

## CHAPTER XVI - THE STOLEN BOOK

Miss Lord came up to the Lodge that Saturday forenoon and proved so agreeable to Aunt Hannah and the girls that she was invited to stay to lunch. Mr. Conant was not present, for he had put a couple of sandwiches in his pocket and would not return home until dinner-time.

After luncheon they were all seated together on the benches at the edge of the bluff, which had become their favorite resort because the view was so wonderful. Mary Louise was doing a bit of fancy work, Irene was reading and Aunt Hannah, as she mended stockings, conversed in a desultory way with her guest.

"If you don't mind," said Agatha, after a time, "I'll run in and get me a book. This seems the place and the hour for dreaming, rather than gossip, and as we are all in a dreamy mood a good old-fashioned romance seems to me quite fitting for the occasion."

Taking permission for granted, she rose and sauntered toward the house. There was a serious and questioning look in Irene's eyes as they followed the graceful form of Miss Lord, but Mary Louise and Aunt Hannah paid no heed to their visitor's going in to select a book, it seemed so natural a thing for her to do.

It was fully fifteen minutes before Agatha returned, book in hand. Irene glanced at the title and gave a sigh of relief. Without comment their guest resumed her seat and soon appeared to be immersed in her volume. Gradually the sun crossed the mountain and cast a black shadow over the plain below, a shadow which lengthened and advanced inch by inch until it shrouded the landscape spread beneath them.

"That is my sun-dial," remarked Mary Louise, dropping her needlework to watch the shifting scene. "When the shadow passes the Huddle, it's four o'clock; by the time it reaches that group of oaks, it is four-thirty; at five o'clock it touches the creek, and then I know it's time to help Aunt Hannah with the dinner."

Agatha laughed.

"Is it really so late?" she asked. "I see the shadow has nearly reached the brook."

"Oh! I didn't mean--"

"Of course not; but it's time I ran home, just the same. My maid Susan is a perfect tyrant and scolds me dreadfully if I'm late. May I take this book home, Irene? I'll return the others I have borrowed to- morrow."

"To be sure," answered Irene. "I'm rich in books, you know."

When Miss Lord went away the party broke up, for Aunt Hannah was already thinking of dinner and Mary Louise wanted to make one of Uncle Peter's favorite desserts. So Irene wheeled her chair into the house and entering the den began a sharp inspection of the place, having in mind exactly the way it had looked when last she left it. But presently she breathed a sigh of relief and went into her own room, for the den had not been disturbed. She wheeled herself to a small table in a corner of her chamber and one glance confirmed her suspicions.

For half an hour she sat quietly thinking, considering many things that might prove very important in the near future. The chair-girl knew little of life save what she had gleaned from books, but in some ways that was quite equal to personal experiences. At dinner she asked:

"Did you take a book from my room to-day, Mary Louise?"

"No," was the reply; "I have not been in your room since yesterday."

"Nor you, Aunt Hannah?"

"No, my dear. What book is missing?"

"It was entitled 'The Siberian Exile.'"

"Good gracious!" exclaimed Mary Louise. "Wasn't that the book you found the letter in?"

"Yes."

"And you say it is missing?"

"It has mysteriously disappeared."

"Nonsense," said Uncle Peter, who had returned with a fine string of trout. "No one would care to steal an old book, and the thing hasn't legs, you know."

"Nevertheless," said Irene gravely, "it is gone."

"And the letter with it!" added Mary Louise regretfully. "You ought to have let me read it while I could, Irene."

"What letter are you talking about?" asked the lawyer.

"It is nothing important, Uncle Peter," Irene assured him. "The loss of the book does not worry me at all."

Nor did it, for she knew the letter was not in it. And, to avoid further questioning on the part of Mr. Conant, she managed to turn the conversation to less dangerous subjects.