

CHAPTER XXIII - A KISS FROM JOSIE

That evening, as Sarah Judd was sitting in her room reading a book, her work for the day being over, she heard a succession of little taps against her window-pane. She sat still, listening, until the taps were repeated, when she walked straight to the window, drew the shade and threw tip the sash. O'Gorman's face appeared in the opening and the girl put a hand on each of his cheeks and leaning over kissed him full upon his lips.

The man's face, lighted by the lamp from within the room, was radiant. Even the fat nose was beatified by the love that shone in his small gray eyes. He took one of her hands in both of his own and held it close a moment, while they regarded one another silently.

Then he gave a little beckoning signal and the girl turned to slip on a light coat, for the nights were chill on the mountain. Afterward she unfastened her outside door and joined the detective, who passed an arm around her and led her to one of the benches on the bluff.

The new moon was dim, but a sprinkling of stars lit the sky. The man and girl were far enough from the Lodge not to be overheard.

"It's good to see you again, Josie," said O'Gorman, as they seated themselves on the bench. "How do you like being a sleuth?"

"Really, Daddy," she replied, "it has been no end of a lark. I'm dead sick of washing other folks' dishes, I confess, but the fun I've had has more than made up for the hard work. Do you know, Dad, I had a session with Nan Shelley one day, and she didn't have much the best of it, either, although she's quick as a cat and had me backed off the map in every way except for the matter of wits. My thoughts didn't crumble much and Nan was good enough to congratulate me. She knew, as soon as I did, about the letter the crippled girl found in a book, but I managed to make a copy of it, while Nan is still wondering where it is hid. I'm patting myself on the back, Dad, because you trained me and I want to prove myself a credit to your training. It's no wonder, with such a master, that I could hold my own with Nan Shelley!"

He gave a little amused laugh.

"You're all right, Josie dear," he replied. "My training wouldn't have amounted to shucks if you hadn't possessed the proper gray matter to work with. But about that letter," more seriously; "your telegram told me a lot, because our code is so concise, but it also left a good deal to be guessed at. Who wrote the letter? I must know all the details in order to understand it properly."

"It's all down in my private shorthand book," said Josie O'Gorman, "but I've never dared make a clear copy while Nan was so near me. You can't read it, Dad, and I can't read it to you in the dark; so you'll have to wait."

"Have you your notebook here?"

"Always carry it."

He drew an electric storage-lamp from his pocket and shielded the tiny circle of light with his coat.

"Now, then," said he, "read the letter to me, Josie. It's impossible for anyone to see the light from the house."

The girl held her notebook behind the flap of his coat, where the lamp shed its white rays upon it, and slowly read the text of the letter. O'Gorman sat silent for some time after she had finished reading.

"In all my speculations concerning the Hathaway case," he said to his daughter, "I never guessed this as the true solution of the man's extraordinary actions. But now, realizing that Hathaway is a gentleman to the core, I understand he could not have acted in any other way."

"Mrs. Burrows is dead," remarked Josie.

"I know. It's a pity she didn't die long ago."

"This thing killed her, Dad."

"I'm sure of it. She was a weak, though kind-hearted, woman and this trouble wore her out with fear and anxiety. How did the girl--Mary Louise--take her mother's death?"

"Rather hard, at first. She's quieter now. But--see here, Dad--are you still working for the Department?"

"Of course."

"Then I'm sorry I've told you so much. I'm on the other side. I'm here to protect Mary Louise Burrows and her interests."

"To be sure. I sent you here myself, at my own expense, both to test your training before I let you into the regular game and for the sake of the little Burrows girl, whom I fell in love with when she was so friendless. I believed things would reach a climax in the Hathaway case, in this very spot, but I couldn't foresee that your cleverness would ferret out that letter, which the girl Irene intended to keep silent about, nor did I know that the Chief would send me here in person to supervise Hathaway's capture. Mighty queer things happen in this profession of ours, and circumstances lead the best of us by the nose."

"Do you intend to arrest Mr. Hathaway?"

"After hearing that letter read and in view of the fact that Mrs. Burrows is dead, I think not. The letter, if authentic, clears up the mystery to our complete satisfaction. But I must get the story from Hathaway's own lips, and then compare his statement with that in the letter. If they agree, we won't prosecute the man at all, and the famous case that has caused us so much trouble for years will be filed in the office pigeonholes and pass into ancient history."

Josie O'Gorman sat silent for a long time. Then she asked:

"Do you think Mr. Hathaway will come here, now that--now that--"

"I'm quite sure he will come."

"When?"

"To-morrow."

"Then I must warn them and try to head him off. I'm on his side, Dad; don't forget that."

"I won't; and because you're on his side, Josie, you must let him come and be vindicated, and so clear up this matter for good and all."

"Poor Mary Louise! I was thinking of her, not of her grandfather. Have you considered how a knowledge of the truth will affect her?"

"Yes. She will be the chief sufferer when her grandfather's innocence is finally proved."

"It will break her heart," said Josie, with a sigh.

"Perhaps not. She's mighty fond of her grandfather. She'll be glad to have him freed from suspicion and she'll be sorry--about the other thing."

Sarah Judd--otherwise Josie O'Gorman--sighed again; but presently she gave a little chuckle of glee.

"Won't Nan be wild, though, when she finds I've beaten her and won the case for Hathaway?"

"Nan won't mind. She's an old hand at the game and has learned to take things as they come. She'll be at work upon some other case within a week and will have forgotten that this one ever bothered her."

"Who is Agatha Lord, and why did they send her here as principal, with Nan as her maid?"

"Agatha is an educated woman who has moved in good society. The Chief thought she would be more likely to gain the friendship of the Conants than Nan, for poor Nan hasn't much breeding to boast of. But she was really the principal, for all that, and Agatha was instructed to report to her and to take her orders."

"They were both suspicious of me," said the girl, "but as neither of them had ever set eyes on me before I was able to puzzle them. On the other hand, I knew who Nan was because I'd seen her with you, which gave me an advantage. Now, tell me, how's mother?"

"Pretty chirky, but anxious about you because this is your first case and she feared your judgment wasn't sufficiently matured. I told her you'd pull through all right."

For an hour they sat talking together. Then Officer O'Gorman kissed his daughter good night and walked back to the Bigbee house.