

CHAPTER XX - DIAMOND CUT DIAMOND

Tuesday afternoon Miss Lord's big touring car stood at the door of Hillcrest Lodge, for Agatha had invited the Conant party to ride with her to Millbank. Irene was tucked into the back seat in a comfortable position and beside her sat Mrs. Conant, who was going to make a few purchases at the village store. Mary Louise rode on the front seat with Agatha, who loved to drive her car and understood it perfectly.

When they drove away there was no one left in the house but Sarah Judd, the servant girl, who was washing the lunch dishes. Bub was in the shed- like garage, however, washing and polishing Will Morrison's old car, on which the paint was so cracked and faded that the boy's attempt to improve its appearance was a desperate one.

Sarah, through the kitchen window, watched Bub for a time rather sharply. Then she went out on the bluff and looked down in the valley. Miss Lord's big car was just passing the Huddle on its way up the valley.

Sarah turned and reentered the house. Her meek and diffident expression of countenance had quite disappeared. Her face now wore a look of stern determination and the blue eyes deepened and grew shrewd.

She walked straight to the den and without hesitation approached the farther wall and took from its pegs Will Morrison's fine hunting rifle. In the stock was a hollow chamber for cartridges, for the rifle was of the type known as a "repeater." Sliding back the steel plate that hid this cavity, Sarah drew from it a folded paper of a yellow tint and calmly spread it on the table before her. Then she laid down the rifle, placed a chair at the table and with absorbed attention read the letter from beginning to end--the letter that Irene had found in the book.

It was closely written on both sides the thin sheet--evidently of foreign make--and although the writing was faded it was still clearly legible.

After the first perusal Sarah Judd leaned her elbows on the table and her head on her hands and proceeded to study the epistle still more closely. Then she drew from her pocket a notebook and pencil and with infinite care made a copy of the entire letter, writing it in her book in shorthand. This accomplished, she replaced the letter in the rifle stock and hung the weapon on its pegs again.

Both the window and the glass door of the den faced the back yard. Sarah opened the door and stood there in deep thought, watching Bub at his work. Then she returned to the table and opening a drawer drew out a sheet of blank paper. On this she wrote the following words:

"John Folger, 1601 F. Street, Washington, D. C.

Nothing under sterling over letter bobbing every kernel sad mother making frolic better quick. If England rumples paper Russia admires money.

Sarah Judd."

Each word of this preposterous phrasing she wrote after consulting another book hidden cleverly among the coils of her red hair--a tiny book it--was, filled with curious characters. When the writing was finished the girl seemed well satisfied with her work. After tucking away the book in its former place she went to her room, got her purse and then proceeded to the shed and confronted Bub.

"I want you to drive this car to Millbank, to the telegraph office at the railway station," said Sarah.

Bub gave her a scornful look.

"Ye're crazy," he said and went on with his polishing.

"That needn't worry you," retorted the girl.

"It don't," declared Bub.

"You can drive and you're going to," she continued. "I've got to send this telegram quick, and you've got to take it." She opened her purse and placed two coins on the fender of the car. "There's a dollar to pay for the message, and there's a five-dollar gold-piece to pay you for your trouble."

Bub gave a gasp. He came up beside her and stared at the money. Then he turned to look at Sarah Judd.

"What's up?" he demanded.

"Private business. Don't ask questions; you'd only get lies for answers. Go and earn your money."

"Miss' Conant, she's gone to Millbank herself. Ef she sees me there, I'll git fired. The boss'll fire me himself, anyhow, fer usin' the car when he tol' me not to."

"How much do you get a week!" asked Sarah.

"Four bits."

"That's about two dollars a month. In two months the Conants will move back to the city, and by then you'll have earned four dollars. Why, Bub, it's cheaper for you to take this five-dollar gold-piece and get fired, than to work for two months for four dollars."

Bub scratched his head in perplexity.

"Ye ain't count'n' on the fun o' workin'," he suggested.

"I'm counting on that five dollars--eight bits to a dollar, forty bits altogether. Why, it's a fortune, Bub."

He took out his knife, looked around for a stick to whittle and, finding none, put the knife in his pocket with a sigh.

"I guess Will Morrison wouldn't like it," he decided. "Put up yer money, Sairy."

Sarah withdrew the gold-piece and put a larger one in its place.

"There," she said; "let's make it ten dollars, and save time."

Bub's hesitation vanished, but he asked anxiously:

"Tain't go'n' to do no harm to them gals thet's stoppin' here, is it?"

"It is to do them a good turn that I'm sending this telegram."

"Honor bright?"

"Hope to die, Bub."

"All right; I'm off."

He folded the letter, placed it inside his Scotch cap and stowed the money carefully in his pocket.

"Don't let any of the folks see you if yon can help it," warned Sarah; "and, whatever happens, don't say anything about that telegram to a living soul. Only--see that it's sent."

"I'm wise," answered Bub and a moment later he started the car and rolled away down the road.

Sarah Judd looked after him with a queer smile on her face. Then she went back to her kitchen and resumed her dish-washing. Presently a scarcely audible sound arrested her attention. It seemed to come from the interior of the Lodge.

Sarah avoided making a particle of noise herself as she stole softly through the dining room and entered the main hallway. One glance showed her that the front door was ajar and the door of the den closed--exactly the reverse of what they should be. She crept forward and with a sudden movement threw open the door of the den.

A woman stood in the center of the room. As the door opened she swung around and pointed a revolver at Sarah. Then for a moment they silently faced one another.

"Ah," said the woman, with an accent of relief, "you're the servant. Go back to your work. Mrs. Conant told me to make myself at home here."

"Yes, I know," replied Sarah sarcastically. "She said she was expecting you and told me it wouldn't do any harm to keep an eye on you while you're here. She said Miss Lord was going to get all the family away, so you could make a careful search of the house, you being Miss Lord's maid, Susan--otherwise known as Nan Shelley, from the Washington Bureau."

Susan's hand shook so ridiculously that she lowered the revolver to prevent its dropping from her grasp. Her countenance expressed chagrin, surprise, anger.

"I don't know you," she said harshly. "Who are you?"

"New at the game," replied Sarah Judd, with a shrug. "You don't know me, Nan, but I know you; and I know your record, too. You're as slick as they make 'em, and the one who calls herself Agatha Lord is just an infantile amateur beside you. But go ahead, Nan; don't let me interrupt your work."

The woman sank into a chair.

"You can't be from the home office," she muttered, staring hard at the girl. "They wouldn't dare interfere with my work here."

"No; I'm not from the home office."

"I knew," said Susan, "as soon as I heard the story of your coming, that it was faked. I'd gamble that you never saw Mrs. Morrison in your life."

"You'd win," said Sarah, also taking a chair.

"Then who could have sent you here?"

"Figure it out yourself," suggested Sarah.

"I'm trying to. Do you know what we're after?"

"A clew to Hathaway. Incidentally, any other information concerning him that comes your way. That includes the letter."

"Oh. So you know about the letter, do you?" asked Susan.

"To be sure. And I know that's what you're here for now. Don't let me interrupt you. It's a mighty hard job, finding that letter, and the folks'll be back by and by."

"You're right," exclaimed the woman, rising abruptly. "Go back to your work in the kitchen."

"This is my occupation, just now," retorted Sarah, lolling in her chair. "Go ahead with your search, Nan, and I'll tell you when you are 'hot' or 'cold.'"

"You're an impudent little chit," said Nan tartly. "See here," with a sudden change of voice, "let's pool issues. If we can discover anything important in this place, there's reward enough for us all."

"I am not opposing you," protested Sarah Judd, "I'm not a particle interested in whether you trace Hathaway or not. I don't believe you can do it, though, and that letter you're so eager for won't help you a bit. It was written ten years ago."

"That makes it more important," declared the other, "We've two things to accomplish; one is to locate Hathaway, and the other to secure absolute proof of his guilt."

"I thought he was caught doing the job."

"So he was, in a way. But the Department needs more proof."

Sarah Judd smiled unbelievably. Then she chuckled. Presently she laughed outright, in genuine merriment, as the thought that amused her grew and expanded.

"What fools--" she said, "what perfect fools--we mortals be!"

All this annoyed Nan Shelley exceedingly. The successful woman detective did not relish being jeered at by a mere girl.

"You've read the letter, I suppose, and are now making fun of me for trying to get it? Perhaps you've hidden it yourself--although that isn't likely. Why can't you give me an honest tip? We're both in the same line, it seems, and both trying to earn an honest living. How about that letter? Is it necessary for me to find it?"

"I've read it," admitted Sarah, "and I know where it is. You might perhaps find it, if you hunted long enough, but it isn't worth your while. It wouldn't help in the least to convict Hathaway and of course it couldn't tell you where he is now hiding."

"Is this straight?"

"True as gospel."

"Then why don't you prove it by showing me the letter?"

"Because I don't belong on your side of the fence. You're working for one organization and I for another. Any little tip I let slip is just for your personal use. Don't bother about that letter."

Susan--or Nan Shelley--sat for a time in thought. Once in a while she would cast a furtive glance around the room and its wall covered with trophies, and then she would turn to Sarah Judd's placid face.

"Where did the boy go?" she asked abruptly.

"What boy?"

"Bub; in the automobile."

"To Millbank."

"What for?"

"To send a telegram."

"Your report?"

"Yes."

"Important?"

"I think it'll bring things to a climax."

"The Hathaway case?"

"You can guess anything, Nan, if you guess long enough."

Nan rose and put the revolver in her pocket. Then she held out her hand frankly to Sarah Judd.

"If you've beaten me in this affair," she said, with no apparent resentment, "you're clever enough to become famous some day. I'm going to take your advice about the letter and if that climax you're predicting arrives on schedule time I'll not be sorry to quit this dreary, dragging case and pick up a more interesting one."

The tone was friendly and frank. Sarah stretched out her hand to meet that of Nan and in a flash a handcuff snapped over her wrist. With a cry she drew back, but a dextrous twist of her opponent's free hand prisoned her other wrist and she at once realized that she was fairly caught.

"Fine!" she cried admiringly, as she looked at her bonds, "What next, Nan?"

But Nan was too busy to talk. She deftly searched the girl's pocket and found the notebook. The shorthand writing caught her eye at once but the characters were unknown to her.

"Cipher, eh?" she muttered.

"A little code of my own invention," said Sarah. "Sometimes I can't make it out myself."

Nan restored the book and examined Sarah Judd's purse.

"They keep you well supplied with funds, it seems."

"Comes handy in emergencies," was the reply.

"Now let's go to your room."

Sarah, handcuffed, led the way. Nan Shelley made a wonderfully rapid search through every article in the maid's room. The lining of her clothes was inspected, her hair-brush tested for a sliding back, the pictures on the wall, the rug and the bed-clothing examined minutely. Yet all this consumed but a brief period of time and resulted in no important discovery.

"Feel better?" asked Sarah cheerfully.

"You know I do. I'm going to remove these handcuffs, now, and then I'm going home. Come and see me, some time when you feel lonesome. I've only that fool Agatha to talk to and I've an idea you and I might interest each other."

As she spoke she unlocked the manacles and dropped them with a slight click into a concealed pocket of her dark skirt.

"I imagine Agatha isn't REAL brilliant," returned Sarah; "but neither am I. When I'm your age, Nan, I hope to be half as clever. Just now you can twist me around your finger."

Nan regarded her seriously.

"I wish I knew what you are up to," she remarked suspiciously. "You can scarcely conceal your joy, my girl, and that proves I've overlooked something. You've puzzled me, youngster as you are, but you must remember that I'm working in the dark while some mysterious gleam of knowledge lights your way. Put us side by side, on the same track, and I wouldn't be afraid of you, Sarah Judd."

"Don't apologize, Nan; it makes me feel ashamed."

Nan's frown, as she looked into the blue eyes, turned to a smile of appreciation. Sarah also smiled, and then she said:

"Let me make you a cup of tea before you go."

"A good idea. We're friends, then?"

"Why not? One friend is worth a thousand enemies and it's absurd to quarrel with one for doing her duty."

"That's what O'Gorman is always saying. Ever hear of O'Gorman?"

"Yes; he's one of the old stand-bys in the secret service department; but they say he's getting old. Slipped a good many cogs lately, I hear."

"He's the Chief's right hand man. O'Gorman used to have this case--the branch of it I'm now working--but he gave it up and recommended the Chief to put me on the job. Said a woman could trail Mary Louise better than any man and with less chance of discovery; and he was right, for I've lived half a block from her in Dorfield and she never saw my face once. But O'Gorman didn't suspect you were coming into the case and the thing's getting altogether too complicated to suit me."

Sarah was brewing the tea and considered an answer unnecessary. The conversation drifted away from the Hathaway case and into less personal channels. When Nan Shelley finally rose to go there was sincere friendliness in Sarah's "good-bye" and the elder woman said in parting:

"You're the right sort, Sarah. If ever you drift into Washington and need work, come to me and I'll get the Chief to take you on. I know he'd be glad to get you."

"Thank you, Nan," said Sarah meekly.

But there was a smile on her freckled face as she watched her recent acquaintance walk down the road, and it lingered there while she returned to her kitchen and finally washed and put away the long neglected lunch dishes.

Bub dashed into the yard and tooted his horn. Sarah went out to him.

"Ye kin call me lucky, ef ye don't mind," he said with a grin. "Sent yer tel'gram, found out the tenner ye guv me were good, an' got back without the folks gett'n' a single blink at me."

"You're some driver, Bub, and you've got a wise head on your shoulders. If you don't talk about this trip, and I don't, no one will ever know, except we two, that the car has been out of the garage."