

## CHAPTER XVIII - MARY LOUISE GROWS SUSPICIOUS

And so Sarah Judd's fate was decided. She prepared their Sunday morning breakfast and cooked it quite skillfully. Her appearance was now more tidy and she displayed greater energy than on the previous evening, when doubtless she was weary from her long walk. Mrs. Conant was well pleased with the girl and found the relief from clearing the table and "doing" the dishes very grateful. Their Sunday dinner, which Sarah prepared unaided and served promptly at one o'clock, their usual hour, was a pleasant surprise to them all.

"The girl is a treasure," commented Mrs. Conant, contentedly.

Sarah Judd was not talkative. When told she might stay she merely nodded her red head, displaying neither surprise nor satisfaction. Her eyes had a habit of roving continually from face to face and from object to object, yet they seemed to observe nothing clearly, so stolid was their expression. Mary Louise tried to remember where she had noted a similar expression before, but could not locate it.

Miss Lord came over that afternoon and when told about the new maid and the manner of her appearance seemed a little startled and uneasy.

"I must see what she looks like," said she, "for she may prove a congenial companion for my own maid, who is already sulking because the place is so lonely."

And presently Sarah Judd came out upon the lawn to ask Mrs. Conant's further instructions and this gave Agatha the desired opportunity to examine her closely. The inspection must have been satisfactory, for an expression of distinct relief crossed the lovely face.

That Sunday evening they all went down to the Bigbee place in Miss Lord's motor car, where the lady entertained her guests at a charming luncheon. The Bigbee place was more extensive than Hillcrest Lodge, as it consisted of a big, rambling residence and numerous outbuildings; but it was not nearly so cosy or homelike, nor so pleasantly situated.

Miss Lord's maid, Susan, was somewhat a mystery to the Hillcrest people. She dressed almost as elaborately as her mistress and performed her duties grudgingly and with a scowl that seemed to resent Miss Lord's entertaining company. Stranger still, when they went home that night it was the maid who brought out the big touring car and drove them all back to Hillcrest Lodge in it, handling the machine as expertly as Agatha could do. Miss Lord pleaded a headache as an excuse for not driving them herself.

Sarah Judd opened the door for them. As she stood under the full light of the hall lamp Mary Louise noticed that the maid Susan leaned from her seat in the car

and fixed a shrewd glance on Sarah's unconscious face. Then she gave a little shake of her head and drove away.

"There's something queer about the folks at Bigbee's," Mary Louise confided to Irene, as she went to her friend's room to assist her in preparing for bed. "Agatha Lord kept looking at that velvet ribbon around your neck, to-night, as if she couldn't keep her eyes off it, and this afternoon she seemed scared by the news of Sarah Judd's arrival and wasn't happy until she had seen her. Then, again, that queer maid of Agatha's, Susan, drove us home so she could see Sarah Judd for herself. How do you account for all that, Irene?"

"I don't account for it, my dear. You've been mixed up with so many mysteries that you attach suspicion to the most commonplace events. What should there be about Sarah Judd to frighten anyone?"

"She's a stranger here, that's all, and our neighbors seem suspicious of strangers. I'm not questioning poor, innocent Sarah, understand; but if Agatha and her maid are uneasy about strangers coming here it seems likely there's a reason for it."

"You're getting morbid, Mary Louise. I think I must forbid you to read any more of my romances," said Irene lightly, but at heart she questioned the folks at Bigbee's as seriously as her friend did.

"Don't you think Agatha Lord stole that missing book?" asked Mary Louise, after a little reflection.

"Why should she?" Irene was disturbed by the question but was resolved not to show it.

"To get the letter that was in it--the letter you would not let me read."

"What are your affairs to Agatha Lord?"

"I wish I knew," said Mary Louise, musingly. "Irene, I've an idea she came to Bigbee's just to be near us. There's something stealthy and underhanded about our neighbors, I'm positive. Miss Lord is a very delightful woman, on the surface, but--"

Irene laughed softly, as if amused.

"There can be no reason in the world, Mary Louise," she averred, "why your private affairs are of any interest to outsiders, except--"

"Well, Irene?"

"Except that you are connected, in a way, with your grandfather."

"Exactly! That is my idea, Irene. Ever since that affair with O'Gorman, I've had a feeling that I was being spied upon."

"But that would be useless. You never hear from Colonel Weatherby, except in the most roundabout ways."

"They don't know that; they think I MIGHT hear, and there's no other way to find where he is. Do you think," she added, "that the Secret Service employs female detectives?"

"Perhaps so. There must be occasions when a woman can discover more than a man."

"Then I believe Miss Lord is working for the Secret Service--the enemies of Gran'pa Jim."

"I can't believe it."

"What is on that black ribbon around your neck?"

"A miniature of my mother."

"Oh. To-night it got above your dress--the ribbon, I mean--and Agatha kept looking at it."

"A good detective wouldn't be caught doing such a clumsy thing, Mary Louise. And, even if detectives were placed here to watch your actions, they wouldn't be interested in spying upon ME, would they?"

"I suppose not."

"I've never even seen your grandfather and so I must be exempt from suspicion. I advise you, my dear, to forget these apprehensions, which must be purely imaginary. If a thousand spies surrounded you, they could do you no harm, nor even trap you into betraying your grandfather, whose present location is a complete mystery to you."

Mary Louise could not help admitting this was true, so she kissed her friend good night and went to her own room.

Left alone, Irene put her hand to the ribbon around her neck and drew from her bosom an old-fashioned oval gold locket, as big as any ordinary watch but thinner. She opened the front of the case and kissed her mother's picture, as was her nightly custom. Then she opened the back and drew out a tightly folded wad of paper. This she carefully spread out before her, when it proved to be the old letter she had found in the book.

Once again she read the letter carefully, poring over the words in deep thought.

"This letter," she murmured, "might indeed be of use to the Government, but it is of far more value to Mary Louise and--to her grandfather. I ought not to lose it; nor ought I to allow anyone to read it, at present. Perhaps, if Agatha Lord has noticed the ribbon I wear, it will be best to find a new hiding place for the letter."

She was in bed now, and lay looking around the room with speculative gaze. Beside her stood her wheeled chair, with its cushion of dark Spanish leather. The girl smiled and, reaching for her work-basket, which was on a stand at the head of the bed, she drew out a pair of scissors and cut some of the stitches of the leathern cushion. Then she tucked the letter carefully inside and with a needle and some black linen thread sewed up the place she had ripped open.

She had just completed this task when she glanced up and saw a face at her window--indistinctly, for even as she raised her head it drew back and faded into the outergloom.

For a moment Irene sat motionless, looking at the window. Then she turned to the stand, where the lamp was, and extinguished the light.

An hour, perhaps, she sat upright in bed, considering what she should do. Then again she reached out in the darkness and felt for her scissors. Securing them, she drew the chair cushion upon the bed and felt along its edge for the place she had sewn. She could not determine for some time which was the right edge but at last she found where the stitches seemed a little tighter drawn than elsewhere and this place she managed to rip open. To her joy she found the letter and drew it out with a sigh of relief.

But now what to do with it was a question of vital importance. She dared not relight her lamp and she was helpless when out of her chair. So she put back the cushion, slid from the bed into the chair and wheeled herself in the dark to her dresser, which had a chenille cover. Underneath this cover she spread the letter, deeming that so simple a hiding-place was likely to be overlooked in a hasty search and feeling that the letter would be safe there for the night, at least.

She now returned to her bed. There was no use trying to re sew the cushion in the dark. She lay awake for a long time, feeling a certain thrill of delight in the belief that she was a conspirator despite her crippled condition and that she was conspiring for the benefit of her dear friend Mary Louise. Finally she sank into a deep slumber and did not waken till the sun was streaming in at the window and Mary Louise knocked upon her door to call her.

"You're lazy this morning," laughed Mary Louise, entering. "Let me help you dress for breakfast."

Irene thanked her. No one but this girl friend was ever permitted to assist her in dressing, as she felt proud of her ability to serve herself. Her toilet was almost complete when Mary Louise suddenly exclaimed:

"Why, what has become of your chair cushion?"

Irene looked toward the chair. The cushion was gone.

"Never mind," she said, although her face wore a troubled expression. "I must have left it somewhere. Here; I'll put a pillow in its place until I find it."