I never missed a clew! That it was really the nurse, Mrs. Orme--Mrs. Jones' old nurse--who stole Alora, according to our suspicions, and that her object was just what I thought, to get money from that miser Jason Jones! Daddy will be pleased with this triumph; I'm pleased; Mary Louise will be pleased, and--By the way, where is Mary Louise?"

"I don't know," confessed the Colonel, who had just placed Alora, now more self-possessed, in a chair. "I was beginning to worry about her when you came in. She seldom leaves these rooms, except for a few moments, and even then she tells me, or leaves word, where she is going. I spoke to the clerk, when I returned, and he said she had left the hotel early this morning, and it's now four o'clock."

Josie's smile faded and her face became grave.

"Now, who," she said, "could have an object in stealing Mary Louise? Complications threaten us in this matter and the first thing we must do is----"

"Oh, Alora!" exclaimed Mary Louise, who had softly opened the door and caught sight of her friend. Next moment the two girls were locked in an embrace and Josie, a shade of disappointment struggling with her sunny smile, remarked coolly:

"Very well; that beats the champion female detective out of another job. But I might have known Mary Louise wouldn't get herself stolen; no such adventure ever happens to her."

Mary Louise turned to the speaker with an earnest look on her sweet face.

"An adventure has happened to me, Josie, and--and--I hardly know how to break the news."

She held Alora at arms' length and looked gravely into her friend's face. Alora noted the serious expression and said quickly:

"What is it? Bad news for me?"

"I--I think not," replied Mary Louise, hesitatingly; "but it's--it's wonderful news, and I hardly know how to break it to you."

"The best way," remarked Josie, much interested, "is to let it out in a gush. 'Wonderful' stuff never causes anyone to faint."

"Alora," said Mary Louise solemnly, "your father is here."

"Where?"

"He is just outside, in the corridor."

"Why doesn't he come in?" asked the Colonel.

"He needn't have worried about me," said Alora, in sullen tone, "but I suppose it was the danger of losing his money that----"

"No," interrupted Mary Louise; "you mistake me. Jason Jones, the great artist--a splendid, cultured man and----"

A sharp rap at the door made her pause. Answering the Colonel's summons a bellboy entered.

"For Mr. Conant, sir," he said, offering a telegram.

The lawyer tore open the envelope as the boy went out and after a glance at it exclaimed in shocked surprise: "Great heavens!"

Then he passed the message to Colonel Hathaway, who in turn read it and passed it to Josie O'Gorman. Blank silence followed, while Mary Louise and Alora eyed the others expectantly.

"Who did you say is outside in the corridor?" demanded Josie in a puzzled tone.

"Alora's father," replied Mary Louise.

"Jason Jones?"

"Jason Jones," repeated Mary Louise gravely.

"Well, then, listen to this telegram. It was sent to Mr. Peter Conant from Dorfield and says: 'Jason Jones killed by falling from an aeroplane at ten o'clock this morning. Notify his daughter.'"

Alora drew a quick breath and clasped her hands over her heart. Uncongenial as the two had been, Jason Jones was her father--her only remaining parent--and the suddenness of his death shocked and horrified the girl. Indeed, all present were horrified, yet Mary Louise seemed to bear the news more composedly than the others--as if it were a minor incident in a great drama. She slipped an arm around her girl friend's waist and said soothingly:

"Never mind, dear. It is dreadful, I know. What an awful way to die! And yet--and yet, Alora--it may be all for the best."

Josie slid down from the table. Her active brain was the first to catch a glimmering of what Mary Louise meant.

"Shall I call that man in?" she asked excitedly, "the man whom you say is Alora's father?"

"No," answered Mary Louise. "Let me go for him, please. I--I must tell him this strange news myself. Try to quiet yourself, Alora, and--and be prepared. I'm going to introduce to you--Jason Jones."

She uttered the last sentence slowly and with an earnestness that bewildered all her hearers--except, perhaps, Josie O'Gorman. And then she left the room.

The little group scarcely moved or spoke.

It seemed an age to them, yet it was only a few moments, when Mary Louise came back, leading by the hand a tall, handsome gentleman who bore in every feature, in every movement, the mark of good birth, culture, and refinement, and in a voice that trembled with, nervous excitement the girl announced:

"This is Jason Jones--a California artist--the man who married Antoinette Seaver. He is Alora's father. And the other--the other----"

"Why, the other was a fraud, of course," exclaimed Josie.